

## VIEWS AND REVIEW

# Epilepsy care: Work, upbringing, leisure, and Chinese culture

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### Abstract

Stigma in epilepsy arises from the misconceptions and prejudices rooted in the patient's culture and traditions. Upbringing also has an important impact on the quality of life of epilepsy patients. In Chinese tradition, the main purpose of life is to be a “gentleman” 君子, to fully express the true human nature. The essence of being a gentleman is “benevolence” and “virtue”. According to Zhuangzi's concept of “virtue overcoming deformity” 德充符, virtue can prevail over physical deficiencies. Consistent with such a principle, a person with epilepsy should receive high honour if he can demonstrate the character of a “gentleman”. In - traditional Chinese culture, the sense of shame is the foundation of morality; “feeling shame” 知耻 and “being shameless” 无耻 are important moral concepts. A gentleman has a sense of shame, whereas a “petty person” 小人 is shameless. However, the ability to resist feeling inappropriate shame - “not feeling ashamed” 不耻 is also a trait of the gentleman. Thus, based on traditional Chinese philosophy, one should resist feeling ashamed for having epilepsy. Chinese culture emphasizes the importance of exerting vitality in the presence of adversity; people with epilepsy who do not feel ashamed of their deficiency is manifesting such a vitality. Traditional Chinese culture takes a positive attitude towards hardship and adversity, that it is essential for developing character and skills. Overcoming adversity requires responsibilities, the pre-requisite is personal freedom. Thus, allowing freedom and nurturing independence is consistent with traditional Chinese attitude to upbringing.

### INTRODUCTION

In epilepsy, it is believed that social consequences result in higher economic burden than direct medical cost. According to a study carried out by the University Malaya Medical Centre comparing healthy siblings who are from similar social background with persons with epilepsy (PWE), the PWE is 13 times more likely to be unemployed, 5 times more likely to live in poverty, 3 times more likely to be single, and 2.5 times less likely to have a college education.<sup>1</sup> The psychosocial effect of epilepsy can be understood through the concept of stigma. Stigma in epilepsy arises from misconceptions and prejudices of the society and people whom the patients live with, which in turn reflects the surrounding tradition and culture. According to Kleiman *et al.*, in Chinese culture, epilepsy imposes a threat to the family's aspirations through a process of “courtesy stigma”. Because of fear of family disgrace, PWE were typically kept at home and their diagnosis kept secret.<sup>2</sup>

Studies have demonstrated that early age of seizure onset is associated with high unemployment, showing the importance of the upbringing pattern.<sup>1</sup> In another study conducted by the University Malaya Medical Centre, self-motivation or self-determined motivation was demonstrated to be a key predictor of employability.<sup>3</sup> How then should we promote greater self-motivation in PWE towards their work or studies? In Western societies, children are brought up enjoying leisure activities. Besides promoting a healthy lifestyle, these leisure activities are also important for moulding of character and nurturing soft skills. Can we also find support for the role of leisure activities in traditional Chinese culture to promote a more holistic education? This article hopes to have a dialogue with traditional Chinese culture to help PWE develop a more positive mind-set to overcome the stigma associated with epilepsy, and have a healthier upbringing.

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## THE CONFUCIUS TEACHING ON THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

In traditional Chinese culture, the ultimate purpose of life is to be a *junzi* 君子 (gentleman), to manifest fully the true nature of man, or benevolence 仁.<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in the saying by the pre-eminent contemporary cultural scholar in China, Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨, when commenting on the ideal Chinese personality: “The ultimate goal of culture is personality. In the Chinese culture, the model collective personality is to be a gentleman. In the Chinese culture, to become a gentleman is everything. If one is not a gentleman, all the striving is in vain. To be a gentleman is to be the model and ideal Chinese...I always feel that the ultimate reason why Chinese culture has not perished, is because the gentleman is not dead, the personality has not come apart.”<sup>5</sup> Yu added: “If one is to summarize the character of a gentleman in one word, it should be “virtue” 德. The essence of virtue is social responsibility to benefit others.”<sup>6</sup> Yu quoted the order listed in “The Great Learning 《礼记·大学》” which is one of the ancient Confucius texts, “In the gentleman’s hierarchy of values, virtue is placed first, the last is wealth”. Yu quoted another disciple of Confucius, Xunzi 荀子 who said: “The gentleman stands on virtue, the petty person 小人 on *li* 力 (power & force)” Yu commented that the desire to be successful and to win, a commendable value in modern Western society is the *li* that Xunzi warned of<sup>6</sup>

