

# HIGHER EDUCATION AS STUDENT SELF-FORMATION

- Rethinking the higher education function in a challenging time
- Student self-formation: elements
- Structure, agency, the inner self
- Antecedents of self-formation idea, including Confucianism and Bildung
- Immersion in knowledge and values
- Conditions and features of self-formation in higher education
- Comparison with Prof Xie Weihe
- Concluding thoughts



# RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHALLENGING TIME



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- Deteriorating eco-system, public health challenges, blockages to globalisation and unstable geo-politics
- Modernisation, including higher education, underpins a **stronger individuality** everywhere but often focused on narrow self-interest
- **Social values** are faltering, we are not solving common problems



# RETHINKING HIGHER EDUCATION IN A CHALLENGING TIME

## Elements of higher education that might be changed:

1. Connections to society
2. Institutional organisation
3. Technology
4. Curriculum and pedagogy
- 5. The learner**



# STUDENT SELF-FORMATION: ELEMENTS

- Pedagogy can imagine higher education students as adults not children
- Learning is becoming. Only the learner can do the learning/becoming.
- At best higher education is a reflexive process of self-formation that establishes, or deepens, ongoing self-making grounded in self-aware agency that continues through life. This is fundamentally empowering
- Higher education like other domains enables people to transform themselves through the never-ending ‘work of the self on the self’. What distinguishes self-formation in higher education is (a) the immersion in knowledge and values; and (b) for full-time students not working, advanced and varied opportunities for sociability
- The essential elements of higher education as self-formation, which are integrated, are **the autonomy of the learner, reflexive agency, the will to learn, and immersion in knowledge**



‘Life isn’t about finding yourself.  
Life is about creating yourself, and  
creating things’ – Bob Dylan,  
Nobel Prize for literature 2016

# STRUCTURE AND AUTONOMOUS AGENCY

- ‘Structure’ includes material resources, hierarchies, and also ‘ideational’ culture, including language, knowledge and information (Archer 1995)
- Neither structure nor agency is ‘immutable’, fixed. Both are emergent and relations between them are always open. ‘The human being is neither pre-given nor socially constructed’ (Archer 2000, p. 50)
- ‘People are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties’ (Archer 1995, p. 71)
- ‘We are simultaneously free and constructed and we also have some awareness of it’ (Archer 1995, p. 2)



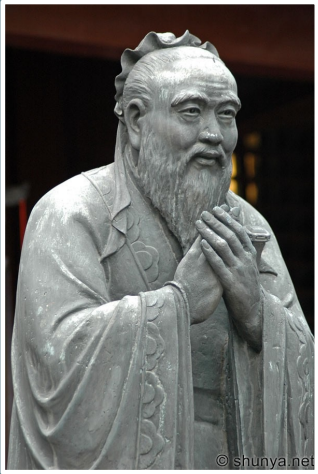
from Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles* (1952)

# THE INNER SELF AND REFLEXIVITY

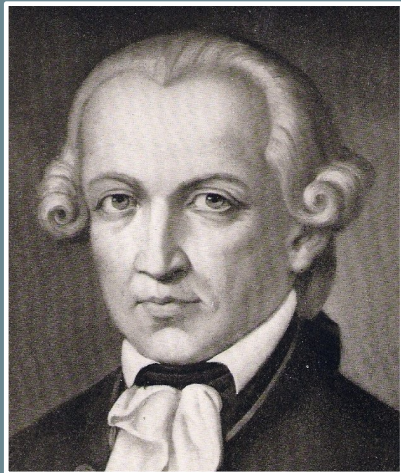
- ‘The causal powers proper to agency itself ... are the powers which enable people to reflect on their social context, and to act reflexively towards it, either individually or collectively’ (Archer 2000, p. 308). Different people respond differently to same conditions (1995, p. 70).
- Self awareness ‘emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness which lasts throughout life (Archer 2000, p. 255). In ‘this rich inner life of reflection upon reality’, this ‘inner conversation’ with ourselves, we give shape to our lives (pp. 9-10).
- The inner conversation is ‘the mode of articulation between people and reality’ (Archer, 2000, p. 306). It ‘enjoys its own relative autonomy, temporal priority and causal efficacy’ (p. 193). Reflexivity is continuous self-evaluation, ‘like a conscience’ (Archer 2003, pp. 26, 32, 73).



