

Core Conceptions of the Theory of Self-cultivation in East Asian Confucian Philosophy

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The present study examines the four core concepts that underpin the various theories of cultivation of East Asian Confucian philosophy: self (*ji*, 己), cultivation (*xiu*, 修), transformation (*hua*, 化), and nurture (*yang*, 養). The discussion is divided into six sections. The first section, the introduction, explains the significance of the issue in question. The second section examines the substantial notion of “self” as expounded in the Confucian intellectual tradition and the corresponding concept of selfhood or personhood. Confucianism stresses that (1) personal selfhood is based on the freedom of subjectivity (subjective volition), and (2) society’s values and norms originate in this freedom of subjectivity. The third section discusses the functional concept of cultivation, focusing on the fact that in Confucian theories the terms “cultivation” and “body” are always combined to form the concept of “self-cultivation.” Moreover, Confucian thinkers tend to discuss the effort of self-cultivation in the context of a body-mind continuum. Indeed, they often use orientational metaphors in order to describe the efforts entailed by cultivation. The fourth section analyzes the linguistic setting and context of the functional concept of transformation within Confucian philosophy of the concrete self. The term “transformation” indicates clearly that Confucian philosophy is a transformative philosophy. The fifth section analyzes the functional concept of nurture, stressing that Confucius’ two greatest followers, Mencius and Xunzi, represent two opposed approaches to nurturing. Mencius stresses that one should undertake the effort of “nurturing *qi*,” that is, produce culture through natural cultivation, while Xunzi advocates artificially instilling culture in order to discipline, tame, and order nature. Mencius and Xunzi both turn to the container metaphor in their discussions of self-cultivation. The article concludes that the various cultivation activities advocated by these two disparate Confucians are based on two assumptions: (1) the self coincides with the physical body, and (2) the physical self is steeped in and interactive with the cultural values of society. In sum, the functional concept of self-cultivation is an important pillar of Confucian theories of self-cultivation.

Keywords: East Asia, Confucianism, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, philosophy of the body, transformation, nurture, cultivation, physical manifestation

1. Introduction

The philosophical schools associated with East Asian Confucianism espouse transformative philosophies, which hold that the transformation of the world starts with the transformation of the self. It follows, therefore, that East Asian Confucian philosophy is centered on the theory of self-cultivation. In order to articulate this

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theory of self-cultivation, the present article discusses the core elements of self-cultivation in East Asian Confucian philosophy: the concepts of self (*ji*, 己), cultivation (*xiu*, 修), transformation (*hua*, 化), and nurture (*yang*, 養).

The importance of the theory of self-cultivation in East Asian Confucian philosophies can be viewed from two angles. First, the cultivation of the self is the starting point in the step-by-step Confucian project of transforming and pacifying the world. In *Analects*, 14.42, Confucius (551-479 BCE) is recorded as saying, “[The gentleman] cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence... He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men... He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people” (1992).¹ Since the pre-Qin period, all Confucians advocated an integrated cultivation process, extending outwards from oneself, to one’s clan, society, state, and empire. These stages are continuous and integrated; they vary only in scope, lacking any qualitative differences. “Oneself” is the core concept that connects each stage to the next. Yu Yingshi (余英時 1930-) describes this cultivation effort from self to empire as a uniquely “Confucian project.”² However, I stress that self-cultivation is the nucleus of this grand project. Mencius (372-289 BCE) argued that “the Empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one’s own self” (*Mencius*, 4A5).³ Moreover, *The Great Learning* reads: “From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation” (1973).⁴ The most important tenet held in common by Confucian thinkers throughout East Asia is that cultivating the self is the starting point for transforming the family, the state, the empire, and ultimately the world.

Secondly, recent scholars of Confucianism have agreed that a basic assumption of the Confucian tradition is that of the body-mind continuum. They also agree that Confucian cultivation activities are all directed to one’s body.⁵ In recent years, the University of California, Berkeley linguists Mark Johnson (1949-) and George Lakoff (1941-) have propounded experientialism and the theory of conceptual metaphor, both of which have proven to be mutually illuminating with Confucian philosophies. Johnson and Lakoff criticize the excessive objectivism of traditional Western philosophy. Equally dissatisfied with Western subjectivism, they stress the bodily basis of the mind and the metaphorical nature of thinking. Johnson makes the point that activities of knowing always involve direct physical experience.⁶ Johnson’s notion of direct physical experience comes close to the idea of bodily knowing (to know with and through the body) in Chinese intellectual history.⁷ This ancient East Asian concept of bodily knowing also includes the cultural traditions that one absorbs from society. However, the progression from physical experience to abstract thinking, and the transformation of emotion to reason, still depend on a long process of concerted cultivation. This is precisely the central tension of Confucian philosophy.

