

Learning Experience: An Alternative Understanding Inspired by Thinking Through Confucius

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Yun You

Department of Education, Institute of Schooling Reform and Development, East China Normal University

Abstract

Purpose: This article aims to provide an alternative understanding of learning experience in contrast to the dominant constructivist interpretation, and discuss its implication for pedagogy.

Design/Approach/Methods: The aim is specifically achieved in the comparison between a review of how experience is understood in constructivism and its philosophical underpinnings and an exploration of how it can be understood alternatively inspired by Confucius' educational thought and premised on his ontology. Drawing on this philosophical discussion, learning experience is reinterpreted.

Findings: Beyond rationally translating experience into knowledge or gaining knowledge on the basis of experience, learning leads students to immediately and consistently experience *dao* in which *tian* and *ren* harmoniously unite. This experience renders aesthetics and religiousness in learning and moral transformation in life events.

Originality/Value: By illustrating this ontological alternative of learning experience, this article is an attempt to fundamentally decolonize thinking about pedagogy.

Corresponding author:

Yun You, Department of Education, Institute of Schooling Reform and Development, Wenke Building, East China Normal University, No. 3663, Zhongshan North Road, Shanghai, 200062, China.

Email: you.yun@outlook.com



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Learning experience

The popularization of international large-scale attainment tests, in particular Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), has positioned China as a new world-class educational reference society, especially for some Anglo-American countries.¹ The 2018 PISA result that saw Chinese students far ahead of even peers in East Asia will probably only accelerate this trend. With regard to the identified lessons, major attention has been paid to either a variety of assumed transferable features regarding school systems, such as teacher payment, education and professional development, national curriculum, school autonomy and accountability, and strategies to eliminate school disparities, or factors outside schools, including Confucian culture still presented in contemporary China, parental expectation and high investment, and private supplementary tutoring (Morris, 2015). However, among these explanations, pedagogy has often been ignored or downplayed in the narratives of China achieving educational “success.”

Even when pedagogical practices in China have been portrayed to be worthy of emulation, most ideas and concepts are thought to have originated in the West. For example, based on the evidence from East Asia, whole-class teaching has been advocated in Western classrooms (e.g., Reynolds & Farrell, 1996; Stevenson & Lee, 1995). However, it was deemed to be “borrowed” by China in the late 19th century as part of the educational modernization movement (You, 2019a). More recently, the Western-generated idea of learner-centered education has dominated the national discourse of educational reforms in China, and Chinese scholars have especially identified constructivism as a pivotal underlying theory (Liu, 2005). This is mainly because constructivism as a learning theory, flourished in the U.S. during the 1990s and characterized by active learning and independent inquiry, was seen as an adequate remedy for Chinese pedagogy that has long been criticized as rote learning and knowledge transmission. A group of leading Chinese scholars played a key role in promoting this fashionable and “advanced” theory in the late 1990s, in the mood of reaching out to, and catching up with, the West, particularly the U.S. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claims (2011), learner-centered reforms have revealed a crucial reason for China’s outstanding PISA performance. It seems that China has become a good apprentice of learning Western traditional and constructivist education and an ideal exemplar of legitimating these two contradictory types of education (You, 2019b).

Some scholars have challenged the Western misunderstandings of Chinese teaching and Chinese learners. A notable example is the series of research accomplished by Watkins and Biggs

(1996) and continued by their colleagues (e.g., Chan & Rao, 2009). They identify a paradox—while Chinese learners are seen as those adopting rote learning and experiencing a less favorable educational environment as Western educators perceive, they perform better than their Western counterparts in “deep learning” tests. A primary argument is that, for Chinese learners, memorization often involves high cognitive processes, which leads to good understanding. The stereotypical representation of Chinese pedagogy seems to be challenged by illustrating that it can achieve the same kind of understanding as Western pedagogy does. But Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) move further. Observing that East Asian learners often obey teachers’ instruction even before understanding occurs, they argue this type of learning is derived from a divergent conceptualization of “self” that brings about less obsession with authority within the process of sensemaking. This move epitomizes a more radical departure from a West-centric system of educational knowledge. In this vein, there awaits a deeper elaboration of Chinese pedagogy² that builds on those like Watkins and Biggs but extends beyond it by examining the philosophical and cultural dispositions that lie beneath pedagogy and PISA scores.

This article is a response to a growing awareness of the comparative absence of the discussion of Chinese pedagogy and the limited efforts going “beyond Western horizon” in the global trend of “looking China” (Silova et al., in press; Takayama, 2017). It specifically reflects on the dominance of constructivism in China’s New Curriculum Reform (*xinkegai*) over the past two decades. Embedded in this dominance are (1) a dichotomy between Chinese/traditional (mainly Confucian)/teacher-centered/exam-oriented education and Western/modern/learner-centered/quality-oriented education (Tan, 2016); and (2) a prevalent assumption that the “flawed” former should be replaced with, or at least amended by, the “advanced” latter, based on a range of perpetuated orientalized and self-orientalized stereotypes of Chinese education (You, 2019a). In this context, this article concentrates on “experience”—a key but under-examined concept of constructivist pedagogy. It explores the constructivist understanding of experience, offers an alternative understanding by “thinking through Confucius,” and discusses how this alternative understanding may inspire an-Other approach to learning experience and contribute to pedagogical improvement.

My emphasis on thinking through Confucius is inspired by Hall and Ames’ (1987) seminal work *Thinking Through Confucius*. In the introduction, they articulate the intention and method of this book—“to achieve relative clarity with regard to the principal issues in Confucius’ thought” and “to provide an exercise in *thinking* using Confucius’ philosophy as medium” (p. 6, emphasis in original). In this article, firstly, my interpretation primarily refers to Confucius as portrayed in the *Analecets*³ rather than Confucianism as a whole that evolved later to include various Neo-Confucianisms, the first arising to meet the challenges posed by Buddhism and the second responding to the crisis of Chinese philosophy caused by the encounter with its Western counterparts. Secondly, although Confucius never used any terms directly equivalent to “experience” in

the *Analects*, the embedded philosophical insight provides a unique perspective to reconsider this dominant pedagogical concept, one which can inspire a more holistic approach. In this sense, rather than exploring Confucius' thinking about experience, I attempt to think about experience *through* Confucius.