## VIRTUE OVERCOMING DEFORMITY

Zhuangzi 庄子 is one of the foremost philosophers in the ancient school of Daoism. He advocated the concept of “virtue overcoming deformity” 德充符. That is, virtues can prevail over physical deficiencies.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with such a principle, a person with epilepsy should also receive high honour if he can demonstrate the character of a gentleman. However, modern Chinese understanding of the sense of honor, mainly based on utilitarianism (*li* 力), is too narrow. Viewed from the perspective of Confucian teaching, that narrow understanding of honor would be the moral value of the petty person 小人.

## SHAME AND NOT FEELING ASHAMED

In traditional Chinese culture, the sense of shame 羞耻感 is the foundation of moral behavior. Mencius, a Confucian scholar, has said: “The feeling of shame is the beginning of

righteousness”. In traditional Chinese culture, a gentleman is a man with a sense of shame 知耻, while the petty person has no sense of shame 无耻; the way of a gentleman is “the way of shame” 知耻之道. “Shame” and “shamelessness” are thus important concepts in Chinese culture.

However, in addition to “shame” and “shamelessness”, there is also the ability to resist inappropriate shame -- “not feeling ashamed” 不耻. This is shown in the popular Confucius saying: “One should not feel ashamed to learn from people of lower position” 不耻下问. Indeed, “not feeling ashamed” is also the mark of a gentleman.

Yu has said: “Not all shame is a manifestation of a gentleman. A gentlemen should in fact help others to distinguish when one should feel shame and when one should not feel shame.” He also said: “The true gentleman is careful and free; careful to ensure that he feels “shame” when he ought to, and free to “feel unashamed” when it is inappropriate to feel shame. Xunzi, the Confucian disciple said: “A gentleman is free to resist feeling shameful when there is no reason to be so...A gentleman is not shameful when “maligned”, “doubted” or “ignored”.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, from the perspective of the teaching of Confucius, one should not feel shameful for having epilepsy. Feeling ashamed for having epilepsy is false guilt.

To further clarify, the concept of shame has some commonality with the concept of “face” 脸、面子, which is also prevalent in oriental culture. However, the two concepts are not identical. “Shame” and “face” are both about honor. However, “shame” is about dishonor, about falling short in morality, while “face” may be largely based on glory from achievements, position or wealth. In the context of “face”, there is no concept of “not feeling ashamed”.

## CHINESE CULTURE ATTACHES THE HIGHEST IMPORTANCE TO BEING ABLE TO EXERT VITALITY IN THE PRESENCE OF ADVERSITY

As mentioned in the introduction, self-determined motivation is a key predictor of employability in PWE.<sup>3</sup> Traditional Chinese culture and values attach the highest importance to being able to exert vitality in the presence of adversity; that is, to hold on to one’s values despite the difficult circumstances. Many Chinese cultural symbols reflect this value of being able to thrive in adversity. For example, common themes in Chinese paintings such as the plum blossoms depict flowers that bloom in winter; bamboo,

portrays strength and agility as bamboo bends but does not break; and the lotus, a flower that grows and blooms out of the mud and yet is untainted. “Not feeling ashamed” is akin to having the mental strength and vitality which overcome adversity.

