

# China's Counterpart Philosophy and Practice of Purpose-driven Learning

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**Abstract:** This article intends to compare China's philosophy and practice in higher education with Stanford's Purpose-driven Learning as a response to the educational call of the new era in terms of sustainable development by means of literature study. Such comparison and introduction may broaden our views about diverse exploration of higher education in the world and hopefully shed some light on future practice. First the background of the times is studied to find out why educators try to transform the way of cultivating talents in the universities. Then the author takes a closer look into Stanford 2025 and China's Confucianism in education, relevant policy and Tsinghua University's practice for life-long learning. This study finds that Purpose-driven Learning and Confucianism teaching reform are both of great significance and have something in common for students' better self-accomplishment and social development, and that the communication and learning between the west and east is essential for better educational practice in the future.

**Keywords:** purpose-driven learning, Confucianism teaching philosophy, life-long learning, sustainable development

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## Introduction

Countries in the world are borrowing wisdom from their tradition or rethinking about their teaching practice in order to answer the calls of times and to cultivate talents who are qualified for the future. This paper will try to compare measures taken by Chinese and American Universities with regards lifelong learning and sustainable development of students.

### 1. Research background

Since the 21st century, the world has entered the era of informatization and globalization. People's lives are gradually moving from closed to shared, physical to virtual. The ways to obtain information and knowledge have also become diverse and convenient, and people's thinking subversive changes in the way of thinking and values, all of which have a profound impact on the traditional classroom teaching<sup>[1]</sup>.

In 2015, UN issued *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, including 17 Sustainable Development targets and aiming to eliminate extreme poverty, overcome inequality and injustice, and curb climate change. Educators are responsible to look into the future and try to research and report to adjust education according to times changes. UNESCO has commissioned several global reports to rethink the role of education at key moments of societal transformation. These began with the Faure Commission's 1972 report *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, and continued with the Delors Commission's report in 1996, *Learning: The Treasure Within*, which proposed 4 pillars for life-learning, they are learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together with others, learning to be.<sup>[9]</sup>

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In 2021, The International Commission on the Futures of Education reported *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*. This new social contract must be grounded in human rights and based on principles of non-discrimination, social justice, respect for life, human dignity and cultural diversity. It must encompass an ethic of care, reciprocity, and solidarity. It must strengthen education as a public endeavour and a common good.<sup>[2]</sup>

## **2. Comparative study of Stanford 2025 and Confucianism in education in China**

### **2.1 Stanford 2025: personalized learning and lifelong learning**

Stanford 2025 is an educational innovative project directed by the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design (d. school) of Stanford University. Once publicized, it caught world's attention and was thought to be a thorough subversion to traditional higher education.

Stanford 2025 explores in 4 main areas: Open Loop University, Paced Education, Axis Flip and Purpose Learning, getting education back to the track of student-centered, ability-oriented and problem-solving centered practice. "Open Loop" advocates a flexible education system that allows students at any age to arrange and finish their university study within 6 years, studying in school and gap year with internship or work. It breaks the limitation of time and space, students can either study online or in the classroom or in other technological ways. It realizes a shift from "teach" to "learn", from "standardized" to "personalized". "Paced Education" provides learners with more freedom, and considers learners' diversities either in study methods or progress, learners can decide to enter Calibrate, Elevate and Activate phases of study by themselves. "Axis Flip" focuses on learners, flipping from teaching certain knowledge to skills and interests, assessment from transcript and resume to skill-print pool, to help students with their qualifications and potential working positions.<sup>[7]</sup>

"Purpose learning", whereby students declared a mission, not a major. The intent was that students couple their disciplinary pursuit with the purpose that fueled it. To support Purpose Learning, Stanford launched a series of Impact Labs around the world in which faculty and students tackled global challenges through immersion. Together, these Impact Labs, now located in 25 countries on six continents, rival the California hub in faculty and student numbers and have increased Stanford's capacity to build a student body unrivaled in global diversity. For those who remained on the Palo Alto campus, Stanford selected seven big global problems each decade to which faculty from different disciplines would rally as a focal point of application for teaching their subject matter.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **2.2 Lifelong learning and students' sustainable development in China**

Due to different historical background features of the times, China's higher education has adjusted itself to fit for the request of talent cultivation to push forward social development. Life long learning was introduced to China in late 1970s with the Reform and Opening-up policy, and gradually integrated into the national educational strategy framework by means of education priority development policy, strategy for invigorating China through science and education, and education modernization.

