

# Diversifying The Single Path

The Existential Dilemmas of the Taiwanese Student Elite



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## Abstract

In this thesis I set out to investigate how Taiwanese elite students experienced their upbringing. I do so by developing my own concept, *Single Path*, and use Susanne Bregnbæk's utilization of the concept *Aporia*. I apply them in order to answer how Taiwanese elite students negotiate their self-cultivation process in relation to the single path. I found that one of their most prominent existential dilemmas spring from the aporia of extensive self-sacrifice in order to follow the single path. When facing the dilemma, they either (1) embraced (2) endure through or (3) rejected the single path. When they were younger they seemed more prone to choose number one, but two and three seemed to have become more common when they reached the university. I conclude that the way they see their self-cultivation right now is more diversified and more individual.

**Keywords:** Social Anthropology, Confucianism, Self-Cultivation, Taiwan, Aporia

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When we become conscious of the fact that the moral and ethical order we consider obvious, or natural, or simply good, could have been different, then we can start asking ourselves what has been gained and what has been lost in this process of making it what it is

- Didier Fassin

## 1. Introduction

In 2016 I spent an exchange semester at the National Taiwan University or NTU in Taipei. I chose to go there in order to be immersed in a culture profoundly different from my own. I knew very little about the small island except that they had a problematic diplomatic situation and that a lot of things used to be made there when I was younger. I was a bit worried because of the stories I had heard about the immense pressure and the demanding workload of the Asian school systems. However, for some reason I held the preconceived notion that Taiwan would be more relaxed than Mainland China. During my first few days on campus, I remember running around in maze-like buildings filled with characters I did not understand, trying to find my way to my different classrooms. I had a lot of help from smiling and laughing native students. I also remember that there always seemed to be some kind of activity going on somewhere on campus and that the students really seemed to enjoy themselves. At that point I started to relax and told myself that I probably would be able to relax and enjoy my time there. That feeling did not last for long.

I vividly remember the first time I went up the stairs of the Main Library on campus and how surprised I was at finding nets covering the opening in the middle of the staircase on every floor. My thoughts immediately told me that it was some kind of suicide prevention. Any preconceptions about Taiwan being more relaxed than other Asian countries were gone, while those about the immense academic pressure were reinforced. I decided to ask Professor Shu Sen Chang about the nets – one of NTU’s leading researchers in the field of Taiwanese suicide – and he informed me that they were put up for the janitors’ safety and that the NTU did not need to take any such precautions against suicide, as it was scarcely a problem. According to him the suicide rates are actually lower or at a similar level with those of Western countries. I had imagined the suicide rates among the youth to be as high as in Japan and South Korea and a lot higher than in western countries but had assumed wrong.

However, in 2008 it was reported that the number of youth committing suicide had increased dramatically, making it the second-leading cause of death among Taiwanese youth (URL 1). It was considered alarming because of the decline of the general suicide rate. The most common reason given for wanting to commit suicide was problems with “emotion and interpersonal relations”. Only 3% mentioned

academic stress as a reason and at least 23% of the Taiwanese senior high school students admitted to have considered committing suicide (URL 1).

These somewhat puzzling facts sparked my curiosity about what it would have been like to grow up on this beautiful island in the Pacific Ocean.

The journey to a more specific research question was long and winding. I initially looked into topics like freedom, subjective wellbeing and happiness; my mind still tangled into the nets of that staircase. I did however end up most intrigued by the Confucian self-cultivation process that seemed to require a lot of self-sacrifice. I saw it as an impossible double bind and maybe the Taiwanese students did so too. On my journey I stumbled upon Susanne Bregnbæk's (2016) research in which she acknowledged the existence of such double binds in China, and applied the term *Aporia* when defining them, which I found very useful so I decided to do the same.

When I went back to conduct my fieldwork one year later and it became evident to me that there is one very standardized way of viewing success and self-cultivation in Taiwan. I chose to call it *The Single Path* throughout this thesis. Everybody seemed to have had to form an opinion of this ideal way of living one's life. Another thing that I noticed was that for many students, the university life seemed to be a very liminal phase in which they start to experiment a lot; trying to explore and "figure themselves out". Some seemed to enjoy this liminality more than others, and for some it had tragic and devastating consequences. With this in mind I asked myself what came to be the main question of this thesis:

*How do the Taiwanese elite students negotiate their self-cultivation process in relation to the single path?*

A more detailed definition of what the single path is and how I utilized it during the analysis and interpretation of my ethnographic material will be presented later on in the thesis. In order to answer my main question I organized a few sub-questions.

- (1) How did they experience their upbringing and schooling?
- (2) How do they reflect on their social relation with their parents and their peers?
- (3) What are the aporias of the Taiwanese students and how do they untangle them

My wish and intention is to highlight certain aspects of my informants' lives that might correspond with more general trends among their peers'. I will focus on the Taiwanese generation born after the 1987. They are the first generation to grow up under a democratized government, and also the first generation to enjoy a remarkably less censored media. They have free access to the Internet, through which they can obtain almost any kind of information they would desire. A majority of them were in school before and after 2006 when the government made corporal punishment illegal, a practice that is not yet prohibited domestically (URL 2). I will therefore throughout this thesis refer to them as the *transitional generation*.

### **Disposition of the Thesis**

I will start by giving a brief background on Taiwan and the history of anthropology. It will be followed by sections about Confucian values, previous research and theoretical framing. In *Approaching the Field* I present my methodological approach e.g. the issues concerning the delimitation of my field. This section is followed by three parts, which constitutes the ethnographic material of my thesis. Here I will apply the Confucian values and theoretical concepts and through them analyze my interviews. I will then end the thesis with a short summary interwoven with my concluding answers to the posed research questions.

## Background

In the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) the Japanese conquered Taiwan.

The Japanese were later forced to capitulate when Chiang Kai-Shek took over, fleeing from Mainland China and Mao with the remainder of his army and the *Kuomintang* (KMT)<sup>1</sup>. The KMT cultural policies were very much traditional Chinese as they still considered themselves to be the rightful rulers of all of China. When Mao and the Communist party closed down the borders of Mainland China it became hard to study “Chinese Culture” for Anthropologists. Their resort was to go to Taiwan instead to *look through it* to see traditional Chinese ideals. Keelung Hong and Stephen Murray wrote *Looking through Taiwan: American Anthropologists’ Collusion with Ethnic Domination* in 2005. In it, they present the complicated relationship Anthropologists’ – not solely American – have had with Taiwan. During the *White Terror years* (1949-1987) the Taiwanese people lived under martial law and constant oppression of the KMT. In Hong and Murray’s view, a lot of anthropology done during this era could almost be considered as collusion with the oppressive regime. They accuse anthropologists for turning a blind eye to the atrocities performed by the KMT and for blatantly ignored anything Taiwanese in order to study the more prestigious “Chinese” (2005:5).

When Chiang Kai-shiek settled in Taiwan, he brought around two million Mainland Chinese with him. Many of them were waiting to move back and reclaim their motherland from the communist occupiers. These people considered themselves Chinese. During the *White Terror* the people who originated from Taiwan were reluctant to express any identification with Taiwan and therefore they mostly called themselves Chinese as well. It was simply dangerous to do otherwise. It was not until the democratization process started in 1987 that people dared to proclaim that “We are Taiwanese” (Lin 2006:134). This would make the *transitional generation* the first generation being able to consider themselves “Taiwanese” without serious repercussions. When the democratization process started, many anthropologists went to China in search for a more “authentic” version of Chinese culture, not so polluted by “Western” ideals, driven by an obsession with primitivism (ibid.). Primitivism was

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<sup>1</sup> Kuomintang (KMT) or Chinese Nationalist Party, was the ruling party of mainland China that fled from Mao and the Communists to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek as its leader. They are still a political party, but they no longer go unopposed



usually studied through religion, family structure and healing practices. This would indicate that the transitional generation might be “less” authentically Chinese, and more “polluted” by Western ideals, and make them into a subject worth studying in their own right.

Even if some of the Anthropologist acknowledged that Taiwan may not be a good cultural representation of China’s sociocultural patterns (Hong and Murray 2005:50), they still found the idea of a Taiwanese Culture or a Taiwanese Society appalling and unthinkable and referred to it as Chinese anyway. Instead of highlighting the particularities of Taiwan there seems to have been a trend to only see the commonalities with China, choosing to ignore the long-term Japanese influence or to fully acknowledge the sixteen indigenous groups living on the island. Until 1987, hardly any work was done amongst the Taiwanese indigenous people. Of course there were exceptions (Chai, CK 1967, Pearson, R. 1968, Kwok M. 1978).

I am not trying to make the case that Taiwan is completely and inherently different from China, quite the opposite. My informant put it well when he said “When you are something like Taiwanese, then there are naturally *some* Chinese” (emphasis added). I advocate the studying of Taiwan for and of itself, and the interrelationship between the Chinese identity and “the other” because today, most of the youth identify primarily as Taiwanese.

This might sound contradictory later when I present the previous research that has influenced me the most, as it was performed in China. The reason for this is partly because of the similarities in research questions, and partly because of the scarcity of similar current anthropological research conducted in Taiwan. I blame it on the longing for primitivism mentioned earlier. I did only find one anthropologist – Professor James Laidlaw from Cambridge - who currently is working within the field of self-cultivation in Taiwan, but he is yet to produce any articles about it. I therefore find a natural place for my contribution.

## Confucian Values

In this part I will go through some Confucian values that will be used to analyze the ethnographic data that I gathered during my fieldwork. In no way should this be considered a holistic account of what Confucianism is, but rather as representing some of the Confucian core concepts and certain interpretations of them.

I do want to bring up one major difference between much “Western” Philosophy and Confucianism. Where Western Philosophers have been concerned about understanding “truth” and “knowledge”, the focus of Confucianism has been “action” and “practice” (*Hwang, 1995*). This is why I find it natural to use it in order to analyze the Taiwanese students’ actions and practices. Much of my understanding of Confucianism is based on Kwang-Kuo Hwang’s research on indigenous psychology, especially her work on Confucian mentalities. She is currently active at the psychology department at NTU (National Taiwan University) and has been studying Confucian value change and that is why I deem her definitions relevant.

In Confucianism, no one is predestined to fail or succeed; their level of self-cultivation is in strong correspondence with their effort and hard work. In situations where the person grows up under difficult economic circumstances and lack good role models they will be more easily excused if they fail to cultivate themselves (*Hansen 1972:184*). In Confucian ethics, legal coercion is not the choice way of leading people to cultivate themselves and become morally good people. They emphasize moral exhortation and leading by example instead (*Chan 1999*). Moral socialization is heavily dependent on the ability of absorbing and teaching of others the customs that are being perceived as ethically respectful and significant ([URL 5](#)). These are some reasons why good role models are considered so important. Both the possibility of moral/social mobility and the importance of role models will be brought up in the ethnographic sections.

The five core relationships within Confucianism are those between ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older sibling-younger sibling and elder friend-younger friend. All of them are considered vertical and according to Confucian thought, the hierarchal element is extremely important in order to keep harmony within the family

and the society as a whole. Harmony within the family is paramount and therefore it is considered an important duty to take care of the family.

This duty is stretching out further than only the immediate family, and if any other family member would happen to suffer from e.g. economical difficulties, other member are considered to be obliged to provide the help needed.

The Confucian upbringing really stresses to teach how to act in an appropriate manner according to the hierarchy of the appropriate *Guanxi*. *Guanxi* can be understood as the interrelationships that have a defining role for a person's character and creation of self. This might diverge from how the self-creation process is carried out in the West (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). I will refer to it as a *social relation* in the text. When someone possessing a superior social relation asks something of its subordinate, the later has to comply. An example would be that a father plans out the life of the son completely, and there is no possibility for the son to negotiate his future. His role, and defining trait as such, is obedience and subordination to the will of his parents.

There are studies indicating that these values were upheld in Taiwan (Chen, 1994) In this particular study students at NTU (National Taiwan University) expressed that they would most likely conform to the superior in their vertical relationships. When the will of the superior and the subordinate is diverging and not converging there is plausible tension, but this is supposedly handled and eased through the practice of *ren* or *forbearance*. There is research that shows how forbearance as a concept have actively been deployed and used amongst young Taiwanese couples (see Li, 1995).

The following values were used when I contextualized my ethnographic material and therefore I wanted to provide a brief explanation of how I utilized and understood them:

孝 *Xiao*, or ***Filial Piety*** is one of the most central and distinctive aspects of Confucian ethics. It is most commonly understood as respecting, honoring and taking care of your parents and elders. It involves not letting your parents worry about you other than falling ill, taking care of anything temporal in a respectful manner, and heeding to their council (URL 5) When in a disagreement with your parents, you are allowed to bring it up, but expected to obey the final decision of the parent, especially the father.

面子. Alvin M. Chan (2006) described *Mianzi* or **Face** as something that has to do with recognition, prestige and reputation. Face is expressed by being successful and ostentatious and earned through personal struggle. Every person in my social network has the right to evaluate my face on both a material and moral level. Usually they are deployed simultaneously. It is not uncommon that an individual represent his or her “greater self” that includes his/her family when interacting with others (2006:3). This is why a person can “lose face” for the whole family.

忍. *Ren*, or **Forbearance** can be understood as patience, humility and endurance. If I possess a subordinate position in the social network and have views that differ from my superiors, I have to practice forbearance. It would mean to suppress my own opinion or desire and selflessly giving up my personal goals, when needed, in order to honor and maintain the harmony within my relationship (Hwang 1997:28).

In the Confucian tradition, the gift from the parents was life and a good upbringing, and the expectation was filial piety and forbearance. Marcel Mauss (1925) concludes – in his famous work – that there is no such thing as an altruistic gift. When a gift is received, the recipient becomes indebted and obliged to repay under socially ritualized ways. By giving up something, there is always an expectation of receiving something in return, thus creating a reciprocal relation.