This attempt is specifically achieved in comparison with a review of how experience is understood in constructivism and its philosophical underpinnings, particularly concerned with the philosophies of Aristotle, British empiricists in the 17th and 18th centuries such as Locke and Hume, Kant, and Dewey.⁴ Drawing on this comparison, I argue that experience is thought as sensory material/basis to generate knowledge within the examined Western philosophical thought. Yet, Dewey additionally conceptualizes it as a living process in which humans are situated and interact with nature. When meaning and value are realized in the process, the process is peculiarly aesthetic and religious, as transformed in the refined experience. In contrast, premised on the ontology of Confucius, experience is primarily in a verb form—experiencing, as an approach to *dao* in which the human becomes one with the whole and this renders a moral way of living. Moreover, the experience of *dao* is not just aesthetic and religious similar to Dewey's ideal form of experience but also immediate, embodied, and consistent.⁵ In the light of this philosophical discussion, learning becomes a concrete process of experiencing harmoniously dwelling in this world, and this learning experience would lead them to persistently attuning to *dao* in varied life situations.

Understanding experience in constructivism and its philosophical underpinnings

As an educational theory, constructivism, which originated from “the Piagetian-led cognitive revolt against behaviorist theories of learning,” has progressively consolidated its global popularity since the 1980s (Matthews, 1993, p. 360). Notwithstanding variations among constructivist theories (Irzik, 2001), a common emphasis with respect to learning is placed on individual students' experience, which indicates their engagement in learning and with what they have done in the past. To teach smoothly and effectively, teachers are expected to intelligently react to both kinds of learning experience through interacting with students and facilitating student-led activities. For advocates, constructivist pedagogy is more likely to enable students to actively yield understandings of how the world is experienced individually and socioculturally. However, experience as a key concept has often been used self-evidently in constructivist pedagogy. This section briefly reviews the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism and how they have shaped the constructivist understanding of learning experience.

As Matthews (1993) notes, “constructivism is basically a variant of old-style empiricist epistemology,” which can be traced to “Aristotle's individualist and sense-based theory of knowledge” (p. 359). Following Plato, Aristotle quests the eternal forms/ideas of the world. But, while Plato

detaches forms from the actual world of experience and degrades experience to untrustworthy appearance, Aristotle pursues knowing the experiential world in which forms are not transcendent but immanent in particular things. Hence, to obtain knowledge means using one's rational faculties to reveal those embodied in experience (Taylor, 1990), which starts from one's regular and immediate "sensory encounters" with the world (Lear, 1988, p. 2). As Aristotle describes,

So out of sense-perception comes to be what we call memory, and out of frequently repeated memories of the same thing develops experience; for a number of memories constitute a single experience. (*Posterior Analytics II*, 19. 99b35-100a8, quoted in Chambliss, 1974, p. 20)

Based on the amassed experiences, one is able to contemplate forms, which elevates particular facts to universal concepts and coincides thought with being (Lear, 1988). For Aristotle, knowledge is innate and to manifest it, experiences as sensory materials are supposed to be rationalized.

While British empiricists in the 17th and 18th centuries generally reject the idea of innate knowledge, they inherit the Aristotelian paradigm of sense-based knowledge (Sgarbi, 2012). Commonly viewing experience as the origin of knowledge, empiricists variously illuminate the operational process of experience as a constellation of ideas stored in the human mind. Locke pinpoints that the mind is born as a *tabula rasa* until experience provides ideas as materials. Sensations derived from the experiential world produce simple ideas, and reflection makes us aware of the operation of our minds in combining simple ideas into complex ones to produce knowledge. Hume aims to discover fundamental laws that account for the working of mind on its experiential contents. As he argues, materials of our thinking are provided by sensory impressions. Through reflection, memory, and imagination, these impressions are copied and saved as ideas that further produce new impressions. Only by processing (e.g., augmenting, mixing, and composing) experiential materials, knowledge can be generated. However, those beyond our experience (i.e., substances) and those depending on the probability of experience (i.e., cause-and-effect) are left unknowable.

Confronting and inspired by Hume's skepticism, Kant recognizes the urgency of critically examining the possibility and impossibility of universal and necessary knowledge. On the one hand, he affirms that the content of knowledge is derived from actual experiences that we gain through sensibility. As we cannot transcend experience, the thing in itself is something actual for itself but uncognized by us. On the other hand, according to its own a priori rules, the mind employs spatial and temporal forms and categories (including cause-and-effect) to organize experience. Through a mediator—the *transcendental schema*—the pure concepts and the sense-perceptions are connected. Thus, opposing the pure empiricists, Kant argues that the forms of intelligence determine how the experiential world appears to us and in this way that we can cognize it. This epistemological turn—the cognitive object is made possible by the subject of

cognition—found the constructivist ideas of Piaget, commencing “the idea of ‘making’ rather than ‘finding’” (Ogborn, 1997, p. 124).

