

The Pedagogical Philosophy of a Village Schoolteacher in Nineteenth-Century Sichuan*

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Abstract: There is abundant research on the examination system, and to a lesser degree, some research on the lower level of the educational system in late imperial China. The extant sources are predominantly written from above—that is, administrators and officials setting the aims of schooling in counties and villages—but the voices of the pupils/students and their teachers are absent. Therefore, compared with earlier sources, the book *Cunxue jiuwu* 村學究語 [Words of a Village Schoolteacher], written by Liu Hengdian 劉恆典 (1809–1884) and published in 1864, gives us unique insight and a different

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perspective. Here, Liu describes his own experiences of teaching, and comments on other teachers, attitudes of parents, and dynamism of students. Furthermore, he develops his philosophy of pedagogy. The text shows that he rests on a long tradition of how to read the classics and that this method is intertwined with the aims of self-cultivation. It also shows that he follows the Neo-Confucian tradition of both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, and that he is searching for an authoritative teaching style rather than an authoritarian one.

Keywords: village schools, pedagogy, self-cultivation, Neo-Confucianism, Wang Yangming, Liumen tradition

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Introduction

Most sources on village schools during late imperial China mainly provide information on why the village school in question was established and who funded it.¹ The aim of the village schools was first of all to make pupils into morally good citizens, which included reinforcing their loyalty towards their parents and teachers to create a pattern for future relations with their superiors.² Reaching this goal meant reading and reciting primers such as the *Sanzi jing* 三字經 [Three Character Classic], the *Baijia xing* 百家姓 [Hundred Surnames] and the *Qianzi wen* 千字文 [Thousand Character Classic], later shortened as *Sanbai qian* 三百千 [Three Hundred Thousand].³ If the students continued for a few years and were good enough, they would go on with the Confucian classics starting with the *Xiaojing* 孝經 [Classic of Filial Piety] the *Daxue* 大學 [Great

¹ The most frequently used sources are local gazetteers.

² See, for instance, Schneewind, *Village Schools*, and Lee, *Education*.

³ There were also other primers. See Yu, 'Reading', 11–13.

Learning], the *Lunyu* 論語 [Analects], *Mengzi* 孟子 [Mencius], and the *Zhongyong* 中庸 [Doctrine of the Mean]. We know that village schools were often built within or beside Confucian shrines. Sometimes it was the other way around; the village school hosted a Confucian shrine.⁴ It is clear that primary schooling was intimately linked to Confucian ideology and ethics. However, we still know very little about the actual pedagogy and what they concretely did at these schools. Luckily, we have *Cunxue jiuyu* 村學究語 [Words of a Village Schoolteacher], by Liu Hengdian 劉恆典 (1809–1884) to fill the gap.

Cunxue jiuyu was first published separately in Weiyuan County 威遠縣, Sichuan Province, where Liu Hengdian lived. This was in 1861. Later, it was republished in the collected writings of the Qing dynasty scholar Liu Yuan 劉沅 (1768–1856), *Huaixuan quanshu* 槐軒全書 [Liu Yuan's Collected Works], in 1905. Liu Hengdian was a close disciple and a relative of Liu Yuan (also known as Huaixuan 槐軒), who was an influential religious figure in nineteenth-century Sichuan. The complete collection of writings by Liu Yuan was reprinted in 1917, but without Liu Hengdian's text. There is much more information on Liu Yuan than Liu Hengdian, because Liu Yuan, first of all, was the originator of the Liumen 劉門 tradition. Now, he is also known to Western readers, thanks to the German researcher Volker Olles' work *Ritual Words: Daoist Liturgy and the Confucian Liumen Tradition in Sichuan Province*. Liu Hengdian was not a prominent scholar, and it is even astonishing that his works were published. Liu Hengdian's language mixes classical and colloquial Chinese, which also is an indicator that he did not belong among the most learned scholars. Furthermore, he could hardly have been successful in the civil service examinations. In that case, he would not have been a teacher at the lowest level of the educational system. His master Liu Yuan merged Confucian learning with Daoist and Buddhist practices.⁵ Eventually, his teaching developed into a religious movement, whose message was handed down within

⁴ Lidén, *Charitable Schools*.

⁵ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 41.

the Liu family.⁶ As a relative of Liu Yuan and member of the Liumen tradition, Liu Hengdian's *Cunxue jiuyu* was added to Liu Yuan's publications, and this affiliation must have been one important reason that his work was published. Olles has compiled a table of ancestral masters and their divine titles in which Liu Hengdian, also known as Liu Hongdian 劉鴻典 and Baochen 寶臣, is mentioned.⁷ In addition to *Cunxue jiuyu*, he was also the author of a number of works including *Zhuangzi yuejie* 莊子約解 [A Short Explanation of Zhuangzi], *Lengyan jing zhuijie* 楞嚴經贅解 [An Additional Explanation of the *Sūrangama Sūtra*], *Nüjie* 女戒 [Rules for Women] and several other titles about which we do not know very much.⁸ A morality book with the title *Xingmi lu* 醒迷錄 [Record of Awakening from Delusion] was written by a certain Xingmi zi 醒迷子 or the 'Master Who Awakened from Delusion'. This was a pseudonym: the man behind it was Liu Hengdian.⁹ The book condemns sexual abuse and lists various kinds of retribution for this kind of behaviour and other misdeeds.¹⁰ From this we can draw the conclusion that Liu Hengdian was eclectic, a characteristic which pertained to the Liumen tradition in general. Liu Yuan and the Liumen practitioners read and explained Confucian, Daoist, as well as Buddhist texts. However, Liu Yuan and his descendants always referred to themselves as Confucians. Olles argues that their community was tied to the Daoist religion but that it is impossible to define them as exclusively belonging to one of the three traditions.¹¹ Ma Xisha describes the movement as a 'popular religion'.¹² This concept can be

⁶ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ This according to Liu Yuan's biography *Liu Yuan nianpu jianbian* 劉沅年譜簡編 [Liu Yuan's Chronological Biography]. *Xunmeng cao* 訓蒙草 [A Draft of Teaching the Uneducated] has been attributed to him but is written by someone else, if there are not different texts with the same title.

⁹ I am indebted to Volker Olles for making me aware of this pseudonym.

¹⁰ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2. Ma and Han, *Minjian Zongjiaoshi*.

used for religions outside of institutions and central state authorities, and those without a fixed clergy. However, the shortcomings of this concept have been discussed before by many scholars such as Philip Clart, who regards it as heuristic, which means that we use ‘popular religion’ as a trash box for all sorts of phenomena we do not know how to categorise.¹³ Festivals are often listed under the label ‘popular religion’, even though members of the elite also take part in them. Alternative concepts would be local religion, folk religion and so on—concepts which are equally difficult to deal with. How do we define people and folk? During the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966–1976), it would have been all those who were not regarded as enemies of the people.