Forbearance can also be applied in the sense of overcoming and enduring all the trials of life in order to reach one’s final goal

In Li’s (1995) research, young couples in Taipei were using forbearance frequently to cope with stress and get through life.

和諧. *Hexie* means **Harmony**. Just as the two opposing forces of the universe (yin and yang) need to be in a harmonious state, so do individuals and families according to Confucius. He treasured internal familial harmony as the most important value within the family (Hwang 1997:22). This harmony is many times utilized through suppression and control of one’s own desire or impulses in order not to create any rupture within one’s *Guanxi* or social relations. It also includes an enduring aspect that emphasizes selflessness in giving up personal goals when needed to honor one’s relationships (Hwang 1997:28)

This can be understood as a way of respectfully performing the ritual of forbearance. It is important to understand that the Chinese concept of harmony does not include consensus. In the *Analects* Confucius famously suggested that we pursue harmony and not uniformity (Bell 2013). This is how a family can be considered harmonious even though the sons and daughters are disagreeing with every choice their parents make, but suffer through it with forbearance.

### Questioning Confucianism

In 2014, Taiwan's Ministry of Education presented *The White Paper on Human Resource Development*. It contains the challenges that their educational system is facing and introduces a 12-year curriculum through which they intend to solve these issues in order to enhance Taiwan's economic competitiveness (URL 3). Self-actualization, Adaptive Learning, Individual Fulfillment and Life Long Learning are the long-term goals and themes of this new curriculum. It is still under review but its general guidelines were already approved and the Ministry wishes to utilize and apply the curriculum within the entire academic apparatus during the first semester of 2018 (ibid). One of the strategies implanted in the curriculum to make these long-term goals a reality is to contextualize and problematize Confucian values. The dominant and unchallenged position that Confucianism has possessed for so long in their educational system will be replaced by a more postmodern and pluralistic stance. Limin Bai (2005), a senior lecturer at a Chinese program in New Zealand, points out that the Confucian work *The Book of Rites* had been seen as an educational authority for more than two thousand years! By challenging Confucianism, it will no longer be *the* way of living your life morally but rather *one* way of doing it. To take such an official stance against the superiority of classical Confucian values in the educational system could be considered a strategy in the process of trying to solve the constant dilemma of Taiwanese national identity. By politically leaving something so traditionally Chinese behind, they take a step forward in the process of forming a Taiwanese identity, by focusing more on other issues such as multiculturalism and globalization (URL 4)

The Ministry of Education is not alone in questioning Confucian values; so does the transitional generation. In 2014 the Sun Flower Student Movement was organized by

students in Taipei; a movement that occupied and immobilized the legislative organ of the government for twenty-three days (March 18<sup>th</sup> – April 10<sup>th</sup>). The organizers officially protested against KMT's passing of a trade agreement with China that had not been reviewed in a satisfying way, but many joined the ranks of their peers just in order to express some other dissatisfaction. One of my informants – who openly expressed his opinion against the movement – thought that “this movement remind us to think what we have done and, which part of our society we want to change”. I believe that a great part of the student body went out because they felt strongly about societal issues that they want to change. Another theory would be that they were driven to participate by the fear of missing out on one of the greatest social happenings of the decade. I choose to believe the prior, as many of my friends had been part of the movement for this exact reason. The possibility of such a movement and proves how far Taiwan has come in its democratization process in roughly 30 years and how the White Terror years have a different place in the life of this transitional generation. It also suggests a strong deterioration of traditional Confucian values, as their actions were a direct insubordination to the authority of the government.

### Previous Research on Value Change

In 1995, Hwang asked 633 of the Taiwanese elite to evaluate the importance of certain Confucian values. He concluded that there were generational differences, especially when it came to the importance of the face of the “greater self” (which includes the family) and forbearance. They consider less important than for the previous generation. The value that had changed the least was the importance of harmony within the family and having a happy marriage (Hwang 1995).

Even though Confucius advocated the superiority of the husband over the wife the roles can be inversed or equal in contemporary society (Hwang 1997:27)

According to Hwang, better education possibilities, advancements in woman's rights and female employment has led to a loss of power of the husband and made the equality possible (Hwang 1997:22). She further claims that a more economically independent youth with educational possibilities have made familial influence on marriage partner selection etc. more difficult for the parents (ibid.). Mutual

dependence in supporting parents when they grow older and the importance of keeping harmony within the family were values that were maintained more rigidly.

The sociologists Christopher Swader and Hao Yuan (2010) did a study on intergenerational value differences in China. They performed semi-structured interviews on an older and younger generation of parents in Shanghai. According to Swader and Yuan, younger parents do not value self-sacrifice or moral education as high the previous generation. Another way of expressing it would be that the self-suppressing aspect of forbearance is becoming less valued amongst the younger generation. It is also another indicator that the vertical relationships within the family and the notion of the greater self are diminishing. Both generations in their study expressed the importance of hard work, but for the younger generation working hard was done in order to achieve personal success primarily. When asked what they prioritized first in life they answered “work” and “studying” (2010:09) Swader and Yuan concluded that their young respondents expressed much less selflessness (2010:19). A similar conclusion was reached by Yun-Xiang (1999) who wrote about the rapid change of the mentality of the youth from North China. These youths demanded increased rights to decide their own lives and did not agree with their parents’ values of filial piety and the expectation of an unquestionable subjection to their will and thought-out plan for their children. This decline of filial piety and some attempts to resolve the previously unquestionable verticality within the family relationships could also be seen in other parts of Swader and Yuan’s qualitative data. The younger parents said that they did not want to impose their will on their children, but rather wanted them to figure things out for themselves (2010:16).

However, there are still indications of authoritarianism in the social relations within the younger families. One of the fathers in Swader and Yuan’s ethnographical data shared this story:

Conflict in the family only make me feel bad. “several days ago when I went back home, my son was very naughty so I spanked him. my wife complained “why did you beat him? you have spent so little time with him. I replied “all of you are kind to him, there should be someone who is strict to him. I just spanked him and yelled at him.” however, I feel guilty about spending too little time with them (2010:17-18).

The father does not feel guilty about spanking his son, but rather about not spending enough time around him, and probably teaching him by his good example. His answer also illustrates the importance of harmony within the family. The father felt like there was a lack of harmony when everybody was being kind. There had to be a little of both sides and therefore he felt obligated to take the strict role within the family.

### **The Difficulties of Self-Cultivation**

According to Michael Slote, a professor in philosophy and ethics, moral self-cultivation has a central role within the Confucian value system. He also suggests that self-cultivation is crucially dependent on the intervention of others and factors outside of an individual's control (Slote, 2016).

Tran Tuan Phong (2012) wrote about the Confucian “self” and the self-cultivation process and suggested some similar things. He understands self-realization as a communal act that is tightly interwoven with the simultaneous realization of others, and as mentioned before, this is a task that is available and should be undertaken by everyone. With these aspects in mind, how does one cultivate oneself into a morally good person within a Confucian tradition, when the success is highly dependent on my social relationships with others, and how does a more self-centered generation, relate to such selfless values? I believe my research to shed some light on questions such as these.

My thesis was greatly inspired by and in many ways a commentary on Bregnbæk's *Fragile Elite: The Dilemmas of China's Top University Students* from 2016. Just as she focused on students from one of the most prestigious schools in China, so will I in Taiwan. This was more of a coincidence than something actually planned. NTU (National Taiwan University) was the school where I had gone on my exchange a year earlier, and therefore had the easiest access to. In Bregnbæk's book, she uses the word self-actualization to talk about what I describe as self-cultivation. I use “self-cultivation” because of its common use in the Confucian discourse but will treat the terms as equivalents. Her data showed that the inability to cultivate and discipline oneself properly is considered to have catastrophic consequences in a person's life, mainly because people are aware of how much self-discipline is required in order to work and study hard enough to perform well in school and thus advance in life (2016:6).



Bregnbæk also uses the term “self-sacrifice” in order to analyze her data where I will use “forbearance”. I choose the later for the same reasons as self-cultivation.

In her book, she describes the dilemmas of China's elite students, the ones who have excelled, and should be benefiterers of the system. They have reached the epitome of the Chinese dream and all of their hard work has paid off in the ladder of social mobility. However, she concludes that these students often suffer from an experienced pressure, feelings of melancholia and a sense of not having been able to choose their own path in life (2016:141). By climbing too fast on the social ladder, some of them felt estranged from their parents and could not really understand for what reason they had been working and cramming for so long, always fulfilling external expectations. This phenomenon was explained by one of the students that she interviewed who noted: “everybody seems to rush ahead in order to get on the train and not be left behind, but no one seems to reflect on where the train is going” (2016:142).

My research will be similar in many ways to what Bregnbæk did in Beijing. It will however be carried out in Taiwan. As mentioned earlier in the *Introduction*, It is important to talk about the particular Taiwanese and *not* look for the authentic Chinese there. It is also important to acknowledge Taiwan as a unique place.

### **When Aporia Devastates**

Wen-Chii Tzeng conducted research on people who had tried to commit suicide in Taiwan. After she finished analyzing her interviews she concluded that her informant had experienced being trapped in a circle in three ways: (1) being controlled by others versus striving to live for oneself (2) being rebuffed by others versus seeking company and being loved, and (3) wanting to leave family versus feeling responsible for family (Tzeng, 2001). Using Bregnbæk's terminology, these would have been examples of people who were really struggling with their oedipal project and could not fully negotiate and find a satisfying space in their aporias. Tzeng's research further shows that an affectionless control amongst the Taiwanese increased their vulnerability and how most of the fears of her post-suicide attempt respondents, derived from being controlled by others in one way or another.

An example of this fear could be to live as a fool, for not having any personal wishes or hopes, not living for oneself but solely for one's family (2001).

In order to prevent the fears that they faced, the respondents were trying to become more individualistic and thus living more for themselves, but at the same time still seeking the company of others and still having somewhat of a responsibility towards their family (ibid). By so doing their life would go from alienation towards connectedness. Another crucial point was that their self-awareness was evoked by mirroring the behavior of others (which reminded them of the importance of taking care of their family). The claim made about affectionless control is strengthened by G. Martin and S. Waite (1994) who concluded that affectionate constraint, intrusiveness and overly controlling, especially from mothers, strongly increased the risk of suffering from depression. Other studies have been carried out showing that emotional and social support by peers and family are important to counter loneliness and hopelessness among youth (Page et al. 2006).

Wang et al. (2015) concluded that older Taiwanese students were more open and had closer friendships than younger college students. They also suggest that self-worth is important for developing these traits and that self-worth would develop through more extra curriculum activities

### **Theoretical Concepts**

I deployed three theoretical concepts apart from the Confucian values already mentioned. The concepts mentioned here were the tools through which I tried to reach and answer my research questions. The first concept was borrowed from Bregnbæk (2016) and was used by her when she was trying to investigate the moral struggle of Chinese elite students. She was especially looking at the moral double binds that her informants were facing and how they lived their life in an ethical space somewhere in-between different values (2016:14,15). In doing so she was influenced by (Hage 2003) who wrote about not being "either or" of something, but rather "less or more" of it.

She called the double binds *aporias*, a term she borrowed from Michael Jackson's (2007, 2009, 2013) existential and phenomenological anthropology. With it, they meant a moral quandary without a definite answer (Bregnbæk, 2016:15); a paradoxical internal contradiction. They focused on aporias between the self and the other, between moral ideals and lived experience. I will employ the concept in a similar way when looking at the role and effect the traditional Confucian values have in the self-cultivating process of the Taiwanese youth today.

Just as Bregnbæk I want to point out the universality of aporias. It is safe to assume that everyone deals with existential dilemmas at some point. Everyone has to position themselves and negotiate between the dichotomies of e.g. attachment:separation and dependence:autonomy. She calls this the "*Oedipal project*" (2016:3-4). She stumbled upon this concept in Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1989). The Oedipal project corresponds with the issues raised by Slote's and Phong's research that was mentioned in *The Difficulties of Self-Cultivation*. I will apply and look at the Oedipal project in a Taiwanese context to investigate how it is expressed and lived by the Taiwanese students.

The last concept is a product of this thesis and I chose to call it the *Single Path*.

The single path is meant to represent the narrow way that is claimed to lead to a successful life; both temporally and morally. It is what every student felt was expected of them growing up (be it true or not), in some way or another and it is a path permeated by Confucian ideals. Some of the core values of the path was the importance of hard work, the importance of self-sacrifice and the importance of performing well in school. One of my informants talked about his life and the life of his peers as a very single path and that is where I got the name. It is also meant to connote some of the characteristics of the Chinese character for "path" i.e. 道 or Dao.

It is the central concept of Daoism and could simplified be said to represent the undeviating, unchangeable and uncompromising course of the universe and everything in it.

## 2. Approaching the Field

Historically, it has been propagated that an anthropologist should stay for long periods in the field, mirroring the early vanguards of the discipline, such as Margaret Mead and Bronisław Malinowski. There are still voices claiming that a proper ethnography can be produced only after spending at least one year in the field (Goffman 1989:130; Sluka and Robben 2007:8). There are other, more liberal voices, claiming that there is no strict right or wrong when it comes to quantity in qualitative methods (Baker et. al. 2012) and that one interview could be enough to prove that a concept or phenomena is more complex than it was originally assumed to be. This study will sympathize more with the liberal side of the spectra as I only spent two months in Taiwan and was working in a discovering, open-ended, inductive context.

No matter who you are or how much experience you have as a researcher, no one is a *tabula rasa* when it comes to values and ideals. I have not really had a hypothetico-deductive but rather hermeneutic-inductive approach conducting this research, and could thus be critiqued for not being truly scientific. Much of such critique is rooted against the unavoidable subjective element of any interpretation and therefore discredits its *raison d'être* as a science, because of the great difficulty of claiming any kind of universality or generalizability. Part of this critique is the result of a grave misunderstanding of the purpose and aim of the inductive research (Baker et. al. 2012)

Anthropologists often set out to make an informed and accurate *theoretical description* of “the other”. The ideal end-result of the encounter is ethnography.

