

# Viewing the Differences between Eastern and Western Educational Cultures from Confucius and Plato's Educational Thoughts in the Axial Age

Mengyuan Zhu

Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, Zigong, Sichuan 643000, China

**Abstract:** Through the comparison of Confucius and Plato's educational thoughts in the Axis Age, the study of the differences between Eastern and Western educational cultures is based on the comparison of educational objectives, educational objects, educational methods, and educational content. There is a difference in the educational culture between the two in the special period of the Axis Age. From the open western idealism education and the introverted oriental materialism education, the similarities and differences between the Oriental Six Arts and the Western Seven Arts, the differences between the East and the West human education, and the differences between the education and training talents, respectively, the differences between the East and the West education culture are elaborated. Therefore, we can better deepen the understanding of the splendid civilization in the Axis era and discover the inadequacies of education through the comparison of Eastern and Western cultures so that our education can better absorb the essence, abandon the dross, and promote the vigorous development of education, improving constantly.

**Keywords:** *axis era; Confucius; Eastern and Western educational culture; Plato*

**Publication date:** March, 2019

**Publication online:** 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2019

**Corresponding Author:** Mengyuan Zhu,  
yumim0910yuan@163.com

## 0 Introduction

In the book "The Origin and Goal of History," the German thinker Carl Jaspers first called the breakthrough of human culture in China, the West, and

India in the BC before and after 500 BC<sup>[1]</sup>. He divided the development period of human civilization into four basic stages: Prehistoric, ancient civilization, axis time, and technology age. In the following, we take the example of Confucius, one of the 100 masters of the Spring and Autumn Warring States, and Plato, one of the ancient Greek "three masters," to illustrate the similarities and differences between the Eastern and Western educational concepts in the "Axis Age."

As great educational thinkers in the world, the two cannot be discussed one by one. This article compares the educational purposes, educational objects, educational methods, and educational contents of the two and draws the East and the West cultural similarities and differences. We will better strengthen our understanding and awareness of the splendid civilization of this special period of the Axis Age so as to play a positive impact on today's education and promote its development.

## 1 The comparison of educational purposes

### 1.1 Confucius and the concept of "gentleman"

At the time of the Spring and Autumn period in the Warring States period, the understanding of the importance of education did not reach the level of attention, and the main purpose of education at that time was to make official wealth. As a representative of that period, Confucius advocated education and prospered education, but the main purpose of education is still "Learning and being good." He believes that only educated people can understand things, understand people, and understand human nature. Therefore, an

important way to cultivate the pillars of the country is to enable people to receive effective education. Moreover, those who receive education can also achieve their own goals and ideals through education - that is, Guangzong Yaozu, promoted from the official education. Therefore, the educational purpose of Confucius is to have a certain feudal utilitarianism. He believes that the most important purpose of education is to cultivate excellent and wise ruling talents for the country.

## 1.2 Plato and the concept of “philosophy king”

However, in Plato’s view, the highest goal of education for human cultivation is to cultivate it as a “philosopher king”<sup>[2]</sup>. He divides people into three ranks. One is the ruler, and they have the wisdom to be able to govern the whole country; the second is the guards, who are full of courage and can help and support the rulers; and the third is the farmers, workers, and businessmen<sup>[3]</sup>. He believes that the philosophical king who can recognize the essence and truth of things should become the ruler of a country. In short, Plato believes that the supreme goal of education is to cultivate people’s pursuit of wisdom, that is, the pursuit of truth, goodness, and justice.

In addition, he believes that education is the process of soul turning<sup>[4]</sup>. Plato argues that human souls are always there and that human beings have the ability to gather truth before humans come into contact with the material world. Through the sensory perception of the world and the formation of image cognition, people perceive the eternal truth and essence, thus completing the process of soul turning. Education is an effective way to lead people toward the direction of the soul. Therefore, people’s cognitive ability is cultivated, that is, the ability and process of recognizing the essence and truth of things.

## 2 The comparison of educational objects

### 2.1 Confucius: There is no class to teach

Confucius’s basic advocacy for the object of education is “teaching without class”<sup>[5]</sup>. The original intention is that, in the object of education, regardless of poverty, wealth, and ethnicity, everyone can enter school to receive education. Confucius’s “teaching and non-class” proposal is aimed at the monopoly school education of the slave-owner class. It breaks the hierarchy of “nothing

to blame” and expands the object of education to civilians. It is a historical progress. The open “educated and non-classified” education policy satisfies the desire of civilians to enter school and educate, expands the educational object, breaks the educational monopoly of the slave aristocracy, adapts to the needs of social development, and is conducive to further promoting the downward movement of culture. The role of cultural and academic prosperity and the emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Warring States period played a role in fueling the situation.