For a long period, Confucianism was linked to the elite through examinations and official positions in the imperial administration, and thus excluded commoners and women. However, from the sixteenth century, a branch of the Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) movement, the Taizhou 泰州 practitioners, start to auto-identify as Confucians, and in local gazetteers, commoners and men of humble occupations such as soldiers are listed in the *ru* 儒 sections.¹⁴ The founder of the Taizhou movement, Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541) was a salt merchant and other participants of his movement had even more simple occupations. Although there were a few scholars among them, most of them were defined as commoners (*buyi* 布衣). Therefore, we can assume that a shift was taking place during the mid-Ming and onwards. To auto-identify as Confucian might have been a way for people of lower social status to move upward. Even a Catholic missionary such as Matteo Ricci experienced that he received more respect dressed as a Confucian literatus than as a Buddhist monk.¹⁵ Seiwert and Ma recognise that the Liumen tradition, contrary to other popular religions of the time, included a surprisingly high number of scholars with high degrees. They furthermore claim that since the Liumen practitioners identified themselves as

¹³ Clart, ‘Popular Religion’, 220.

¹⁴ Lidén, ‘Taizhou Movement’, 31.

¹⁵ Fontana, *Matteo Ricci*, 63.

Confucians, they were not regarded as heterodox by the government.¹⁶ This is yet another of their ideas worth investigating closer. The Taizhou practitioners also self-identified as Confucians but were accused of heterodoxy, and some of them were severely persecuted. My conclusion from my study of the Taizhou movement was that those who were persecuted had criticised taxes and judicial decisions and, thus, were perceived by the government as a threat.¹⁷ Self-labelling as Confucians did not help to escape the criticism of heterodoxy. We know that when people are in search of freedom they will use old concepts in a new way to ameliorate their situation, and thus, a verbal cat-and-rat-race between rulers and unruly subordinates develops.

There are, thus, a number of assumptions we have to reconsider, and to these we have to add the concepts of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In my view, we still need those concepts, but the borders between them have always been unclear, and when we reach late imperial China they become even muddier. Therefore, it is, perhaps, an uninteresting proposal to define the Liumen tradition along those lines at all.

No matter how we would like to define the Liumen tradition, its practitioners were deeply religious. Celebration of saints and their birthdays were examples of such rituals. It seems it was common that the practitioners repented their sins during their rituals. They also had rituals for releasing the souls of their ancestors from suffering in the underworld.¹⁸ Departed members of the Liu family were included in the pantheon and were given divine titles.¹⁹ Liu Hengdian, for instance, was given the divine title *Yiwen zhendao tianzun* 翊文鎮道天尊 (the Heavenly Worthy of Assisting Culture and Harmonising the Way). His first and second wife (or concubine) were given divine titles like their husband, which proves these women also belonged to the movement and that they as female members could receive divine status.²⁰

¹⁶ Seiwert and Ma, *Religious Movements*, 479.

¹⁷ Lidén, 'Taizhou Movement', 255–57.

¹⁸ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 204–05.

According to Volker Olles, the educative activities of the Liumen tradition continued into the Republican era. In 1916, an academy called the Shangyou shushu 尚友書塾 (Academy of Ascending Friendship) was founded by Liu Yuan's grandsons. Following old traditions, the school was situated in the temple of the Liumen community (Yanqing si 延慶寺) but their teaching methods were progressive. For instance, guided self-study to develop students' independent thinking was set up and corporal punishment abolished.²¹ We will see that Liu Hengdian discusses the negative effects of beating children in his *Cunxue jiuyu*. Despite the radical character of the Liumen movement, it was persecuted after 1949 and labelled a 'reactionary secret society'.²² At this point, the societal climate had changed compared with imperial times. Rulers have always regarded new religious movements as a threat, and this sentiment remained after the Chinese Communist Party takeover in 1949. However, from that point on, all kinds of traditional cultures should have been replaced by a socialist one. Although it is possible that the Communist Party in the 1950s did not accept the progressive pedagogical ideas of the Liumen tradition because the party promoted a more authoritarian style of education, we cannot prove this from their antagonistic measures against the Liumen tradition. Their hostility might have been a result of their hostility to religious movements in general.

Today, there is a renewed interest in Liu Hengdian and his text among university students and scholars in mainland China. There is also an interest in his pedagogy in Taiwan. A teacher called Zhao Xiaolong 趙曉龍 has produced several videos for YouTube in which he explains the text.²³ This young teacher belongs to an academy called Hongren International Academy of Sinology 鴻仁國際漢學書院, which also runs a kindergarten (or several kindergartens).²⁴ The

²¹ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ To give just two examples, see Zhao, "Cunxue jiuyu" xuexi fenxiang'; *idem*, 'Zhao Xiaolong laoshi'.

²⁴ This scholar might also be linked to the National Yang-Ming University in Taipei 國立陽明大學.

academy is located in Tainan City. If the academy is not Buddhist, it has at least a strong Buddhist affinity. The Chinese interest in Liu Hengdian and his text is not reflected in Western scholarship, with the exception of the German scholar Olles, mentioned above.

Previous Research on Village Schools and Confucian Education

We have noticed that most scholarly works on Chinese education deal with higher education and especially the examination system. Rigorous scholarship such as the works of Benjamin Elman also include some information about schools in general and sometimes even on primary schools; for example, village and charitable schools.²⁵ There has also been quite a lot written on literacy: for example, the research of Evelyn Rawski.²⁶ An overall work on education covering circa two thousand years of Chinese educational history is Thomas Lee's work *Education in Traditional China: A History*. Lee has some passages on primary schooling and gives a general picture in which primary schooling was mainly dealt with within the family or the lineage, but with a few attempts by higher educational officers and emperors to create something that comes closer to a primary educational system. In the Han dynasty, primary schools were not much more than an ideal, according to Lee.²⁷ It was not until the period of disunity (220–581 CE) that real initiatives to establish schools were taken, although the quality was uneven. During the Eastern Wei (534–550), the establishment of Confucian temples in local government schools was ordered for the first time. Lee suggests this was under Buddhist influence.²⁸ In the Northern Qi dynasty, the so called

²⁵ Elman, *Civil Examinations*, 131, *idem*, *A Cultural History*, 38, 77, 246. The paragraph in *Civil Examinations*, 131 and the one in *A Cultural History*, 246 are identical except for that the one in *A Cultural History* has keywords in Chinese.

²⁶ Rawski, *Literacy*.

²⁷ Lee, *Education*, 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

simen xiaoxue 四門小學 (Schools of Four Gates) were established, which were primary schools for boys up to fourteen years old.²⁹ A work primarily focused on the lowest level of education is *Community Schools and the State in Ming China* by Sarah Schneewind. As the title indicates, this book is more interested in the state and its relation to education at the local level, rather than the actual teaching taking place in the schools in the villages. This is understandable, since the sources—that is, local gazetteers—do not have much information on what took place in the schools but include more about the ambitions of various officials. However, to understand something of the schools' ideals it is a good first step. In my article on 'charitable schools' (*yixue* 義學), I tried to understand the aims of local officials and found that those schools were a part of a larger welfare project including 'charitable granaries' (*yicang* 義倉) and 'charitable graveyards' (*yimu* 義墓). The aim was not only to teach children to read and write but to create a total transformation of the children through recitation of the Confucian Classics, practicing self-cultivation, and performing rituals in the Confucian temple. Thus, the aims were identical to those of the Neo-Confucian academies.³⁰

As for the outline of research on Chinese education, going backward in time to the nineteenth century, there were already Westerners describing village life and village schools. Their works stand with one foot among the primary sources and one among the secondary, because at the same time as they describe the Chinese education and try to adopt scientific perspectives, those writers are first hand witnesses to Chinese pedagogy in late imperial China. One example is the body of work by the American protestant missionary Arthur H. Smith (1845–1932). His 1899 book *Village Life in China: A Study in Sociology* is especially of interest, with a chapter devoted to village schools. He also wrote the 1894 'Chinese Characteristics', which has been dismissed by the Canadian historian Timothy Cheek as 'blighted by thinly disguised racism'.³¹ I would say that the racism

²⁹ Lee, *Education*, 72.