Writing a ‘thick’ description with well-interwoven theory requires certain broad theoretical ontological presuppositions. In this study, I take a critical realist epistemological stand, and assume that there are existing phenomena in the world waiting to be described; that there is one true account and thus my intention is to approximate it (Hammersly1990). This will be done by listening to the multiple experiences of the informants during the interviews and incorporate their accounts with previous research in order to gain one unified account and theory. The finalization of this account will be performed by a personal interpretation of my data.

Edward Slingerland (2003), a professor of Asian Studies, presented an understanding of theoretical interpretation that I found very informative.

He suggests that the interpretation is driven by two principles i.e. *Interpretation of Charity* and *Interpretation of Humanity*. The first sets out to maximize truth in what is studied. When interpreting culture and customs this way, they are assumed to have developed in accordance with the needs and the reality that fits the ontology of their originators best. The interpreter thus tries to maximize the perspective of the originators of what is studied, in order to approach the truth (2003:199). The second sets out to maximize reasonableness. It advocates that certain ontological assumptions will lead to specific beliefs and looks for universal non-contradictory explanations and tries to bring about harmony among beliefs. The Interpretation of Charity sometimes forces the interpreter or author to an agreement with the originator in order to maximize truth. If this is the case, the originator's perspectives are not properly questioned. This is not the case with the second interpretation, in which they are allowed to be questioned in order to bring about a universal non-contradictory explanation. As he puts it himself: "The ancestry of a bad interpretation does not make it a good interpretation" (2003:200). Most of the time these theoretical principles coincide, but historically anthropologists have been guided more by the first principle. Some of the critique aimed at the anthropological discipline might have been able to be avoided through more explicitly expressing how these interpretative principles were being used and why. In this study I will mostly follow the first principle in order to highlight the personal perspectives of the Taiwanese students, but if something they say contradicts the other data or previous research, I will not fall back on a relativistic paradigm but rather look for theoretical coherence and harmony. The study will thus aim to reproduce some portion of the world and is built upon the presupposition that it is possible.

I am well aware that everything that I value to be true will have an effect on and underdetermine the whole research process, from the choice of phenomena to the way I describe it; what I bring up and what I find irrelevant. This way of looking at the field and conducting research is greatly inspired by Hammersly (1990).

I find myself agreeing with his assertion that theory is something distinct from description. Theory does not simply spring from the data naturally, but should rather be considered a result of choices made by the researcher (ibid). Inductive theory is a direct results of the values through which the whole research process was carried out.

Didier Fassin – mainly publishing works on medical anthropology and moral anthropology – brought up one possible pitfall working with morality and ethics, i.e. that ethical or moral categories seldom get mobilized by individuals in situations when the morals are seemingly governing what that person finds to be right, virtuous or fair in that specific moment or context (Fassin 2012:15).

Fassin suggests that a moral or right action of the person studied should be interpreted by the ethnographer, through the way in which the agent themselves make sense of the action. This is how he solves the problem and this is what I intend to do.

I will perceive the theoretical concepts and values in this study as Weberian teleological models or ideal types (Weber 1949). They are not to be considered absolute truths, but rather as tools with which the data will be compared in order to lay out differences and similarities (1949:43).

This leaves us with the problem of validity. This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. Many of the themes and questions that were brought up during these interviews were concerning the past. I had no possibility to access the “field” directly and little to confirm the truthfulness of their stories.

My account was heavily dependent on what they decided to tell me and what they chose to leave out. It was further pruned by what I chose to involve and leave out which was directly dependent on my theoretical preferences. What then, makes such an account valuable and valid in the scientific discourse?

I believe that all science is value driven at some level as frequently propagated by Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). There are other ways of dealing with this than flagrantly trying to ignore it, e.g. trying to be as transparent as possible with what you as a researcher bring into the field. I prefer the second option as it facilitates you to stay reflective and helps you monitor how your ideals and theoretical presuppositions guide the whole scientific process, from preparation and data gathering to the analysis and conclusion. This study will mainly be framed and delimited by my understanding of Confucian value ethics and Bregnbæk’s concept of Aporia.

Geertz (1975) suggested another way of strengthening the validity of ethnographic claims, i.e. by reusing theories from other ethnographers doing similar studies or within a similar field. This is why I choose to reuse Bregnbæk's theory in order to find consistency but also highlight eventual discrepancies. A lot of the previous research has been gathered from sociologists and psychologists. I believe that an anthropological study on topics usually dominated by other disciplines will be a contribution as it brings different perspectives to the phenomenon.

### **Why Elite Students?**

Marginalization and liminality are two common topics within the field of Anthropology. Charlotte Davies argues that these are common characteristics for key informants in the field (2002:79) I entered the field with the preconception that students in Taiwan could be considered both marginalized and liminal.

When students reach the university and probably move away from home for the first time, most parents would start treating them more like adults and stop viewing them as children. They would however, probably not ascribe them full adulthood neither until they enter the workforce and assumingly start a family of their own. This would leave them in a liminal state between full adulthood and adolescence/childhood.

I viewed them as marginalized because of the subordinate positions that befall the younger persons in Confucian ethics. Their opinions would generally not matter, as their superiors would know better what is good for them. The opinions and thoughts of the young in such a hierarchal system would easily be overlooked and ignored. Even if they would not be marginalized as students, being mostly elite, I assumed that they had experienced a marginalized role as children and teenagers. This would be sufficient for me as most of my question were about their upbringing.

Another reason that students were chosen as a target for the study is their English language proficiency. Far from all students at the university feel comfortable expressing themselves in English but the likelihood of finding such individuals are greater in this generation than in previous ones. There is also a greater likelihood of finding informants comfortable enough expressing themselves about these topics in English at an elite school. My personal experience of the English proficiency outside of Taipei was that it was a lot lower.

It is far from desirable to gather ethnographic data through a lingua franca, being a second or third language for both parties. Because of my time spent around Taiwanese students at NTU (National Taiwan University) during my exchange year, I decided to proceed anyway as I felt that their language proficiency would be enough to answer the kind of questions I would like to ask. I did not want to use a translator, as that would have added an extra layer of interpretation, instead I wanted the interview situation to raise awareness and sensitivity to concepts and thoughts that would be hard to translate (Davies 2002:77). If a prospect participant expressed doubts about their English language proficiency, I encouraged them to bring friends along to help them if they got stuck and make the situation more relaxed. Two of the interviews were group interviews conducted this way.

### **The Informants**

The students that were chosen to participate were for the most part studying at the most prestigious public school in Taiwan i.e. NTU. It might have been more ideal to travel around the country and gather stories from different parts of the country and different schools in order to get a more holistic picture of their experiences, but this was simply not possible with my time frame and my economical resources. I am well aware about the fact that the delimitation of a field has important implications. While encircling phenomena, some things are always left out (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Through my theoretical and methodological delimitations, I will leave out the voices of students from vocational education and training completely. I did interview students from four other universities in Taipei, hoping that I might capture possible differences. My methodological delimitation might also result in the promotion and enhancement of the perspectives of the Taiwanese student elite in Taipei and inhibit or restrict those of all the others. However, I do not know if this study would have been possible to carry out if I would not have done so due to the language concern mentioned earlier.



The informants mentioned in this section were participants in semi-structured interviews. I am heavily indebted to other students, friends and acquaintances who in less formal settings have been answering my questions, and been giving me material for new questions to bring to upcoming interviews. In total, sixteen people participated in the sixteen semi-structured interviews that constitute the ethnographic material of this study. Two of the informants were professors at NTU. Kim, a European professor of the philosophy department and Shen Se, one of NTU's leading professors on suicide. When I arrived to the field, the study was about student happiness in Taiwan, and the professors were intended to enrich the data by adding an additional voice to the issue or by exposing eventual discrepancies between how students perceived themselves and how others perceived them.

Kim was chosen because of his European origin. By not having grown up in Taiwan himself he was anticipated to might have a different view of the students he was teaching than a native professor.

Shen Se was interviewed as an authority of his field, to shed some light and answer some questions about student welfare and thus get an "official" picture of the situation, the one held by the authority in Taiwan, and then juxtapose it with the students' own experiences and views on the matter. Apart from the professors, there was an equal divide between female and male informants. Nine of them were current students at NTU, one was a NTU graduate who was currently enrolled in Oxford and four of them belonged to another university in Taipei. They were all in the age group of 20-26 and had quite diverse backgrounds. Most of them had at least one parent (the father) with a university degree, and one of them had parents who had lived and studied abroad. Four of them had parents with blue-collar jobs and were beneficiaries of the possibility of social mobility.

Out of the 15 students, only three of them claimed that they did not believe in anything in particular. Five of them had grown up in different Christian denominations whereas three had converted to Christianity at some point in life. One informant had a Buddhist background but was not practicing herself, and the others said that they and their families were Daoists. Religion and self-cultivation are definitely connected, but I had to delimit my thesis and that topic was taken out as I chose to focus on Confucian values. Doing a comparison between different religious backgrounds would be a good suggestion for further research.

## Interviews

All of the interviews were conducted during my two month long fieldwork in Taipei. They were all performed in public places chosen by the informant, sometimes on my suggestion. Examples of such places would be an empty classroom on the NTU campus, a public park or a bench next to a waffle stand. The informants were told that the interview would last for around 35-60 minutes and the anticipated time schedule was always kept. Sometimes we continued to talk afterwards but then I had stopped recording and made it clear that the interview was over.

None of the informants were compensated for their participation in any way. They were all made aware that they could end the interview at any given time without providing a reason for it and that they were in no way obligated to answer all the questions. During the interview, before asking questions about depression and suicide, they were reminded about the lack of obligation to answer and asked for permission to ask such questions. None however, decided not to continue at that point.

The informants were knowingly being recorded by an iPhone 4s, usually placed between us. The sound quality was good enough for all of the interviews to be transcribed. All of the student interviews were fully transcribed but I decided to only partially transcribe the interviews done with the professors. I decided to only transcribe the parts that I found relevant at the time listening to the recordings. The professors' thoughts and opinions were only secondary in this study, so therefore they were not given as much attention.

There is no simple way to recreate and capture an interview setting or atmosphere with a transcript. I made some changes to make the quotes more legible. During the group interview with Kitty and Bonbon, Bonbon was only speaking in Chinese so Kitty offered to translate it for me at the spot. In that transcription all the things that Bonbon actually said in Chinese were omitted.

All of the informants were told that their contribution would be anonymous and that their names would be changed. None of them really cared whether or not I put their name down. They were all offered the transcribed interviews later and were told that they could read through them and ask me to change anything that they didn't feel

comfortable having there, or correct any kind of misunderstanding. None of them had any objections but I gave them pseudonyms anyway.

This made me wonder a bit about face. I have no guarantees that my informants were not saving face or the face of their “greater self” during these interviews. Only on one occasion did I feel certain that one of my female informants – Bonbon – were considering not telling me something in order to save face. I feel certain because her friend Kitty told me this during the interview and I could see no reason why she would make it up. Bonbon did end up telling me the story anyway.

I could think three reasons that they chose to speak so freely (1) They do not value saving face substantially (2) they were excited about the attention they got and (3) they did not see how telling me something would affect their face anyway. I believe the reason to be a mix of all three reasons, or at least reason two and three.

For all of the interviews I brought my laptop. I had some questions on it and took notes on it while they were speaking. In some cases I also brought a notebook to take down notes and possibly write down any Chinese characters that I could not pronounce in an understandable way. This was only necessary once.

I brought a very general interview guide with me. After conducting my first interview with a very loose framework with the general aim of learning a bit of what it was like growing up in Taiwan I decided on a few topics of interest. These were: (1) What they considered to be a traditional parent and their relationship to their own (2) the punishment and recognition systems experienced at school and at home (3) what they thought about and how they experienced pressure, depression and suicide, and (4) how they and their parents expressed their emotions.

I chose these themes in order to better understand how they experience their upbringing and what they think about it. I then intended to compare them with Confucian values in order to accentuate eventual cohesions and discrepancies between them.

Lastly I want to mention that my interpretations and analysis of the interviews have not been presented to my informants at this point in time. It is my intention to do so when I have finalized this thesis to get feedback from them.

## Introducing the Ethnography

I divided my ethnographic material and analysis into three parts, each corresponding to one of the sub-questions asked in the Introduction. Each part has subcategories or topics that are intimately related to its category, but many times the answers and topics cross over the topic-boundaries. I found this to be inevitable as they are all inter-related. My hope was to encapsulate the experience and feature the concerns and dilemmas of my informants through my ethnographic fieldwork that mainly consists of semi-structured interviews. I used Confucian ethics to contextualize, and Susanne Bregnbæk's utilization of the concepts *Aporia* and *Oedipal Project* in order to answer my sub-questions and frame my research. The way the Confucian values were used was much like Weberian archetypes. The ethnographic material was compared with the traditional Confucian values mentioned earlier in order to contextualize the experiences and answers of my informants.

### 3. Part I - Coming of Age

#### The Ubiquitous Teacher

This section is intended to contextualize and give a small glimpse of the vast influence that Confucius and his ascribed teachings have had on Taiwanese and Chinese society.

The teachings of Confucius have been around for more than two centuries and can with ease claim a position amongst the most influential works in Chinese history. His, is a very practical philosophy trying to answer the practical problems of how to live a fulfilling and morally good life. Some of the key aspects have already been brought up in the *Confucian Values* section.