### 2.2 Plato: Selecting outstanding people for training

As the first educator in the West to propose the educational ideas of prenatal and postnatal care and child education, he believes that private ownership should be abolished so that educational resources become public resources and that national citizens are obliged to provide quality children to the country. Quality children are also the main target of education and training. This also reflects Plato’s educational hierarchy. He advocates giving priority to cultivating quality offspring born to quality parents, while children of those who are bad are placed in places that people do not know. Therefore, from his educational point of view, the most important object of education is high-quality, high-level people, and those who are inferior and low-level are not educated.

## 3 The comparison of educational methods

### 3.1 Confucius’s educational method

In the adoption of educational methods, Confucius believes in the use of multiple educational methods, rather than a uniform method, for the education of students. That means, his education is to teach students in accordance with their aptitude that education is different from person to person and not a systematic and unified education. His educational method is a more detailed analysis of each student and designing an educational program that suits them individually.

#### 3.1.1 Lateral thinking “not eager; don’t reveal, not communicative; don’t explain”

Confucius is the first educator in the world to propose heuristic teaching. He believes that whether it is to cultivate human morality or learning knowledge, it must be based on the students’ conscious needs. To give full

play to the initiative of students, he opposes mechanical learning and advocates heuristic teaching. As he said, “Not eager; don’t reveal, not communicative; don’t explain”<sup>[6]</sup>, and put forward what he thinks is that only when students take the initiative to learn and teachers enlighten and guide their needs, can they better master and understand their knowledge.

### **3.1.2 Learn to learn that “the person who knows is not as good as the one who knows the good, the person who knows well is not as good as the one who is happy”**

In addition to promoting heuristic teaching, Confucius believes that more attention should be paid to the interest needs of students to learn so as to achieve learning. Only students who are interested in the content of the knowledge that they are learning can fundamentally promote them to learn. “The person who knows is not as good as the one who knows the good, and the person who knows well is not as good as the one who is happy”<sup>[6]</sup> is also Confucius’s explanation and understanding of this point of view.

### **3.1.3 Learn to know parallel and step by step**

“Learn to know” is the leading idea of Confucius teaching. Learning is the way to seek knowledge and the only means. He believes that, in the process of learning, it is necessary to think deeply on the basis of learning and combine learning and thinking. He pointed out that “learning without thinking, then thinking without learning is awkward”<sup>[6]</sup> accurately discusses the inevitable connection between learning and thinking. Moreover, he pointed out that the purpose of learning is to apply what is learned and learning to use and learning to act is the ultimate goal of learning.

On the basis of parallelism in learning, Confucius also pointed out that, in the process of learning, it is necessary to proceed steadily and not to be quick and profitable. Knowledge is interrelated. In the process of learning and education, it is necessary to understand their connections and relationships so as to carry out education and learning step by step.

## **3.2 Plato’s educational method**

### **3.2.1 Heuristics from socrates**

For Plato’s educational methods, he studied under Socrates and carried forward in a way that he improved his teacher’s method. He advocates the method of

maternity education. Teachers must guide students into the realm of contemplation so that they can open their minds after meditation and enjoy rational pleasure. This teaching method can promote students to think about progress and better cultivate their independent thinking ability.

### **3.2.2 Teaching and research in parallel**

In addition to questioning and reflection, he also advocates lectures and research-based learning. The lectures are mostly esoteric and incomprehensible professional knowledge. At the same time, students are encouraged to delve into the research and solve various problems, thereby achieving the degree of parallelism between education and research. The goal of the school is not only to cultivate students’ learning ability but also to cultivate students’ scientific research ability and practical ability, that is, parallel teaching and research.

### **3.2.3 Entertaining and learning**

In his study tour, Plato strongly advocated the teaching method of entertaining and learning. He opposed the traditional and rigid teaching methods, emphasizing that teachers should first stimulate students’ interest in the process of learning and then implement interest-based teaching. In the teaching process, teachers should train their students to learn in a happy way, rather than stress learning. Maintaining student interest is, especially, important throughout the teaching process. The character of a student varies from person to person. Teaching cannot rigidly attempt to change a students’ personality because the student has an independent personality and should not be subject to any oppression or inhibition. At the same time, teachers should encourage students to innovate when organizing teaching activities.