³⁰ Lidén, 'Charitable Schools', 1–29.

³¹ Cheek, *Intellectual*, 60–61.

in *Village Life in China* is not concealed at all and his disdain for Chinese culture and Chinese traditions lays completely open on display. Smith lived a few decades later than Liu Hengdian and he spent most of his time in the Shandong Province, compared with Liu who lived in Sichuan. He left China because of the outbreak of the Boxer uprising in 1899, the same year his book on Chinese village life was published. He was influential in shaping the Western image of China, and might even have been the one who coined the term 'Boxer uprising'. In Smith's book on village life, the Chinese scholar is described as narrow-minded, falling far behind his Western counterparts:

...no man in Western lands can fail to come into vital contact with other minds. And there is what Goethe called the Zeit-geist, or Spirit of the Age, which exerts a powerful influence upon him. But in China, a man who is educated in a narrow line, is likely, though by no means certain, to remain narrow, and there is no Chinese Zeit-geist, or if there is, like other ghosts, it seldom interposes in human affairs.³²

Smith also describes the Chinese 'race' with sweeping brush strokes: 'Every one knows that the minds of the Chinese are not by nature analytic; neither are they synthetic', and he goes on: 'The inborn conservatism of the Chinese race is exhibited in average literary man, whatever the degree of his attainments.'³³ As for Chinese education, his evaluation is just as negative. Smith claims that 'there is probably no country in the world where there is so much uniformity in the standards of instruction, and in all its details, as in China.'³⁴ Then he makes an anachronistic comparison between Confucius' way of teaching his son and James Mill (1773–1836) teaching his prodigy, nobody less than the famous thinker and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). In contrast to Confucius, who according to Smith had a very distant relationship with both his son and his pupils,

³² *Village Life*, 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 102, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

Smith claims that James Mill was a much better example of a good educator. Smith describes how James Mill educated his son about all kinds of subjects, following lofty teaching principles and a thorough teaching plan, with the result that John Stuart Mill became one of the most educated men.³⁵ Smith's comparison between a Chinese philosopher from about the fifth century BCE with an English philosopher and political economist from the nineteenth century serves his purpose well, that is, to give a picture of Chinese education as failing to take into consideration the pupils needs and possible development. Smith is, in general, very critical of the methods used. Often, the teachers themselves take part in the civil service examination with the result that the teaching at school is seriously interrupted, he says.³⁶ Smith goes on at length about the pupils doing nothing but reading, and because of this becoming totally useless in daily life. Furthermore, they are poor and yield to begging.³⁷ Smith also criticises the Chinese schools for not teaching mathematical skills. The teachers do not even know how to use the abacus or reckoning boards themselves. This has to be learnt in shops and other places of business, Smith tells us.³⁸ Evelyn Rawski's research on literacy and elementary education in the Qing dynasty also indicates that training in using the abacus and book-keeping was done in commercial guilds by apprentices and that it was not generally taught in primary schools, although there were some exceptions, for instance, in Jiangsu and in some clan schools that called in arithmetic specialists.³⁹ On a higher level it was different. Already by the Tang dynasty (618–907), there were technical schools, and in the Song dynasty (960–1279), they were incorporated into the Directorate (*Guozijian* 國子監).⁴⁰

³⁵ *Village Life*, 72–73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁹ Rawski, *Literacy*, 52–53.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Education*, 80. 'Guozijian' is sometimes also referred to as the Imperial College, Imperial Academy, Imperial University, National Academy, or National University.

Benjamin Elman criticises the view that mathematics and natural science lost its position in the civil service examination in late imperial China, a view that was dominant among the Jesuits missionary activities in China and onwards.⁴¹ Mathematics—or rather, calculating—had been one of the six arts studied since ancient times. The other five were rites, music, archery, equestrianism, and calligraphy.⁴² One might assume some mathematical skills were required for studying music. Except for equestrianism, all those subjects seem to have been present at the county school level. Unfortunately, we do not have much information on how arithmetic was dealt with in village schools. In fact, we cannot even be sure that they learned to write. They might only have practiced reading. Since village schools were a type of school for the poorest, anything costly such as writing materials were probably lacking. A county school sometimes had archery grounds, but in a village school the teacher was most likely happy to have a few books on his own bookshelf. To provide brushes, ink, inkstones, and paper for the pupils might have been too costly.

Although Smith is biased, it is possible to find some useful facts on village schools if we cleanse his text of prejudices and derogatory value judgements. Smith states that the reason why far from every village had a school was that they were ‘too poor, or too small, or both’.⁴³ He mentions that at the winter solstice or at the end of the year (before the Chinese New Year) the names of the pupils were written on a red card, which was a school list.⁴⁴ After this was done, the pupil had to pay tuition.⁴⁵ Smith gives the information that the schoolhouse usually consisted of an unoccupied room in a private house, an ancestral temple, or some other kind of temple. Smith furthermore makes the comment that it was very rare to rent a room for the purpose of making a schoolhouse, which means, they did

⁴¹ Elman, *Cultural History*, 461–64.

⁴² *Yu* 御 refers both to riding and knowing how to drive two-wheel carts/carriages.

⁴³ *Village Life*, 73.

⁴⁴ *Kuan-tan/guandan* (館單?). Smith does not give the characters.

⁴⁵ *Village Life*, 74–75.

not have funding for rents but accepted to use a room for free. The furniture was provided by the parents.⁴⁶ In many parts of the country they had an altar, incense, and candles, and offered formal prayers to Confucius, but in Confucius's home province (Shandong) this was much simpler, Smith says. At the feast of the teacher, the scholars (that is, the pupils) are introduced and make obeisance to Confucius and to the present preceptor.⁴⁷ What he says about teaching materials is nothing new, really, but Smith has an interesting comment that the books are stored away in the abdomens of the pupils, where the intellectual faculties are supposed to be located.⁴⁸ In 1966 when the Cultural Revolution had broken out, the red guards attacked the Temple of Confucius in Qufu. They discovered a hole in the belly of the Confucius statue, whereupon one of them stuck in his hand and took out books and the guts of Confucius made of mirrors and bronzes.⁴⁹ We can notice that there was an idea in traditional Confucianism that the teaching became a part of one's body. The moral charisma filled one's back and the teaching was stored in one's belly.⁵⁰ County schools had libraries, but the poorer village schools might only have had a shelf for books, or simply the memory of the teacher and—if the teaching was successful—the memories of the students.⁵¹ In summary, from Smith's narrative as an eyewitness, we can draw

⁴⁶ *Village Life*, 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁹ Wang 2002: 391.