The concepts of substantiality and normativity have been rich topics for research in the Chinese language academia.⁸ Functional concepts, however, have been given less attention.⁹ The present study investigates the substantial concept of self and the related functional concepts of cultivation, transformation, and nurture operative in the cultivation theory of the Confucian philosophy, thereby opening a new vista for the study of Confucian philosophy.

2. The Starting Point of East Asian Confucian Philosophy: Self

East Asian Confucian philosophy begins with the concept of self. I shall focus on the term *ji* (己) in discussing the Confucian concept of self. Confucius elaborated on the meaning of *ji* in many utterances. For example, in *Analects*, 12.1, when Yen Yuan (顏淵 521-481 BCE) asks Confucius about benevolence,

Confucius asserts, “To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence.” During the past 2,500 years, Confucian thinkers not only in China but also in Korea and Japan have focused on this term and this passage and added their own comments. In 1172 when he was 43 years old, the eminent Song dynasty Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200) discussed Confucius’ utterance in his essay “Ke Zhai Ji” (克齋記). Drawing on Cheng Yi’s polarity of heavenly principle and human desire, Zhu Xi emphasizes that the effort of overcoming the self lies solely in the observance of rites.¹⁰ Early Confucian constructions of self tended to stress the need for the self to be humble and aspiring, arguing that goodness consists in responsibly carrying out one’s roles. In contrast to contemporary Western rights-based morality, Confucian thinkers advocate a sort of duty-based morality.

In Confucius’ and Mencius’ thought, the most important aspect of self is that decisions about the direction of the will are made by the “mind-heart” (心, *xin*). This thesis has two arguments: (1) The self is the free subject, and (2) the norms of society originate in the subjective will. In Confucius’ elaborations on the self, he affirms that people have autonomous will, and that by exercising will to transform the self, they ultimately transform the world.¹¹ Confucius said, “A benevolent man helps others to take their stand in that he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in that he himself wishes to get there” (*Analects* 6.30).¹² Moreover, “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” (*Analects*, 12.2). “It is not the failure of others to appreciate your abilities that should trouble you, but rather your own lack of them” (*Analects*, 14.30).¹³ Thus, Confucius stresses that subjectivity of will is established through interactions between self and others. For Confucius, the self is not a silent and static subjectivity, but rather the subjective agency of concrete praxis. As Benjamin I. Schwartz (1916-1999) rightly pointed out, Confucius defines subjectivity in terms of ethics rather than metaphysics.¹⁴ Consequently, whenever Confucius discusses self, it is always in connection with benevolence. Indeed, the pursuit of benevolence is the ultimate mission of human subjectivity. Hence, Confucius’ close follower Zengzi (曾子 505-432 BCE), says, “He [the master Confucius] takes benevolence as his burden. Is that not heavy?” (*Analects*, 8.7)¹⁵ Confucius remarks, “To return to observance of the rites through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others” (*Analects*, 12.1).¹⁶ According to Confucius, benevolence is the supreme virtue, produced internally through one’s aspirations and conscious efforts *via* the efforts of one’s mind-heart. In this formulation, the spirit of benevolence does not come down to us as the revelation of an otherworldly power, the divine other. The notion that the gentleman “takes benevolence as his burden” also underscores the idea that benevolence is to be realized through the concrete efforts of self. Self (*ji*, 己), for Confucius, represents the core of moral subjectivity; however, in order to realize moral consciousness, one must dwell in and have interactions with an ethical society. In summary, in Confucius’ thought, Self can be described as a sort of reflective mindful subjectivity.¹⁷

Mencius also stresses the subjectivity of self. For example, he says, “There has never been a man who could straighten others by bending himself” (*Mencius*, 3B1).¹⁸ For Mencius, self is the source of a consciousness that is capable of making value judgments. Those who cannot establish the subjectivity of self lose their ability to judge right and wrong, good and evil, and easily lose their way, become dissipated, and ultimately undermine their human dignity. Mencius comments on this sort of person, who lacks moral subjectivity, as those who consider only “obedience and docility the norm” (*Mencius*, 3B2).¹⁹ At the same time,

he affirms that once a person establishes his subjectivity, he is able to “live in the spacious dwelling, occupy the proper position, and go along the highway of the Empire” (*Mencius*, 3B2).²⁰

