

Narrative as Practical Pedagogy: Cultivating Moral Personhood through Chinese Classic Novels

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ABSTRACT

Prevailing moral education theory, shaped by universalist and cognitive paradigms, often fails to connect abstract principles with lived experience, fragmenting the moral self. This paper argues that China's Four Great Classic Novels form a rich repository of culturally-grounded *phronesis* (practical wisdom). We propose an analytical framework structured around the Chinese sequence of "lixin, lishen, liye, liming" and elaborated through four dimensions: authentic disposition, relational sentiment, strategic wisdom, and holistic harmony. Engaging Western theories, we show how each novel distinctly dramatizes one facet: *Dream of the Red Chamber* (authenticity), *Water Margin* (relational ethics), *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (dialectical wisdom), and *Journey to the West* (integrative harmony). Together, they model a holistic, processual pedagogy for moral development. The study concludes by advocating a shift toward narrative-based reflective praxis to cultivate integrated and discerning moral agents.

KEYWORDS: Moral Personhood, Narrative Pedagogy, Chinese Classic Novels, *Phronesis*, Moral Education

INTRODUCTION

The project of moral education in the late modern era confronts a persistent paradox: despite a proliferation of theoretical paradigms—from neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to Kohlbergian rationalism, and from care ethics to character education—the cultivation of a coherent, resilient, and authentic moral identity remains elusive (Kristjánsson, 2020). Individuals, particularly the young, are frequently presented with abstract principles, hypothetical dilemmas, or catalogues of virtues, yet report a palpable disconnect between these prescriptions and the contingent, emotionally charged realities of lived experience. This disconnect points to two interrelated lacunae in mainstream approaches: a deficit of integrity and a deficit of individuality.

The deficit of integrity refers to the fragmentation of the moral self. Influential cognitive-developmental models, in their laudable pursuit of generalizable reasoning structures, can inadvertently compartmentalize morality into a domain-specific skill (Nucci, 2017). Morality becomes applied in discrete "dilemmas" rather than being an orienting disposition that permeates one's entire being, emotions, relationships, and life narrative. Consequently, the moral person is conceived in pieces—the rational judge, the empathetic carer—seldom integrated into a unified agent whose understanding is embodied, historically extended, and woven into a coherent life story (Taylor, 1989). Kohlberg's (1981) focus on justice-as-fairness,

for instance, while foundational, has been critiqued for marginalizing the moral salience of care, community, and particularistic attachments (Gilligan, 1982). One may master post-conventional reasoning yet remain unequipped to navigate the complex web of loyalties, loves, and historical responsibilities that constitute a concrete moral life.

The deficit of individuality concerns the threat of homogenization. In reaction against relativism, some forms of values education risk promoting a thin, conformist version of the good, failing to engage the deep, often painful process of singularization—how universal moral impulses are answered by a unique person within specific socio-historical coordinates (Ricoeur, 1992). Education can thus subtly discipline subjects into reproducing approved responses, stifling the emergence of a genuinely personal moral voice (Biesta, 2013).

In response, a significant “narrative turn” has emerged, arguing that human identity and moral understanding are fundamentally narrative in form (MacIntyre, 1981; Ricoeur, 1992). This paper seeks to advance this paradigm by introducing a rich, systematic, and under-utilized resource: the narrative wisdom embedded in China’s Four Great Classic Novels. We contend these texts are not mere didactic tales but sophisticated laboratories of *phronesis*—practical wisdom—that dramatize the very processes of moral identity formation which contemporary theory struggles to articulate. They offer thick descriptions of moral life in its agonistic complexity, showing how individuals navigate tensions between authenticity and convention, loyalty and law, ideal and expediency.

Our core argument is that a philosophical excavation of these novels, framed by *phronesis*, reveals a coherent pedagogical model for cultivating moral personhood. This model addresses the integrity deficit by framing moral development as an embodied, lifelong process encompassing the establishment of one’s foundational disposition (*lixin*), social embodiment (*lishen*), purposive action (*liye*), and reconciliation with broader destiny (*liming*). It addresses the individuality deficit by narratively demonstrating how this process is irreducibly singular and ambiguous. In dialogue with and as a critical complement to Western theories, we propose a “Four-Foundation” model grounded in Qing (authentic affectivity), Yi (relational commitment), Xin-Zhi (integrated wisdom), and He (holistic harmony). This model informs a practical pedagogy of narrative-reflective praxis, aligning with this journal’s focus on educational application, by providing a structured approach to using complex narratives to foster moral discernment, integration, and resilience.

NARRATIVE AS A PEDAGOGICAL VEHICLE FOR PHRONESIS

We posit that canonical Chinese classic novel function as rich repositories of *phronesis*, systematically cultivating the cognitive-affective dimensions of practical wisdom through their narrative architecture.