The perception of experiences as sensory materials being organized in various ways to generate knowledge only changed substantially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular, under the influence of Deweyian pragmatism. He challenges the traditional empiricism that articulates experience as atomic sensations and the rationalist denigration of experience as perceptual and fluxed. Underlying both is the nature–human dualism that he attempts to bridge. Dewey highlights the role of primary (or immediate) experience in associating human with nature, in which knowledge is rooted. Nevertheless, knowledge is not the vital determinant of experience’s relation to nature, as I shall elaborate later.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey (1929) points out that, “experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature” (p. 4, emphasis in original). That is, things are what they are experienced. Rather than passively being imprinted on with experience, our experiences of the nature are actively constructed via our interrelationships with it. Human and nature thus become a whole in primary experience. Nonetheless, primary experience is defined to be “gross, macroscopic and crude,” in contrast to “the refined, derived” and reflective secondary experience (p. 4). As Dewey (1929) articulates, primary experience forms a basis for secondary experience:

That the subject-matter of primary experience sets the problems and furnishes the *first data* of the reflection which constructs the secondary objects is evident; it is also obvious that test and verification of the latter is secured only by return to things of crude or macroscopic experience . . . (pp. 4–5, italics mine)

In other words, the products of secondary experience “are experienced only because of the intervention of systematic thinking” (pp. 3–4) or “the intelligent control” (p. ix) of primary experience. Having had “first data,” secondary experience grasps the meanings of the world, alters our interactions with nature, and continuously shapes the next round of experience. By asserting that experience is stemmed from and embodies human–nature interactions, Dewey distinguishes himself from traditional empiricists. However, his categorization of experience and the way of reflectively processing primary experience seem not to stray far away from what traditional empiricists insist on. The essential difference lies in his conceptualization of, and emphasis on, aesthetic experience and religious experience.

For Dewey, experience is not equivalent to knowledge or cognition; rather, the immanent aesthetic and religious qualities characterize the ideal form of experience. In his book *Art as Experience* (1934a), Dewey holistically integrates cognition, emotion, action, and meaning as one in aesthetic experience. More specifically, when adjusting our interactions with nature to

recover from disparity and resistance and regain the felt harmony and consummation, crude and gross ordinary life experience is transformed to refined aesthetic experience, as embodied in arts. This is what Dewey conceptualizes “an experience,” in which the human impulsion for “a heightened sense of meaning and the realization of value” is manifestly achieved; we “dwell within the world and appropriate it in its meaning” (Alexander, 1987, pp. xvii–xix). Similar to aesthetic experience, in the book *A Common Faith* (1934b), religious experience emerges from the adjustment that enables us to overcome disturbance and imbalance between nature and us. For Dewey (1934b), “the adjustment in life” is “an orientation,” which generically changes our existential interrelationships with nature and brings with it “a sense of security and peace” (p. 12). Religious experience allows us to move beyond our intelligent comprehension of things in present and imagine the ideal possibility of existence in the future that we would strive for to fulfil life with meaning and value.

The aesthetic and religious qualities of experience extend and deepen Dewey’s notion in a more holistic sense. For Dewey, the pursuit of knowledge is contextualized in a meaning and value system, leading to dynamic consummation and ideal future (Alexander, 1987). Yet, these two qualities of experience are almost absent in his books directly devoted to learning experience, even in *Experience and Education* (1938), which was published 4 years later. In this book, Dewey stresses the idea of basing education on students’ actual life experience to ensure “more multiplied and more intimate contacts” and continuity between students and what is studied (p. 21). Learning occurs when students’ past experience interacts with the subject matter that they are learning, and then, the present experience is further moved into the “net product of past experience” of human accumulated in curriculum as “organized bodies of knowledge” (Dewey, 1902, p. 21). Teachers should understand how students are shaped by their life experiences and set an educative environment in which unfamiliar ideas and concepts can be smoothly assimilated within students’ experiential scope, and what students have learned creates new experiences for the future learning. In short, the past life experiences serve as the basis to grow new experiences through which knowledge is gained, instead of being imposed as in traditional education.

Similar to Dewey, Piaget emphasizes the interaction between human and environment. But as experiences are the products—sensory feedback—of human’s actions, he regards the latter as the starting point of knowledge. Inspired by Kant’s idea of *schema*, Piaget conceptualizes scheme as “the generalizable aspect of coordinating actions that can be applied to analogous situations” (Furth, 1981, p. 296). Unlike schema, for Piaget, only the first scheme is innate; it is constantly extended and transformed during the human–environment interactions. This is a process that organizes experiences generated by actions and incorporates them into existing schemes, that is, *assimilation*, which leads to the adjustment of existing schemes and, thus, the emergence of new schemes, that is, *accommodation*. At least two aspects of experience can be seen in this process.

First, experiences are continuously gathered as materials, assimilated to yield understanding. Second, past experiences matter in terms of modifying schemes to let learning move forward.

Piaget's approach to experience has shaped how it has been generally used in constructivist pedagogy. Instead of passively receiving preexisting facts, students are expected to actively bring order to their experiences to construct understandings and meanings (e.g., Confrey, 1990; von Glasersfeld, 1995; cf. Irzik, 2001). For most constructivists, knowledge "tells us about our experiences, and how they are best organized" (Matthews, 1993, p. 362). Moreover, the construction of knowledge, including selecting sensory input and interpreting objects and events, is largely based on students' past experiences (cf. Jonassen, 1991; e.g., Osborne & Wittrock, 1985). To sum up, the constructivist understanding of experience is confined to be materials/basis of generating new knowledge, which has remained essentially objectified and cognitive.

If we think through Dewey here, we might image the following: When students "recover" from unknown to known and thereby imagine the possibility of ideal living, they experience a process of realization and this learning process becomes "*an* experience"; and when they use what they have learned to reestablish the harmony in their interactions with nature, the experience is again aesthetic and religious. What is missed is the experience arising out of learning concrete content of subject matter. This does not refer to psychological or mental phenomenon, but through the learning content, students experience the meaning and value of living in this world. The verb attribute of experience is highlighted. Moreover, rather than going through a transformative process, this kind of aesthetic and religious learning experience is immediate, embodied, and consistent. Here, I argue that the crucial shift from a noun form of "experience" to a verb form of "experience" becomes visible if we think from the ground of Confucian ontology. In the following sections, I first enunciate the inspiration from thinking through Confucius and then accordingly reinterpret learning experience.