⁵⁰ Mencius has the saying that the Confucian values benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge are rooted in the heart of the authentic man (*junzi* 君子). However, they are not only in his heart but also appears in his countenance and fills his back (*ang yu bei* 盎於背, see *Mengzi, Jinxin I* 盡心上, 21). In Buddhism, statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Guanyin were filled with objects to give them life force. These could be sūtras, grains, medical seeds, stones, and so on. For this information, I thank Barend ter Haar, who provided me with the second chapter of his unpublished manuscript of 'Figurines, Familiars and Personal Demons: The Fear of Witches in Imperial China'.

⁵¹ For county school libraries, see Brook, *School Libraries*.

two conclusions: first, that the village schools were poor and simple; and second, that the teaching was intimately linked to the religious praxis of Confucianism.

The Icelandic researcher Geir Sigurðsson has made great efforts to nuance Western prejudices against Confucian education and pedagogy. He bases his view on pre-Han philosophical texts, which he finds show a deep concern for adopting a critical attitude, an attitude Sigurðsson calls ‘transformative self-critical’.⁵² Sigurðsson gives several examples from the *Lunyu* and other pre-Han Confucian texts showing the ideal of critical reflection, which according to Sigurðsson also takes context and change into account, unlike Western philosophy which tries to decontextualise specific statements.⁵³ In the famous quotation from the *Lunyu*, as translated by Legge, Confucius says: ‘When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat the lesson’ (舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也).⁵⁴ For the American missionary Arthur Smith, this is an example of Chinese education being too demanding. In Sigurðsson’s view, the very same quotation shows that the Confucian tradition tried to develop a critical attitude in its students.⁵⁵ Whereas Smith believes Chinese education would benefit from Western ways of teaching, Sigurðsson argues that the Confucian transformative self-critical attitude would be a fruitful tool in higher education in the West.⁵⁶ Sigurðsson, who specialises in the pre-Han period, argues that Confucian philosophy stagnated during its last phase in the Ming and Qing. Contrary to this, my research finds that there is a rather vivid and critical discussion about pedagogy during this later period. It is striking that as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279) in the writings of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), there is a strong criticism of the examination culture. This is interesting since

⁵² Sigurðsson, ‘Transformative Critique’, 131.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁴ *Lunyu*, ‘Shuer’ 述而 8, *SBCK*, 4: 2a. The quotation is obscure, since we do not know which objects those corners belong to. *Village Life*, 71.

⁵⁵ Sigurðsson, ‘Transformative Critique’, 141.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

Zhu Xi has been severely criticized for the stagnation of the Chinese civilization, not only by Communists attacking feudal ideas, but also by Confucians in the Ming dynasty. Zhu Xi also complained about how poorly the governmental schools were administered.⁵⁷ Later, Wang Yangming brought in a criticism of physical punishment in education and the importance of children's play.⁵⁸ In this article, we will see a village schoolteacher from the late nineteenth century arguing in a similar vein and, furthermore, emphasising the importance of the teachers' own self-cultivation (or self-transformation, to use Sigurðsson's concept), and not only self-cultivation but also self-respect, which seems to manifest in the process of self-cultivation.

Liu Hengdian's Ideas about Pedagogy and Schooling

Self-Cultivation of the Teacher

Before discussing concrete pedagogical tools in *Cunxue jiuwu*, Liu Hengdian situates his teaching ideas in a philosophical framework, and the first issue he raises is the importance of self-knowledge. Liu Hengdian starts his text with one quotation from the *Lunyu* and one from *Mengzi*. I assume this is a standard pattern used when writing such texts. The quotation from the *Lunyu* expresses the traditionalist view of knowledge: 'If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others' (溫故而知新, 可以為師).⁵⁹ The quotation has to do with knowledge, and to be able to acquire knowledge. Human beings need roots, and if the roots are lost, we cannot evaluate new experiences simply because we then do not know if they are new or reexperienced. Knowledge about old knowledge and knowledge about history are the best ways to contextualise our lives. If the quotation from the *Lunyu* is self-evident, the Mencian quotation is intriguing. Mencius says: 'The evil of

⁵⁷ Gardner, *Learning*, 20, 28.

⁵⁸ Wang, 'Instructing the Uneducated'.

⁵⁹ *Lunyu*, 'Weizheng' 為政 11, *SBCK* 1, 10a, Legge's translation.

men is that they like to be teachers of others' (人之患在好為人師).⁶⁰ That is not directly what is expected in a work praising knowledge and teaching. In Mencius we find the idea that fathers should not be teachers of their own sons. Mencius explains that, historically, the profession of teaching began when fathers exchanged sons. Liu Hengdian shares Mencius' idea of parents as unsuitable teachers for their own children. He is obviously quite annoyed by stingy parents who think they can teach their sons themselves without sending them to school, and that this at-home method would be equally good. He argues that knowing some characters is not enough to be a teacher; one has to understand the meaning of them. And it is not enough to know how to read a text; one has to understand its deeper meaning. If a parent without this understanding teaches their children, it is like 'making pearls from fisheyes' (魚目混珠).⁶¹

Liu Hengdian moves quickly from hands-on faculties to higher levels of knowledge, ranging from reading to requirements of following 'the Way of assisting Heaven and Earth by completing oneself and completing others' (成己成人參天贊地之道).⁶² This is traditional Neo-Confucian philosophy. But what is interesting is that this poor teacher from central Sichuan applied Neo-Confucian philosophy to his own situation, explaining: although 'Heaven and Earth give birth to human beings, they do not educate us' (天地生人而不能教人).⁶³ See, a teacher fills such an important gap, the gap between Heaven and Earth! But despite this important task 'it is only the teacher who will be poor until the end of his life! (獨訓蒙糊目往往貧終身)'.⁶⁴ Men of all the other professions can become rich, no matter if they are peasants, craftsmen, or merchants, he complains. He was further-

⁶⁰ *Mengzi*, 'Lilou' I 離婁上, *SBCK* 12, 7: 15a, Legge's translation. Both the quotation from the *Lunyu* and the one from *Mengzi* appears on the first side (8b) in *Cunxue jiuwu*.

⁶¹ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 10a. The expression is an idiom.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9a.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* The expression *humu* 糊目 means 'gum in the eyes'. This is probably a dialect description of a person who is unhealthy and in a poor state.

more aware of the strength of social inheritance and clarified it thus: ‘Of those who make a living from poetry and books; there are those who belong to the upper levels of society, and they become officials. Those who belong to the lower levels become teachers’ (凡人以詩書為業者，達而在上則為官，窮而為下則為師).⁶⁵ It is thus not a question of skill, talent, or intelligence that creates success in the examinations; it is one’s social background that decides where one will end up. This understanding is of no surprise, since everyone at the time knew that only those from good families could pursue studies for the years necessary to succeed in the civil service examinations. The Chinese dream of becoming an official was as difficult to fulfil as the American one of becoming extremely rich. Repeatedly, Liu Hengdian expresses his basic assumption: ‘To be a teacher is certainly not easy, and to be a primary schoolteacher is especially difficult! (然師不易為，而蒙師尤不易)’⁶⁶

After self-knowledge, Liu Hengdian highlights the importance of self-respect.⁶⁷ In his argumentation we can see similarities with the Taizhou learning of Wang Gen.⁶⁸ He had pursued a circular argumentation that if you respect and love others, they will respect and love you. The result would be one’s protection. Both extremes of disrespecting oneself and disrespecting others are thus dismissed.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 9a.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8b.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11b.

