

A Letter to Mr. Zhou Ning

Most respectfully,

Now that the spring wind has come and the hundred grasses compete to flourish, I trust this letter finds you in peace and good health.

Having lately been much moved by the temper of the times and the decline of public morals, I have sat long in reflection. After many turnings of thought, I could not but take up my brush to write these few words. This is not a complaint of personal misfortune, nor an idle indulgence of sentiment, but rather an expression of deep concern: that the way of moral education is daily in decay, the spirit of our academies is languid, and we students, rootless in thought, drift unconsciously in pursuit of gain.

Mencius once said, *“To have the finest talents under heaven and to educate them—this is the joy of a great man.”* In ancient times, the purpose of education was to cultivate virtue and character. But today—what is the aim of education? What is its true path?

In recent months, wherever my eyes have seen and my ears have heard, all is entanglement in coursework, anxiety over examinations, dawn to dusk in endless toil. When students gather, they speak not of learning or art, but of grade points and certificates. Some even labor through the night, scheming and striving for prizes and credentials—calling upon favors or employing devices. This tide of utilitarianism deepens daily, seeping into the marrow of youth, and few seem aware of it. I, though unworthy, cannot bear to watch in silence; lest by saying nothing, I too sink into the same mire.

Confucius said, *“The gentleman attends to the root; when the root is set firm, the Way will grow.”* If our universities do not return to their roots—cultivating the moral and human foundation—then even if we add a hundred new courses or import ten thousand foreign books, all will be but an empty shell. Though I am but an ordinary student, I cannot still my worry when I see our generation losing its spiritual ground, our hearts restless and shallow. Thus, I must ask, though it may seem presumptuous: **Is today’s “university” still a “university” in truth?**

I. On the Essence of the Great Learning

The word “university” in ancient times did not refer merely to halls of instruction or material facilities, but to the Great Way of perfecting one’s virtue. The *Great Learning* teaches: *“The way of great learning lies in manifesting one’s bright virtue, in renewing the people, and in resting in the highest good.”*

“Bright virtue” is not merely private wisdom, but the light that illuminates and inspires

others; “renewing the people” is not only governance of the masses, but the cultivation of sincerity and empathy; “resting in the highest good” is the ultimate aim of moral education—the return of the world to benevolence.

The ancient academies placed virtue before skill, righteousness before utility. They pursued the “three immortalities”—virtue, word, and deed—seeking to form persons, not merely to manufacture instruments.

But today’s universities, though new in design, tall in buildings, rich in faculty, and strict in administration, have lost their spirit. Four years of study teach much technique, yet little truth. We are taught how to build bridges, how to compute forces, yet not why we build, or for what purpose we stand. Mechanics is taught without measure of the human heart; modeling, without guidance in moral choice. A certificate outweighs conviction; a prize eclipses perseverance. Students learn for grades, for career, for gain—but dare not say they learn for virtue, for truth, for humanity. Thus education exists in name, but not in essence.

As *The Songs of Chu* laments: “*Though I possess inner beauty, I must adorn it with cultivated ability.*” Virtue must precede talent; aspiration must guide knowledge. Yet the modern system has lost its compass—fixated on technique, enslaved by form, and sunk in vulgar competition for rank and title. It is like drawing water from the sea with a bucket—labor without meaning.

I see my peers running breathless for grades and tests, rejoicing at one certificate, grieving at another’s loss. Piles of exercises rise like mountains, yet few ask *why* they study. Even teachers, once guides of virtue, now struggle under evaluations and bureaucracy—teaching becomes mere training, formation of persons reduced to production of specialists. Thus the decline of learning is not the fault of students alone, but of the entire structure.

Laozi said, “*In the pursuit of knowledge, something is added every day; in the pursuit of the Way, something is taken away.*” To learn is to acquire skill; to seek the Way is to refine the heart. If learning is guided by the Way, technique follows naturally; but if the Way is abandoned for skill, the spirit is lost. Today’s education exalts learning and forsakes the Way, leaving only the pursuit of profit. How sorrowful this is.

II. On the True Purpose of Education

Education is not the mere transmission of knowledge and technique; it is the guiding of souls toward goodness and wisdom, the path of self-realization and the fulfillment of humanity. The ancient sages never regarded teaching as a mere tool. Confucius said: “*It*

is through poetry that one is inspired, through propriety that one is established, through music that one is perfected."

Modern education, however, seeks function over virtue, utility over cultivation. Classrooms echo with jargon and drills; examinations dictate the rhythm of youth. Students ask not, "Why do we learn?" but "How many credits does this course bring?" or "Will this certificate help me find a job?" Thus, few cultivate virtue; many chase after utility. The forms of teaching remain, but the spirit of learning fades.

The *Doctrine of the Mean* says: "*What Heaven has conferred is called the nature; following this nature is called the Way; cultivating the Way is called teaching.*" Teaching must guide by the Way; otherwise it is but craft. Education without moral direction leaves hearts disordered. True teaching transforms quietly—awakening both self and others, returning all to humanity and righteousness.

Scholar Qian Mu once wrote: "*Life is not merely for survival, but for the pursuit of meaning.*" Education should give meaning to life. Yet now many see it only as a ladder for social ascent, forgetting its role as the foundation of one's being. Mencius said, "*The great man does not lose his child's heart.*" Zhuangzi said, "*The true man is untroubled by the world's fetters.*" A true learner studies not for fame or wealth, but to preserve sincerity, to nourish the soul.