Even if it would be like Fassin suggested (2012:15), that people don't really think about their actions through established ethical or moral concepts, they can still arguably be considered to be there, interpreted to at least have influenced the agent's action. Many of Confucius' most important teachings can be found in the *Analects*, a collection of assumed discussion between the master and his disciples. Many of these discussions start with the iconic phrase "Zi Yue" that can be translated as "The Master said". These are words that have been recited by nearly every child going to school for the last two centuries in China. To study these teachings have more or less been an inevitable part of growing up in China and Taiwan, and understanding them has been key to understand the surrounding societal structure. It is therefore not surprising that it is a mandatory part of their educational system to memorize parts of it. My informants also grew up with the ubiquitous influence of The Master. Confucius stresses the importance of education in becoming a moral person. To reach sagehood is the same as reaching the epitome of his moral endeavor. Going to school and performing well can thus easily be considered a very moral thing to do. The better score you get, the more diligent you have been in your strife or self-cultivating process of reaching benevolence and sagehood, and thus have a harmonious social relationship with everyone around you.

At least in the early years, students in Taiwan have a parallel "moral score" together with their exam results. The teachers keep a thorough track of the conduct

and misdemeanors of the children and let the parents partake of it. All of the clubs and extra-curriculum activities taken during the later years are taken into account during the university application process. They are considered indicators of the character of the person.

This is a small introduction to the permeating relationship that Confucian ethics have had on the social life in Chinese and Taiwanese society.

But the authoritarian position of the master is being challenged both officially and privately as seen in the introduction. I now set out to understand to what degree their ideal self-cultivation and morality coincide with that of the Ubiquitous Teacher and at the same time gain some insight of what it must have been like to grow up as the transitional generation.

## Pressure

Just as I mentioned in the introduction, an immense pressure to perform well academically was one of my strongest prejudices when I arrived in Taiwan the first time. The stories of my informants supported my initial assumption. Growing up in Taiwan definitely involves being under a lot of stress. This section will try to capture the particular pressures that the transitional generation was facing and how they dealt with it.

Every single one of the informants talked about how they experienced stress and pressure in school. The feeling of pressure was mostly connected to taking exams and the fear of not performing well. Damien, a philosophy student expressed it this way:

D. Taking exams really get me feel uneasy and stressful because many people, many people will expect you to do what they expect but, many times, you force yourself to study hard but, sometimes you can't meet their expectation. They will feel depressed, they will feel disappointment and you will also feel that. It's a bad feeling. Especially your parents

He describes the pressure created through a feeling of inadequacy. When he describes the situation that makes him feel uneasy he mentions external expectations and how they fail to be met. He then goes on saying that his failure to live up to someone else's expectations will make *them* feel depressed, and also him, but in this case he comes second; especially when you make your parents depressed. This could be seen as an indicator that performance and success is not a personal business, but a collectivistic affair. Having a child fail is almost the same as failing yourself for a parent. It is hurtful for the face of the greater self and it could also be considered a failure in being a good and diligent role model for their children. By not presenting the single path to success and proper self-cultivation well enough, their children might have started walking down a different path.

The stress and unease that Damien were experiencing could be the effect of the disappointment in himself in failing to honor his parents by living up to the expectations that they put on him.

The educational performance pressure that my informants were experiencing culminated at two points, the high school entry exam and the university entry exam. For many, these were considered the most stressful parts of their lives.

Not all of them experienced this pressure as something inherently bad. Rick, a top-performing student that moved to Taipei from the countryside and currently is studying social science, described his preparation period for the university entrance exam like this:

R. Before I take that test, three years ago I woke up every day at 6.30 and I went to my high school and I start to study at 8 am and I study to like 10 pm and then I go home at 11 o'clock and then I take a shower and go to bed, and it's like every day routine. It lasts for like three or four months. Just in order to get a good grade

He summarizes by saying that studying in Taiwan is “not a very good experience” because of the pressure, even though he felt it was not too hard on him because he got good results. The educational performance pressure they experience growing up does not necessarily go away when they get accepted to the university. I will write more about that later. Hanna – a senior forestry student and student council member – commented on the devastating effect the pressure still can have at a University level. She had friends who were depressed and even considered committing suicide because of it. She was not alone in saying that she had friends like that.

Nicky, one of the girls who did not go to NTU and had a Chinese literature background, said that she understood how pressure could be good for motivation, but in her case, it had the complete opposite effect. Failing to live up to other peoples' expectations and then being chastised for it, just made her angry.

Just as Nicky pointed out, pressure, as uncomfortable and dreadful as it may seem, is not all bad. If we never feel any pressure it might be hard to motivate any change or effort. Rick said that he was still happy during his major exam periods and when I asked Johnny – a senior social science student – if he would have preferred to go to a school without it, he answered forcefully and instantly “NO!” because he found it to be a prerequisite to grow. They probably had a more positive attitude towards pressure as they usually came out on top and thus lived up to the expectations set on them.



Pressure really is a double-edged sword. Sometimes the students ended up at the wrong edge and did not feel like it was motivating, but rather suffocating them. In Nicky's case, it really had the opposite effect than the desired and she reveals a negative spiral that is easy to get trapped in. If the pressure does not help you to perform well enough, it will bring out frustration, self-doubt and shame instead of feelings of advancement or growth.

### Releasing Pressure

Sean thought of his adolescent years as hard. He did not really enjoy going to school and did not have many friends going up. His way of releasing pressure was doing something that he liked:

S. I think mm, I like playing computer games for at least two reasons. I can forget the pressure I face in the real life and I like the story of the computer games. They really encourage me to find what I really like. It's a good way to release.

He also mentioned going to the public pool and swim by himself. He did not mind spending time alone. Gaming is extremely popular in Taiwan. It is easy to see how spending time online in a virtual world helps you detach from everything you are facing in the real one. Sean was lucky enough to know what *he* enjoyed doing. It is an existing issue for others to not know their personal preferences. Sean had a long experience of cultivating the things that *he* wanted to do. He had openly opposed his parents in the choice of high school and started going to a private instead of a public one. By directly disobeying his parents he showed an early negligence of forbearance as he chose to subdue and sacrifice his own will in order to follow his parents' wishes.

Nicky illuminated another strategy by sharing a story about how she used to be bullied by others in junior high school. I am glad that I interviewed subjects from diverse schools because she was never the kind of top-performer that you needed to be in order to get accepted to NTU. None of the "elite" mentioned bullying as a release during the interviews but during more informal conversations, some of them admitted of being bullies. They did not seem to regret it by the way they talked about it, but I never openly confronted them about it.

This is Nicky's story:

N. We were preparing the test for high school [...] maybe the people who bullied me, maybe they just got so much stress and (chuckles) they were trying to release that so they bully me just for fun and also to release their pressure I think. I mean, they didn't punch me or something like that, but they teased me in a not so nice way. They would, they tease me what I look like, they tease me about my score, they say I am a bad person. Actually I'm not, I was not a bad person but for them I was a bad person so they pretty much tease me about everything. If they think that's my weakness, and they tease my weakness so that they can laugh at it [...] I didn't know what to do at the time. Should I tell my teacher, I should tell my parents? Well, I did try to tell my parents but they...but they just blamed it all on "because you didn't get a good score so you deserved it" or something like that.

For Nicky, the students that were bullying her were just doing it in order to release some of the pressure in their lives. They did not abuse her physically, but teased her by calling her a bad person *because of* her test scores and because of her appearance. This would indicate that looks and scores were areas in which they were insecure and therefore wanted to feel superior in. They did so by belittling others. To call someone a bad person because of poor test score is an indicator of the morality that they attached to performance. This is in concordance with the Confucian value system. The bullies persuaded themselves that they were good people by pointing out to themselves how much further they had come in the self-cultivation process, by being more diligent and thus getting better scores than Nicky. Her parents' reaction further implies that you were considered a morally bad person by failing your tests. They basically told her that her *face* deserved being questioned, as her actions were being immoral. Nicky also mentioned a friend that suffered more from bullying than herself. The few times she tried to talk with her friend about it she got mad. It could be seen as an attempt to save face and the frustration a result of not succeeding. It is seldom a pleasant experience to appear weak before another, not for anyone.

How did Nicky herself release her pressure? When I asked her the question she said "by reading my favorite manga", but I believe that she had another way:

N. Homework and grades score, it's my business not a teacher's business. A teacher's responsibility is teaching me how to write homework or teaching me what kind of person I am going to be. So scores, grades and homework is not their business [...] if I do good they should give me a clap right? You should say something good, but if I don't they *have* a part of it too. That's how I feel. [...] when I was getting older I realized that the teacher was trying to motivate

me or to do better, but they just didn't do that in a good way and at home it's the same thing. Like, when I got something messed up they just blame on me and I got angry with them and I don't want to do it anymore. And it's like a bad circle.

Nicky creates a clear distance between her business and someone else's. This is a form of individualization. She is re-writing her *social relation* to her parents and her teacher, and rejects the idea that her failure is their failure; something that Damien seemingly did not do with his parents. She alone is responsible for her self-cultivation. Parents and teachers have a role in this process, but a profoundly different one than in the Confucian system. For Nicky, a parent's roles is to encourage her and present to her the path she is supposed to take, but she is at liberty of choosing to follow it or not. Neither her parents nor her teacher have the right to impose their wishes on her because she is no longer an extension of them. She is more of an entity in and of herself.

The reason why this pattern is so visible in Nicky's case could be that she realized that she would never "be" the ideal, and instead of giving up completely she just chose to walk her own path. She openly quarreled often with her dad, not showing the traditional filial piety. By, in many ways, cutting completely with many Confucian values, she relived herself of the stress and pressure of constantly failing to become something or someone she knew she could never be.

## A Well-Intended Blunder

The Ministry of Education has not turned a blind eye to the issues that their educational system creates. They made it mandatory for students in high school to join a club in order to develop personal interests and encouraged participation in activities outside of school. They would give you bonus point in you application processes to either senior high school or the university. Rick shared how this initiatives of trying to release some of the pressure from the students and increase the general wellbeing, backfired completely:

R. Parents spend money for their child to go to learn other things or participate in other activities and but they still have them to go to cram school and to study very hard you know. now they want you to develop other things as well. Now people also criticize that only the rich family can afford other thing for their children to learn, they can spend more money on other things besides studying.

Instead of releasing pressure this way, the authorities just added another layer onto it. The parents might have seen this as just another aspect of the single path that had to be cultivated within their children in order for them to be successful and morally good people. By introducing this initiative, the Ministry also diminished the likelihood of social mobility by giving the richer an advantaged in the application process that the poorer could not afford.

## Comparison and Competition

In Taiwan it seems to have been an institutionalized inveterate conscious habit to compare yourself with others, both at home and throughout the school years. Thea – one of the few informants who did not go to NTU – summarized well what many of the informants said about how they were being compared in school:

T. You really compete with each other. After each exam you know you are the second, you are the tenth or you are the last and then that's really strange because you feel you are not catching up with some people or you are, some students are just always doing better than you. I think that's hard.

The feeling that she mentions of “not catching up” puts pressure on you to make you want to perform better. The habit of constantly comparing and showcasing the top performers resonates well with the Confucian ideals of moral socialization. This is an example of moral exhortation (Chan 1999) and leading by example, or cultivating the self through a good role model. The comparison of scores also worked as a hierarchal divider. Top performers were sent to special schools or special classes all the way from elementary school to senior high school. Kitty, a NTU graduate who currently studied at Oxford said:

K. I was always in the top class [...] In junior high when I first entered into the talented class I was in the middle and then I worked my way through the top. I'm like that.

In her case, being compared helped her to progress and therefore she did not find it destructive or bad. During the same interview, when Bonbon shared how her grades had been dropping, Kitty started to pat her back saying “It's fine, *you* are fine” (emphasis added), to console her and as if to tell her that she is so much more than her grades. I do not think that she would have felt the need to do that if she would not have felt that at least others identified and based their self-worth on their grades just as she did.

Johnny mentioned the importance of comparison and competition in order to showcase excellence. When not comparing or competing in something, that action becomes meaningless:

J. Because we hold a lot of competition as well, you know like yeah, we do. I don't know, welcome to Chinese life (laugh). But it is just like if there is no competition, then it somehow means nothing. When we were young, it was just like that you know. Because you don't have test on it, so it's just like, people don't care about it. It's just like "it cannot prove anything" it's just like "you're good at that", that's all.

Even the art classes had a scoring system in order to be able to compare and compete within the subjects. For Sarah – a senior forestry student that I knew from my exchange semester – this extracted all the fun from drawing and a painting, so she eventually just stopped doing something she initially enjoyed. In her case, this systematized comparison did not enhance her performance but rather inhibited it.

The most important comparison or competition in the educational system is the university entry exam. It is the final hurdle, the last boss fight or the light at the end of the tunnel. Because I heard many students say that it is extremely hard to get into the University you want, but a lot easier to graduate. Many of my informants shared this view. The exam has two parts, one with letter grades and the other with actual points. The second one is considered the harder one. The grading is also based on your daily performance, your club of choice and what special activities you have attended.

Ian pointed out to me that the marginal decided where you end up is very slim. He said that " There is a big difference between 100, 99 and 95. Often a 0.1 point will decide if you go to medical school, the engineer department or study literature".

I started pointing up some of the problems with this system in *A Well-Intended Blunder*. By having such a system, practically all of your life's actions up until then will be evaluated in the exam. It means that you ought not choose an art club just because you are curious and want to learn more about art, or join the "animal club" because you think animals are cute. The system basically implies that you should only join the art club if you want to become an artist when you grow up or the "animal club" if you are thinking about becoming a vet. I find the evaluation "leisure time" to be defeating the purpose of having it.

If they perform well enough, the student will be accepted to the University they want. Going to the university is a big change for many of the students. Until that point, all of the subjects and all of the exams had been highly standardized. You are always

competing against your peers and for the university entry exams you are competing against peers on a national scale; fighting to get into the most prestigious schools. All of the informants lived at home during their high school years even though they spent most of their days being somewhere else. When they start going to the university, most of them move away from home for the first time. In the university, everybody is doing different majors, taking different courses, which makes it harder to compare. This is not always an easy transition. Johnny said:

J. When we choose different paths it just becomes more lonely. But it is liberating as well 'cause you feel like you have the freedom to choose. However I can sense that a lot of my friends are panicking because they don't know what they are going to do in the future

For some, the freedom that they receive is not welcomed. It is more overwhelming as they do not know what to do with it. There seems to be a sense of security in the highly standardized path set out for the students. It might strengthen the sense of collectivity by having everyone competing for the same thing, following the single path. Loosing this would then certainly enhance feelings of isolation and loneliness, because if the single path gets diversified, it becomes harder to compare and compete. For many students, these seem to be key elements in the creation of their selfhood. They spend all of their efforts on competing well enough to reach their goal; "I'm like that", as Kitty said previously.