Phronesis as the Meta-Concept

To bridge Chinese narrative wisdom and contemporary moral education, we require a robust meta-concept. *Phronesis*, often translated as “practical wisdom” or “prudence,” serves this purpose impeccably. In the Aristotelian tradition (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI), *phronesis* is the intellectual virtue concerned with action (*praxis*). It is the capacity to deliberate well about what is good and beneficial for the flourishing life (*eudaimonia*), not in a universal sense, but in particular, contingent situations. Its object is the “thing-to-be-done” (*prakton*). Unlike

theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) or technical skill (*techne*), *phronesis* is inherently ethical, context-dependent, and non-codifiable. It involves a perceptive grasp of the salient features of a unique circumstance, an understanding of the mean relative to us, and the ability to act accordingly (Aristotle, trans. 2009).

This concept resonates deeply with the moral epistemology underlying Chinese classical narratives. These stories are less concerned with promulgating universal moral laws than with exploring how agents exercise discernment (*jian* 鉴) and appropriateness (*yi* 宜) within the fluid, relational, and often contradictory fabric of the human world (*renlun* 人伦). The novels present morality not as the application of a rule, but as a situated performance requiring sensitivity, timing, and a holistic assessment of persons, relationships, and consequences.

A Chinese Framework: The “Four Establishments” and “Four Valuings”

While *phronesis* provides the universal philosophical anchor, its manifestation in the Chinese narrative tradition demands a culturally attuned hermeneutic. I propose an analytical framework comprising two interrelated schemas.

The Developmental Chain: Establishing Heart-Mind, Personhood, Endeavour, and Destiny (立心、立身、立业、立命). This schema conceptualizes the cultivation of moral personhood as a dynamic, lifelong process:

1. **Lixin (立心): Establishing the Heart-Mind.** This is the foundational, existential stage. It involves the awakening and clarification of one’s core disposition, authentic feelings, and fundamental moral orientation. It asks: What is my true nature? What do I genuinely value amidst societal expectations? It is the struggle for an authentic moral compass.
2. **Lishen (立身): Establishing the Personhood.** This stage concerns embodiment in the social world. It involves navigating the web of concrete relationships (family, friends, community), defining oneself through roles and responsibilities, and learning to act with integrity within, and sometimes against, social structures. It asks: How do I live out my values in relationship with others?
3. **Liye (立业): Establishing the Endeavour.** This stage pertains to purposive, often public, action. It involves engaging with broader historical or communal projects, exercising agency, strategizing, and confronting the complex interplay of ideals, power, and consequences. It asks: How do I translate my personhood into effective, meaningful action in the world?
4. **Liming (立命): Establishing (or Reconciling with) Destiny.** This is the integrative and transcendent stage. It involves coming to terms with the limits of agency, the role of contingency and larger cosmic patterns (*tianming* 天命), and achieving a sense of inner peace and holistic harmony. It asks: How do I find meaning and wholeness within the broader tapestry of life, including its sufferings and finitude?

The Analytic Dimensions: Valuing Disposition, Sentiment, Heart-Mind/Wisdom, and Harmony (重性、重情、重心、重和). These four dimensions, derived from the thematic emphases of the Four Great Novels, represent the key loci where *phronesis* is exercised and dramatized within the “Four Establishments” chain.

1. **Zhong Xing (重性): Valuing Authentic Disposition/Nature.** This dimension prioritizes the exploration of innate character, genuine emotion, and the tension between one’s true self and social artifice.
2. **Zhong Qing (重情): Valuing Relational Sentiment/Passion.** This dimension foregrounds the moral power and complexity of deep interpersonal bonds—love, friendship, loyalty, and “righteousness” (*yi* 义) born of shared feeling.
3. **Zhong Xin (重心): Valuing Heart-Mind and Strategic Wisdom.** This dimension emphasizes the interplay of ethical intention (*xin* as heart) and calculative, strategic intelligence (*xin* as mind) required for effective action in a complex world.
4. **Zhong He (重和): Valuing Holistic Harmony.** This dimension seeks integration—of the self’s conflicting impulses, of the individual with the community, and of humanity with the cosmic order. It views moral fulfillment as a state of dynamic equilibrium.

The Four Great Novels, we argue, are masterful exemplars of these dimensions, each offering a deep dive into one primary facet while implicitly engaging the others. This framework allows us to systematically extract their pedagogical *phronesis*.

EMBODIED PHRONESIS: CASE STUDIES FROM FOUR CLASSIC CHINESE NOVELS

To substantiate the core proposition, this section presents the Four Great Masterpieces as four distinct yet complementary embodied systems of *phronesis*. Each novel, through its unique narrative logic and moral universe, operationalizes practical wisdom in a manner that is both philosophically rich and pedagogically potent. The following analyses engage in a hermeneutic dialogue between text and theory, elucidating the specific paradigm of *phronesis* that each work enacts.