Understanding experience through Confucius

Confucius never intends to differentiate the world of forms/ideas and the world of experience. This prevents him from being trapped in corresponding these two worlds, capturing the form of the world by objectifying and rationalizing experience. For Confucius, there is only one world in which humans live as and with *wanshiwanwu* (万事万物, all nature) and directly experience living in this world. Hence, he "shunt[s] aside questions which requir[e] him to go beyond empirical understanding and carefully limit[s] his discussions to those things within the bounds of immediate experience" (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 196). In contrast to the transcendence of the Western deity, the Chinese *tian* (天, Heaven) is "within the bounds of immediate experience." As Hall and Ames (1987) elaborate, *tian* is "unqualifiedly immanent," which is "a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own accord" and has "no existence independent of the calculus

of phenomena that constitute it” (pp. 206–207). Even acknowledging the transcendent characteristic of *tian*, Zhao (2009) argues that it is an alternative form of transcendence, which emphasizes the connection to “this-worldly experiences” and the engagement of humanity in the realization of its purposes and goodness.

In this sense, the notion of *tianrenheyi* (天人合一, Heave/nature-human unity)⁶ implies a sense of immediateness between *tian* and *ren*. Instead of resorting to external intermediators (e.g., *wu-shaman* and the king), as Yu (2003) argues, Confucius’ reinterpretation of *ren* (仁, co-humanity) justifies human’s “heart” as a new medium of the *tian-ren* communication, so that those “spiritually awakened and liberated individuals” are able to communicate with *tian* by self-cultivating towards *ren* (仁) (p. 70). *Tianrenheyi* is thereby situated in everyday life. For Ames (2011), rather than “the reconciliation of two originally separate aspects of the world after the fact,” *tianrenheyi* refers to “the continuing symbiotic mutuality” of “two inseparable aspects of experiences,” that is, “oneself and one’s world” (pp. 53–54). Thus, *tianrenheyi*, or the process of *ren* (人)—becoming one with the whole—is not just “within the bounds of immediate experience” but also consummately realized in the immediate experience. The unity is consummated as indicated in the notion of *he*—a harmonious integration among all correlative parts of a whole (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 207), which characterizes *tianrenheyi* with aesthetics and religiousness (see Li, 2020).

Drawing on Qian (2015 [1990]), Zhao (2018) notes that “the noblest encountering of *tian* and *ren* is in the *dao* movement” (p. 2). While *dao* (道, Way) embodies a sense of transcendence, it is never far from everyday life (Yu, 2003). I argue that this “encountering,” or *he*, is what should be experienced in everyday learning, which is the alternative learning experience focused in this article.

As it is often translated into Way, *dao* seems to be nominalized as a presetting, normative ideal for people to passively follow, which affirms the stereotypical critique of Confucian authority and obedience. Although this kind of *dao* is mentioned in the *Analects*, Hall and Ames (1987) accentuate that it is done “in a deprecating way” (p. 227). For example, as we read, “the masses can be made to travel along it, but they cannot be made to realize it”⁷ (*Analects*, 8/9). They argue that *dao* should be taken as a verb, meaning “leading through” or “road making” based on the legacy documented in the classics that “embraces all aspects of the historical process of organizing and structuring human experience” (p. 230). *Dao* is thus inherited as well as persistently being made. As recorded in the *Analects* (19/22), “The *dao* of King Wen and King Wu has not fallen to the ground, but existed in people.”⁸ Broadening *dao* (弘道, *hongdao*) is essentially “to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce, and where appropriate extend, a way of life established by one’s cultural precursors” (p. 227).

Whether one broadens *dao* depends on one’s engagement with the experience of one’s cultural precursors. The ways of individuals’ engagement are not fixed and unvaried. As Hall and Ames (1987) argue, Confucius’ “ontology of events” entails “an explication of the activities of specific

persons in particular context” (p. 15). *Dao* exists in varied dynamic interactions between a unique person and her/his unique circumstances. This is explicit in Confucius’ elaboration on the philosophical meanings of his key concepts—he does not offer “a general theory of being,” “a universal science of principles,” or preexisting norms, but rather sets concrete contexts, areas, and events (p. 248). Thus, the individual embodiment of *dao* is unique. People are cultivated to use their judgments to determine what is appropriate on “a case-by-case basis” (Ivanhoe, 1990, p. 28). *Dao* reveals itself in individuals’ specific experiences of reflecting on the contextual events and creatively adjusting their manners to different circumstances.

Dao is neither content-fixed nor identical to abstract and transcendent theory or principle. Nevertheless, it is consistent in individuals’ specific experiences. This kind of consistency is embodied in Confucius’ notion of *yiyiguanzhi* (一以贯之, one thread). As recorded in the *Analects* (4/15), the Master said, “Shen, there is one thread binding my *dao* together.”⁹ Zeng Zi interprets “one thread” as *zhong* (忠, loyalty) and *shu* (恕, reverence). Many scholars have commonly taken these two concepts as the Confucian Golden Rule but diversely interpreted their philosophical meanings (cf. Ivanhoe, 1990). In contrast, Zhang (1999) insists that Zeng Zi’s interpretation would substantialize *dao* by presetting its content. My understanding is that the concepts of *zhong* and *shu* should not be substantialized in the first place. Moreover, although the two concepts can be interpreted from diverse perspectives, to practice *zhong* and *shu* is aimed at achieving harmony between the self and related others. While the specific embodiments of *dao* differ in terms of content and forms, *dao* presents and leads to harmonious existence and encounters, which means that experiencing *dao* in various life situations is fundamentally consistent.