In October 2010, the State Council issued a notice on piloting the reform of the national education system, which designated Beijing City, Shanghai City, Jiangsu Province, Guangdong Province and Yunnan Province, as well as the Central Radio and Television University, as pilot units for exploring the construction model of open universities. The Open University Of China and open universities at provincial level were established and built to be the main platforms for lifelong learning, online education, flexible education and international cooperation.<sup>[4]</sup>

Jiangsu Province plays a pioneering role in developing and upgrading life long learning in different phases keeping the pace with times and development of the country. By 2011 a system has been formed including adult education, distance education, professional training, either diplomatic or non diplomatic, ranging from preschool education to the elderly education, from education in the school to the whole society.<sup>[8]</sup>

In 2017, the National Open University was awarded the "Outstanding Institution Award" by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). *Outline of the National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and*

*Development Plan (2010 – 2020)* declared to speed up the construction of a sound lifelong learning system. In February 2019, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the *Modernization of Education in China 2035*, proposing that by 2035, the first priority should be given to education and the goal is to "build a modern education system that serves lifelong learning for all". The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China has decided to implement the strategy of revitalizing the country through science and education in the new era, and to promote education digitalization, building a learning society and learning oriented society for lifelong learning for all.<sup>[4]</sup>

As the top university in China, Tsinghua Future Laboratory was established on the 15th of December 2017 to promote cross-disciplinary research and development. The Future Laboratory's mission is to continuously innovate, break through barriers between disciplines, and to carry out in-depth interdisciplinary research and academic exchange. With the vision of combining computing, communication, media and art, Future Laboratory's goal is to promote advances in human cognition, perception, and human-machine-environment interaction to explore the future of humanity and to revolutionize the human lifestyle and work environment.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **2.3 Confucianism in education: “human becoming” centered education**

Chinese civilization is the only ancient civilization in the world which has been existing continuously until today. Education, as an essential part of civilization, is an inherit and representative of the philosophy. Confucianism has been the central philosophy of China and it is a mainline of educational changes in China.

Confucius is the most important representative of Confucianism, whose masterpiece and opinions have a great influence on teaching. Scholars do their research from different aspects, some study his educational spirit as a teacher. Confucius had a profound love for all students, he did not make benefit from teaching but to cultivate students to be better men. He was sincere to students, learning and teaching with all his heart, he has set an example for teachers from one generation to another. Some scholars focus on his education concept, insisting that Confucius attaches great significance to education, self development and accomplishment. In terms of core values, Confucianism emphasizes “Ren”, “Yi”, “Li”, “Zhi”, “Xin”, setting self moral development as the foundation of social construction. Ethics is one of the main characteristics of Confucianism. There are still many scholars focusing on teaching method. Confucius' main teaching methods are “to teach students in accordance with their aptitude” and “to inspire students helping them to find answers to knowledge and questions by themselves.”<sup>[10]</sup>

In this paper, the author prefers to take the notion “human becoming” proposed by Roger Ames to describe the process of education, a process to become learners themselves and to become “Ren”.<sup>[6]</sup> Confucianism is the art of living, Roger Ames calls it Zoetology, which features with continuity, progressive and narrative. Meanwhile, Roger Ames emphasizes focus-field, and “The Indivisible one and many”. When we try to explain and understand certain concept and phenomenon, we have to see it from its own cultural background and social context. Stanford 2025 roots in American educational background and serves as a pioneering, unconventional reform in higher education. Whereas China's “human becoming” philosophy and exploration in lifelong education and reform in higher education has Chinese characteristic. Both of them are trying to get closer to the essence and core of education, especially in this modern times, it is human-centered and has a common concern for countries and mankind as a whole.

### **2.4 Similarities between the west and east**

The first concern is that can we compare Confucianism and Stanford 2025, one seems ancient, the other latest? Yes, although Confucianism has been developed for more than 2000 years, the core spirit is kept the same while adding something new for this new era.

Similarities: they are both student-centered, the starting point and final purpose is to help students to become themselves, based on their own will, character and ability. Confucius emphasizes more on moral education, the core spirit “Ren” a high level of a well-developed self is the first thing. That is the basis and foundation for having a harmonious family, successful career and contribution to the society. Furthermore, neither Confucianism nor Stanford 2025 limits education to a mere individual purpose or accomplishment, but links it with obligation for a larger group, to one's

community, nation or even beyond to the global level. Personal moral development or purpose is the inner impetus for future study, and even a lifelong learning, and to some degree forming the process of learning and teaching.

### **3. Conclusion**

This study compared China's lifelong learning practice with Confucianism as the core with Stanford's Purpose Learning, both of them are human-centered and linking self-accomplishment of individuals with development of the country and even the world. Furthermore, the communication and reference between the west and east is essential for better educational practice in the future.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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