Leung Insing 梁燕城, a contemporary Chinese philosopher observed: “After Confucius, the Chinese is able to separate the personality from the success or failure of his work. That is, whether a person is of high honour or not is not based on his practical achievements. A person can be a failure in his career. However if he struggles in defeat and failure while adhering to the principle of goodness, then he is a man of high honour.”; “This is also reflected in the heroes that the Chinese admire and venerate such as Wen Tianxiang, Shima Qian, Confucius... 文天祥、司马迁、孔子... who are mostly failures in their careers, but are admired for their persistence in holding on to their values;... On the contrary, the Chinese do not venerate the powerful emperors of Qin, Sui and Han 秦始皇、隋炀帝、汉武帝 who had a great impact in unifying China or founded the various great dynasties...”<sup>8</sup>

The contemporary poet and scholar Ye Jiaying 叶嘉莹 spoke about the “virtue in weakness” 弱德, expressing the same concept of exerting vitality in adversity. The poet herself lived in great distress, thus “in weakness.” Yet in the midst of life’s miseries, the poet persisted and was able to hold herself high. Thus she lived out “virtue in weakness”. She explained: “I advocate the beauty of ‘virtue in weakness’, but I am not weak”. She is in fact expressing strength and vitality in adversity.

### **TRADITIONAL CHINESE ATTITUDES TO PAIN AND UPBRINGING**

Children living in nuclear families in contemporary industrialized societies, especially in societies without adequate social welfare benefits, must not only have a resilient personality to overcome adversaries, but also possess marketable skills to allow them to be economically independent. Studies have shown that PWE having onset in childhood are more likely to face unemployment.<sup>1,3</sup> One of the reasons for this is over-protection during their upbringing, affecting the development of their personality and educational achievement, resulting in their higher rate of unemployment in adulthood.

The moral values of “not feeling ashamed”, and “vitality in adversity” can build mature, tough and independent character. Traditional Chinese philosophy takes a positive attitude to pain,

hardship and adversity as essential for molding of character. This is demonstrated by the famous saying of Mencius, who is another Confucius sage: “So it is that whenever the Heaven intends to entrust a person with great responsibilities, the Heaven will first try the man’s resolve, exhaust his muscles and bones, starve his body, leave him destitute, and confound his every endeavor. In this way, his patience and endurance are developed, and his weaknesses are overcome.”

How then does hardship and difficulties help to mold character, and promote the mastery of technical skills? It is through personally grappling with and solving complex and challenging problems. However, this in turn requires the person to bear real responsibilities and take ownership of the problems, something the person can only do if he has personal freedom to make judgement. Thus, we can conclude that allowing freedom and nurturing independence is consistent with traditional Chinese attitude to upbringing, while over-protection of children with epilepsy is against Chinese culture.

Indeed, traditional Chinese upbringing attaches great emphasis on not spoiling the child. For example, in the well-known and influential “Yan Family Teaching” 《颜氏家训》 composed in the sixth century, in the chapter on children’s education, it states that the education of children should be strict, and spoiling the children will ultimately harm them. Chinese traditional culture attaches great importance to discipline. This is the core of the Confucian teaching on “courtesy” 礼. Other than discipline, courtesy also implies “respect” 敬 and “giving way” 让.

### **HARMONY AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES**

Leisure activities can help to promote a healthy body and mind. After a stressful, busy, and exhausting day, it can help to rejuvenate the body and mind. Some leisure activities, such as playing musical instruments have some characteristics of “work”, requiring the learning of special skills and discipline. Thus, these activities can help to cultivate self-control. There are also many group-based leisure activities that can facilitate socialization, and cultivate communication and team-work. The achievements and success experienced in leisure activities can facilitate better self-confidence and self-esteem. In the context of Chinese culture, leisure activities can be a means of cultivating “benevolence” and “virtue”, the essence of a “gentleman” 君子.