## Inter-familial Comparison

A few of my informants did not have any siblings but that did not seem to have been a hindrance for familial comparisons. When I asked Ian about being compared at home he said:

I. I grew up in a big family with my aunts and my uncles living together. So I have a lot of cousins living together, growing up together. And...I'm always the one they compare their children with [...] I don't have the stress to perform well on exams, no, I don't have that pressure

In his case, he lived surrounded by his big family, and they all compared their children with each other. He phrases his answer "I'm always the one they compare their children with" because he was the one who was performing the best. Because Ian was in the top of his class, performing well, he became the role model and good example for his peers. He did not feel the stress that Thea mentioned earlier; the stress of always feeling like you are getting behind and other people are always doing better than you. Neither "Hanna" had any siblings growing up, but she had a same-aged cousin. She said that they used to talk about how they did not like how their parents were comparing them with each other, as they were so fundamentally different. Her male cousin liked to work with his hands. After he started going to a university he enjoyed studying and got good grades. She said that they are still being compared and that it is not really a problem, just a little annoying.

"Hanna" acknowledges an essential difference between herself and her cousin that I feel like the Taiwanese school system seldom does, i.e. that not everyone is fit to reach *sagehood*, not everyone is made for the single path. Not everyone is made for reaching the Confucian ideal state and some probably never really want to either. Her cousin seemed to have possessed a more "practical" temperament growing up, and it must have been hard to living in a system where education was everything.

"Hanna" did not think it fair to compare herself with her cousin on this level, but on an academic level, after he became a "good student", she did not see any problem in comparison. My assumption is that because she, just like Ian, were at the top, they did not feel the weight of comparing yourself with others, knowing that most of your peers are doing better than you.



The male informants told me about they often were compared with their brothers (if they had any). When I later bring up *Traditional Parents* I will write more about the different expectations and treatment of the genders. Even if you did not have any siblings, it did not seemed to have been a hindrance for inter-familial comparisons.

## Punishment

“棒头出孝子 "Dutiful sons are the product of the rods"

Confucius encouraged the use of the rod in order to morally shape children.

Previous research indicates that this has been considered an axiom by Chinese parents (Wolf Solomon, 1971; Lin & Wang, 1995) and that both giving advice and delivering harsh physical punishment has been considered necessary in order to cultivate “good character”. Other research proved that it is still considered necessary in parts of China (Swader & Yuan 2010). I previously used their informant’s comment on why he chose to hit his son. For him, it was an important way to keep harmony and balance within the family. When everyone else was being kind to the son, he chose the equally necessary role of being strict. This section will cover how the students expressed their experiences of being punished at home and in school.

Most of the informants had experience and witnessed corporal or physical punishment in school. The following is example of how punishments could be carried out, taken from my interview with Bonbon and Kitty:

B. If you behave seriously bad, like hurt someone else, then “the hurter” would be asked to lean down facing the blackboard and raise their butt, and then they’d receive strikes on their butts (K. gasps) using the broom. Ok, so the teacher would ask the students sitting in the first row to leave because she would be swinging it. It’s very very painful. This was only for students who did a quite serious...misconduct

K. For me, I remember strikes on my hands. It’s different for each student because they expected of me to get 95 so if I get 90 I got 5 strikes. But for her, maybe she’s usually got like 80 and then she would only get like one strike. [...] I remember verbal abuse from our junior high school teacher. He could say things that made us feel absolutely worthless, like: “you’re just a rubbish coming from rubbish family and you don’t know what you are doing”. I think he was wise in the way he punished us. He would threaten girls but, the real punishment only came to boys. So he would literarily hit boys. But he would threaten us all by hitting the black board and then hitting the stage or the floor making huge sounds. That scared us a lot.

Having the teacher hit the inside of their palms with a stick seemed to have been a common punishment when an academic standard – set by the teacher – was not

reached or when they had performed some misconduct or misdemeanor. An example that Bonbon gave was that the boys in her school would pull away the chair from their classmate. Then they would receive the broom. Most of the punishments were carried out publically in front of the class. This could be seen as a moral exhortation strategy to help them in their self-cultivation process through setting deterrent examples.

Kitty touches on another aspect. The girls did not seem to have suffered from physical punishment to the same extent as the boys. She does mention that verbal scolding or abuse was carried out in front of the class. This seems to have been a common punishment as well. Sometimes they would also be asked to write their wrong repeatedly on the black board in front of the whole class.

Almost all of the informants experienced a decline in corporal punishment when they reached junior and senior high school. I believe that this might be because of the national ban of corporal punishment 2006. The substitute punishments were e.g. having to do chores, doing push-ups in front of the class and having to miss out on your lunch break.

Only one of my informants said that she was never punished at school. She claimed to never have seen any corporal punishment even though the other informants replied that they always were carried out in front of the whole class. I do blame *face* for the discrepancy in comparing her answer to the others'. Thea also claimed that it was illegal for her generation to be punished, which is only partly true. Another reason why I chose to challenge her account is that she later said:

T. Sometimes you know, students can be very naughty and it's really hard to not get crazy when you are trying to teach them [...] They really liked students who could get a good grade, and they think that students who didn't get a good grade are those who were not hard working

I do not see why she would have to take an apologetic stance for teachers who never did anything wrong, or never punished the children. She also seemed uncomfortable in general, talking about the subject.

The other informants shared her experience of teachers' attitudes. Hard work was equal to gaining high test scores, something that was openly praised in front of the others, whereas failing, or performing bad on a test, was considered a direct result of laziness. Being lazy is a serious vice in such a performance-centered value system. Not working hard, would be the same as not diligently trying to cultivate yourself and

following the single path. Proper self-cultivation – which is trying to achieve sagehood in Confucianism – is not an independent strife, it is something you achieve as a group or as a whole. This is probably why being “lazy” is considered so bad. It affects not only them, but everyone around them too by failing to have forbearance in their social relations. When self-cultivation is so tightly connected to academic performance, being lazy would be the same thing as saying that you are not trying to be a good person. It is also a question of face. Not only do you lose face yourself, but you lose face for your “greater self” or family. That would make your success a family business.

### **Different Gender, Different Punishment?**

In my interview with Tess, she insinuated that there was a difference between how girls and boys were treated. Bonbon reinforced that with a story about how she was slapped in the face by her aunt whenever she was late, but the aunt never raised her hand on her brother. In Bonbon’s case, she suffered a physical punishment that her brother was relieved from, just the opposite from what she and Kitty experienced at school. Bonbon thought that the aunt had felt more responsible for the moral education of her than of that of her brother.

Tess shared something more typical, i.e. that her parents had punished her brother more harshly:

T. My, my, my brother, my brother he like got hit very often when he was little because he was too naughty (M. T. Both laughing softly) Yeah [...] I think they expect more from him than me, like to have a better grade or study harder. But that’s also because I am a bit more organized and would just do things on time or on schedule. I didn’t really let my parents worry about me.

In Tess’ family, her brother seemed to have been expected to become the main family face outward and therefore it seems to have been more important that he was successful than his sister. At a more informal setting, Johnny told me how women historically had been treated as less valuable as they would eventually leave the family and become a part of someone else’s. Rick explained the same phenomenon by saying that “daughters that get married are just like water that gets spilled out, its gone”. He then added that things are different now and that relations are more equal,

but this “outdated” attitude can still be hinted in this ethnographic material. This could be seen as one example of it.

Tess seemed to have been a very caring sister and hearing her talk about her brother being punished, I found it evident that it was a painful memory for her. She said that she many times tried to mediate between her parents and her brother as they had a really hard time understanding and reaching each other. It was important for her to make sure that nobody needed to “worry about her” so that she could be there as a resource for her family.

### **Punishment At Home**

The students who had parents who were well educated tended to be more strict and traditional, expecting more out of their children.. The students who came from less well off families had parents that could say things like “as long as you do your best we are content”. This could be understood through the light of parents wanting their children to progress and outgrow them. It would take a lot more to surpass parents who both were doctors than parents who were blue-collar workers.

All of the male informants – except one – shared stories of corporal punishment from their childhood. Among the female informants only two had suffered from it personally. Bonbon had only received it from her aunt that used to live with them and Kitty from her mom. She wanted to make it clear that it only happened once but she never gave the reason for why her mom twisted her arm.

Reasons given for receiving corporal punishment at home were poor academic performance or some kind of misdemeanor that their parents found the informants guilty of. These are examples given by Charles, Damien and Yuan:

C. Yes, my parents beat me (chuckles) when I was young if I like, if I get like 90 in my math test, and they’re like “why you, you should have get 100” and like “psh psh psh” (imitating hits) for I mean like one point, one, yeah

D. My mother was really angry. I didn’t expect that. Yeah. I don’t know why. Anyway she’s just very angry and she just hit me and my sister, both of us. Because we, we both didn’t want to go home.

Y. My father would use a stick “pak pak pak” (imitating hits) when I was young. It’s so terrible... When my father used the stick I felt like it was nightmare and it didn’t really do good on me. But I think he did it because he didn’t know a better way to teach us children.

None of the informants mentioned chores as a punishment at home. The ones who didn't suffer corporal punishment told stories about how they were locked into small rooms, locked outside of the house, had to face the wall for a long time or were treated with silence until their parents thought they had suffered enough to learn their lesson. The informant did not see the silent treatment as a punishment but rather as a substitute for it. Some other methods that were mentioned were prohibition of video game playing or a long and angry scolding. Bonbon shared a story about how her dad would physically drag them to church if they refused to go. When they tried to lock themselves in, he would try to break down the door to reach them. He also used a belt to make a lot of noise in order to scare them for reasons she couldn't remember.

In Thea's case, she was not punished by being locked in, she was being locked out. She said it was one of her most significant memories and probably also a very painful one. As she was crying outside a neighbor asked of her parents to let her in but they did not immediately insist that they needed to teach her a lesson. I never inquired about what for as it was seemingly a painful memory. After sharing the story with me she said "compared to lots of other kids during my generation I wasn't really punished hard". Her comment indicates that she was aware of peers that suffered from more severe punishments. As a follow-up question I asked her to reflect on an eventual value change when it came to punishing children:

T. I don't really know [...] I guess it's changing because people know that physically punishment is not really helpful and it hurts the relationship. I also think people are more educated than before and people are changing and not being so traditional

In this conclusion she gives away her own values by saying that physical punishment is not helpful and an outdated way of dealing with relationships. It corresponds well with what Sonny said about his dad just not knowing any better way to raise him. It also witnesses an urge to break with tradition.

Sarah shared a story that illuminates another aspect of parental discipline and the continuing effect of Confucian values:

S. When I was a kid I just watched a movie and in the movie a girl cheated in class, but I had no idea what that means and I just feel like "ok that's fun" and I just do it in school. *I don't need that*, I don't have to I just didn't know what

it meant. And then the teacher just discovered me and told my mom, and my mom said something really weird. She basically said: “Maybe now your teacher won’t like you so much because when she thinks of you, she’ll only remember that you cheated”. Maybe she just tried to tell me to not do that again. But I wonder why she didn’t get like really angry. She just said that really calm [...] I thought she would be really pissed (laughs) That’s why it’s so weird. Me not being vegan really pissed her off many times, so maybe that day is just not her pissed off day.

Initially she was saving face by making sure that I understood her innocence and that she did not need to cheat in order to get a high score on the test. By telling Sarah how her teacher’s only memory of her will be reduced to one single immoral action, the mom is teaching her daughter about the importance of “face” and as noticed earlier, it seems to have worked.

A reason for the mother to be more upset about her not being vegan is that it might be interpreted as a lack of self-awareness. Tzeng’s research (2001) suggested that self-awareness was evoked by mimicking others and in this instance, Sarah failed to do so. By not following her parent’s good examples and choosing her own way of living, she was openly challenging the family hierarchy, and thus not showing filial piety. She would not let herself be controlled by her parents but wanted to live for herself, thus being more individualistic

## Recognition

Recognition and rewards are great tools for reinforcing behavior. I believe them to be deployed often to encourage behavior that is found good or moral in others.

This section will cover how and when my informants were recognized and rewarded.

All of the informants were asked questions about how they were rewarded and recognized by their parents and their teachers growing up. A common theme throughout the interviews both at home and in school was receiving material rewards. They were rewarded with stickers and stamps in elementary school, and when they had received enough, they got a little gift like a doll, a clock or a key ring. They would also receive more beautiful stickers and stationary. This material way of rewarding and motivating was most commonly used in the earlier years, both at home and in school. You were rewarded by performing well on tests. Most of the informants shared stories about how they got toys or other things that they wanted – from their parents – when they performed well in school. They were also offered snacks, money and meals at their favorite restaurants. The gifts were usually in direct accordance with the seriousness and size of the performance. By scoring high on the high school entry exam e.g. Damien was given expensive gaming gear from his parents. This was his greatest motivation to perform well in school according to himself.

In high school the reward systems from the teachers seemed to have differed a bit more. Some mentioned that top performers gained perks like food, drinks and coupons for restaurants and book shops, others just mentioned praise and recognition in front of the class. The informants that did not remember how they were being rewarded in school were students who all said that they were not top performing and probably never received those kinds of rewards. Nicky said that she was usually just ignored by her teacher because she was not a good student. By reading through the interviews it becomes evident that the teachers were friendlier towards the top performers. Here is an example:

N. I think when I was in elementary school I think that's pretty much what every teacher did (both chuckles) I mean, like...no one don't like good students right?