Honglou Meng (Dream of the Red Chamber) and the “Lixin (Establishing Heart-Mind) – Zhong Xing (Valuing Disposition)” Paradigm

Cao Xueqin’s masterpiece is, at its core, a profound exploration of the crisis of *lixin*. The novel’s protagonist, Jia Baoyu, is born with a “muddied” nature, a piece of mythical stone longing for the purity of its origins, trapped in the exquisite but decadent artifice of the Rongguo and Ningguo Mansions. His moral struggle is not about choosing between right and wrong according to an external code (Confucian *li* 礼), but about preserving his authentic, sensitive, and emotionally rich disposition (*xing* 性, *qing* 情) against a world that seeks to mould him into a conventional scholar-official.

Phronesis here is displayed not as triumphant moral action, but as a fragile, often passive, resistance and a quest for truthful feeling. Baoyu’s “wisdom” lies in his intuitive rejection of hypocrisy and his deep attunement to the authenticity of others, particularly the girls of the Daguan Garden. His famous declaration that “girls are made of water and men of mud” inverts the patriarchal hierarchy to valorize purity and sensitivity. The tragedy unfolds as the social machinery of the Jia family, governed by *li* (ritual propriety), systematically crushes

these pockets of authenticity—embodied in the fates of Lin Daiyu (whose poetry and love represent unadorned truth) and Qingwen (whose fierce loyalty is untamed by decorum).

Dialogue with Narrative Identity Theory (Ricoeur, MacIntyre): Baoyu's plight offers a powerful counterpoint to Western narrative identity. For Ricoeur, narrative identity synthesizes the *idem* (sameness, character) and *ipse* (selfhood, promise). Baoyu's struggle reveals a potential fault line: what if the socially conferred *idem* (the Jia heir) is so radically at odds with one's felt *ipse* (the sensitive, anti-utilitarian self) that narrative synthesis becomes a form of violence? The novel suggests that *lixin* may sometimes require a *refusal* of certain dominant narratives, a point under-theorized in Ricoeur's emphasis on concordance. It highlights the *affective and existential* ground of identity—the “heart-mind” (*xin*)—as prior to and often in tragic conflict with the socio-linguistic narrative construction MacIntyre describes. *Honglou Meng* thus enriches narrative ethics by insisting that the “story I find myself in” must be evaluated against the measure of my *authentic disposition* (*xing*), a deeply interior and pre-narrative benchmark of truth.

Shuihu Zhuan (Water Margin) and the “Lishen (Establishing Personhood) – Zhong Qing (Valuing Sentiment)” Paradigm

If *Honglou Meng* explores the inner genesis of moral identity, *Shuihu Zhuan* plunges us into its explosive social embodiment. The 108 outlaws of Liangshan Marsh are forced to *lishen*—to establish their personhood—outside the bounds of a corrupt and unjust official order. Their primary moral currency is not law (*fa* 法) or even abstract virtue (*de* 德), but *yi* (义), a concept deeply entwined with *qing* (情)—the passionate bonds of brotherhood, loyalty, and reciprocal obligation.

The *phronesis* dramatized here is that of extreme situation ethics. Characters like Lin Chong, Lu Zhishen, and Wu Song are constantly forced to make agonizing decisions in the grey zone where legal justice fails. Their “practical wisdom” is the capacity to recognize when the demands of *yi*, born of deep personal loyalty and a visceral sense of injustice, must override formal legality. This is not lawlessness, but a form of embodied, relational justice. However, the novel is profoundly ambivalent. The very bonds of *qingyi* that create the heroic community also lead to its downfall—through internal factionalism, excessive violence, and the tragic, misguided commitment to a treacherous emperor. The practical wisdom of *zhong qing* thus has its dark side: it can be parochial, vengeful, and ultimately self-defeating.

Dialogue with Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmental Theory: *Shuihu Zhuan* presents a formidable challenge to Kohlberg's (1981) stage theory. The heroes' moral reasoning frequently operates at what Kohlberg might classify as a “pre-conventional” (obedience to avoid punishment) or “conventional” (maintaining social order, law and duty) level. Yet, their actions are celebrated as heroic and *righteous*. Their highest loyalty is to a particular community bound by *yi*, which transcends both blind obedience to the state (“law and order” orientation, Stage 4) and even a social-contract understanding of justice (Stage 5). It represents a different moral universe—one where particularistic commitments hold supreme value. This narrative exposes the limitations of a model that privileges universal, impartial justice as the pinnacle. *Shuihu Zhuan* suggests that a mature moral personhood (*lishen*) must incorporate the *phronesis* of particular loyalty and the courage to enact situated justice,

even when it defies universalizable rules—a dimension better captured by an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) or an ethic of community (Stage 4½ in some post-Kohlbergian critiques; see Snarey & Samuelson, 2008).

Sanguo Yanyi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) and the “Liye (Establishing Endeavour) – Zhong Xin (Valuing Heart-Mind/Wisdom)” Paradigm

This epic of statecraft and war shifts the focus to *liye*—the arena of grand historical agency. Here, *phronesis* takes the form of strategic intelligence and historical judgment, the art of navigating the treacherous waters where moral purpose (*dao* 道) intersects with pragmatic necessity (*shu* 术). The novel’s central dialectic is embodied in its three protagonists: Liu Bei, who champions benevolence (*ren* 仁) and legitimacy; Cao Cao, the brilliant but ruthless pragmatist; and Sun Quan, the master of survival and balance.