Although Xunzi (荀子 298-238 BCE) differs from Mencius regarding the theory of human nature and related teachings, he nonetheless also regards self as free subjectivity. More hard-minded than Mencius, Xunzi insists that free subjectivity must be achieved through conscientious efforts of study, learning, and practice, stressing that moral norms and rules originate in the subjectivity of self. Xunzi also says, “The learning of the gentleman enters through the ears, is stored in the mind, spreads through the four limbs, and is visible in his activity and repose” (*Xunzi*, 1.9).²¹ He thus advocates that, with regard to self, one must pay attention to the choices of the mind-heart. Hence, one must undertake learning and other cultivation efforts so that the self will make the right choices and interact in a morally upright way with society and the wider world.²²

As Kwong-loi Shun points out, when Confucian thinkers speak of “oneself” or “self,” they tend to be referring to the personal, physical body. These expressions hark back to the context of cultivation or reflection. This underscores, again, the fact that the Confucian concept of self is related to one’s self-reflective cultivation activities: a person’s ability to be introspective and self-critical, and even to transform himself depends upon his mind-heart. Mind-heart not only determines the direction of one’s will, but also acts as the intermediary between oneself and one’s body. Despite the significant differences between Mencius and Xunzi, including their diverging positions on whether the free volition of subjectivity arises from within, or from external standards and habituation, both argue that the mind-heart determines the direction of the person’s will.²³

The early Confucians held both that the mind-heart determines the direction of the will and that the mind-heart and body form a continuum.²⁴ In his “Inquiry into the *Great Learning*,” Wang Yangming (王陽明 1472-1529) elaborates on two early Confucian tenets: firstly, that the mind-heart and body form a continuum; and secondly, the notion of the freedom of subjectivity. Wang also suggests that the intentionality of mind-heart is the underlying premise of subjective freedom.²⁵

While Tokugawa-era (1603-1868) Japanese Confucians espoused a wide variety of different teachings, they agreed on some core issues. Importantly, they all held firm to the idea of the mind-body continuum, as well as that of subjective freedom. Itō Tōgai (伊藤東涯 1670-1736), son of the master of the Tokugawa Classicist school Itō Jinsai (1627-1705), stressed that the essence of self-cultivation lay in the unity of body and mind. He also opined, however, that the mind is the master of the body, because the mind is responsible for creating consciousness of value.²⁶ Itō Jinsai had said, “Discussions of the mind should be based on Mencius’ remarks regarding the minds of compassion (*sokuin*, 惻隱), shame (*shūo*, 羞惡), deference (*jijō*, 辭讓), and right and wrong (*zehi*, 是非).”²⁷

The 19th century scholar Ōshio Chūsai (大塩中齋 1794-1837), an adherent of the Yōmei school of philosophy, advocated that one who deeply recognizes that the body exists in the mind will be able to achieve subjective freedom of the self.²⁸ Parallels can be drawn between Ōshio Chūsai’s conception and the position of the contemporary American linguist Mark Johnson, who speaks of “the body in the mind.”²⁹

To sum up, the notion of self in East Asian philosophy embraces both the inner and outer lives of the person: in stressing the internal relationship between body and mind, Confucian thinkers suggest the mutual penetration of body and mind, and ultimately the unity of body and mind. Regarding the relationship between people and the world in which they live, Confucian thinkers argue that the transformation of the self is the foundation of the transformation of the world.

3. Functional Concept (1): Cultivation

In the East Asian Confucian theory of self-cultivation, the first functional concept is cultivation itself. The ancient dictionary *Guangya* (廣雅) states that “to cultivate is to refine.”³⁰ In Zhu Xi’s edition of the *Doctrine of Mean* (中庸), he explains the proposition that “to cultivate that Way is called ‘instruction.’”

“Cultivation” involves the making of measured gradations. Although the Way of [the common] human nature is the same for all, their psycho-physical endowments may differ, so there cannot but be differences in going too far or not far enough. The sage takes into account these individual differences in what it may be expected of them to do, and makes appropriate gradations in setting the norms for all-under-Heaven—and this is what is called instruction. Thus, we have the different categories [of instruction] under such headings as rites, music, punishments, and administration.³¹ (1999, 735)

The Korean Confucian Jeong Dasan (丁茶山, 정다산, 1762-1836) responded to Zhu Xi’s gloss of cultivation as “making measured gradations,” by insisting that “to cultivate means to refine so as to rectify,”³² reinforcing the East Asian Confucian interpretation of cultivation as rectification.