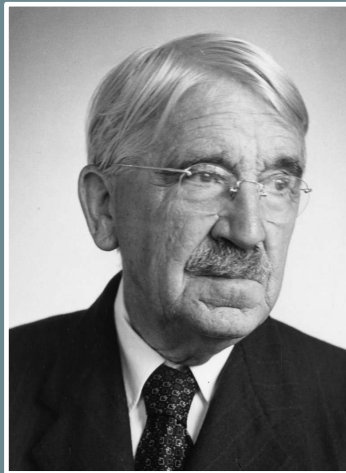
# ANTECEDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS SELF-FORMATION



**Confucius:**  
The Confucian learner is engaged in a continuing and never finished process of self-cultivation, explicitly informed by moral and ethical dimensions



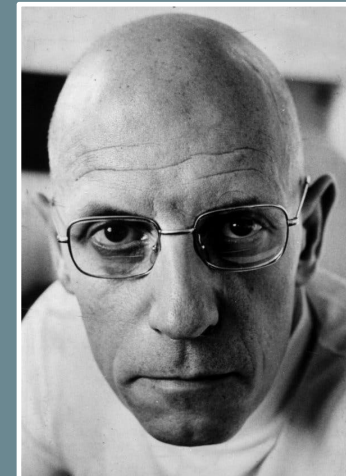
**Immanuel Kant:**  
Bildung and Enlightenment: 'man's release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding ... without direction from another' (Kant 1784/1992, p. 90)



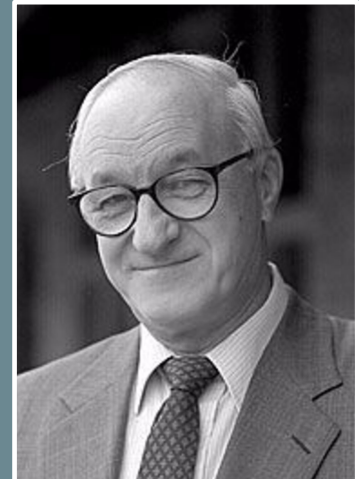
**John Dewey:**  
'To learn to be human is to develop through ... communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community' (1927, p. 353)



**Lev Vygotsky:**  
'The true development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, it is from the social to the individual' (1986, p. 136)



**Michel Foucault:**  
The self is the only object we can freely will 'without having to take into consideration external determinations' (2005, p. 133)



**Albert Bandura:**  
Self-belief, and 'the most distinctive human characteristic is the capability for reflective self-consciousness' (1986, p. 21)



# CONFUCIAN SELF-CULTIVATION AND *LIZHI*

- ‘Person-making is at the heart of the Confucian heritage of educational thinking’ (Zhao and Deng 2016). ‘It has long been held that self-cultivation is the precondition’ for developing ‘the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfil social responsibilities and functions’ (pp. 2-3).
- “Autonomy and personal agency’ are integral to Sinic learning (Li 2012, p. 132). Li (2006, p. 483) cites Saari (1990), in whose studies Chinese children ‘developed an “inner self” in order to retain a private space of their own’,
- The starting point for Chinese people’s learning affect is establishing one’s will (*lizhi*), commitment to learning’ Li 2012, p. 163) with the whole ‘heart and mind’ (p. 164), often by six or seven years, primarily in the home (p. 14)



# BILDUNG AND THE AMERICAN PRAGMATISTS

- Translations of the German *Bildung*, the most generative Western idea, include 'self-formation', 'development' and 'inner cultivation'. Kant sees education as crucial in evolving humanity both individually and collectively, shaping individuals in the capacity for independent judgment, 'the basis for agentic and autonomous action' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007, p. 133), as an active person 'in the public sphere among other individual beings' using public reason (Kivela, 2012, p. 59)
- In *Bildung* there is an open independent space that is separate from the teacher, and the educability of the learner continually expands
- American pragmatists such as John Dewey and CP Mead agree that the purpose of education is the formation of the free autonomous self, and this contributes to the formation of society. For them, students learn through experience of social relations and the natural world, gradually becoming aware of the social conditions of their individual growth



# STUDENTS' IMMERSION IN KNOWLEDGE

- Immersion in knowledge replicates infant self-formation: a sense of self is nurtured in speech community, triggerings self-awareness (Vygotsky 1978). In self-formation in higher education the student engages knowledge not instinctively but consciously
- Dubet (2000): 'students "form" themselves through the meaning they attribute to knowledge' (p. 222), using it to transform themselves, including their capacity to respond to and affect social structures
- Knowledge is acquired individually but relational-collective in form. It embodies theories, methods, contents and values
- Disciplines are powerful diverse knowledges about nature and society, fostering differing inner conversations, values and social capabilities
- *Teaching* is crucial because it facilitates access to knowledges and values
- *Humility*, openness and determination to work are crucial to learning