If education loses its spiritual axis, it cannot cultivate character. *The Book of Rites* says: "*A good singer inspires others to continue his song; a good teacher inspires others to continue his purpose.*" That purpose lies not in worldly success, but in the preservation of virtue and integrity.

Therefore, those who educate must first know the human heart. To revive the true university, we must restore moral purpose before technical training, placing *virtue first, skill second*. Only then can the moral atmosphere of society be renewed.

III. On the Student's Dilemma

I am twenty-one years of age, born in the southeastern corner of the land. Since entering this university, years have slipped by silently. I came not by lofty design nor by worldly ambition, but rather by a mistake of path. Yet, as I drift within this field, I cannot but feel troubled.

Often, sitting alone at dusk, I ask myself: "Why do I study? Where am I going?" Confucius said: "*Let your will be upon the Way, rest upon virtue, rely upon benevolence, and find joy in the arts.*" But among today's youth, most are as I am—bound by exams and grades.

We think not of *how to be human*, but *how to compete*. Talent becomes a means of extra credit; knowledge, a tool for escape. The mind is enslaved by things; the spirit has no anchor.

This confusion is not mine alone. Once, while conducting field research at the ancient Baoneng Temple, I conversed with senior classmates under the eaves, in the pale starlight. All spoke of study and the future, yet all bore the same melancholy: "Though I study civil engineering, I know not how to find peace of heart." These were intelligent men, yet shared the same malaise. Truly, the greatest suffering of our age is not toil, but rootlessness—ambition without meaning.

Though I have tried to enrich myself—learning editing, modeling, photography, drawing—yet despite effort, a certain emptiness remains. One evening, watching the setting sun fade and hearing the wind through the valley, I suddenly felt lost. I realized I no longer knew *why* I did all these things, nor *where* I was heading. Perhaps this is the very state Qu Yuan described: "*Long, long is the road ahead; I shall seek truth above and below.*"

Education today prizes application over humanity, skill over virtue. Yet without roots, skill becomes drifting smoke. Machines may replace human labor, but no algorithm can replicate conscience or compassion. Thus I do not reject craft, but wish to unite it with reflection—learning the art, yet knowing the Way.

As *The Book of Songs* says: "*Let not the sorrow endure forever.*" May our generation, amid the sea of vanity, still learn to pause, to reflect, to return to sincerity.

IV. On Culture and the Homeland

Culture is not lofty scholarship nor official discourse, but the spirit within daily life—the invisible order of ordinary hearts. The *Zuo Zhuan* says: "*Ritual guides the will; music harmonizes the heart.*" Culture teaches one how to dwell in peace and recognize one's place in the world.

Yet today, the roots of locality grow thin. Towers rise, but hearts disperse. The internet connects all, but speech grows hollow. Many youths, far from home in search of learning and livelihood, feel inwardly adrift. The ancient valued "attachment to the soil," but now many see their homeland as a burden, not a foundation. Culture becomes ornament, not lifeblood.

I have often pondered this: to dwell long in a place is to develop feeling; from feeling arises propriety; from propriety, civilization. The village, with its ancestral halls, its ordered

streets, its visible and invisible harmonies, embodies centuries of moral design.

But today, in the name of modernization, ancestral halls decay, villages are merged, rituals forgotten. When memory and structure vanish, modernization becomes amnesia. The *Book of Songs* laments: “*When I went, the sun and moon were clear; now I return, and snow and rain obscure the way.*”

Even more perilous is the severance of the human spirit. Without local education, without custom or ceremony, young people learn only technique, not culture; they know tools, not the peace of the heart. Thus the city prospers, but the soul withers.

Education must therefore re-root itself in culture and land. Beyond textbooks, let us teach local language, customs, and ethics—so that youth, while learning for the future, do not forget their origin. Only then can education nurture not just workers, but whole persons.

If culture can once again dwell in daily life, if rural spaces revive their spiritual order, then even amid the noise of the world, the young may preserve an inner stillness. As the *Book of Songs* says: “*The peach blossoms are radiant.*” When culture is rooted in the soil, it shall bloom forever.

V. Conclusion

Are we learning merely for certificates? For offices and rank? Or for that ineffable faith and ideal within the heart?

Though I have found no answer, my unease grows day by day. I know well that ideals are often mocked as naïve, yet without them, man is a ship without a sail, a tree without roots. However arduous the voyage, such a vessel must surely sink.

We may be young and ordinary, yet if we do not resolve to live by virtue and truth, but spend our days chasing grades and prizes, we not only wrong ourselves, but betray the life Heaven has given and the care our parents bestowed. Wang Yangming, through hardship, realized that “the mind is principle itself,” and achieved unity of knowledge and action. Should we not, too, seek the same inner clarity and steadfastness?

The decline of moral education is not born overnight, nor can it be reversed by one man alone. Yet “a thousand-mile dike may collapse from an ant’s hole”—its ruin begins small, and so may its restoration. If even one person awakens, if even one reflects, if even one guards a spark of conscience, then the tide may yet turn.

Lu Xun wrote: “*The boundless distance and countless souls—all are connected to me.*” I am but a student, no sage, yet I dare not remain silent while learning decays and virtue

fades.

Now, writing at midnight, the lamplight flickers; rain murmurs beyond the window. My heart feels heavy as stone. I wish for nothing grand—only that the hearts of our youth remain uncorrupted, that amid the ruins of education, we might plant a few seeds of hope.

If one day the university regains its true name, if education once more serves humanity and not utility, then even in death, I could rest in peace.

Humbly written in haste, unworthy as it is, I beg your kind instruction.

With the season's best wishes,

Respectfully,