## **4 The comparison of educational content**

### **4.1 Confucius’s confucianism and taoism**

Confucius inherited the Western Zhou culture and education tradition, with the “Six Classics,” namely “Poetry,” “Book,” “Li,” “Le,” “Easy,” and “Spring and Autumn” as textbooks. At the same time, he proposed to use “six art” as the main educational content, that is, the six kinds of skills, including ritual, music, shooting, imperialism, books, and numbers, which are the teaching contents, and the students are educated in

various aspects such as “literature, travel, loyalty, and trust.”

In addition to his six classics and the educational content of Ren Li, Confucius’s humanistic thinking also plays an important educational content. Zi Yan: “Ningwuzi, He Who Knows And Knows that He Knows Is a wise Man-Follow Him; He Who Knows Not And Knows Not that he Knows Not Is A Fool- Shun Him.”<sup>[6]</sup> He pointed out that human life is the most important, and protecting your life is the first thing in a crisis. Moreover, Confucius’s important evaluation criteria for the merits of those in power are also whether they can protect the lives of the people. At the same time, they expect the rulers to use the virtues of the people and they must not kill them at will. In addition, Confucius’s cherishment of life is also reflected in family education. “Parents are only worried about their illnesses” means that parents want their children to be healthy, and their children are also filthy to their parents<sup>[7]</sup>.

## 4.2 Plato’s “ideology theory”

### 4.2.1 *Idea theory and “ideology”*

The most important and central position in Plato’s entire philosophical system is the “ideology”<sup>[8]</sup>, which is the core idea of his educational thoughts and educational content. At the same time, he also proposed the educational thought of Qi Yi and his first as an educator in the world to propose education legislation. He believes that everything that the human senses perceive is unreal and that what exists in reality should be immobile, which corresponds to the absolute and eternal meaning of the concept of his teacher Socrates. Plato refers to this concept as “idea.” He believes that philosophy is the origin of all things. It is external and exists independently of sensitive individual things. Based on this conception, Plato conducted a discussion on his ideal country and wrote his representative work “The Republic of China.”

### 4.2.2 *Preconceived early education thought*

Regarding the education of children, he advocates early education, and it is the best to educate children from prenatal education. He believes that “it is best to educate children from prenatal education which is the most important thing at the beginning, especially the character. It is the easiest to accept in the young and tender stage, what form you can shape it into”<sup>[9]</sup>. This confirms his early stage of educational thinking and the

need to exert correct educational influence on children at an early stage so as to promote their development in a good direction.

## 5 The differences between Eastern and Western education and culture

Through the above analysis of the two, it can be seen that the Eastern and Western cultures in the Axis Age are both strikingly similar and different in some respects. In general, it can be divided into the following four aspects.

### 5.1 Open and idealistic Western education and introverted materialistic oriental education

As for the overall education, the Western education culture represented by Plato is mainly based on objective idealism, and the philosophical thought accounts for a large proportion in the West in this period. They believe that education is mainly the transformation of people’s souls, and the soul is higher than the physical and eternal existence of high-level things. It advocates the purification of the soul, which is manifested in the means of education, which is biased toward openness and freedom, and which promotes the liberation of the soul and the release of nature. Therefore, the education in the West is biased toward the guidance and turn of the soul of the person itself. This is specifically manifested by Plato’s inheritance and development of his teacher Socrates.

As far as the education in the East is concerned, the oriental education represented by Confucius is mainly based on subjective materialism, and it is the main purpose of education that advocates the role of education in the actual existence of individuals and the improvement of self-worth. Moreover, unlike the relatively open education in the West, the education in the East is more self-centered, and there are few ideas about communication and common progress and reaching Datong. Taking Confucius as an example, he pointed out that “the gentleman looks to himself; the petty person looks to other person.” For the education of the East, the achievement of personal ideals and personal ambitions is the main purpose of education, and the promotion of the whole country can be achieved by upgrading individuals. This is the basic idea of Eastern education. The pursuit of the whole society and the harmony of the country in the West and the promotion of personal progress are different. The starting point of the one is from the individual to the

collective, while the other is from the collective to the individual.