It is in all these senses that morality (道德, *daode*) for Confucius, as implied in the Chinese characters, is not pursuing integration with the whole by imitating the preexisting order and obeying prescribed rules but rather broadening *dao* (道) and realizing harmony with one’s unique, concrete, and changing circumstances. So that individuated *de* (德, virtue) can be cultivated to become one with the whole (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 221), and individual people encounter *tian* in the *dao* movement.

Dao is not the object of cognition. Instead of rationally and logically understanding *dao*, we are experiencing *dao* while we are harmoniously living in this world. This aesthetic and religious experience guides us to constantly broaden *dao*—living in the way that attunes to *dao*, which is the moral way of living. The question then becomes how the dynamic, contextualized, but meanwhile consistent *dao* could be aesthetically and religiously experienced and lead to moral existence. For Confucius, there are three pivotal approaches—music, ritual, and poetry:

Be evoked by poetry, be established on the ritual and be perfected through music. (*Analects* 8/8)¹⁰

As recorded in the *Analects* (7/14), “the Master heard the *Shao* in *Ch’i*”¹¹ and for three months did not notice the taste of meat he ate. He said, ‘I never dreamed that the joy of music could reach

such heights’.”¹² Zhang (1999) depicts this experience as *wu* (悟, awakening), which is “an ultimate aesthetic experience” embodying “the supreme beauty and goodness” (pp. 44–46). This experience is not emergent from mastering the theory of music but from the moment of *wu* in which he reaches a sacred state of attuning to *dao* by appreciating, and immersing himself in, a great piece of music. Thus, it is religious. The experience of *Shao* leads Confucius to experience *dao*, which is consistent with the experience of moral living. Moreover, experiencing *dao* is neither a result nor an end of experiencing *Shao* but rather an ongoing changing, a transformation to “a morally conscious person who would continue to strive for the highest state of moral perfection” as they have experienced (Cheng, 2005, p. 641). In this sense, the experience of experiencing *dao* would continuously direct people to keep self-cultivating throughout their lives.

Poetry in particular reveals the consistency of experiencing *dao*. To illustrate this, *xing* (兴, evocation) is the concept that should be understood. It is often compared with *bi* (比, analogy). They are both poetic device employed in and beyond China’s earliest collection of poems—*Shijing* (诗经, *The Book of Songs*). As Liu Xie argues in *Wenxindiaolong* (文心雕龙, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*),¹³ while “*bi* is a consequence of reasoning” by comparing general characteristics of things, *xing* “is the result of our responding to a stimulus according to the subtle influence we receive.”¹⁴ Dai (1991) underscores the irrationality of *xing*; as he argues, *xing* “comes to the mind first, without being sought after and therefore without being intellectualized” (p. 10). Thus, it neither necessarily follows causal logic nor presents the association of any substances but retains sensory intensity and highlights the consistency of feelings (Ge, 2004). I take the first stanza of *Guanju*¹⁵ from *Shijing* as an example:

Guan guan sing the fish hawks, 关关雉鸣

On the sandbars in the river; 在河之洲

The graceful, virtuous lady, 窈窕淑女

A fit mate for the *junzi*. 君子好逑

The singing of fish hawks is generally interpreted as the sound of mating call, which allusively analogizes to the desire of *junzi* (君子, a man of moral integrity) for the fair lady (Gu, 1997). Zhang (1999) nevertheless provides an alternative analysis of this stanza. Rather than telling a fact or simply describing a scene, he argues that the first two lines (i.e., the *xing* sentences) create an atmosphere and evoke a feeling of remoteness, peace, and seclusion that people yearn for. This leads readers to imagine a gentle and serene lady who embodies the distant, deep, and graceful spirits and sense (as the Chinese characters 窈, 窕, and 淑 imply), which attracts *junzi*, in the last two sentences (i.e., the sentences of *being-xing-ed*). There is no need of any further explanations for the correlation between these two images. The statement that being threaded together is the

instinct for mate and spouse—the rational facts—would in effect sacrifice the poetic sense. What is consistent are the experiences arising from two utterly different images; and I assume this kind of profound experience is what *junzi* pursues as portrayed in the first poem of *Shijing* edited by Confucius.

In everyday life, *dao* can be directly and ideally experienced through *li* (禮, ritual). Despite the fact that *li* stems from the attempt to imitate *tianrenheyi* and broaden *dao*, it is not a set of presetting norms and rules requiring one to mechanically obey. The etymology of *li* suggests its original connection with religious rites, which opens the communication between human and spirits (Cua, 2002, p. 474) in which one experiences the sacredness of *tianrenheyi*. This extends to concrete patterns of dynamic “man-to-man” interaction, which incarnates harmony and reverence in everyday life (Fingarette, 1972, p. 7). The capacity of *li* is not inborn but learned. Although the goal of learning *li* is not to master the prescriptions of *li*-procedure, this is where to start. Fingarette (1972, p. 7) pinpoints that in Confucius’ teaching, while the language and imagery of *li* serve as a medium, within which he talks about “the entire body of *mores*.” *Li* is far beyond the proficiency in skills. Ivanhoe (1991) accentuates that it invites and guides involved people to “develop a sense of what is right” (p. 24). In illuminating the moral, aesthetic, and religious dimensions of *li*, Cua (1979) notes that:

The *li* celebrating birth is, for the Confucian, a celebration of an anchorage; the *li* of mourning is an acknowledgment of the terminus of one’s efforts and achievement, and to be respected and venerated, not just for expressing our honor for humanity, but also for the continuity of accomplished words and deeds. The rites are thus to be performed with sincere generosity and reverent formality. (p. 387, emphasis in original)

In this sense, actions and emotions related to moral virtues are regulated and transformed by *li*, acquiring aesthetic and religious significance. The religiousness of *li*-experience lies in its direction to the cosmos and in the commemoration of “the Confucian vision of the grand harmony of man and his world” (p. 388). Parallel to this is the aesthetic experience evoked by the felt “grand harmony.” In well-learned rituals, one does what they are supposed to do and their gesture is harmoniously coordinated with others, all effortless and unaware. In this condition, one would gradually depart from merely practicing ritual actions (Fingarette, 1972, p. 9). This does not indicate a kind of automatism without any spirit in it; but rather, this spontaneous coordination is led by the ever-experienced aesthetic and religious experience of *dao*.