Nicky claims that teachers universally treat good students better, and I believe she has a point, but her comment could also be considered to be a small indicator of how widespread the privilege system is in Taiwan and how much they take it for granted.

Moments of praise and recognition usually took place publically in front of the class, just like the punishments did. I would like to suggest that this system was implemented in order to set both good and bad examples for the group just as brought up before. The teachers would thus make sure that all of the students had good role models to mirror and deterring examples to learn from. The public reward system got epitomized during a weekly flag ceremony. Every Thursday of the week the students had to raise the flag on the school ground. It was accompanied with a ceremony in which students – who had won a contest or competition – got to receive their reward front of the whole school. Rick described the ceremony as a time when “the whole school will cheer for them” and that the well-performing students received small gadgets and candies. But the affect that the ceremony had on students differed.

For Rick it sometimes invoked feelings of envy and admiration, but for Sarah it was just not interesting and she remembers having to stand under the scorching sun with only one wish, to go inside.

It is Noteworthy that Rick always was one of the top performers and claimed to have enjoyed studying hard. When confronted with it he said that his success was due to the fact that he grew up outside of Taizhong, a more rural area than Taipei, thus belittling his own efforts and appearing more humble.

When he was awarded in front of the school he said that he felt: “Proud, glorious. Whatever (laughing) Yeah, you like “I’m the top of the world” or something”, whereas Sarah said that she never really enjoyed studying and thought that it was awkward to stand up in front of the class because she felt like nobody cared anyway. When asked why she thought they had the ceremony she answered:

S. Before our generation, raising a national flag was really meaningful and singing the national anthem is really meaningful, yes, but I think when time change, the meaning is changing so, I think maybe we are trying to change. Maybe in a few year they won’t do it [...] I guess they just think that if they reward someone who did really well, then other people will try to learn that, imitate that.

She does not only suggest a value change in national pride but also highlights the Confucian value of learning through good examples. She later added that she wasn't really sure if this method of setting good roles was really working because during the flag ceremony she claimed that students just wanted to get back to their classrooms.

Bonbon and Kitty were both a bit skeptical to the flag ceremony, but for a different reason. They did not feel like it really gave them the recognition they deserved for all the struggles they went through in order to be an ideal student. Kitty said that she had a book full of diplomas from her school years that she just found ridiculous, because they meant nothing to her.

### **The Group Game**

Bonbon mentioned inter-class moral competitions and how the whole class could be rewarded. There was a moral scoring system through which your morality was measured and evaluated. A high moral would give you bonuses on your final scores and small perks like letting you go earlier from class etc. It becomes evident that performing well academically is tightly connected with morality. This is an example of the strong influence that the Confucian value system has had on the teaching curriculum.

There were also inter-class academic competitions. By winning them continuously you received a permanent honor reward. It seems to have been important to let everyone else know that you were the honored class. This goes together well with the idea of the importance of face and also the previous comments on the importance of having good examples. The system would work as a way of habituating the idea of one's face as something *shared* and not solely dependent on yourself. This is probably why some students started to feel like their self was heavily embedded by the others', thus enhancing the idea that you cultivate yourself together and through the others around you.

The group game or group rewards seems to only have been part of the earlier school years. The older you got the more individualistic it became. Sarah said that the older you got, the more individualistic it became.

## Recognition at Home

Johnny was born into a family in which his mother was a doctor and his father a businessman. For a while his grandfather lived with them and he shared this story about how he used to be rewarded and recognized by his Grandfather:

J.I remember that he reward me for my handwriting. We care about handwriting a lot, “you need to be good and stuff” (said with ironic voice) so I wrote some characters [...] he would give me money for that, It’s just like some kind of encouragement, and I know that a lot of my friends had the same rewarding system [...] I think from my childhood experience I just realized that all my family cared about scores a lot, even though they don’t say it, they say “as long as you work hard you’ll be fine”, you know, but, that’s probably because I got higher grades so they always just ask me to try my best. But it was different for my sister. They reward her through, saying like if she got more than 90 on her test, she would be rewarded with 500 dollars or stuff like that, so it’s kind of different. But I think they all want us to study really hard.

He also mentioned how he saw his parents very little and spent more time with nannies than with his parents. This did not seem to be uncommon among people of a higher class. The grandfather rewarded him materially based on his performance in order to encourage morally good habits. In Confucianism, calligraphy or handwriting was an important aspect and part of the schooling that led to the path of true scholarship. Most of the students said that they took calligraphy lessons as an after-school activity when they were children.

Johnny’s story also shows a pattern of learning through copying something good and then being rewarded for it. In the second part he claims that his whole family cared a lot about performance. This resonates well with the Confucian values.

It also seems like they used money as an incentive in order to make his sister study harder and get better grades. Because Johnny already did perform well the incentive was not needed and therefore he received words of encouragement instead. He later said that his parents were busy and with their limited time they chose to focus their attention on his sister, as she was failing, not him.

## Scoring Your Way to Freedom

Some of the informants were rewarded by being allowed to do things that they enjoyed. For Ian and Sean, being allowed to play video games or computer games was an important reward. As for Rick, he was allowed to skip school by his parents:

R. Whenever I did great, my parents would allow me to have a day off and I would go wherever I want to play or do whatever I want. It's the same in the university as well, but the period is much longer

The same system of rewarding was applied by Ian's parents. He was allowed to skip class and do things that he enjoyed, like mountain climbing or playing basketball when he scored well on tests. Another way of expressing the reward given to Rick, Ian and the others is trust or freedom. Because they all performed well enough, their parents trusted their methods of doing things and did not feel like they needed to dictate how they were to live their life. They were confident that their children would perform well regardless if they skipped class and therefore they did not worry. This trust gave these students more opportunities to spend time discovering and doing things that *they* enjoyed. Because of the good scores they did not have to "catch up" with their peers and could allow themselves to do these things. They might have had an easier time developing a personal identity and personal preferences as they could do it more easily than others. In a sense, both Johnny and Tess were experience this freedom as well. By being "good kids" and following the single path, their parents did not have to worry about them, and they were more trusted to take care of themselves without parental intervention. This was not necessarily what they wanted.

## 4. Part II – Kinship Values

### The Traditional Parent

By asking my informants about how they perceived typical “traditional parents” I tried to make them situate themselves in the negotiation process of Confucian kinship values. This section will cover how they perceived their parents growing up and how they experience and discuss the social relation between children and their parents.

The most common attribute to describe traditional parents was a strong expectation of others – especially their children – to work hard. Most of the informants told stories about how they were only expected to focus on their studies and perform well in school growing up. Hanna believed that this was a way for them to “force their children to reach the dreams that they once wanted to achieve but didn’t”.

This expectation was usually being expressed through what they experienced as an over involvement and excessive planning of their children’s’ lives during their early years. My informants thought that they did so in order take away all the other possible worries for their children so that they could solely focus on their studies.

By taking away a lot of other responsibilities from their children, they were considered to diminish their children’s’ ability to make those kind of decisions themselves. This pampering and all the hard work that parents suffer through for their children’s’ sake, could be part of why parents have felt entitled to filial piety. It is also something that probably makes the university period more transitional and difficult for many, as it would increase the feeling of being lost by adding on even more new life aspects never before experienced.

Having overly protective and controlling parents was given as a reason for why some students felt lost and unhappy when they reached the university and moved away from home. It correlates well with the previous research that suggested that over involvement from parents and the feeling of being too controlled were major reasons for feeling hopeless (Martin & Waite 1994).

Traditional parents were being described as someone who cared a lot about their children but were stubborn in their ways and were a bit controlling. They would typically put more pressure on their sons and expect more chores from the girls and take something like homosexuality really bad. It was also mentioned that that they would speak Taiwanese with their children at home (instead of the official language that is Chinese). Another typical trait of traditional parents was the willingness – both by the mother and the father – to give their children material things.

An example of how they expressed their care would be that they always made sure that their children ate a lot and made sure that they were doing everything so that their children would not get bullied in school. At least according to Charles, who said that traditional parents have a kind of “victim consciousness”, being afraid of being bullied or having their children being bullied. This could be a reason why they push their children so hard to become successful. Nobody else brought up this “victim consciousness”, but later in the interview, it became clear that he suffered from it himself. He gave an example of how he many times “pretended” to be dumber than he was and went hanging out with the lower ranking students to avoid being bullied. He said that if you looked like and seemed like a nerd and lacked in social skills, you were an easy target for bullies.

Some other things that was said about the traditional parent was that they always expect their children to get paid more than them and become more successful and end up in a big house with a happy family. Therefore they expect their children to become doctors, lawyers or engineers. They were also said to happily compare their children with those of family member or neighbors.

Bonbon described a traditional mother as “more tolerant, full of charity and she takes care of the children and she cooks, which is very important” and this view was shared by other informants. Kitty, the female informant who had studied a year at Oxford shared something that no one else shared about traditional mothers. She claimed that traditional Taiwanese mothers had more responsibilities than fathers. She based this on all the unpaid labor that the mothers would do in the home. Kitty’s answer could be directly influenced by the growing feminist movement in Taiwan, or her gaining the exclusive perspective from abroad. Either way, she does not support what she understands to be the traditional division of unpaid labor.

When asked if she considered her parents to be typical Taiwanese she answered:

K. Hm, for me, I don't think my parents are typical. I think they are both very very supportive and very open and respect my choices. They wouldn't tell me what I'm supposed to do. And my mom works and earns more than my dad and I don't think that's very traditional

A traditional parent would then, not have been open in respecting her choices and would have wanted to tell her what to do. This could be understood through the light of filial piety and forbearance. Someone with a superior position was only expected to be obeyed when asking something out of a subordinate. Being a child comes with an expected disposition to respect and honor the wishes of the parent. When they diverge with one's own, you are supposed to subject yourself in order to do what is morally good and keep the harmony within the family. Thea strengthens this interpretation with one of her comments:

T. Traditional parents also think that they are always right and you always have to listen to your parents...Yeah, and then they don't listen to their children much because they feel like children don't understand much things, and it is always children learn from their parents and not parent learn and listen to their children. That's how I would say (laughs) very traditional.

According to Kitty her parents were not very traditional and neither were Thea's according to herself. However, later Kitty also shared a story about how she was absolutely forbidden to have a boyfriend before high school by her mother. Not allowing their children to date was considered a traditional trait, so there would seem to be a discrepancy in her account. I think the key to understand it lies in Thea's comment. What she describes is basically a vertical family structure in which the father is superior and unconditionally expects filial piety and forbearance from his children. I believe that it is this traditional Confucian family structure that does not overlap with Kitty's personal experience, and that is why she does not consider her parents traditional. Another reason that might be behind the discrepancy might be a will to perceive oneself as modern or progressive. Having more modern parents would facilitate that.

## The Preferred Parent

During my interview with Sean and Sonny they started to share with me what they thought a parent *should* be like. This section will express some of the values that they wished that their parents would have had and that they might apply when they become parents themselves:

S. I think a parent is like a tour guide. They will tell you “oh, take this road or this destination” but they will give you the choice share tell their experience with you. I think it needs to be so, because if your parents don’t tell you what’s good what’s wrong, and instead says “it’s up to you” I think, we can’t do the right thing in the beginning. So I think the parent have to lead and have to teach when the child is young. And then when they grow up, I think it’s time for us to choose. I think it’s a different stage. But you have to teach your children, so they will have ability to distinguish between right and wrong. If you don’t (chuckles) if you don’t punish your children, if you don’t reward your children I think it’s hard for them to go to the right side

The idea of the tour guide and giving children more freedom were values that were expressed by the young parents in Swader and Yuan’s (2010) study. Sean and Sonny do insist on the importance of being a good example during the younger years in order to instill in their children a proper moral compass. They also mention the importance of punishments and rewards in order to motivate them properly. Except for the depreciation of filial piety, their answer doesn’t depart significantly from those of traditional parents. I wanted to dig a little deeper in their personal values so I asked them if they would want to raise their children the same ways as their parents. To this Sean replied that he wanted to keep some traditions, and change some things. He wanted to transfer the value and importance of working hard to support yourself and your family for example. He also shared:

S. I think the study weight and the ability to study is not the only way to be the successful and happy man, or happy child. I think they need to choose and follow themselves. Yes, because I will be just a parent, I’m not the owner of them. They need to be the owner of themselves. If you can take care of yourself you will have your family in the future

It is apparent that he still values collectivism but at the same time his answer witness of a value of independence. He does not want his social relations to be the same towards his children as the one he had to his parents. I find it reasonable to assume



that he thought of his study weight as too heavy and that it made him unhappy. It is apparent that he believes that there are more ways to become happy and successful than through education. He has been diversifying the single path and accepted more ways to be successful. In this he believes himself different from his own parents. It seems like he felt “owned” or at least too intertwined with his parents growing up and this is something that he wants to change. Later he said:

S. I had a hard time in my high school because (laughs) my parents have this, have argument between the economic, because the problem of using money (laughs) and when arguing the children will be affected [...]

I think I need to learn how to manage the money. It's the top priority. So I really need to work and to team up with my wife and my children. Everyone has to work. I think it's a good way to cultivate responsibility. I think responsibility is essential for every family member.

[...]

S. In Taiwan, many children don't have the ability to work, so they are dependent on their parent. They are too economically dependent so they are limited (laughs) They are limited in doing what they like and cultivating their interest. Plus, after growing up, I realized that every penny my parents earn is precious. It takes them every effort to do this, to provide a good quality for us. I really appreciate this.

The arguing of his parents seems to have affected Sean deeply. He even suffered in school because of the environment at home. I believe this to be the reason why he, just as some of Swader and Yuan's (2010) parents, said that money is a top priority for him. By making sure that money is not an issue, his children will not have the same distressful experience. This is his motivation for working hard, and this is something he wants to do together with his family as a team. He also brings up the importance of responsibility. As mentioned before, parents have tended to take away a lot of responsibilities from their children in order to help them focus solely on their studies. Previously it became clear that he wished that certain things, such as study weight would not be arranged and dictated by his parents. The same attitude was reflected in a story Ian had heard about a boy who committed suicide because he felt he was not allowed to be himself. Because he was not allowed to choose his own path in this life, he decided to try his luck in the next.