The paragon of this complex wisdom is Zhuge Liang. He is the “heart-mind” (*xin*) incarnate: a man of profound ethical commitment to the restoration of the Han (serving Liu Bei) who is also a peerless strategist, tactician, and psychologist. His wisdom is not merely technical (*techne*) but deeply phronetic. He understands character (e.g., manipulating Zhou Yu), reads historical momentum, and makes agonizing choices (e.g., the empty fort strategy, the northern campaigns) where moral purity is sacrificed for strategic survival or a greater long-term good. His tragedy is that even the most supreme human wisdom has limits before the vast, inscrutable movements of *tianming* (heaven’s mandate).

Dialogue with Nussbaum’s “Poetic Justice”: Martha Nussbaum (1995) argues that narrative literature cultivates the “narrative imagination,” fostering empathetic identification and a nuanced understanding of particularity, which is essential for a liberal, compassionate justice. *Sanguo Yanyi* both complements and complicates this view. It certainly cultivates a sophisticated historical and political imagination. However, its core lesson is not solely about empathetic identification with the “other” (one feels for both Liu Bei and Cao Cao). It is about the tragic *burdens of leadership and choice*. Nussbaum’s model, focused on the judge/citizen as spectator, underplays the dimension of agency under dire constraint. The *phronesis* of *Sanguo Yanyi* adds a crucial layer: moral judgment in the realm of *liye* must weigh consequences, utility, and historical responsibility with a cold-eyed realism that empathy alone cannot provide. It teaches the *agonizing integration* of heart (ethical intent) and mind (strategic calculation), a form of wisdom indispensable for any education aimed at preparing individuals for public life and complex decision-making.

Xiyou Ji (Journey to the West) and the “Liming (Establishing Destiny) – Zhong He (Valuing Harmony)” Paradigm

This allegorical pilgrimage offers the most explicit model of moral personhood as an integrative, transformative journey. The quest to fetch Buddhist scriptures from India is a macrocosm of the individual’s path toward enlightenment and harmony. Crucially, the protagonist is not a single individual but a *team*: the monk Xuanzang (Tang Sanzang) and his four disciples, most famously Sun Wukong (the Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (Pigsy), and Sha Wujing (Sandy).

This ensemble is best understood as a “five-in-one” allegory of the human psyche or moral personhood in need of integration (Yu, 1977):

- **Tang Sanzang:** Represents the spiritual aspiration, the “conscience” or “superego,” often frail and needing protection but providing the ultimate direction.
- **Sun Wukong:** Embodies raw talent, rebellious energy, egotism, and intuitive brilliance—the untamed “id” or will that must be disciplined and directed.
- **Zhu Bajie:** Represents physical appetite, laziness, and worldly desire—the sensual and comfort-seeking side.
- **Sha Wujing:** Symbolizes steadfastness, diligence, and the capacity for humble service—the stabilizing, workmanlike aspect of the self.

The 81 tribulations are not just external obstacles but pedagogical devices to forge harmony (*he*) within this community of the self. Sun Wukong’s journey from a rebellious, self-aggrandizing being to the “Buddha of Victorious Strife” is the central drama of *liming*: the taming and integration of powerful, disruptive energies into a purposive whole. Wisdom here is the synergistic functioning of all parts. Tang Sanzang needs Wukong’s power; Wukong needs Sanzang’s moral compass; both need Bajie’s humanizing flaws and Sha Wujing’s support.

Dialogue with the “Integrity” Deficit in Moral Education: *Xiyou Ji* provides a powerful narrative model directly addressing the fragmentation of the moral self. Modern moral education often treats virtues in isolation (teach courage, teach honesty). *Xiyou Ji* shows that moral personhood is a *dynamic, internal ecosystem*. The goal is not to extinguish Wukong (our passions and will) or Bajie (our desires), but to *educate and harmonize* them under the guidance of a higher purpose (Sanzang). This is a pedagogy of *integration* through *practice* (the journey). It acknowledges that moral growth is messy, involves repeated failures (the disciples constantly err), and requires external guidance (the Bodhisattva Guanyin) and constraints (the golden headband). It offers a narrative metaphor for the development of integrity that is holistic, psychological, and process-oriented, far surpassing models that conceive of the moral agent as a unified, rational will from the outset.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED MODEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL EDUCATION

Having established the four novels as distinct systems of phronesis, we now synthesize their contributions into an integrated theoretical model. This synthesis is not a mere aggregation but reveals how the four paradigms constitute complementary foundations for moral personhood. The resulting model then allows us to draw significant implications for the philosophy and practice of moral education.