In sum, *dao* is immediately experienced. While the experiences of *dao* may differ in terms of content, they are consistent in terms of aesthetics and religiousness as illustrated in music and poetry, informing the moral way of living. The *li*-experience of *dao* and the transforming function of *li* enable one to appropriately amend and adjust one’s behaviors to accord with *li*, broaden *dao*,

and live morally. Based on this philosophical reinterpretation of experience, the next section elucidates learning experience alternatively, against the backdrop of a permeated constructivist understanding in the Chinese context.

An alternative understanding of learning experience

Since the 1990s, constructivist learning ideas and concepts, particularly, learner-centered education, have been introduced to China and gained in popularity among educators and scholars, although not without controversy. Chinese advocates have portrayed them as an antidote to the poison of the scandalized traditional education. To rectify the “backward” pedagogical modes under the banner of “quality-oriented education” (*suzhi jiaoyu*), New Curriculum Reform was nationally implemented in 2001 and has been ongoing to date. Since then, learner-centered education has explicitly or implicitly shaped the pedagogical discourse in China, despite the fact that two groups of leading scholars were locked in heated debate on constructivist learning in the mid-2000s (Tan, 2016), and more recently, the notion of “core competences” (*hexin suyang*) has replaced “learner-centeredness” as the trendy academic and policy concept.

A crucial move of the 2001 reform was the shift of the curriculum objective from “two basics” (*shuangji*) to “three dimensions” (*sanwei*). In addition to “basic knowledge and basic skills” (i.e., two basics), two new dimensions are included, namely, “process and methods” and “emotions, attitudes and values.” Learning experience is a vital concept to this policy change. Zhong (2011), the leader of the consultant team of this reform, articulates “process and methods” as “communicative teaching environment and interactive learning experience” (p. 63), which has resulted in the emergence of various forms of “cooperative learning” (*hezuo xuexi*) and “scenario-based learning” (*qingjing xuexi*) (You, 2019b). Desirable learning experience has been causally associated with the so-called learner-centered pedagogical activities, such as question–answer interaction between teachers and students, students’ active and independent inquiry, and group discussion and collaboration. Additionally, confronting the detachment between curriculum and students’ life experiences, scholars have underscored the incorporation of real-life situations into classroom teaching to help students associate their personal experiences with teaching materials. Ideally, students would construct knowledge based on their past and present experiences of learning-by-doing and their dialogues with curriculum, teachers, and peers (Zhong, 2003).

While affective education (*qinggan jiaoyu*) is not new to China, the addition of “emotions, attitudes, and values” has discursively heightened the status of noncognitive objectives and attached more significance to whole person education which stresses the holistic development. In practice, however, this dimension has often been taught either as the variants of knowledge memorized as preexisting or abstract concepts or principles or as being separated from academic learning and confined to daily life affairs. All in all, the understandings of learning experience in

the contemporary Chinese curriculum reform have been substantially limited to cognitive forms, the outcome of learner-centered pedagogical activities, and the materials and basis of constructing new knowledge, which are considerably congruent with the views growing out of constructivism.

In general, the Chinese equivalent word of learning is deemed to be *xue* (学). Nevertheless, Ames (2011) reminds us that Confucius explicitly distinguishes “cognitive exercises . . . associated with learning” and *xue*—“learning as personal growth” (p. 162). He elaborates that “the process of *xue* requires the deepening of one’s awareness as one lives one’s network of relations, thereby enabling one to become an increasingly sensitive and responsive member of family and community.” That is, learning should be circumstanced in terms of lived ethical roles and characterized by the sense and meaning of morality. It moves beyond developing cognitive and rational capabilities as a priority but values the cultivation of sensitivity to and appreciation of living-in-this-world with all nature in harmony. The level of learning is thus lifted from “*ren* penetrating *tian*” (*rencantian*, 人参天) to *ren* (人) harmoniously resonating with *tian* (Lin, 1983), which is “*Dao*-learning” (Chen, 2016). The holistic development of students, if it embraces the idea of cognitive and rational development accompanied by the nurturing of relation-awareness and morality, and if this is indeed the goal of educational reforms, it can only be achieved in this alternative learning.

Accordingly, thinking through Confucius engenders an alternative understanding of learning experience. While this does not negate the importance of students’ life experience in learning, it demands that it must be more than that. As explained above, two events, although not logically related, are consistent with each other as they both attune to *dao* and share the aesthetic and religious experience of *dao*. Likewise, while the contents of curriculum are rich and diverse, they are organized bodies of human culture and derived from real human life, ideally either presenting the “best” forms so far of human existence to be inherited and carried out by the following generations or containing the desire and aspiration for harmony to be fulfilled in the future. *Dao* lies in them and threads them together in a larger system of meaning and value, which could and should be experienced in the learning process. Like the transformation function of *li*, the experience of experiencing *dao* would guide students to learn various subjects of knowledge along moral lines. Furthermore, this learning experience impels self-cultivation and adjustments of students’ behaviors in their encounters with all nature. The *telos* of learning is not cognitively knowing the world but experiencing *dao* via knowing the world and transforming students’ ways of living in the world consequently. This learning experience would encourage them to constantly strive for moral perfection in their lives, as they taste the grand experience of harmony when they are young.