Sean adds another possible explanation for why children still follow their parent's arrangements even though they are diverged from their own. It does not necessarily have to be filial piety, it could also be for the simple reason that they would not be able to support themselves without their parents money; they are simply too economically dependent on their parents. After talking about things that he would have wanted differently within the family, he adds a comment of gratitude to his parents. This could however be considered as an expression of filial piety and saving face. By indirectly revealing faults he found in his parents he might have felt guilty and thus felt the need to also praise them and thus bringing back harmony to the relationship and more properly fulfill his filial piety. It would then also counter some of the self-inflicted damage on the "greater self" or face that he would have gotten by exploiting family issues to an acquaintance.

### **The Progressive Parent**

I never asked my informants about what they considered being a progressive parent. My understanding of what such a parent would be like is based on what my informants said about traditional parents and what they wished their parents would have done differently. I also based it – to some extent – on what they said about their own. Rick e.g. expressed that he wished that there had been a more positive and emotional interaction between him and his parents, and therefore I considered that a trait of a progressive parent.

In Swader and Yuan's (2010) research, the younger generation of fathers in Shanghai did not consider filial piety and moral education as important as the older. They claimed that they wanted their children to be able to discover and choose their own path as they grew up. In the previous section, Kitty expressed that she had experienced such an atmosphere growing up in Taiwan. She was not the only one.

Not planning every step and every part of their children's life seems to be an important part of being progressive, but they still have to work hard and provide a moral compass for their children.

Sarah described her parents as very non-traditional, accepting and open. Let us see what that kind of parenting entails:

S. For example, I'm born in a vegetarian family, they are really devoted Buddhists, so they want me to be vegan. But unfortunately (laughs) I'm really not a vegan person (laughs). So when I was a kid I remember they were really intense about this, they would always say something about what will happen to me if I am not vegan. The bad things that will happen to me in a religious way [...] I was kind of afraid because other kids don't really believe that, yes, but afterwards I'm just like "ok, I'm really not a vegan person". After I really showed my opinion they were like "ok" so now it's ok. Before when we gathered together, they always wanted to go to a vegan restaurant, because they wanted everything to be vegan. Now it's like "ok, which restaurant you wanna go? We'll just ask if they have any vegan meals so you can have your carnivore meal" (laughs)

In her case, her parents did not want to act controlling but wanted to let her choose her own path. This example however, can be interpreted in two ways. They found an indirect alternative way of trying to make her choose the life path they considered worthy pursuing. They did so by moral extortion instead of direct confrontation, by scaring her and insisting in questioning her certainness not to be vegan. What makes her parents different is that forbearance seems to trump filial piety for them. Instead of insisting their right and justifying themselves through their authoritarian vertical social relation, they choose to practice forbearance, and let her choose her own path in order to keep the familial harmony, even though she choose to live a life that was not in accordance with their religious practices. She mentions that her parents are devote Buddhists. This is why they do not approach parenting from a typical Confucian way. This example illustrate a big difference in the two systems

Sarah's parents became less eager in their efforts to make her change her mind as she grew older. Hanna shared a similar experience:

H. I have friend with traditional parents [...]I don't know why but when we were older, their parents just became less traditional [...] maybe the children had a fight with their parents and they told their parents what they really think is important, so after several fights the parents will understood and then gave some space to their children. [...] My parents were really open (laughs) so I had no need to fight, but my friends were having fights with their parents.

Again, controlling is almost equivalent to traditional for Hanna; controlling and closed. This strengthens the image of a progressive parent as someone open and not so controlling. Another aspect of a progressive parent is that they do not expect forbearance from their children. Even if they feel like they know better, they should let their children dictate the course of their life if they prove to them that it is what they really want to do, like in this case. They give in after a several fights and open disagreements if they feel like it is what their child really wants.

When I was reading what my informants had said about their own parents, this excerpt really stood out to me; especially the fact that Hanna said that her friend's mother *became* less traditional over time. All of my informants were in the "liminal" zone of becoming adults and had achieved some adulthood at least, by becoming university students and moving away from home. With this new adulthood, they were certainly to be treated differently by their parents. I do not find it extraordinary that parents would be more controlling over a teenager than a son or daughter living away from home studying at the university. Neither do I find it extraordinary that someone experiences their parents as more controlling when they are younger and find it to be a bigger issue. With that said, some parents never seem to let go of their children at all and some seem to never care. There is therefore still value in portraying particular parental control values.

### **Expressing Emotions**

When I asked some of my informants about their favorite thing about growing up in Taiwan, they answered: "that we can say what we want" or simply put, freedom of speech. They were comparing themselves with China where you have to be more careful with what you say and write in order to not rub certain people the wrong way. The Sun Flower Movement and the legalization of same-sex marriages this year, can be seen as direct results of people not being afraid of using this privilege in Taiwan. However, expressing your emotions is not always easy, and there is a difference in expressing emotions publically and privately. The questions in my interviews was mostly concerned that later of the two.

Most of the questions about expressing emotions were connected to their relationships with their parents. They would be asked questions about how often they heard their

parents praise them or express their love for them verbally or in other ways. These questions led into others, most often concerning if they felt it was easy to express their feelings to their parents and if they ever felt like it was a reciprocal exchange.

Expressing your feelings verbally to your parents, or having your parents express them to you, when not negative, didn't seem like a common thing amongst the students. I am not saying that they grew up in an expressionless deadpan milieu, because they did not, but the feelings that were most commonly connected to "expressing yourself" were negative ones. They mentioned how they would fight or argue often, sometimes even daily. Expressing positive, uplifting emotions, or talking about very personal problems or thoughts was not as common. For some it hardly happened at home. Only Ian said that his mom expressed her love and affection verbally to him on a regular basis. This happened more often after he started going to the university and moved away from home. Mothers seemed to have been more expressive in general. Ian's father expressed himself through actions rather than words, a pattern that was recognized throughout the interviews.

When I asked Nicky about how her father used to show her appreciation she just said: "Show me appreciation? He didn't really do that". Having a more emotionally distant or "silent" father was almost universal throughout my interviews. It could be seen as some kind of ideal masculinity in Taiwan. None of the male informants mentioned ever hearing their fathers talk about emotions openly.

The only father that did so without constraints seemed to have been Bonbon's. Her dad would actually come to her and talk about his personal feelings of inadequacy, because of not holding the position of household provider. In Bonbon's case, the mother was more stern and distant. According to the Confucian value of harmony, a family ought to have both roles. In their case, the mother was best suited for the leader role so it became hers.

## Parental Expressiveness

Many of the informants claimed that parents usually had trouble expressing their shyness, and that it is typical in Chinese culture. Others suggested that it might just be that it is more natural for them to show it through actions than words. According to Thea, cram school<sup>2</sup> and comparison were two ways through which traditional parents showed their love and appreciation for their children. Both are manifestations of Confucian values. The first one emphasizes education and the other self-cultivation through habituating the examples of others. When we were on the topic of parents and expressiveness she also said:

T. All the parents in the universe are generally like that. They don't want to talk about emotions. If you have a fight with your friend or boyfriend/girlfriend they will be like "ok, I don't want to talk about this"

For her it was so natural that her parents and the parents she knew just did not talk about these things that she took for granted that it was a universal behavior. But even in this small sample some of the other female informants said that they felt like they could talk about such things with their parents, at least with their mom.

A possible explanation to why they were reluctant to talk with their children about their feelings might be distance. In order to keep the verticality of the *social relation* between a child and its parent, distance is needed. You would talk about issues such as Thea's horizontally, with equals such as friends, and not within the core family as the roles are very hierarchal. This is probably one reason why the dad often was perceived as the most emotionally distant and the least expressive of the two parents. Another way of interpreting distance in this case is *actual* distance. You do not talk openly with someone that is not very close with you according to Confucian values, and getting close to someone requires spending time together, which is hard to do when everyone is working hard and the family members hardly see each other. This might be what Tess was referring to when she talked about a typical Chinese shyness. A related reason to this is lack of practice and know-how. If you have never really openly discussed and expressed your emotions before, it

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<sup>2</sup> Cram Schools are specialized schools where students go after the regular school day is over. The idea is to train you how to perform well on a specific test or to learn a specific skill. Cram Schools with a good reputation are usually very costly which makes it harder for parents with a narrow economy to afford to send their children there. In some ways they can be said to increase the gap of equal chance to social mobility.

probably would feel even more awkward and uncomfortable than when you are used to it.

Rick had grown up outside of Taizhong, in a more rural part of Taiwan. None of his parents had any higher education but he described them as really hard working. He described the frustration he felt when he went home and all that his parents would talk about was very local news or other things he found trivial. According to Rick, their world was really small, and he expressed an envy of his classmates' family situations. In their homes they would sometimes talk about love and sadness, but that never happened in his family. Because of his skill and diligence, he had always gone to the best school and many of the students that he had met and made friends with, came from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Some of the attitudes that he saw there were probably more "progressive" than those of his own family. Tess's parents e.g. could be an example of what I mean with "progressive". She felt like she could ask her father and that he would tell, but none of the informants – except Ian – seem to have heard praise or verbally expressed love very often. Rick however, did not doubt the fact that his parents really loved him and cared about him. He shared others' view that they were more expressive through actions rather than with words:

R. The deal was that if I can attend this university, the very best university in Taiwan, I can go to Romania. But in the end, before the grades come out, my Father said "I saw you were so hard working every day and night so the result won't matter, I will support you to go to Romania"...So, you know, only something like this will make me feel that I'm very lucky in this family. But you know in the daily life they are just very plain.

His parents were less open with their feelings in general than "progressive parents". His father's act of love could be seen as a confirmation, approval and reward for Rick's success in mirroring his good example of working hard.

## Filial Expressiveness

Yuan told me that he and his brother only felt like they could express their emotions to their mom, because “she is so tender and she really take good care of us”. It was hard for them to use words like “I love you” so they would write it on a card on mother’s day instead. Most of the informants answered that it was easier to express negative emotions to their parents than positive.

Sean and Sonny brought up embarrassment as a reason for not talking about emotions such as love or affection. They were embarrassed themselves to do so. Damien expressed the exact same thing. Most of the female informants felt like they could talk about many things, especially with the mother, but did not very often express their love or appreciation through words. Tess shared how she used to just bring home her father’s favorite snack and leave it on the kitchen table so that he would see it when he got home.

Most of the informants were also physically closer to their mothers. Kitty mentioned a “thing that we do here in Taiwan”. She then showed it to me by cuddling up against Bonbon’s arm and infantilized her voice and started making demands. She said it was either done in order to actually get something out of their parents or just to show affection. I sometimes heard how my female friends applied this behavior when talking with their fathers on the phone.

Almost all of them had an easier time talking to their mother. This was probably because she was closer, and not so distant in the vertical family hierarchy. In Kittys’ case, she would talk about certain things with her father and others with her mother, but she was encouraged by her mother not to disturb her father with trivialities from her personal life, Sarah received the same exhortation from her mother. This is a traditional standpoint. In Kitty’s family, the mother was actually making more money than the father, and technically, *she* should have been the one that should have been left alone in order to better focus on her job. I believe that the reason why “Kitty’s mother did not see it this way is because she valued and wanted to uphold the traditional parental roles



Some of the informants expressed how they often had experienced neglect from their parents when they had tried to share something personal. This, built up over time, resulted in an unwillingness to do so. They felt strongly that their parents really were not interested in what was going on in their emotional, or personal life, so they eventually stopped sharing it with their parents. The only time they experienced their parents to care was in a restrictive manner. It seems to have been quite a widespread practice to heavily dissuade dating before going to the University for example.

This pattern of disinterestedness followed by dissuasion is probably the foundation of Tzeng's (2001) "affectionless control" that her informants had experienced from their parents. It would easily enhance feelings of isolation and loneliness (Page et al. 2006). The experienced restriction or control from their parents, usually resulted in longer periods of fighting with them. Both male and female informants experienced this. A reason for these fights would e.g. be a disagreement in life path or career choice. Damien suffered from this, which led to a strain in his social relation to his parents. The resolves of these fights will be brought up in Part III

### **Horizontal Expressiveness**

Charles expressed how he thought that all the Taiwanese strictly live by ideas like "emotions are your own business" and "you should not bother others with it" and that even if you would be unhappy, you should save face and not show it. He also thought it was easier to talk about emotions when he was younger. When I asked him about what he thought had changed, he said that he felt more mature now, and that he learned how to deal with his emotions himself. Charles believed maturity and self-reliance to be reasons for not sharing emotions with others. Not having to rely or confide in others when it comes to your personal life could be seen as a kind of personal self-reliance, or a way of becoming more independent. You would not "be a bother" to anyone. Damien also expressed a wish not to bother his peers with his emotions. It was only male participants who explicitly did so.

They had probably been influenced by the "ideal masculinity" that they could observe in their fathers. When I asked Damien if he felt like he could express himself freely, he said:

D. I hold it inside until I get a chance to have someone listen to me. I had good friends that were willing to listen to me, both in junior high and senior high school. But sometimes, we just didn't meet or maybe we just didn't have time. In that case I couldn't talk about my feelings and things I would like to express, so I just hold it in

The group of friends seemed important when it came to expressing and sharing your emotions because of their horizontal social relation to the self. It is more horizontal than vertical, which makes it easier to open up and share due to the lack of hierarchy between the social relations. On a horizontal level, everybody can be considered equals. Kitty had mentioned that her father had a handful of close friends that he used to confide "those kinds of things" to. It seems like Damien had a similar group of friends growing up. The other informants had close friends too, that they could confide in and share things with. Hanna pointed out that it is really hard to make someone open up if you are not really close. Even if you want to help, and you see someone who does not look well, they might be reluctant to talk. Hanna said that she had had a few experiences in which she had confronted people and they slowly started to express themselves.