⁶⁸ There were two Taizhou followers who came from Sichuan. These were Zhao Zhenji 趙貞吉 (1508–1576), a.k.a. Mengjing 孟靜 and Dazhou 大洲, from Neijiang County 內江縣 in Chengdu. (See Huang, *Mingru Xucan*, 746.) He was a well-known general and a person and a very important person for the Taizhou movement. He even wrote the grave inscription of Wang Gen. He Xiang 何祥 (dates unclear) was also from Neijiang County and a disciple of Zhao Zhenji (*ibid.*, 844). However, there does not seem to be a direct connection between the Taizhou movement and the Liumen tradition. The latter shared the same Neo-Confucian tradition as the Taizhou practitioners did, although at the time of the nineteenth century it had, of course, changed somewhat.

⁶⁹ Wang, *Chongjuan Xinzhai Wang xiansheng quanji*, chapter 3, 32b.

Liu Hengdian gives two examples of not respecting oneself as a teacher. The first one is to equate high emoluments with self-respect. A teacher who bargains about emoluments will, in the end, not be well paid.⁷⁰ The second kind of teacher lacking in self-respect is someone who behaves immorally, that is, frequenting prostitutes, engaging in gambling, drinking excessively, and smoking foreign tobacco.⁷¹

Now we are approaching questions of pedagogy. Liu Hengdian says that what is most important in teaching is patience. But, fostering children is not a job, it is a sacred task (*shenggong* 聖功).⁷² One might think that the idea about teaching as a mission—an idea which we have had in the West as well—was also used by those who employed the teacher. Making the teaching profession a kind of holy mission is also a very good way to utilize the teacher arguing that you should work hard despite low income, bad working conditions, and too many students, as well as too many students of different capability. As for Liu Hengdian, teaching is, however, all about pride and self-esteem. He is arguing for the value of his mission.

To Beat or Not to Beat

In Liu Hengdian's view, the teacher has to find the golden mean in teaching, which means he cannot be too stern and at the same time not too slack. Quotation: 'In between sternness and slackness, the boys can be made to love the teacher and respect him' (不寬不嚴之間, 而使子弟愛其師).⁷³ As for the different abilities of the pupils, the teacher has to adapt his teaching accordingly. He exemplifies this adaptation with pupils who have good memories but are not very intelligent, and those with the opposite abilities.⁷⁴ While talking of

⁷⁰ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 11b.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12a.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13b. An alternative translation would be 'sacred achievement' but that does not make sense in this context.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13b.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14a.

patience, Liu mentions beating the pupils. In this regard, we can see a trait from the philosophy of Wang Yangming and his idea that corporal punishment is not a very good way of dealing with children. Liu Hengdian says: ‘If you beat them severely and on top of that scold them with evil words arbitrarily, the intelligent ones will become less intelligent out of fear, and the dull ones will become even duller’ (酷撻之夏楚, 橫加惡言詈罵, 所以聰明之子弟駭退聰明, 愚魯之子弟更加愚魯).⁷⁵ We can adopt two perspectives on Liu Hengdian’s criticism of corporal and mental punishments of the pupils. (1) That this was a very common strategy of dealing with unruly boys at school. (There were no girls in the village schools. If they had any education, it was within the family, by private tutors.) (2) That from Wang Yangming’s time and onwards, there was a growing awareness about the harm such treatment caused. In my view, we have to keep both ideas in our minds simultaneously, that is, there was abundant scolding and beating, and this cruelty created a reaction. This reaction comes, furthermore, fairly early in Chinese educational history compared with in the West, but a more liberal education later was suppressed in China.⁷⁶ Liu Hengdian gives several examples of extremely cruel teachers. Here is one:

A certain teacher from my village, was in exclusive possession of teaching and became known for beating the children. If there was a pupil who could not recite a text by heart, he would easily hit him several tens of times with a plank. Every night at midnight he would painfully beat those who were craving sleep while bending over their

⁷⁵ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 14b.

⁷⁶ In the United States, corporal punishments were banned in 2018 in public schools except for those in New Jersey and Iowa. In private schools it is still allowed. In the People’s Republic of China, the Liuming movement worked for more progressive teaching methods in the twentieth century but the movement was persecuted after the communists took over in 1949. Although different means to make students behave such as writing self-criticism, standing in a corner and so on are rather common in China, corporal punishment was banned in the PRC in 2022. See ‘China enacts new regulations’.

desks [and would do so] until they woke up. When pupils became extremely drowsy, they would go to the toilet to get a short relief while leaning against the wall to sleep. When the teacher noticed that a boy did not return, he would clasp the plank and search for him, and when he caught him in this situation, he would beat him severely to wake him up. People from the village called him the iron beater and this was literally true. Rustics and nitwits in the village did not know how it was but, on the contrary, praised the man as a good teacher. Many families sent several boys to study with him. Some of them had physically strong boys, who could endure the torture. Others had physically weak boys, who often fell ill because of the treatment. [Some] even died young and their parents believed it was their fate, not knowing that it was the teacher who had injured them. The teacher was poor during his whole life and became old without any offspring. Some said that he was rewarded with a hard life, suspecting that the divine order had no knowledge of him. There was a certain senior licentiate, who had already reached the age of fifty, present among the teacher's students when they were retrospectively talking about the hardships of their former studies.⁷⁷ Deeply moved, he said: 'He was the leader of success and the superintendent of crime'. As soon as this was uttered, the evaluation of this teacher was fixed.⁷⁸

余同里某先生專教誦讀，而以打人馳名。如遇學生不能背誦，動輒數十板。每夜讀書，必以三更為率。有伏案渴睡者，即痛打之使醒。學生困極，至於入廁小解，倚牆壁睡。先生見其久不歸，案挾板尋之。得其狀，又痛打之使醒。里人呼為某打鐵板紀其實也。而鄉愚無知，反稱先生為‘善教’，多送子弟從之。其子弟之體強者，尚坎受其磨折；體弱者往往因而致疾以妖亡。父母皆以為命，而不知先生害之也。先生窮困終身，老而絕嗣。或謂先生辛苦。彼得報如此，疑天道之無知。而其徒有明經某，年已五旬，追叙昔日從事之苦，慨然曰，‘先生固功之首，罪之魁也’。自此一言一出，而先生之論定矣。⁷⁹

⁷⁷ They were prefectural graduates, that is, the lowest degree of the civil exams.

⁷⁸ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 30b–31a.

⁷⁹ The interpunctuation here follows the original edition, although I sometimes disagree with it.