# FEATURES OF SELF-FORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- Immersion in knowledge, a social-relational (collective) form that is individually appropriated. Includes extra-curricular knowledge
- Diverse potential mirrors for reflexivity, including inter-cultural
- Diverse peer experiences and relations
- Potentials for social, cultural, and political activism
- Time and resources permitting, exploration of the world
- BUT the extent of potential immersion in self-formation varies greatly – it is maximised when students have
  - Income support and don't have to work during study
  - Good access to teaching and other learning resources
  - Administrative and pedagogical conditions that support student agency and foster inclusion and tolerance
  - Space and time to read, talk and create individual and collective works



# SELF-FORMATION AND SOCIAL FORMATION

- The natural environment and human society are dynamic, continually changing, not 'being' but 'becoming'. We cannot know the future. But we can help our students to prepare themselves for the future
- Knowledge and social values are likewise continually changing, evolving. During their studies students are immersed in diverse knowledges and values. Through this they become joined to large networked conversations (worldwide in the sciences) which enhance their potentials as individuals and as social beings
- Yet the knowledge and values in higher education contain tensions – consider the differences between business studies and environmental studies. Our values have not led to consistently healthy societies – consider the wrecked ecology, weak multilateralism, geo-political conflicts, economic and political instability
- *We cannot programme the social values of our students. We can help them to form themselves as learners capable of ethical serious-minded judgments. It is they who must decide the kind of society and values that are right for their future*



# EAST MEETS WEST? PROFS XIE AND MARGINSON

- The two profs each respect both Eastern and Western ideas
- They agree the potentials of students are large and open, with a confusing range of choices. There is an expanding tension between the open potentials of student growth and the confusion it entails
- They agree social values are crucial in understanding the self and society and in navigating the growing uncertainty
- Prof Xie emphasises the immersion of students in values as the mode of regulating their ethical development and choices. We can identify strong values for this purpose
- Prof Marginson emphasises the self-forming agency of students as people making their own decisions, including choices about values, rather than other-formation by faculty. Student agency is strengthened by immersing students in knowledge (which includes social values). Today's students will determine their own values



# FINAL THOUGHTS

- Individuality is strengthened in modern society, while nature and the social order are in turmoil. The answer is not to balance or limit student individuality by imposing a blanket of social values, but to foster that agency, strengthen it so that it breaks out of narrow economic self-interest – enlarged agency is our best hope for social transformation and solving social problems. We should immerse student agency deeply in knowledge, strengthening its sociability
- Higher education as student self-formation is both a norm to pursue and a living reality. As with Confucian self-cultivation, it is lifelong and never fully completed
- Self-formation goes further than its antecedents. Confucianism and *Bildung* seem to underestimate autonomy. They are doctrinal, seeing education as an induction into societies with pre-given values. Students need teachers, and a curriculum, they are neophytes in knowledge. Yet values are not fixed but changing, and students in higher education are not children but adults, with an essential will - not educational objects but subjects. They will make the world as they wish



# RESOURCES

## Books and papers mentioned in slides:

- Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (2000). *Being human: The problem of agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.
- Zhao, G. and Deng, Z. (2016). Introduction. In G. Zhao and Z. Deng (eds.), *Re-envisioning Chinese education: The meaning of person-making in a new age* (pp. 1-9). Abingdon: Routledge.

## Research on self-formation includes:

- Yusuf Oldac on the self-formation of mobile Turkish students in educational, social and civic settings, in four countries (CGHE seminar 206)
- Soyoung Lee on academic self-formation, Korean students in Korea and UK, (CGHE seminar 226), DPhil in progress, University of Oxford
- Yushan Xie, DPhil in progress, University of Oxford
- Soyoung Lee, Yusuf Oldac, and Lili Yang (eds.) (forthcoming), *Student agency and self-formation*. Palgrave
- Marginson, S. (2014). Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18 (1), 6-22
- Marginson, S. (2023). Higher education as student self-formation. In S. Marginson, B. Cantwell, D. Platonova and A. Smolentseva (eds.), *Assessing the contributions of higher education*. Edward Elgar