Firstly, the functional concept of cultivation is most often discussed with reference to the body. In East Asian Confucian philosophies, the body is often viewed as a container or vessel, which can be refined as such. The ancient dictionary *Erya* (爾雅) states that the line of poetry, “As a thing is carved and polished,” refers to self-cultivation.³³ This line comes from a description of the beauty of the gentleman’s character in the *Book of Odes*: “There is our elegant and accomplished prince/As from the knife and the file/As from the chisel and the polisher!”³⁴ The fourth chapter of the *Great Learning* also quotes this line, “As a thing is carved and polished,” referring to self-cultivation.³⁵ One undertakes the work and process of cultivation in order to achieve the cultivated self/body, which is elegant without, and possesses a deep integrity within. As Zhang Zailin (張再林 1951-) argues, self-cultivation means to refine one’s manifest character; its ultimate objective is the achievement of a “well-balanced admixture of the ‘native substance’ and ‘acquired refinement’” (25).³⁶

The verb “to cultivate” suggests certain kinds of conduct and physical action, and takes the terms “body” and “self” as its object. As Confucius said, one “cultivates oneself in order to achieve reverence,” “to bring peace and security to his fellows,” and “to bring peace and security to the people” (*Analects*, 14.42).³⁷ In effect, this cultivating of the body is a process of opening and integrating the mind with the world. Therefore, self-cultivation is the starting point for changing the world. For example, the *Doctrine of Mean*, Chapter 20, stresses that the process of self-cultivation culminates not only in transforming the self, but also, effectively, in transforming the world.³⁸

Secondly, in Confucian cultivation theory, the notion of “body” is always discussed in the context of mind-body interpenetration. At the same time, mind always takes the lead. For example, in the seventh chapter of the *Great Learning*, self-cultivation is interpreted as “rectifying the mind.” As Lao Sze-kwang (勞思光 1927-2012) has pointed out, in the *Great Learning*, the expression “rectifying the mind” refers to the process by which the mind ceases to be influenced by the emotions.³⁹ However, I propose that waves of emotions are the foundation of the living body. In fact, in the *Great Learning*, mind and body are always discussed in tandem, and the emotions are integral to both. Indeed, as we have seen, body and mind form a continuum and the effort of self-cultivation is discussed in the context of mind-body unity. The Korean Confucian scholar Jeong Dasan (丁茶山 1765-1836) stresses that throughout the *Great Learning*, the problem of self-cultivation is presented in the context of the idea that “mind and body are subtly united and indivisible.”⁴⁰

Thirdly, Confucian discussions of self-cultivation often draw heavily on orientational metaphors.⁴¹ The human body, for example, is regarded as the foundation for distinguishing the binary orientations of inner/outer, above/below, left/right, and before/after.

When the author of the *Great Learning* invokes the image of the measuring-square⁴² and the notion that morality is the basis of political order,⁴³ he uses orientational metaphors in order to describe positive and negative psychological states or emotions. These psychological states connect the self and the other.

The seventeenth century Korean king Jeongjo (正祖 정조, Yi San 李祘 이산, 1752-1800) also used an orientational metaphor in order to describe the body: “as to seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting, it definitely can be said, these functions are focused without, however can the effort to be unwilling to look, listen, speak, or act be said to be rooted without?” (1978)⁴⁴ In discussing Confucius’ saying, “to master the self by practicing the rites constitutes being of *Ren*,” king Jeongjo stressed that the verb “to master” refers to “ordering oneself within,” and emphasized the inseparability of the two processes of ordering oneself within and regulating oneself without—a very acute insight. Such use of orientational metaphor in discussing the effort of self-cultivation is a distinguishing feature of East Asian Confucian philosophy.

Fourthly, social relations provide a context for discussions of self-cultivation. In chapter 20 of the *Doctrine of Mean*, self-cultivation is discussed with reference to the five cardinal social relationships between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends.⁴⁵ This line of thinking is entirely consistent with the teaching of Confucius, who said: “mastering the self by practicing the rites constitutes *Ren*.” Xunzi also said: “It is through ritual that the individual is rectified. It is by means of a teacher that ritual is rectified. If there were no ritual, how could the individual be rectified? If there were no teachers, how could you know which ritual is correct?” (157)⁴⁶

Chapter 20 of the *Doctrine of the Mean* reads: “To fast, to purify, and to be correct in dress [at the time of a solemn sacrifice], and not to make any movement contrary to the rulers of propriety—this is the way to cultivate the personal life” (106).⁴⁷ Both texts reflect the view, prevalent in the Confucian tradition, that the full-fledged human self is the interactive, relational self in society.

Regarding the notion of the relational self in society, contemporary scholars of Confucianism stand in agreement. For example, David B. Wong describes Confucian ethics as essentially community-centered, with the common good as its objective. In other words, according to Confucianism, if everybody strives to fulfill his or her role, social order will be maintained and quality of life guaranteed. This sort of socially-oriented morality stands in stark contrast to rights-centered moralities in which the individual is distinct from others. Confucian ethics is opposed to privileging the individual over the community or disregarding one’s role in and contribution to society.⁴⁸ According to Confucianism, human beings are essentially social animals. The greatest human achievements therefore are manifested as ideal fulfillments of social norms and standards. For that reason, in Confucianism, the virtues of loyalty, fraternity, benevolence, love, etc., have different meanings and implications than they do in Western ethical theories.⁴⁹

To sum up, in the Confucian theory of self-cultivation, the notion of cultivation is always connected with the body and forms the starting point of the “Confucian project.” Furthermore, the idea of the body is steeped in the context of social and ethical values and the network of relationships between different social roles. Therefore, the Confucian notion of self is that of an interactive, relational self.