In the last dry comment, Liu Hengdian gives us his view of how rumours and false knowledge are established in people's minds. However, Liu Hengdian was not totally against corporal punishment, only against using it wrongly or excessively. He argues that it is important to differentiate between different pupils who are good and those who are evil. In his words:

The village schoolteacher must differentiate between those students who are docile and those who are untameable. Those who are docile can be treated in a lax way; those who are untameable must be treated severely. If you need to flog them, you must flog them. If you need to scold them, you must scold them. All pupils will be in awe. If you treat them mildly, without action, you will lose authority; how would they then pay respect to the school rules? The saying goes: 'When law is established, there is mercy'.⁸⁰

塾師須辨某徒馴善，某徒桀驁。馴善者待之宜寬，桀驁者待之宜嚴。當撻則撻，當罵則罵，諸生方知敬畏。若優柔不振，自失威嚴，學規何由？而俗語云：‘法立而後知恩’。

Furthermore, Liu Hengdian states that it is important that the teacher tells the pupils in advance that he will flog them.⁸¹

Development of Psychology and Group Dynamics

Liu Hengdian is concerned both about the individual development of the pupils, as well as the group dynamics in the class. First, the teacher has to analyse the level of the children, so as to be able to adapt the teaching to their abilities.⁸² The teacher has to teach them

⁸⁰ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 31b.

⁸¹ This is also the way things are done in Japanese Zen monasteries. The person who is going to strike a practitioner who risks falling asleep during meditation first touches the *keisaku* 警策 stick on the shoulder of the meditator to prepare him for the coming blows. In their discourse they, furthermore, argue that the blows release tensions in the shoulders. See Mod, 'Zen Hack'.

⁸² *Cunxue jiuwu*, 29b.

according to their aptitude, and make them receive what is beneficial for them. Otherwise, they might become ill and even die.⁸³ At a certain age, the boys will reach puberty. Then, their ‘desires open’ (慾開). Liu obviously thinks that it is possible to make those desires appear more slowly, thanks to correct teaching. Exactly how this would be done is, however, unclear. Liu says that at the age of sixteen or seventeen (according to Chinese counting, which would be one or two years younger by Western counting) they already have sexual desires and become ‘dim in their minds/chests’ (胸中模糊不明).⁸⁴ They will influence the younger pupils and make them use dirty language. It is then important not to reprimand the younger pupils but go directly to the root of the problem, namely the older ones who create the problems. In general, Liu argues that the teacher must not let the older pupils help him with teaching but always do it himself, so as to prevent harassment and bullying. It is important to use preventive measures to avoid ‘indulgence in desires start[ing] early’ (嗜欲之早開).⁸⁵ If it starts later, they ‘can live fully their allotted lifespan’ (命根植得固故得盡).⁸⁶ This conviction might be based on the Daoist notion of sexual health.⁸⁷ While the teacher should not be lazy, but work hard to help his pupils progress, he has to understand his limitations. Whether the children can develop or not does not come down to what humans can arrange but is decided by Heaven. However, if one has accumulated virtue and done good deeds it is

⁸³ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 29b.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 33b.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 43b.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Despeux, ‘Huanjing bunao’. Despeux follows earlier interpretations of Daoist texts (for example *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳) arguing that the practitioners believed in the benefit of obstructing semen and instead making it move upward towards the brain. Russel Kirkland questions that *jing* 精 would be regarded as physical semen and, subsequently, longevity would not be a question of simply reducing the number of ejaculations. Kirkland, furthermore, rejects the idea that the controlling one’s *jing* would be exclusively Daoist. See Kirkland, ‘Fanzong shu’.

possible to transform and create a change—if not in this life, then in the next.

To Teach Children to Read or Become Morally Good Humans

Liu Hengdian gives a famous quotation from the Han dynasty saying: ‘To be a teacher of the Classics is easy. To be a teacher of human beings is difficult’ (經師易, 人師難).⁸⁸ It means that it is an easy task to teach people to read books and to write essays, which the teacher of the Classics does, but to teach them self-cultivation is difficult. The most important part is to make them become morally good persons. One way to realise this goal is to read ledgers of merit and demerit. This is a specific genre, which lists good and bad deeds and how actions effects a persons life. The general rule is that evil actions bring bad retribution and good deeds bring good retribution. ‘If you plant beans, you will get beans; if you plant pumpkins, you will get pumpkins. This is a natural principle’ (種豆得豆, 種瓜得瓜, 亦自然之理).⁸⁹ Liu Hengdian especially mentions three ledgers of merit and demerit, namely: *Taishan ganying pian* 太上感應篇 [The Tract of Taishang on Action and Response], *Wenchang Dijun yinzhi wen* 文昌帝君陰騭文 [Lord Wenchang’s Text of Hidden Administration], and the *Guansheng Dijun jueshi zhenjing* 關勝帝君覺世真經 [True Scripture to Awaken the World by Imperial Lord Saint Guan].⁹⁰ *Taishan ganying pian* is a record of Lord Taishang, or Laozi as a deity. This works explains that the fate of men is created by themselves.⁹¹ There are comments on the work

⁸⁸ *Cunxue jiuyu*, 41b. The expression originates in the *Houhan ji: Lingdi ji* 後漢紀·靈帝紀 [Annals of the Later Han: The Records of Emperor Ling] by Yuan Hong 袁宏 (328–376). The expression has become an idiom and turns up in the *San zi jing*. It is still used today, for instance, to describe Xi Jinping’s views on teaching. See Wang, Qu, and Wang, ‘Jingshi yi de renshi nan qiu Xi Jinping zheyang zhijing “da xiansheng”’.

⁸⁹ *Cunxue jiuyu*, 12b.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18b.

⁹¹ Brokaw, *Ledgers*, 36.

in 1164, so we know that it at least existed at that time. Later it was included in the Daoist Canon.⁹² Different deities, for example, the Stove deity, Zaojun 灶君, will report about people's evil deeds and decide a karmic retribution according to the degree of evil. A certain period of time will be subtracted from this person's life.⁹³ *Wenchang Dijun yinzhi wen* is a newer kind of ledger of merit and demerit (the preface is dated 1724). It has a great number of topics but few explanations.⁹⁴ The *Guansheng Dijun Jueshi Zhenjing* was, according to tradition, written by Lord Guan 關公 himself through spirit writing. The deity Guan Yu 關羽 (?–220) was an overseer of moral behaviour and hence the text was of significant importance and had to be learnt by heart by young pupils as well as distinguished officials.⁹⁵ According to Liu Hengdian, the teacher should recite those texts for the children at school, and he should even recite them together with the children.⁹⁶ Most likely, only the teacher had a copy of those ledgers of merit. The students might have learnt to recite the texts from listening to the recitation of the teacher. Liu proposes that the teacher explain the passages for them and if they do not understand, he should elaborate even more on them. The most important is to make them understand that if they do bad things, it will enact bad retribution, but if they do good things, their future will be bright.⁹⁷ As we have seen, the Daoist tradition regards those texts as Daoist, but the idea of retribution has also been reinforced by the Buddhist notion of karma. However, even Confucians claim that retribution is a Confucian idea, and the *Taishan ganying pian* starts with a quotation from *Zuozhuan* 左傳 [Commentary by Zuo], which is regarded as a Confucian text.⁹⁸

⁹² Brokaw, *Ledgers*, 41.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁹⁵ ter Haar, *Guan Yu*, 218.