Model Synthesis: Towards a “Four-Foundation” Theory of Moral Personhood

The analysis reveals that the four novels, read through the lens of *phronesis* and the proposed framework, constitute a comprehensive, complementary system. They do not present sequential stages but interdependent facets of a full moral life. We can synthesize their contributions into an integrated model for cultivating moral personhood:

- **The Qing (情)-Based Foundation (from *Honglou Meng*):** Moral life must be grounded in the cultivation and honouring of one’s authentic emotional and dispositional core. Without this “true heart-mind” (*zhen xin* 真心), morality risks

becoming hollow performativity.

- **The Yi (义)-Based Foundation (from *Shuihu Zhuan*):** Moral identity is forged and realized within concrete communities of shared sentiment and commitment. Loyalty, reciprocity, and the courage to stand with others are irreducible dimensions of a full moral life.
- **The Xin-Zhi (心智)-Based Foundation (from *Sanguo Yanyi*):** Moral action in the complex world requires the dialectical integration of ethical heart and strategic intelligence. Practical wisdom demands historical awareness, prudence, and the capacity to navigate the tragic choices inherent in public agency.
- **The He (和)-Based Foundation (from *Xiyou Ji*):** The ultimate aim of moral development is not a collection of traits but an integrated, harmonious self, capable of managing internal conflicts and aligning personal striving with broader cosmic or communal harmony.

This “Four-Foundation” model directly counteracts the dual deficit identified at the outset. It promotes *integrity* by insisting that moral personhood is a multi-dimensional, embodied, and lifelong process of integration (psychic, social, agential). It honours *individuality* by recognizing that the journey of *lixin* is irreducibly singular, that the demands of *qing* and *yi* are particular, and that the path to *he* is unique to each person’s composition and tribulations.

Theoretical Contribution to Moral Education Philosophy

This research makes several key contributions:

1. **It enriches the global discourse on *phronesis* and narrative ethics** by introducing a sophisticated, non-Western canon of narrative *phronesis*. It demonstrates how Chinese narratives operationalize practical wisdom in culturally specific yet philosophically universal ways, broadening the resources available for moral reflection.
2. **It provides a robust narrative-based counter-model to overly cognitive or fragmented approaches to moral education.** It argues that a holistic education of moral personhood must simultaneously address the existential (*lixin*), the relational (*lishen*), the agentic (*liye*), and the integrative (*liming*) dimensions, using narrative as the primary pedagogical medium for exploring their interconnection.
3. **It offers a critical corrective to Western theoretical biases.** The dialogues with MacIntyre, Ricoeur, Kohlberg, and Nussbaum show how Chinese narrative wisdom can challenge assumptions about the primacy of concordant narrative synthesis, the pinnacle of moral reasoning, or the primacy of empathetic spectatorship, thereby fostering a more pluralistic and robust philosophical conversation.

Pathways for Modern Transformation: Towards a Narrative-Based Pedagogy of Reflective Praxis

The application of this model does not entail forcing students to read 2,000-page Ming dynasty novels. Rather, it suggests a philosophical reorientation of moral education practice, moving from a *didactics of principles* to a *pedagogy of narrative reflection*.

- **Curriculum & Pedagogy:** Educational practice should prioritize engagement with complex, morally ambiguous narratives (from any culture) that mirror the four foundational dimensions. This involves facilitating “narrative-critical” discussions (Zhao, 2021) that go beyond “what is the moral?” to ask: *What is the character’s authentic struggle (lixin)? How are their choices shaped by loyalty and relationship (lishen)? How do they balance ideals with practical realities (liye)? What does their journey suggest about achieving wholeness (liming)?*
- **Teacher as *Phronimos*:** The educator’s role shifts from transmitter of moral facts to a facilitator of phronetic reflection—a “co-deliberator” who helps students navigate the complexities of narrative situations, drawing out the structures of practical wisdom.
- **Focus on Moral *Bildung*:** The ultimate aim becomes the cultivation of a *narrative-reflective habitus*—the disposition to interpret one’s own life as an ongoing narrative of moral becoming, to exercise discernment in complex situations, and to seek integrity amidst fragmentation.

In conclusion, the Four Great Classic Novels of China, when philosophically excavated, reveal themselves not as relics of a bygone didacticism, but as vital, systematic resources for one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary education: how to cultivate moral persons of depth, integrity, and resilient individuality. They offer a vision of moral growth as a narrated, practiced, and never-complete pilgrimage—a vision from which global educational philosophy has much to learn.

AN INTEGRATED PEDAGOGICAL MODEL: FOUR FOUNDATIONAL PROCESSES FOR CULTIVATING PHRONESIS

This section moves from the *explication* of the Four-Foundation Model to its systematic *theorization*. While the model is derived from close readings of the classic novels, its validity and utility require grounding in contemporary discourse. We therefore deepen each foundational pillar—*Qing* (情), *Yi* (义), *Xin-Zhi* (心智), and *He* (和)—by engaging with relevant scholarship in moral psychology, educational philosophy, and narrative theory. This theoretical elaboration aims to articulate the model’s internal coherence, its distinctive contribution to moral education, and its capacity to address the deficits of integration and individuality outlined at the outset.