4. Functional Concept (2): Transformation

After dwelling on the East Asian Confucian concepts of self, body, and cultivation in the preceding section, we now turn to the second functional concept in Confucian self-cultivation theory: transformation. The Chinese term for transformation is *hua* (化), the ancient form of which was *bi* (匕), which meant *bian* (變, transformation). In fact, the term *hua* (化) has many different meanings in the ancient texts, but all were connected with the concept of *bian* (變, transformation).⁵⁰ *The Rites of Zhou* states: “If you intend to change it, then use water and fire to transform it” (1979).⁵¹ Here, *hua* (化) as change refers to *sheng* (生), which means life or to produce. *The Annals of Lü Buwei* states: “He cut open the womb of pregnant woman to look at the fetus” (剖孕婦而觀其化) (*The Annals of Lü Buwei*, 23/4.1).⁵² Here *hua* (change) refers to the unformed foetus inside the womb and is related to the idea of life and giving birth. *The Annals of Lü Buwei* also states: “Sturdy as the trees growing on a high hill. Oh, how sincere! Watchful, attentive of the awesome change” (*The Annals of Lü Buwei*, 26/1.3).⁵³ Here *hua* (化) carries the meaning of instruction and cultivation. Xunzi offers the following definition of *hua* (化, change): “Where the appearance undergoes metamorphosis, but there is no distinction in the reality, yet they are deemed different, it is called ‘transformation.’ Where there is transformation but no distinction, it is called one object” (*Xunzi*, ch. 22, “On Rectifying Names,” 22.2h).⁵⁴ Xunzi thus takes *hua* (化) to refer to phenomena that change on the outside but remain essentially the same on the inside.

In East Asian Confucian philosophy, the functional concept of transformation (*hua*, 化) is discussed in two contexts.

First, the functional concept of transformation appears in the context of moral self-cultivation. Xunzi, for example, describes, “transforming the nature to initiate (a better) artifice.” Similarly, Mencius is recorded as having said: “To be great and be transformed by the greatness is called ‘divine,’”⁵⁵ referring to the attainment of sagehood through self-cultivation.

Chapter 23 of the *Doctrine of Mean* describes sincerity (*cheng*, 誠) as the result of the action of transformation.⁵⁶ In his commentary on this passage, Zhu Xi argues that the sincerity within a person’s unified mind and body could give rise to moral “sedimentation and transformation.”⁵⁷

Second, when employed in a socio-political context, the term “transformation” invokes the idea of transforming the people and fulfilling the customs. This sort of functional change is expressed in the *Mencius*. For example, Mencius thought that Shun, the mythic sage-king, could exhaustively fulfill the mission of filiality: “Shun did everything that was possible to serve his parents, and succeeded, in the end, in pleasing the Blind Man.” Ultimately, Shun’s actions had the effect of “transforming the Empire.”⁵⁸ Here, Mencius implies a seamless, dynamic interaction between inner and outer. Xunzi also advocates that by being sincere, one (the leader) transforms the people. In Xunzi’s thought, sincerity (*cheng*, 誠) is not only an inner moral quality with the power to transform one’s body and mind: It can also affect the outer socio-political reality with its power to “transform the people.”⁵⁹ Sincerity, then, is capable of integrating the inner moral world of the person and his or her external environment.

Xunzi further advocates that the force of the transformation from the inner to the outer depends on the presence of a ruler. For Xunzi, this ruler is the root catalyst of transformation.⁶⁰ Xunzi also stresses the transformative function of cultural transformation and the renewal of customs. Thus, the core concept in Xunzi’s theory of ethics is ritual conduct, which includes the virtues of filiality, compassion, sincerity, loyalty, etc. These virtues—or ethical orientations—are imbued with aesthetic and religious connotations.⁶¹ Xunzi’s

innovative teaching of the “transforming influence of ritual and morality” must be viewed in the context of Confucius’ maxim that one “masters the self by practicing the rites.” Xunzi’s view may also be understood in connection with Ogyū Sorai’s (荻生徂徠 1666-1728) advocacy of “incorporating the body in the rites in order to rectify the mind by the rites” (1973).⁶²

To sum up, the functional concept of “transformation” accentuates the distinctive element of orientation in East Asian Confucianism. While pre-Qin Confucians spoke of transformation in internal and external contexts, their discussions were always grounded in the body. For example, Xunzi argued that by cultivating the rites, one can transform one’s original nature by developing an acquired nature, thus transforming raw nature into refined culture. Moreover, through the efforts of the minority of sages and worthies to reform the customs, the majority of the population can be transformed.