⁹⁶ *Cunxue jiuju*, 18b.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18b.

⁹⁸ Brokaw, *Ledgers*, 40.

The morality that was taught also included being a good friend. According to Liu Hengdian, a teacher has to teach pupils to accept their fellow students as friends. Friendship is the fifth of the traditional five Confucian bonds. Liu Hengdian argues that the students are like his children and therefore students, sons, and nephews of a teacher all call each other ‘brother’ or ‘brother of [the same] generation’ to translate it literally (*shixiong* 世兄).⁹⁹ The relationship between fellow students is especially important. Liu gives an example from the *Lunyu* where Zihua 子華, a disciple of Confucius, was employed on a mission. A fellow disciple, Ran Qiu 冉求, cared for his mother and requested grain for her.¹⁰⁰ Compared with the other four bonds, a friendship is mutual, and this mutuality gives it its special character.¹⁰¹ Except for the emphasis on self-respect, the emphasis on friendship is also shared with Taizhou learning.¹⁰² If the next generation of sons and students do the same for generation after generation, their feeling of mutual respect will grow. Liu Hengdian says that this is why there has been a saying transmitted from ancient times about good relations between the Kong 孔 and the Li 李 family. In this way, Liu makes a connection between the bond of friends and the compatibility of Daoism and Confucianism.¹⁰³ I find this transition from ideas on friendship to a theoretical perspective on the two philosophical and religious traditions to be rhetorically skilled. The argumentation is also totally congruent with the ideas of his master Liu Yuan. He regarded the way of Confucius and Mencius as the same way as Laozi, and he believed that Laozi had been the teacher of Confucius. From Laozi, Confucius had learnt not ritual (*li* 禮) but principle (*li* 理), which according to Liu Yuan is the same as the

⁹⁹ *Cunxue jiuyu*, 21b.

¹⁰⁰ *Lunyu*, ‘Yongye’ 雍也 4: ‘子華使於齊, 冉子為其母請粟’.

¹⁰¹ The other four bonds are the bond between parents and children, superior and subordinate, husband and wife, and the one between older (brother) and younger (brother).

¹⁰² Lidén, ‘Taizhou Movement’, 118.

¹⁰³ *Cunxue jiuyu*, 21b. Confucius’ family name was Kong and Laozi’s family name was Li.

Way (*dao* 道).¹⁰⁴ When the *Daxue* talks of ‘resting in goodness’ (在止於至善), this is the same as the Daoist learning of ‘going down to the cinnabar field’ (*xia dantian* 下丹田).¹⁰⁵ However, the praxis Laozi taught Confucius can only be learnt through oral transmission and therefore there is nothing written down about those exercises.¹⁰⁶ The idea that Confucius and Laozi met is found as early as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a text on which both Liu Yuan and Liu Hengdian wrote commentaries. In *Zhuangzi*, Confucius arrives at the archive where, according to tradition, Laozi (Lao Dan 老聃) used to work. They have a conversation during which Laozi makes fun of Confucius and his petty philosophy, especially his putative hypocritical ideas of humaneness and benevolence.¹⁰⁷ Further on, Confucius tells his disciple Zigong 子貢 of Laozi and recognises that Laozi is the dragon. When Confucius again visits Laozi, he confesses that he had hitherto not taken part in the Heavenly transformations. Luckily, Laozi confirms that he now finally found the Way (*dao* 道).¹⁰⁸ The chapters ‘the Heavenly Way’ (*tiandao* 天道) and ‘the Heavenly transformation’ (*tianyun* 天運, ‘the Revolution of Heaven’ in Legge’s translation), where we find this narrative, belong to the outer chapters of *Zhuangzi*. Their authenticity has been questioned, but nevertheless, we can assume there was an early tradition of placing Laozi and Confucius together, usually to show that Confucius is inferior to Laozi, that is, to express a clear Daoist stance in a satirical way. In Liu Yuan and Liu Hengdian, the rhetoric is a little bit different. For them, Laozi and Confucius both contributed to the tradition despite their presumed awareness of the narrative in *Zhuangzi*. They never mock Confucius, although they describe him as the student of Laozi.

¹⁰⁴ The translation Way cannot do justice to the concept of Dao 道.

¹⁰⁵ Another translation would be ‘to rest in the attained goodness’. Legge translates it as ‘to rest in the highest excellence’.

¹⁰⁶ Olles, *Ritual Words*, 103.

¹⁰⁷ *Zhuangzi*, ‘Tiandao’ 天道, 6.

¹⁰⁸ *Zhuangzi*, ‘Tianyun’ 天運, 7.

Methods of Reading

As for concrete teaching of reading and writing, Liu Hengdian argues that it is important to lecture while teaching the children to read and write. Explaining the texts was an important part of the reading process. The differences between reciting and explicating a text are emphasised by using two different concepts (*nianshu* 念書, reciting, versus *jiangshu* 講書, explaining). In private academies, famous masters lectured on a classic in the same way as famous Buddhist monks lectured on the meaning of a certain Buddhist sūtra, such as the *Fabua jing* 法華經 [Lotus Sūtra].¹⁰⁹ In the view of Liu Hengdian, the teacher should use colloquial language while explaining characters to improve the understanding of the children. This should be done without slipping into slang or dirty words. He has to proceed slowly, by teaching one character and then another one, one text and then another text, thus building a solid foundation. Liu Hengdian's definition of a teacher versus a parent is that the teacher has knowledge of the whole learning process. Furthermore, when talking about a text, the teacher has to relate the content to his own life. The teacher has to 'go back to his own stable mind and examine himself' (*zhi pingxin zishen ye* 之平心自審也).¹¹⁰ This means his ability to relate the content of the classics to his own life, is a prerequisite to help the students do the same. One common mistake of the Classicist teacher, according to Liu Hengdian, is having the pupils read too many books. 'It you read one classic, you will benefit from it for until the end of your life' (讀一經即終身受一經之益).¹¹¹ Liu refers to how the disciples of Confucius read the Classics. They specialised in one, or at most two. 'Zixia was good at *Shijing*, Ziyou was good at *Liji*, Qidiao Kai practiced *Shangshu*, and Shang Qu practiced *Yijing*' (子夏長於詩, 子游長於禮, 漆雕開習尚書, 商瞿習易).¹¹² Patrons like when pupils read extensively, but after having

¹⁰⁹ Yu, 'Reading', 76.