Theoretical Deepening: Dialogues with Contemporary Research

Deepening the *Qing* (情)-Based Foundation: Affective Scaffolding and Moral Perception

Honglou Meng’s emphasis on authentic disposition (*xing*) and true sentiment (*qing*) finds powerful resonance in contemporary “affective turn” in moral philosophy and moral psychology. The novel’s pedagogical insight is that moral identity is scaffolded upon a

substrate of affective attunement. Recent work in embodied cognition and situated affectivity argues that moral perception is not a cool, cognitive appraisal but is fundamentally shaped by pre-reflective, emotionally saturated engagements with the world (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Slaby, 2014). Baoyu's "muddy" sensitivity is a form of heightened moral perception—he *feels* the hypocrisy and authenticity in others before he can rationalize it.

This challenges the still-prevalent "rationalist overcoat" in moral education (Ferkany, 2021). A narrative pedagogy grounded in *qing* would prioritize the cultivation of moral sensitivity and emotional granularity before, or in tandem with, moral reasoning. It aligns with Kristjánsson's (2020) neo-Aristotelian argument for the education of emotions, but with a distinct Chinese inflection: the goal is not merely to moderate passions according to reason (*logos*), but to honor and refine the authentic heart-mind (*zhen xin*) as the source of moral truth. This involves engaging with narratives that explore the complexity of emotions like shame (*chi* 耻), resentment (*yuan* 怨), and empathetic grief (*bei* 悲), which are central to the moral phenomenology of *Honglou Meng* (Ng, 2019).

Furthermore, the novel's tragic arc underscores a crucial point: the protection of this affective core requires what might be termed "affective integrity"—the courage to resist social scripts that demand emotional inauthenticity. This connects to Biesta's (2013) concept of "subjectification," the process of becoming a subject who can resist the pressure of existing social, cultural, and political orders. *Honglou Meng* thus provides a narrative map for the often painful process of subjectification in the affective domain.

Deepening the Yi (义)-Based Foundation: Relational Autonomy and the Ethics of Community

Shuihu Zhuan's world of brotherhood and righteous rebellion pushes us to rethink the concept of autonomy, a cornerstone of much Western moral and political education. The novel presents a model of *relational autonomy*, where the self is constituted and agential precisely through deep, particularistic commitments (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). The outlaw's identity and moral compass are unthinkable outside the network of *yi*. This complicates the liberal ideal of the detached, impartial moral agent.

Contemporary communitarian and care ethics scholars have long critiqued this ideal (Held, 2006; Sandel, 2009). *Shuihu Zhuan* narrativizes this critique with visceral force. Its pedagogy teaches that moral maturity involves navigating the sometimes-fractious demands of multiple loyalties (to family, friends, community, and a larger sense of justice). This aligns with the concept of a "thick" moral self, embedded in constitutive attachments (Taylor, 1989). However, the novel's ambivalent ending—the community's self-destruction—offers a critical lesson: an ethic of *yi* unchecked by broader reflection, institutional mediation, or a critical distance can descend into factionalism and collective self-deception. A modern narrative pedagogy must therefore engage students with stories that honor the morality of loyalty while also exploring its potential pathologies, fostering what Kwame Anthony Appiah (2005) calls "rooted cosmopolitanism"—a commitment to one's particular community alongside a recognition of broader human connections.

This foundation also speaks to the development of "social-emotional learning" (SEL), but urges a move beyond skill-building (e.g., "relationship skills") towards a deeper philosophical

engagement with the nature of commitment, obligation, and the moral costs of betrayal (Wang & Hawk, 2020).

Deepening the *Xin-Zhi* (心智)-Based Foundation: Phronesis in the Anthropocene and the Ethics of Responsibility

Sanguo Yanyi's dramatization of strategic wisdom (*zhi*) in the service of ethical purpose (*xin*) is acutely relevant in an era defined by “wicked problems”—complex, interconnected crises like climate change, geopolitical instability, and technological disruption. These problems defy simple moral solutions and require the kind of phronetic judgment Zhuge Liang embodies: long-term thinking, systems understanding, risk assessment, and the tragic willingness to make imperfect choices for a perceived greater good.

This dimension connects to Hans Jonas's (1984) “ethics of responsibility,” which argues that modern technology has created powers of such magnitude that traditional ethics is inadequate; we need an ethics focused on the foresight and care for the future of humanity. The phronesis of *Sanguo Yanyi* is a narrative precursor to this, exploring the burden of responsibility on a historical scale. A narrative pedagogy informed by this foundation would use stories of leadership, strategy, and historical contingency to cultivate what might be termed “planetary phronesis” or “futures literacy” (Miller, 2018). It moves beyond Nussbaum's “poetic justice” (focused on the spectator-judge) towards educating the *agent* who must act under conditions of radical uncertainty and immense consequence.