Although learning experience as discussed in this article is stimulated by studying concrete knowledge, the emphasis on experiencing *dao* in the process of learning does not downplay experience as the concomitant emotion and feeling of knowing. Rather, it holistically unites knowledge and meanings in learning, which enables us to aesthetically and religiously inhabit

this world. Moreover, experiencing *dao* through the concrete content of knowledge embraces the richness, vitality, and complexity of real life. Learning is thus far beyond understanding abstract concepts, theories, and rules, exercising skills, and developing capacity for reasoning. This alternative understanding of learning experience is more likely to achieve what Zhao (2016) calls for—“logical thinking skills and rigorous reasoning . . . [should be] taught along with cultivation of sensitivity to and responsibility for other human beings” (p. 181). From the ecofeminist perspective, the sensitivity and respect should be further extended to students’ daily more-than-human interactions and relations (Taylor, 2017). Thus, learning experience is essentially about experiencing how *dao* is experienced in various possible life encounters of students. Students can only become sensitized and respectful when they really feel that way. Concrete knowledge and the content of each experience may be easy to forget, but the felt profound experience of *dao* in learning is deeply embedded in heart.

Two examples are shown to illustrate the implication of this alternative understanding of learning experience for pedagogy. The first one is about learning the word “Spring” (春, *chun*) in Chinese. More than reading and writing it correctly and understanding it as one of four seasons (or other knowledge about Spring), learning this word should include experiencing the scene and meaning that grass, flowers, and trees come back to life in the sun as reflected in the image of the seal character of Spring 春, the simultaneous joy and hope, and beauty and sacredness attached to the endless change of time, the restarting of life, and growing to prosperity. The aesthetics and religiousness of *dao* is embodied and experienced. Thereby, learning Spring moves beyond knowing a character and a season; from now on, Spring itself is more than a character and a season for students. Once fully experienced, all these aspects of Spring as a holistic unity would arise spontaneously while students read, write, and think about Spring and would be reinforced and extended in the future learning. For instance, I once observed a demonstrative lesson teaching the prose *Spring*. The teacher was very good at reading aloud; the very first sentence of her reading—“yearning, yearning, Spring is approaching”¹⁶—immediately brought me into the mood of finally embracing something that I had been waiting for so long and so eagerly. Before reading the text, she asked students to describe the changes that they had experienced in the transition from Winter to Spring. When they started reading the text, while paying attention to how the author described the Spring scenery and shared feelings through the medium of language, students were experiencing Spring in a great piece of prose that moved them with the author’s exquisite writing. In this lesson, the life experiences of the author and students, the experience depicted in the text, and students’ present learning experiences of the prose and past experiences of learning the character are all consistent.

The second example is about studying biology. Formal schooling provides students with limited time and opportunity to have direct encounters with nature. Nevertheless, what Taylor (2017)

advocates—the anthropocene-attuned “common worlds” pedagogy—can also be adopted in classroom teaching. She underscores that a “common worlds” approach is to learn “with” non-human others rather than “about” them and “on their behalf” (p. 1), which rejects “the structuring logics of twentieth century humanist education” but instead highlights “the hybrid naturalcultural real life worlds that children inherit and inhabit, along with all other life forms” (p. 8). Hence, beyond biological knowledge, such as the physical structures and habits of animals, and the distribution and possible medicinal values of plants, biology is the subject nurturing sensitivity for “the ways in which we both affect and are affected by other species” (p. 11), which is likely to directly evoke experiencing living-in-this-world. However, according to my learning and class observation experiences, a typical Chinese biological lesson dedicates about 80% of the class time to studying about one species, while devoting the remaining time to explaining its ecological meaning. A possible better approach is organizing each lesson in the way that takes the whole ecological system as a net connecting all species including the human. Focusing on one species, students are not just taught to understand the way in which it cohabits with all other life forms in this net, but more importantly, to experience the harmonious co-habitation and the possible disturbing break of this harmony of the net.

Returning to learning *experience-ing*

Within constructivism and its philosophical underpinnings, experience is deemed as sensory material, which is (rationally) processed and serves as the basis for generating new knowledge. This conventional concept is endowed with new meaning in Dewey’s philosophy—it denotes a way of living in the world. Particularly, Dewey elaborates the aesthetic and religious qualities of experience, embodying the desire and efforts to reach a state of harmony, balance, peace, and stability by adjusting one’s interactions with nature. Although Dewey attaches great significance to learning experience, his focus is on the continuity between students’ actual life experiences and curriculum and teaching. The two qualities are rarely, if ever, discussed in the educational context. While there are some alternative Western approaches to experience, the constructivist understanding of learning experience has largely shaped modern pedagogy and China’s efforts on educational modernization.

While Confucius never directly uses the term experience, an alternative understanding of experience is inspired by his philosophical thought—an alternative to both Western practices and the recent attempts in China to redefine “learning” under the Western horizon. Key to this understanding is the concept *dao* in which *tian* and *ren* encounter. On the one hand, *dao* exists in every unique life event; the broadening of *dao* is contextualized and dynamic. On the other hand, it is consistent in all life events in the sense of leading to harmony and the highest state of morality that bring the aesthetic and religious feelings and meanings. The experience of *dao* seems similar to

what Dewey articulates as the ideal form of experience. However, for Dewey, human and nature are connected in and via immediate experience that should be refined to acquire aesthetics and religiousness, whereas for Confucius *tianrenheyi* presented in *dao* is immediately experienced in a non-bifurcated world and the experience of experiencing *dao* leads to continuous self-cultivation of a morally conscious person in ever changing life situations. The verb form of experience is thus fundamentally ontological.