### **5.2 The idea of equal education for the people in the East is earlier than in the West**

From the perspective of the object of education and the attitude of treating people, the education in the East is more equal to the civilian population than the West. The Confucian school represented by Confucius in the East advocates that education can make people “learn and be better,” which also enhances the enthusiasm of learning and the possibility of receiving education for the broad masses of the people. Moreover, Confucius has a profound thought of benevolence in education<sup>[10]</sup>. He believes that human life and safety are more important than any other and that the importance of spreading life to them while educating people is also important and precious. In this respect, compared with Western education, the humanistic thinking of the East is advanced and mature. The ancient Greek education hierarchy was strict, and at the same time, it emphasized the prenatal and postnatal education and advocated that the education of young children should be selective and they choose to exile or killing of the bad one. This also shows that the Western concept of education for human beings and equality for human beings is farther than the East and that the right to equal education is also opposed and not fully recognized by the West at the time.

### **5.3 Cultural differences between oriental six arts and western seven arts**

Judging from the content of education, the education of the “art” is proposed by the East and the West. The “Six Art” in the East and the “Seven Art” in the West have become similar and different educational characteristics. The six arts in the East are based on the rituals, music, shooting, imperialism, books, and numbers proposed by Confucius, while the Western “seven arts” are based on the logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and music proposed by Plato in ancient Greece for the main educational content.

Overall, although Liu Yi and Qi Yi seem to be the same, there are different aspects. On the one hand, the purpose of the six arts training is related to social needs, and students are mostly practitioners of the social value system. Qi Yi Education also disseminates social values, but the requirements are relatively more liberal. On the other hand, compared with the educational content of

Liu Yi and Qi Yi, the six arts in the East not only pay attention to the study of cultural knowledge but also pay attention to military training, while the Western seven arts initially value music and sports, but, with the times and history, the need to educate became more. To cultivate people’s ability to engage in political activities and to deal with personal and social affairs, the focus on the seven arts is biased toward philosophical, rhetorical, geometric, mathematical, astronomical, and other practical courses. From this perspective, Qi Yi pays more attention to the practicality in real life and the thinking and ability to meet people’s daily needs. Six arts pay more attention to the emotional influence and the development of values in education, which is one of the differences between the two.

### **5.4 Differences in education and training**

From the perspective of educators, there are also significant differences between Eastern and Western education. For the East of the feudal monarchy, the main purpose of education is to maintain the rule of the monarchy and to provide the country with outstanding talents and strengths for the country. In this respect, the educational goal of the East is more simply unified. It is only to maintain the rule of the monarchy and the stability of the country. For personal ideals and ambitions, the main purpose is to assist the country. Therefore, the people trained by the Oriental Education Institute are excellent scholars, and their political attributes and national colors are the distinctive features of Eastern education.

In contrast, Western education appears to be more free and open. Plato’s cultivation of the “King of Philosophy,” although from the national point of view, is also to train outstanding talents for the country, but he cultivates the state’s ruling talents, the need for truth, and the need for good and justice. It is very different in purpose and meaning from the education of the East to maintain the rule of the monarchy.

## **References**

- [1] Yusheng L. Re-understanding of plato’s and confucius’ thoughts from the perspective of mutual training—from “heaven and man’s thought” to “educating people’s thought”[J]. *J Southwest Univ Natl(Humanit Soc Sci Ed)*2018;39:212-219.
- [2] Yu T. The pursuit of humanity and theology: A comparison between confucius and plato’s educational thoughts[J]. *J Liaoning Adm Coll* 2014;5:36-40.
- [3] Binhe G. In: Zhuming Z, editor. *Plato. Ideal State* [M]. The Commercial Press; 1986: 71.

- [4] Lisha Z. Contrast between plato and confucius' educational thoughts[J]. *Sci Technol J* 2014;5:5-6.
- [5] Huanhuan H. A comparative study of confucius and plato thoughts[J]. *Curriculum Educ Res* 2017;24:232-233.
- [6] Kezhen L. *The Analects of Confucius*. Vol. 34[M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press; 1996.
- [7] Qin W, Liangjuan L. The enlightenment of confucius' humanism on modern early childhood education[J]. *Educ Theory* 2017;6.
- [8] Zhijia Y. *Research on Plato's Ideas on Educational Thoughts* [D]. Changchun: Jilin University; 2018.
- [9] Jianhua M, Qi W. The evolution of free education, general education and humanistic quality education-based on the investigation of personality ideal and social background[J]. *High Educ Sci* 2012;2.
- [10] XiaoxiaT, Jiang C. The infiltration of confucius' "benevolence" concept in ideological and political education[J]. *Educ Mod* 2018;5:350-1, 357.