Furthermore, the novel's central tension between *ren* (benevolence) and *shi* (power/expediency) provides a crucial antidote to moral naivete. It teaches that good intentions are insufficient without effective power and wisdom, and that power without an ethical heart is ultimately destructive. This prepares students for the realpolitik of public and professional life without succumbing to cynicism.

Deepening the *He* (和)-Based Foundation: Integrative Selfhood and Ecological Wisdom

Xiyou Ji's allegory of psychic integration offers a powerful framework for addressing the crisis of mental well-being and fragmentation in late modernity. Its model of the self as a community-in-need-of-harmonization prefigures contemporary psychological models like Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, which views the mind as a system of interacting “parts” (Schwartz, 2021). The novel's pedagogical genius is its demonstration that moral and spiritual growth is not about suppressing parts of the self (e.g., desire, anger, ambition) but about educating, dialoguing with, and integrating them into a purposeful whole.

This foundation promotes what could be called “narrative therapy for the moral self.” It encourages individuals to identify their own “Sun Wukong” (rebellious will), “Zhu Bajie” (earthly desires), and “Sha Wujing” (steadfast diligence), and to understand their life challenges as “81 tribulations” designed for integration. This moves moral education into the realm of holistic personal development, linking ethics with psychology and spiritual well-being (Yang, 2021).

Moreover, the concept of *he* extends beyond the individual to encompass harmony with society and nature. The journey is a pilgrimage through a fantastical ecology, requiring the

pilgrims to negotiate with gods, demons, and natural forces. This resonates deeply with ecological philosophy and the need for an “ecological self” (Naess, 1989). A narrative pedagogy of *he* would thus include stories that foster a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility within the broader web of life, countering anthropocentric and fragmentary worldviews.

Operationalizing the Model: A Pedagogy of Narrative-Reflective Praxis

Translating this theoretical model into practice requires moving from abstract framework to concrete pedagogical principles and activities.

Curricular Architecture: The Spiral of Narrative Engagement

A curriculum based on this model would not be linear but spiral, repeatedly engaging students with narratives of increasing complexity that touch upon all four foundations, deepening the understanding each cycle (Bruner, 1960). It could be organized around thematic clusters rather than historical periods.

- **Cluster 1: The Quest for Authenticity (Focus: *Lixin/Qing*).** Core Text: Selections from *Honglou Meng* (e.g., Baoyu’s rejection of the “career path,” Daiyu’s poetry). Complementary Texts: J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, stories of artistic or social non-conformity. Guiding Questions: What masks do characters wear? What is the cost of authenticity? How do societies police emotional expression?
- **Cluster 2: Loyalty, Betrayal, and Community (Focus: *Lishen/Yi*).** Core Text: Episodes from *Shuihu Zhuan* (e.g., Lin Chong’s persecution, Song Jiang’s leadership dilemmas). Complementary Texts: Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, narratives of friendship and civil conflict. Guiding Questions: When does loyalty become blind? Is betrayal ever justified? How do groups build moral codes, and how do they corrupt them?
- **Cluster 3: Power, Strategy, and the Greater Good (Focus: *Liye/Xin-Zhi*).** Core Text: Stratagems and dilemmas from *Sanguo Yanyi* (e.g., the empty fort, the choice between *ren* and *shi*). Complementary Texts: Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (as a counterpoint), narratives of political or scientific responsibility (e.g., Oppenheimer’s story). Guiding Questions: Can a good end justify morally questionable means? What is the difference between wisdom and cunning? What do leaders owe to the future?
- **Cluster 4: The Journey of Integration (Focus: *Liming/He*).** Core Text: Key tribulations from *Xiyou Ji* (e.g., taming Sun Wukong, the Kingdom of Women). Complementary Texts: Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, modern coming-of-age stories that involve internal conflict. Guiding Questions: What different “parts” of yourself do you recognize? How do personal flaws contribute to growth? What does it mean to be “whole”?

Pedagogical Practices: From Discussion to Embodiment

1. **Phronetic Questioning:** Move beyond “What is the moral?” to questions that mirror the four foundations: “What is this character’s *true* heart feeling, beneath what they say?” (*Lixin*); “What web of relationships is pulling them, and what do they owe to whom?” (*Lishen*); “Given their goals and constraints, what was the wisest course of

action? What would you have risked?” (*Liye*); “How are the character’s inner conflicts mirrored in the outer plot? What would ‘wholeness’ look like for them?” (*Liming*).