Thinking through Confucius, learning is characterized by a moral sense that the human is (self-)cultivated to be able to harmoniously interact with all correlatives, as embodied in *dao*. Accordingly, learning experience can be interpreted as directly and consistently experiencing the aesthetic and religious *dao* through the concrete content of curriculum. Self is being transformatively cultivated not when students cognitively and rationally understand the world—that is simply knowledge accumulation, but in the moment of experiencing the coordination of self and *wan-shiwanwu* (all nature) in learning, as Confucius' *wu* (awakening) experience of the ancient music *Shao*. Learning experience is not objectified but rather participatory. Teachers are expected to guide students to *experience* by intelligently designing pedagogical approaches. In this way, the learning process becomes an aesthetic and religious process of experiencing the ideal way of living.

However, the dominance of Western philosophy on which modern education is founded has served to prioritize rational and objective knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge, the cultivation of the rational person, and the assumed causally resulting economic growth have permeated the aims of modern education (Zhao, 2016). In recent years, wide and severe critiques have pressured the OECD to partly shift its concern from cognitive–economic assessment to students' happiness and well-being (i.e., the noncognitive dimension of education), which have seemingly presented a more balanced conceptual design of its surveys. However, first, as Rappleye et al. (2019) argue, the definitions of happiness and self are “inherently biased in their first assumptions that anchor” these global surveys (p. 2), favoring the Western individualist self and independent mode of being. Second, the complete separation of cognitive and noncognitive realms in education is underpinned by the Western dualism. Acquiring knowledge is never the ultimate goal of Confucian education; anything learned that can be labelled education is fundamentally moral in the sense that it coordinates one's behaviors to achieve and maintain harmonious relationships with others. As Confucius emphasizes, “Learning and practicing what have been learned when appropriate, which makes me happy” (*Analects* 1/1).¹⁷

Parallel to the privileging of knowledge is the denigration of experience in modern pedagogy. Stengers (2012) criticizes a taken-for-granted Western hegemony in academia expressed in an unwritten rule of “thou shalt not regress,” which warns scholars to avoid “betraying hard truth by indulging soft, illusory beliefs” (p. 2). Quoting Stengers, Silova (2020, p. 140) notes that while

“looking for alternatives beyond the logic of Western modernity . . . would surely be perceived by many (Western) academics as a ‘regress’,” it is necessary for reimagining the world in richer terms. Echoing Silova, this article is another attempt to “regress” from the evolutionary tale of modern science by “returning” to the immediate and irrationalized experience. Meanwhile, this “returning” is rooted in Confucius’ ontology that conceives and experiences the non-bifurcated world in a religious and aesthetic, rather than (Western) rational and logical mode. This learning experience is not an epistemological alternative—getting access to the Western world in a noncognitive way, but fundamentally originated from an alternative ontology that centers the harmony in unique life events—getting access to the correlative world by means of experiencing. By illustrating this ontological alternative of learning experience, this article is an attempt to deeply decolonize our thinking about pedagogy.

Beyond rationally translating experience into knowledge or gaining new knowledge on the basis of experience, the alternative learning experience inspired by Confucius’ thought is highly significant as it leads students to experience aesthetic and religious existence in the continuous and harmonious encounters with all other life forms, which further renders moral transformation. In a Confucian sense, if *dao* designates “world-making,” a world in which correlative parts are in the harmonious coordination, the learning experience of *dao* would facilitate the fulfillment of “person-making” (Zhao, 2016). A person who has experienced the harmonious coordination in learning would strive to consistently cultivate self and adjust behaviors in consistence with *dao* throughout the span of one’s entire life.

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Notes

1. The title “learning experience” contains double meanings. First, this article aims to *learn* the concept of experience in an alternative way that is inspired by Confucius’ educational thought and premised on his ontology. Second, the term “learning experience” in a broader sense denotes the experience of learning and

the experience involved in learning as the material of knowledge production and the basis of knowledge growing, which may include the past experience of learning and general life experience.

2. While providing a definition of Chinese pedagogy is beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that this term is used here to refer to the evolving pedagogical ideas and practices derived from the Chinese philosophical premise and cultural disposition. Moreover, this article specifically focuses on Confucius' educational thoughts. Nevertheless, rather than taking it as the sole fundamental factor in shaping Chinese pedagogy, it is thought to be the key origin of Chinese educational thinking.
3. In other words, this article takes the *Analects* as the canonical text of Confucius' educational thoughts.
4. Dewey's work is concentrated here mainly for two reasons. First, despite the fact that he never used the concept of constructivism, "in recent constructivist literature, references to Dewey are . . . quite common" (Vanderstraeten, 2002, p. 234). Meanwhile, experience is "the very heart" of his thought (Alexander, 1987, p. xiii), which has long and deeply shaped the general understanding of learning experience.
5. This is not to deny or neglect the Western understandings and appreciation of immediate and embodied experience as elaborated and accentuated by, for instance, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. To what extent that these Western understandings are similar/different to that of Confucianism will need another paper to explore. Nevertheless, while there are alternative Western understandings, they have not led to substantial reshaping of modern pedagogy.
6. Although this notion is not directly stemmed from, or employed by, Confucius, it has been regarded to be "developed on the basis of the transmission" of some *Analects* texts (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 362) and become a unique characteristic of Confucianism (Yu, 2003).
7. "民可使由之，不可使知之。" Translated by Hall and Ames (1987).
8. "文武之道，未坠于地，在人。" Author's own translation.
9. "参乎！吾道一以贯之。" Author's own translation.
10. 子曰："兴于诗，立于礼，成于乐。" Author's own translation.
11. *Shao* is a piece of ancient music, which is the oldest then known in China.
12. 子在齐闻韶，三月不知肉味，曰："不图为乐之至于斯也。" Translated by Lau (1983, p. 59).
13. *Wenxindiaolong* is an ancient book of Chinese literary theory.
14. Translated by Shih (1959, p. 195).
15. Author's own translation.
16. "盼望着，盼望着，春天的脚步近了。" Author's own translation.
17. "学而时习之，不亦说乎。" Author's own translation.

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