5. Functional Concept (3): Nurture

The third functional concept in the East Asian Confucian theory of self-cultivation is nurture (養, *yang*). In the early Confucian classics, the term nurture usually refers to the raising of animals or people. *The Book of Changes* states: “The Receptive means the earth. It makes sure that all creatures are nourished” (1977).⁶³ *The Book of Documents* states: “The government is tested by its nourishing of the people” (“The counsels of the Great Yu,” *The Book of Documents*).⁶⁴ In these two cases, nurture is presented in concrete terms. For his part, Confucius says, “Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more that that he is able to provide his parents with food” (*Analects*, 2.7),⁶⁵ and “in one’s household, it is the women and the small man that are difficult to deal with” (*Analects*, 17.25),⁶⁶ and “when caring for the common people, he was generous” (*Analects*, 5.16).⁶⁷ These passages sum up the ancient Confucians’ concrete understanding of nurture.

Mencius also draws on the traditional concrete meanings of nurture, as when he describes “a pension of ten thousand measures of rice for the support of his disciples” (*Mencius*, 2B10),⁶⁸ and states that “They do not get enough to minister to the needs of their parents” (*Mencius*, 3A3),⁶⁹ and in his claim that “Without the latter (common people), there would be none to support the former (men in authority)” (*Mencius*, 3A3).⁷⁰ Mencius, however, also gives the concept of nurture a new meaning in his extensive references to the nature of one’s *qi* and the importance of nurturing one’s *qi*. In this manner, he initiates a turn towards a more inward, abstract conception of nurture, a conception that would make nurture a fundamental functional concept in Confucian philosophy of the body.

In the conversation between Mencius and Gongsun Zhou (公孫丑) recorded in *Mencius*, 2A2, Mencius describes his notion of nurturing *qi*. A large body of research on nurturing *qi* has appeared over the past century.⁷¹ Put simply, Mencius advocates the nurturing of one’s *qi* as the means to elicit and bring into play the moral nature originally present in each person’s physical body. Consequently, Mencius says: “That which a gentleman follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rites and wisdom, is rooted in his heart, and manifests itself in his face, giving it a sleek appearance. It also shows in his back and extends to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words” (*Mencius*, 7A21).⁷²

In effect, Mencius uses the concrete “four limbs” to explain the abstract values of humaneness, appropriateness, ritual propriety, and wisdom, advocating that human beings possess the “four moral beginnings” just as they are born with “four limbs.” Hence, people needn’t look outside of themselves for the beginnings of the moral impulse. Mencius extends this argument by suggesting that the original, primal form of *qi* can be transformed through reason. For example, he transforms the physical life impulse of *qi*, which fills the

body, into a vast flood-like *qi* that infuses everything: human life, culture, and society. At the same time, Mencius' notion of nurturing *qi* implies the nurturing of the mind.⁷³ In this respect, the notion of mind is bound up with the idea of vast overflowing *qi*. Furthermore, the notion of *qi* is at variance with the natural physical principles at work in the body: "The organs of hearing and sight are unable to think and can be misled by external things. When one thing acts on another, all it does is to attract it. The organ of the heart can think. But it will find the answer only if it does think; otherwise, it will not find the answer" (*Mencius*, 6A15).⁷⁴

Here, Mencius claims that physical forms, such as the organs of hearing and sight, are merely natural phenomena, unrelated to the ability to think and distinguish. The flood-like *qi* is imbued with value judgments. In this formulation, Mencius infuses concrete practice with the spirit of the vast, overflowing *qi*, which connects mind and form, and allows people to experience things beyond their individual selves. Ultimately, this *qi* allows people to attain a kind of cosmic resonance, and proceed from the limited self—a particular body locked in a particular time and place—to the unlimited self that is attuned to the cosmos.⁷⁵

In Mencius' discourses on self-cultivation, the body is often described as a container or vessel.⁷⁶ When Mencius pronounces, "*Qi* is that which fills the body" (*Mencius*, 2A2), he presents the body as a concrete container or vessel into which many values can be infused. This idea of the body as container involves the dichotomy of inner and outer, as well as the statuses of replete and empty. Mencius advocates nurturing one's vast, flood-like *qi*⁷⁷ not only in order to fill and transform this tiny container, the human body; but also, and more importantly, to connect and be a conduit between the great container, that is, the natural world and the realm of human culture. In Mencius' model, the *qi* of civilization and culture fuses with, rationalizes, and transforms the primitive *qi* of nature. Thus, the physical and limited (corresponding to the body) is combined with the spiritual and unlimited (corresponding to the mind), suggesting the potential for abstract human qualities to become concrete. This is precisely what Mencius refers to as "giving fulfillment to the body."⁷⁸