2. **Moral Bifurcation and Role-Play:** Present key decision points in narratives (e.g., Should Song Jiang accept amnesty? Should Liu Bei have taken the chance to seize a rival’s territory?) and have students argue from different characters’ perspectives, forcing them to articulate the phronetic calculations within different value frameworks.
3. **Narrative Identity Mapping:** Have students create visual or written “maps” of a character’s (or their own) moral journey, charting key moments of authenticity (*lixin*), loyalty tested (*lishen*), strategic choice (*liye*), and integration/acceptance (*liming*). This exercise cultivates meta-cognitive awareness of moral development as a narrative process.
4. **Creative Co-Authorship:** Ask students to write an additional chapter or modern adaptation of a scene, exploring a “road not taken” or transposing the core dilemma to a contemporary setting (e.g., a *Shuihu*-style loyalty dilemma in a corporate or online community). This deepens engagement and applies phronetic imagination.
5. **Contemplative and Somatic Practices:** Drawing from the *he* foundation, complement narrative discussion with practices that foster integration: guided reflection on internal “parts,” mindfulness to observe one’s own reactive patterns (the “Sun Wukong” within), or even simple *taiji* exercises to embody the principle of dynamic harmony.

The Teacher as Phronetic Facilitator and Co-Narrator

The teacher’s role is transformed from moral authority to a “phronetic facilitator” (Winston, 2015). This requires:

- **Epistemic Humility:** Acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity in narratives, refusing to provide simplistic moral takeaways.
- **Dialogical Skill:** Facilitating discussions that honor multiple interpretations and emotional responses, while gently challenging students to consider neglected perspectives (the viewpoint of the “other” in the story, the long-term consequence).
- **Narrative Competence:** Being well-versed in a wide range of stories and able to draw connections across texts and to students’ lived experiences.
- **Modeling Reflexivity:** Sharing, when appropriate, one’s own ongoing narrative of moral learning and perplexity, embodying the idea that *liming* is a lifelong process.

Critical Expansions and 21st-Century Relevance

Addressing Critiques: Patriarchal Norms, Violence, and Fatalism

Any proposal to use pre-modern texts must engage critically with their historical limitations. The novels are embedded in patriarchal, hierarchical societies. *Honglou Meng*, while critical of the system, still operates within it; female characters’ fates are largely tragic. *Shuihu Zhuan* often exhibits misogyny and glorifies extreme violence. *Sanguo Yanyi* is androcentric

and can valorize Machiavellianism. *Xiyou Ji's* journey is framed within Buddhist and Confucian hierarchies.

A critical narrative pedagogy does not shy away from these issues but uses them as fertile ground for discussion. It engages in what Paul G. Sturges (2014) calls “hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery”—critiquing the oppressive ideologies while recovering the transgressive or subversive insights. For instance, students can analyze the gender politics in *Honglou Meng* to understand how structures of power work, while also valuing Baoyu’s proto-feminist sensibility as a form of resistance. The violence in *Shuihu Zhuan* can be interrogated: When is violence justified? How does narrative framing make us complicit in celebrating it? This critical engagement turns potential weaknesses into strengths, fostering critical media literacy and historical consciousness.

Globalization and Intercultural Phronesis

In a multicultural world, this model advocates not for a parochial Chinese approach, but for a *comparative narrative phronesis*. The four-foundation framework provides a lens to analyze narratives from any culture. What is the *lixin* struggle in *Hamlet* or *The Kite Runner*? How does *The Godfather* portray the dark side of *yi*? How do films like *Lincoln* or *Dark Knight* explore the *xin-zhi* dilemma? How does *Life of Pi* or *The Alchemist* chart a journey towards *he*?

This comparative work fosters “intercultural wisdom”—the ability to understand moral reasoning and identity formation across different narrative and cultural traditions (Zhao, 2021). It decenters Western canonical texts as the sole source of moral-philosophical insight and promotes a global dialogue on practical wisdom.

Digital Narratives and the Fragmented Self

The 21st-century self is often shaped by digital narratives—social media profiles, streaming series, video game quests, and fragmented online discourse. This environment can exacerbate the deficits of integrity and individuality, promoting performative identities and echo chambers.

The four-foundation model offers critical tools for navigating this landscape. It encourages a reflective stance towards the stories we consume and co-create online. Are our digital personas authentic (*lixin*)? Do online communities foster genuine *yi* or shallow tribalism? How do we exercise *xin-zhi* in the face of misinformation and algorithmic manipulation? How can we seek *he* in a digitally mediated, attention-fractured life? Using classic narratives as a deep, slow, and complex mirror, we can better diagnose the pathologies of our contemporary narrative ecology and cultivate the reflective resilience needed to use digital media wisely rather than be used by them (Turkle, 2011; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

CONCLUSION: CULTIVATING MORAL PERSONHOOD THROUGH NARRATIVE PEDAGOGY

The Chinese classic novels, as systems of narrative phronesis, offer vital resources for addressing the central challenge of cultivating integrated and resilient moral persons. The proposed “Four-Foundation” model, derived from their wisdom, advocates for placing sustained, critical engagement with complex stories at the heart of moral education. Such a

narrative-based pedagogy does not provide easy answers but schools us in the art of moral perception, the weight of commitment, the agony of choice, and the patience for integration. In an age of fragmentation, this constitutes a profound education in practical wisdom—a lifelong pilgrimage of moral becoming guided by the reflective power of story.

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