¹¹⁰ *Cunxue jiuwu*, 16b.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28a.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 27b–28b, the chapter: 'Books should be read thoroughly' (*shu yi*

read several books, the pupil will still not be an accomplished person, nor will they remember the books. Their knowledge will be empty and shallow. According to Liu Hengdian, ‘to understand the principle clearly while reading, one has to practice them diligently with one’s whole body’ (讀書明理在身體力行), and the goal of reading is to receive the book in your heart.¹¹³ First, the pupil should recite the book from the beginning to the end without missing a sentence and without reading a single character incorrectly. This defined the ability to memorise the text.¹¹⁴ The method has often been criticised by Westerners as useless rote-learning, but for the Neo-Confucians, a main idea was that by memorising the text, its moral philosophy would be internalised and the learner would automatically practice it in real life.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the differences between classical and vernacular Chinese were huge, and for the children it was like learning a new language in a similar vein as it was in the West for anyone to learn Latin.¹¹⁶ After reciting the text, Liu Hengdian said that the student should digest it for a few days, following his breathing while reciting, until it has entered into his heart.¹¹⁷ Almost a contemporary of Liu Hengdian, Mei Zengliang 梅曾亮 (1786–1856) argued that essays would be realised by the voice and the recitation of them would make *qi* flow. Liu says that if you read the Classics in this way, you will benefit from them through your whole life.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, it is stated that students were reading the text in a fast rhythm while swaying the body, which a Korean visitor to China, Hong Taeyong (1722–1809), commented upon, saying it was the same as in his country.¹¹⁹ The protestant missionary Arthur A. Smith had quite

shudu 書宜熟讀). Zixia is also known as Bu Shang 卜商, Ziyou as Ran Qiu 冉求, Qidiao Kai as Zikai 子開, and Shang Qu as 子木.

¹¹³ *Cunxue jiuju*, 28a.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Yu, ‘Reading’, 55.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹⁷ *Cunxue jiuju*, 28a.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Yu, ‘Reading’, 43.

a different opinion of recitation in Chinese village schools. He mockingly describes how they read, or rather shouted, at a ‘railway speed’. For a Confucian teacher, shouting and studying is synonymous, Smith concludes sarcastically. Liu Hengdian’s philosophy of education and reading followed an older Neo-Confucian tradition which goes back to Zhu Xi’s theory of reading. This reading is a kind of mindfulness exercise, which comes close to sūtra recitation.¹²⁰ An author of a Ming text gives many quotations from both Confucian and Buddhist texts on the benefits of reading aloud.¹²¹ According to Zhu Xi, one should have an open mind (*xuxin* 虛心) while reading so as to read the text without prejudice.¹²² Another understanding of his expression would be to interpret *xu* in *xuxin* as a verb, that is, to empty one’s mind. Zhu Xi also emphasized chanting or intoning *fengsong* 諷誦 (songs).¹²³ Qing scholar Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1732–1815), argued that quick reading (*jidu* 急讀) helps to understand the form of a text, while slow reading (*huandu* 緩讀) is a means to understand the meaning.¹²⁴ Li Yu makes an interesting comment on the relationship between the way of reading the Classics and Buddhist sūtra recitation. According to her, Buddhist monks were often involved in teaching at the elementary level.¹²⁵ Furthermore, mothers were often

¹²⁰ The recitation of Buddhist sūtras is a part of Buddhism’s world of sound. In Japanese, chanting Amida’s name and recitation of the title of the *Fabua jing* is common, and all Japanese Buddhist schools were engaged in vocalisation of the texts (Mross, *Memory*, 8). *Kōshiki* 講式 is a specific genre of ritual which includes different types of vocalisation of texts. They were originally meant to be read in private, but when recited during the ritual they are vocalised. In Shingon 真言 and Tendai 天台 traditions, musical notation was used to write the basic melodies. The vocalization was a tradition in itself and was passed on from master to disciple (Mross, *Memory*, 28) In the Daoist tradition, recitation is also very important.

¹²¹ Yu, ‘Reading’, 118. The author was Hu Shi 胡侍 (fl. 1548) and the text where he gives those references is ‘Zhenzhu chuan’ 真珠船 [Real Pearl Boat].

¹²² Dai, ‘Books, Reading’, 39.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹²⁴ Yu, ‘Reading’, 63–64.

a child's first teacher of reading, and they were often Buddhists. If the way of reading did not come from Buddhist monks, mothers might have influenced the children to read the Classics in the same way as the Buddhists read the sūtras. Li Yu points to the perceived beauty of the recitation melody and comments on similarities with Chinese Kunqu opera (昆曲), which points to recitation as a form of artistic appreciation.¹²⁶ The enjoyment of listening is there both for the one who is reading and the one standing beside the reader.

Summary

Liu Hengdian's theory of teaching is based on Neo-Confucian philosophy, a belief in retribution—no matter if it is a Daoist or Confucian idea of retribution or a Buddhist idea of karmic retribution—as well as (Daoist) theories on preserving the body. He quotes from the Classics such as the *Lunyu*, *Mengzi*, *Liji* 禮記 [The Book of Rites], and *Zhuangzi*. To divide those classics into Confucian and Daoist is, in this case, superfluous. For Liu Hengdian, they were all useful and deserved to be revered. He belonged to the eclectic Liumen tradition which mixed Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and wrote commentaries on *Zhuangzi* and the *Da Foding shoulengyan jing* 大佛頂首楞嚴經 (Skt. *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*). For Liu Hengdian, teaching was a sacred endeavour. He regarded teaching as the continuation of Heaven and Earth's creation of human beings. Where the creation stops, the teaching starts.

In many ways, Liu Hengdian follows a middle path. The teacher should not be too stern and not too slack, and he should refrain from beating the students, but not completely. He also had to make himself respected, and flogged misbehaving pupils so as to set an example. From the Wang Yangming tradition, he inherited criticism of uncontrolled beating and scolding as well as the idea of self-respect, which was inaugurated by Wang Yangming's follower Wang

¹²⁵ Yu, 'Reading', 66.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 65.

Gen. The self-respect of the teacher meant to behave morally well. It meant also not being overambitious and trying to force the pupils to become better than they had capacity for, but not being lazy either. Both extremes he regarded as selfishness. Furthermore, the middle path meant refraining from greediness and teaching too many pupils, but also having parents and patrons pay reasonably. Liu Hengdian shared the common Neo-Confucian idea of education, namely that the goal is self-cultivation and creating a good person, not to 'write flowery compositions' and other literary skills, but, of course, the pupils should learn to read. It is not entirely clear if they should learn to write, and he says nothing about mathematical skills. Liu Hengdian was a realistic teacher. It is of no avail trying to teach pupils things that are too difficult for them, and the teacher has to analyse the levels of different children and give them individually customized teaching. Some students are more intelligent than others, and this might also change over time. Puberty is a critical period in their lives. To prevent the older and more mature boys interfering with the innocent younger ones is, according to Liu, important, otherwise their sexual interest will start too early, which he believes can shorten their lives. He was deeply concerned with the question of how to create a positive group dynamic and prevent the older, crafty pupils from harassing the younger ones. The pupils should have a good relationship with other children and be good friends, which is one of the five Confucian bonds.

As a teacher today in a different part of the world, it is still easy to recognize Liu Hengdian's struggle with students and parents. He wanted to spread his lifelong and concrete knowledge to his contemporaries to improve education at a local and basic level. What makes his argumentation interesting is that his philosophy of education is an application of Neo-Confucian philosophy. This philosophy had from the start combined Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist ideas, most likely without making a clear distinction between them. Liu Hengdian's message was that teaching, if performed in the right way, is a way of practicing self-cultivation.

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Abbreviations

SBCK *Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊. See Secondary Sources.

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