Mencius' view of the body as a container is taken up by Xunzi, who provides a sharper analysis of the body's sensory organs and their functions. Xunzi notes that each of the body's sensory organs requires a different sort of nurturing⁷⁹ in order to achieve acute resonance and perceptivity in the body. Mencius' and Xunzi's uses of the container metaphor could be called typical and paradigmatic for the East Asian Confucian tradition.

How is "nurturing" in the East Asian Confucian theory of self-cultivation possible? Mencius and Xunzi would respond differently on the basis of their respective outlook. Mencius describes the nurturing of the vast, "flood-like *qi*" as being "born of accumulated rightness and cannot be appropriated by anyone through a sporadic show of rightness" (*Mencius*, 2A2).⁸⁰ Is it possible to explain this production of an accumulation of rightness by the effort of nurturing *qi*? How is it possible to make the leap from nurturing *qi* to rightness, a value that seems to belong to a different category?

In explaining Mencius' discourse on the effort of nurturing *qi*, Zhu Xi appeals to his philosophy of principle (*Li*, 理),⁸¹ thereby transforming the moral subjectivity of Mencius' approach into a sort of moral epistemology. This is somewhat at variance with Mencius' original theory of *qi*, which led to several bitter quarrels and disputes among subsequent generations of East Asian Confucian thinkers. I have discussed these quarrels and disputes elsewhere and need not go into them here.⁸² Among the many critics of Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming provided the best account of Mencius' notion of nurturing *qi*. Wang drew on his notion of the extension of the innate knowledge to interpret Mencius' idea of accumulating rightness.⁸³ On this basis, Wang regarded the cultivation effort of nurturing *qi* as a means to generate a new awakening of the mind. Clearly,

Wang's approach reflects and reaffirms Confucius' and Mencius' stress on the freedom of the moral will and subjective freedom. The 19th century Japanese scholar Yamada Hōkoku (山田方谷 1805-1877), an adherent of the Yōmei school of thought, built on Itō jinsai's *Qi* monism theory by proposing that *Qi* generates *li*. This allowed him to explain the implicit moral meaning of Mencius' discussion on nurturing the vast, overflowing *qi* and thus how nurturing *qi* can involve the accumulation of rightness.⁸⁴

Xunzi has an entirely different take on the cultivation effort of nurturing. He stresses that by practicing the rites and rightness, one makes an effort to order *qi* and nurture mind.⁸⁵ We might say that Mencius' approach to the cultivation effort of nurturing is a sort of compliance with nature while Xunzi's approach is a sort of effort to rework nature.

To sum up, the functional concept of nurturing in pre-Qin Confucian philosophy refers to the internalization of value consciousness with respect to the bodily organs so that they produce appropriate responses to stimuli, facilitating the cultivation of sensitivity to value cues. Thus, nurturing mind and nurturing *qi* are closely intertwined. Mencius and Xunzi understand and approach cultivation by nurturing self from two different poles. The former places stress on nurturing the mind of humaneness and rightness, and thereby to accumulate rightness by nurturing *qi*; the latter's "Art of ordering *qi* and nurturing mind" lays stress on transformation by modeling and practicing the rites and rightness so that culture may tame and order nature.

6. Conclusion

The present paper is focused on the substantial concept of self operative in Confucian philosophy and the three constituent functional concepts of "cultivation," "transformation," and "nurture" at work in the Confucian theory of self-cultivation. These three concepts form the core of East Asian Confucian views of self and other. Based on the above discussion, I wish to summarize the findings of this investigation and indicate several important points.

Firstly, East Asian Confucian thinkers discuss the body in terms of the container metaphor. In these discussions, the body-as-container is an organism and not a machine. The process of self-cultivation is therefore comparable to the crafts of cutting and chopping, carving and polishing. The body is taken as the object to be cultivated, nurtured, and transformed. Mencius says in the passage on the vast, overflowing *qi* that the body is to be purified, cultivated, ordered and amended. This transformation process imbues the body and its four limbs with moral principles; those principles are then manifested without, in one's appearance and bearing, and within, deep in one's moral consciousness. Moral principles shine forth in one's disposition and observances of the rites; even the sparkle of one's eyes and the tones of one's voice express this spirit. In Mencius' ultimate notion of "giving fulfillment to the body," subject and object have become as one, such that one's mind and practice form a perfect continuum. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) expresses this notion with his concept of the phenomenal body, which is the synthesis of one's own body.⁸⁶ We may ask, how is Mencius' notion of "giving fulfillment to the body" possible? Its very possibility lies in the fact that body and mind are originally indivisible and interpenetrating, with mind as the leader. That is, the mind has to be cultivated and harnessed to govern the body as the ultimate agent of transformation of the body.