While leisure activities and the arts are strongly encouraged in traditional Chinese culture, they

are also viewed as having strong links to moral values. The eminent writer and philosopher of the twentieth century, Lin Yutang 林语堂 said: “There is the generally accepted belief that an artist’s work is strictly determined by his personality. This personality is both moral and artistic...The Chinese has always accepted implicitly the belief that no painter can be great unless his own moral and aesthetic personality is great, and in judging calligraphy and painting, the highest criterion is not whether the artist shows good technique, but whether he has a high personality or not.”<sup>9</sup>As for the arts and leisure activities conveying moral values, an obvious example is the art of the traditional Chinese opera, which is a fusion of poetry and local dialects. Lin observed that the traditional Chinese opera is very popular in twentieth century China. An opera can be watched many times over, without losing its appeal and enjoyment. Lin described the traditional Chinese opera as the intellectual food of the populace, “providing them with all the moral notions of good and evil.”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, traditional Chinese culture does place a high value in a life of leisure. According to Lin, “From the Chinese point of view, the man who is wisely idle is the most cultured man.”<sup>11</sup> The poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 of the fourth century abdicated his government position to return to life in the village as a farmer-poet, subsisting on material scarcity but enjoying a carefree life. On Tao, Lin commented that “There will be no one in China to object when I say that Tao represents to us the most perfectly harmonious and well-rounded character in the entire Chinese literary tradition”. His saying: “I cannot bend and bow myself for the sake of five bushels of rice” is a classic.<sup>12</sup> Lin added, “Great men of letters, Su Dongpo, Bai Juyi, 苏东坡、白居易...were generally enticed into a short term of official life, did a wonderful job at it, and then got exasperated with its external kowtowing and receiving and sending off of fellow officials, and gladly laying down the burdens of an official life, returned wisely to a life of retirement”.<sup>13</sup>The Chinese traditionally admire those who are able to adhere to their inner values and make independent decisions despite the temptations and pressure from higher authorities to live a life of leisure.

Leisure is closely linked to harmony in Chinese culture. Politicians are generally fearful of social unrest. “Moderation” is the key value advocated to promote social harmony. Daoism emphasizes harmony with nature. Laozi, the founder of Daoism, advocates “inaction” and spoke about “The soft overcoming the hard, and

the weak the strong”; reflecting the concern for harmony with self, others, and nature. The longing for a simple leisurely life in the villages also reflects the same motivation for harmony, away from the strife and pressure felt in the city.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, PWE may adopt the traditional Chinese attitude to leisure and harmony, not only to help build their character and skills, but also to live a balanced life to counter the competitive and materialistic cultural values prevalent in the modern world. With such a mindset, the parents may also find it easier to accept their PWE children who may not fulfill their high expectations.

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## DISCLOSURE

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## APPENDIX

### Translations of quotations

Yu Qiuyu: "The ultimate goal of culture is personality. In the Chinese culture, the model collective personality is to be a gentleman. In the Chinese culture, to become a gentleman is everything. If one is not a gentleman, all the striving are in vain. To be a gentleman is to be the model and ideal Chinese...I always feel that the ultimate reason why Chinese culture has not perished, is because the gentleman is not dead, the personality has not come apart."<sup>5</sup>

余秋雨：“文化的终极成果，是人格，中华文化的集体人格模式，是“君子”。对中华文化而言，有了君子，什么都有了；没有君子，什么都徒劳。做个君子，也就是做个最合格，最理想的中国人。。。我一直认为，中国文化没有沦丧的最终原因，是君子未死，人格未溃。”

Yu Qiuyu: "If one is to summarize the character of a gentleman in one word, it should be "virtue". The essence of virtue is social responsibility to benefit others."<sup>6</sup>

余秋雨：“君子怀德”，是君子之道的起点。德主要是指“利人、利他、利天下”的社会责任感。

The Great Learning: In the gentleman's hierarchy of values, virtue is placed first, the last is wealth. 《礼记·大学》：“君子先慎乎德。有德此有人，有人此有土。有土此有财，有财此有用。德者，本也；财者，末也。”