Secondly, in East Asian Confucian philosophy, the cognitive functions of the mind-heart are always conceived as rooted in the body. The body is not only the biological body; it is steeped in the values and traditions of society and culture. These factors are cultivated and folded into the appearance, dispositions, habits, and behavior of the body. For this reason, East Asian Confucian thinkers advocate that the

transformation of the world begins with the transformation of the self. Further, the transformation of the self begins with self-cultivation or the cultivation of the body. Thus, Confucians uphold the elite minority of cultivated talents—the sages and worthies—who bestow moral qualities upon society and nurture the myriad things to pacify and harmonize the empire. Confucians advocate the cultivation efforts of nurturing so as to coordinate and unite reason and emotion. They honor the worthies of the past as exemplars and benchmarks for later generations to study, heed, and emulate in order to completely carry out what they define as the fruitful rationalization of human life.

Thirdly, in East Asian Confucian philosophy, the body as object of self-cultivation is taken as the performative platform of socio-cultural and political values. Book X of the *Analects* presents many descriptions of Confucius. In every case, Confucius' body is presented as reflecting and informing the context of his cultural and socio-political environment. For this reason, the 17th century Japanese Yōmei school scholar Nakae Tōju (中江藤樹 1608-1648) gave extended comments on this particular chapter, praising Confucius' "body performance" within his socio-cultural ambiance context.⁸⁷

Finally, East Asian Confucian philosophy is a discourse of self-cultivation that is rooted in the body. For the past several thousand years, Confucian thinkers have shared a common understanding: The conduct of political affairs is entirely based on one's self-cultivation. Indeed, self-cultivation serves as the starting point for political affairs. For this reason, Confucian thinkers all advocate the internalization of profound cultural values. Mencius calls this process the effort of "nurturing flood-like *Qi*." It is also what contemporary anthropologists call the process of embodying or embodiment.⁸⁸ The East Asian Confucian functional concepts of cultivation, transformation, and nurturing can be taken as dynamic or active factors in the anthropological process of embodiment. Moreover, the Confucian discourse of *Ren* (humaneness) is grounded in and developed on the foundation of the theory of self-cultivation.

Notes

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 3. D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), Bk. 4, Part A, Chap. 5, 154.
 4. Wing-tsit Chan (陳榮捷), trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 87.
 5. Chun-chieh Huang, *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2010), Chap. 2, 29-46.
 6. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 57.
 7. The earliest appearance of the term "tizhi" (體知, bodily knowing) is in Fan Ye's (范曄, 398-445) *Houhan shu* (後漢書) [*History of the Later Han*] (Taipei: Dingwen shuchu, 1996), Bk. 5, 3015.
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12. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1992), Bk. 6, Chap. 30, 55.
13. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects*, Bk. 14, Chap. 30, 143.
14. Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), 74-75; 414.
15. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects*, Bk. 8, Chap. 7, 71.
16. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects*, Bk. 12, Chap. 1, 109.
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20. D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius*, Bk. 3, Part B, Chap. 2, 127.
21. John Knoblock, trans., *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (California: Stanford University Press, 1988), Vol. 1, Bk. 1, Chap. 9, 140.
22. John Knoblock trans., *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Vol. 1, Bk. 1, Chap. 14, 142.
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37. D. C. Lau, trans., *The Analects*, Bk. 14, Chap. 42, 147.
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39. Lao Sze-kwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhexuesi*, Vol. 2, 53.
40. Jeong Yak-yong (정약용 丁若鏞), *Daehakgongui* (대학공의 大學公議), Vol. 3, Dasan haksul munhwa jaedan, ed., (*Gyogam-pyojeom*) *Jeongbon Yeoyudangjeonseo* (여유당전서 與猶堂全書), Vol. 6, 117.
41. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chap. 4, 14-19.
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43. Cf. Lao Siguan (勞思光), *Xinbian Zhongguo zhexuesi* (新編中國哲學史) [*New Edition of History of Chinese Philosophy*] (Taipei: San Min Book Company, 1983), Vol. 2, 55. “What the gentleman holds on to is the cultivation of his own character, yet this brings order to the Empire” (*Mencius*, 7B32), and I have heard about cultivating character, but I have never heard about administering the state” (*Xunzi*, 12.4).
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