Yu quoted Xunzi who said: "The gentleman stands on virtue, the petty person on *li* (power & force)" Yu commented that the desire to be successful and to win, a commendable value in modern Western society is the *li* that Xunzi warned of.<sup>6</sup>

荀子说，君子立身于德，小人立身于力（“君子以德，小人以力”）。西方近代社会，主要着眼于力。。。他们崇尚“成功”，甚至从童年开始，就永远弥漫着“输赢”的符咒。。。他们所说的“成功”和“赢”，也就是荀子所警惕的“力”。

Zhuangzi's "virtue overcome deformity"; virtues can prevail over physical deficiencies. 庄子的“德充符”，“故德有所长，形有所忘”

Mencius: "The feeling of shame is the beginning of righteousness". 《孟子·公孙丑上》：“羞恶之心，义之端也”

Confucius: "One should not feel ashamed to learn from people of lower position" 《论子·公冶长》：“不耻下问”

Yu Qiuyu: "Not all shame is a manifestation of a gentleman. A gentlemen should in fact help others to distinguish when one should feel shame and when one should not feel shame." He also said: "The true gentleman is careful and free; careful to ensure that he feels "shame" when he ought to, and free to "feel unashamed" when it is inappropriate to feel shame.

余秋雨：“并不是一切羞耻感都属于君子。君子恰恰应该帮人们分清，什么该羞耻，什么不该羞耻”。。。真正的君子极为谨慎，又极为自由。谨慎在“有耻”，自由在“不耻”上。

Xunzi: "A gentleman is free to resist feeling shameful when there is no reason to be so...A gentleman is not shameful when "maligned", "doubted" or "ignored"<sup>6</sup>

荀子：“君子耻不修，不耻见污；耻不信，不耻不见信；耻不能，不耻不见用。”根据余秋雨的语译，“君子之耻，耻在自己不修，不耻别人诬陷；耻在自己失信，不耻别人不信；耻在自己无能，不耻别人不用”。

Leung Insing: "After Confucius, the Chinese is able to separate the personality from the success or failure of his work. That is, whether a person is of high honour or not is based on his practical achievements. A person can be a failure in his career. However if he struggles in defeat and failure while adhering to the principle of goodness, then he is a man of high honour"; "This is also reflected in the heroes that the Chinese admire and venerate such as Wen Tianxiang, Shima Qian, Confucius..."

who are mostly failures in their careers, but are admired for their persistence in holding on to their values;...On the other hand, the Chinese do not venerate the powerful emperors of Qin, Sui and Han who had a large impact in unifying China or founded the various great dynasties...”<sup>8</sup>

中國哲學學者梁燕城說：“中國人自孔子以後，即能將人格價值與功業成敗分開，即一個人偉大與否，跟他有沒有實踐成就無關，一個人在功業上可失敗，但他若能在這失敗中奮鬥，堅持美善原則，那麼這人仍是有價值的。”；“中國人最懷念的人物是孔子、蘇武、關羽、岳飛、文天祥，史可法、鄭成功等，全是失敗者，不過能在失敗中堅持道德奮鬥，維持光輝的良知和人格而已。”；“中國人却不崇敬秦始皇、隋煬帝、漢武帝，甚至唐太宗也只能給人好感，而不被尊崇。”。

Ye Jiaying: “I advocate the beauty of ‘virtue in weakness’, but I am not weak”

叶嘉莹：“我提倡‘弱德之美’，但我並不是弱者”

Mencius: “So it is that whenever the Heaven intends to entrust a person with great responsibilities, the Heaven will first try the man’s resolve, exhaust his muscles and bones, starve his body, leave him destitute, and confound his every endeavor. In this way, his patience and endurance are developed, and his weaknesses are overcome.” (modified from David Hinton’s translation)

孟子：“天將降大任於斯人也，必先苦其心志，勞其筋骨，餓其體膚，空乏其身。”，是中華文化傳統的苦難觀的經典論述。

Laozi: “The soft overcomes the hard, and the weak the strong”

老子：“弱之勝強，柔之勝剛”