Expressing oneself was hardest for Damien when he felt much pressure from school. He and his friends knew how busy the others were trying to live up to all the expectations, and that sometimes led them to avoid talking to each other. Their most busy and stressful times were before the high school and university entry exams. This was probably the period when they needed to vent the most but could not or did not do so because they did not want to be a burden to someone else. We can thus see that the attitude of "not being a bother to someone" exists in non-familial social relations as well. Not wanting to be a bother could also be considered a masked way of saving personal face. Hanna shared how a few of her male friends did not want to go and seek help from their friends nor from professionals for their depressions. They were afraid to lose face and of what the others and their family would think of them when they did.

Lastly I want bring up something that Kitty and Bonbon termed pretentious politeness. They claimed it to be very widespread in Taiwan but I did not inquire about it from my other informants. They described it as when you say “it’s ok, it’s fine but you really don’t think so” and then they would gossip about it. For me, it first sounded like something that is widespread in my home country Sweden as well. I could picture myself doing that exact thing in some situation in order to prevent an awkward situation or unnecessary conflict. I do however believe that it might be more extreme in a society where saving face and keeping harmony throughout your social relations are historically very important values.

## 5. Part III – The Aporias of Taiwanese Self-Cultivation

### “Whosoever will lose his life shall find it”

The title of this section a paraphrased passage from the Bible<sup>3</sup>. It is one of the great paradoxes within the teachings of Jesus Christ and was observed literally by many of the early practitioners of Christianity, who more than willingly became martyrs in the name of their faith and their God (Eusebios 1683). By so doing, they secured salvation in the life to come, or as they saw it, their eternal life.

In traditional Confucianism, there is a similar thought. It can be understood through the dynamism between self-cultivation, forbearance and filial piety. In order to cultivate yourself fully, you have to willingly subdue your own will in order to follow the directives and dictations of your superiors. In Christianity, the superior would be God and his representatives but in traditional China, it would rather be the elders of your family or the government officials. This section will bring up the aporia of realizing yourself through self-sacrifice and how it was experienced by the transitional Taiwanese generation.

There seems to have been a consensus amongst my informants on what it means to be successful in life growing up. They were greatly encouraged to let almost all of their life circulate around one thing, to follow the single path and get into a prestigious university. There were a few cases when the mothers would ask the informants to remember to take a break every now and then, and not work too hard, but in those cases their kids were already top-performers. I mentioned Nicky previously, and how she was bullied in school because of her poor performance amongst other things. Her dad’s reaction when she told him about it was to blame her for not getting higher grades, telling her it was her own fault that she was bullied. It became quite apparent in the “punishment” section, that the informants could be punished – sometimes even physically – if their grades did not live up to the expectations of their parents.

Bregnbæk (2016:41-42) mentions a tragic event that made national news in China in 2001. The mother of Xu-Li expected him to go to a top university in Beijing but Xu-Li, albeit a good student, was never considered the top of his class. His mother abused

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:25 “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it”

him repeatedly and threatened to break his legs if he would not perform well enough on the university entry exams. At a certain point Xu-Li had enough and performed the ultimate Confucian atrocity and killed his own mother (ibid). I never heard about anything similar during my time in Taiwan but I know that other students suffered from far worse parental pressure than those I interviewed; mostly due to the fact that the majority of my informants were top-performers. I find the story about the boy who killed his mother to exemplify how singular and narrow the idea of a “good life” or a “good enough” life can be in a society resting on Confucian values. This was definitely something that all of my informants experienced. Rick talked about the experience like this:

R. I think that’s a very typical situation for Taiwanese student here. We are under a very single road, single path. It’s to get a good grade, go to good high school, go to university so you can get a good job. It’s like a very single path. Many people say that it’s very bad, and that we should change, but it’s very hard to change, you know, because our morals, our concepts and ideas, they are all affected by this idea.

So how was this narrow definition of what it means to live a good or the single path utilized in a Taiwanese context? Having it, seemed to have made the traits of working hard and being competitive peak. Almost every aspect of the lives of my informants (at least every aspect that mattered) had a strong competitive element and you were constantly comparing, or being compared by others.

The system pushes out role models and you were either made into the one that the others should look up to, or the deterring example. Almost all of my informants belonged to the prior group. But what was the price that had to be paid to be in this top category? Herein comes the aporia; in order to cultivate yourself, you had to practice a great deal of self-sacrifice; you had to “loose yourself” in order to fully realize yourself. That makes it fulfill the requirements of being a moral quandary with paradoxical internal contradictions.

## What Was “Lost” In Taiwan?

It is not easy to stay on top, especially not in such a competitive environment as Taiwan. What do you do when everyone around you is working hard? You work even harder. This is why there are cram schools. Damien explained that they are specialized in teaching you have to take test in specific subjects. He found it funny, because he did not understand why there should be a need for it, if the teachers did their job properly. I believe that the most enticing aspect of sending children to a cram school initially, was to give them an opportunity to be ahead, but for my informants, it was rather a question of not getting behind because almost every other student went. Some of them did not go, but in their cases, their parents did not mind as long as their scores were good. This was the exception of the rule.

Going to school and then attending a cram school afterwards is time consuming. There is not much time or energy to do anything else. The next excerpt is some of Thea reflections on the topic. I found it representative for many of the other informants’ experiences:

T. I feel like the education has got a lot to be improved [...] We have exams and so many assignments every day so we don’t have so much time to do other activities, it’s really stressful. I feel like you don’t get to go really deep into the subjects you like because we cover so many [...] You don’t get to explore what you are interested in, so many people are in the university, studying a subject for three years and have almost graduated, but they still don’t know if they like the subject or what they want to do in the future. I think that it’s kind of a big problem

I want to highlight how she mentions that they did not have the time to go deep into any subject, as they had to cover such a vast range of subjects in a short period of time. Even if you would become interested in a subject, you would have to set it aside in order to learn enough about the next one to perform well on the test. She did not explicitly mention cram school here and I did not inquire about it from her, but the experience and the point is the same, she had no time for “other activities”. For her this meant giving up her interest in art. Her parents did not forbid her to practice it, but in order to keep up in school, she felt like she had to let go:

T.I didn’t get to cultivate my interest further and I didn’t continue this path. I got to learn other things and that is good but I think some people give up their talents or something they really like because of this kind of reason

For Damien, having to sacrifice his “other activities” was the reason behind the biggest rupture between him and his parents. He had been scouted by one of the nation’s leading ping pong coaches and was offered to be trained by him when he was in middle school. His parents declined the offer with the argument that their son should focus on his studies to get a more reliable income in the future. When he went to junior high school he was offered a spot in a team that were playing a computer game professionally. At that time his parents said that they would allow him to play if he got accepted to the most prestigious high school in the area. He worked hard and eventually got accepted, only to realize that his parents would not live up to their end of the promise. This put a wedge between them, a wedge that is partly there still.

Everyone has to make sacrifices and make hard choices in life. It is not always easy to choose between what is “good” and what is “best” or to even be able to determine which one is which. I want to acknowledge the universality of this problem. In Taiwan however, none of the students seemed to have really enjoyed the time period before university. When talking about it, they seemed more proud that they had been able to endure the stress and managed to work hard all the way; a behavior that could be seen as a success in applying forbearance. Their sole cultivation in life had been directed towards the university, even their club activities or afterschool “recreational activities” for some. If they could not be used for such purpose, many denied themselves the pleasure to cultivate and explore things that they enjoyed in order to be able to cultivate themselves into what really had been expected of them all of their life; to follow the single path. Being students at the NTU means that they have reached the pinnacle of cultivation, they should have reached the “good life”, but they did not necessarily feel that way. For some, studying at the university becomes the time when they finally start to make up for all the “lost time” of their school years. They start surrounding themselves in all kinds of “other activities” that they never had time to do before. Making friends and doing frivolous activities becomes their prior cultivation, and education almost becomes secondary. They start to diversify and challenge the single path.

Some students do not have this experience and cannot “relax” without feeling guilty and therefore they keep focusing on scores and results. To follow the single path of self-cultivation was something that had been expected of them by their parents, their

peers and society in general all of their life. One of the easiest ways to deal with the other's expectations seems to have been to make them into your own. Most my informants that were studying at NTU were all good examples of this principle. They gave up "other things" voluntarily, which made their lives less stressful, they experienced less pressure and felt freer. Ian and Sean found a way to legitimize their trivial activities by performing well in school, but the sacrifice in order to do so, was almost bigger than the reward for Sean and probably for many others too. Nicky was the example of someone who did the opposite throughout her life, and by so doing she was ostracized by her father and her peers.

David Pendry (2015), a social psychologist that had been active in Taiwan, conducted research on student wellbeing. He argued that the students appear to be lacking strong social connections with their peers even though they do participate in many activities at their school. He blames the lack of deeper social connections on the heavy workload and the frivolous nature of the social activities. This made him draw the conclusion that spending time doing such void and frivolous activities is contra productive because "then that person is traveling down a profligate path in life" (2015:5). Through the light of aporia and the single path, I rather seem these activities as necessities for the students to diversify what they have know to be the one way to live their life and be happy, as they start to realize that it not necessarily true for them.

I want to return to the "other activities". In *A Well-Intended Blunder* I brought up how the Ministry of education tried to tackle the problem of the Taiwanese youth not doing wholesome recreational activities, and how it backfired and created a new problem entirely. Going to a club was mandatory for the students and many just picked a club that they thought might be good for their educational advancement. On this topic, Sean said something that made a deep impression on me:

S. I think a lot of people, a lot of people like me in National Taiwan University, we have this problem that we don't find that we have other skills or other things that we are proud of



He explains a void that has come due to the fact that he mainly spent all of his efforts cultivating the ability to take tests well and perform well in school. It makes it harder to be proud of something that everyone else around you also master and making recreational activities a part of the single path, defeats the intended purpose of trying to decrease its influence and pressure.

Another aspect that I did not bring up was the prestige ascribed to certain of these “other activities”. A popular thing for parents to have their children do was to play piano or violin as an after school activity. Many of my informants had tried at least one of the two in their childhood. Other activities like playing computer games or playing some sport were usually not held in such a high regard. The informants’ parents tended to ask of them not to spend too much time on “such trivial activities”. Dating is another example of a trivial activity that was either forbidden or not recommended. Only Hanna was actually encouraged to date by her mother, because that was something that her mother really would have wanted to do growing up. She wished that she had “experimented a little more” in Hanna’s age. I want to add that Hanna’s dating did not affect her studies negatively, because she got accepted to NTU.

## Was I Really True to Myself?

“Was I really true to myself?” This seems to be a question that many of the Taiwanese students ask themselves when they reach University and reaches the liminal adulthood that it entails. Most of my informants did not enjoy the school years leading up to University. However, they diligently suffered through them, proved themselves, their parents and their peers that they were hardworking and focused their life around education, just like the ubiquitous teacher once suggested, and they earned a position at a top university to prove it. They made their greater self proud and improved the face of the family. They sacrificed some “other things” along the way with forbearance and now they are studying to get a degree in something that will end up giving them a fruitful career and a good bountiful life. Or is it really so?

During my interview with Johnny, he mentioned that he was gay. One of my first thoughts was how that would affect the face of his greater self or what his parents were thinking about it. He told me that he hadn't told them yet and probably was planning on brining it up when he reached his 30's. At that point he hoped to have landed a job that would make him economically independent if they would end up having a falling-out. I asked about if it was common that gay persons did not come out to their parents, and his answer was “definitely!”. He gave me the example that in his department at the NTU, he knew about 11 gay guys and only one of them had come out at home and two of them were leaving evidence like gay porn on their computers hoping that their parents would find out indirectly.

Growing up as gay in Taiwan, Johnny possessed two very conflicting ideals and had to choose in which direction he wanted to go. Initially he chose to cultivate himself towards the ideal that also was expected of him by others, the single path to self-cultivation, shared by all students. In it was most importantly a wish to succeed in life. He felt like he had seen enough examples of the bad consequences of choosing to live out one's homosexuality, and therefore he concluded that this was something that he would not do. He needed to sacrifice his sexuality in order to cultivate himself and follow the single path. He joined the Mormon church in order to “cure” or eliminate the conflicting and seemingly intrinsic ideal within him. That never happened. When

he started going to the university, he found himself in a completely different environment. He saw people around him “letting loose” their previously subdued ideals, and they seemed happy to do so. Some of his peers seemed to have a good life, even though they were openly gay for example. At this point in time, his idea of cultivation had also incorporated Mormon ideals, which made his struggle even harder. Not being able to live out his sexuality, denying such a big part of himself made him unhappy. After seeing enough examples of people who seemed to be happy and successful, he started to challenge his previous conclusion that homosexuality would make him an unhappy man in the end. He started to compromise with Confucian values, when he concluded that he would be happier to live with some degree of stigmatization and shame from others, than to deny his sexuality with forbearance, and ensure harmonious relationships within the family. That would have been the more Confucian thing to do.

Johnny is a good example that not everyone thinks of the university experience as a liberating time when they finally have time to live out their previously self-subdued inclinations. During this liminal phase, many students reach the peak of their Oedipal project. They are standing at the threshold between being totally dependent on others such as their parents, and more independently constructing and negotiating their social world (Brown [1959] 1989:118). The transition period can be a painful for both parents and children. In *Comparison and Competition* I brought up how it might be a dilemma for many to not be able to compare themselves with others as easily. Another aspect is that they might be hesitant to let go of the comfort and security of having everything planned out and taken care of for you (Bregnbæk 2016:38). I found this to be true for some of my informants. Rick just said this in passing during our interview:

R. I think before university I just knew that I have to study very hard and then I can go to good university and it's like, my life will be very good after that, yeah. But when I come here to this university, I found that things are not so easy as people said before

Other shared his feelings. During informal conversations Damien and I sometimes talked about similar issues and he mentioned something he called “the nihilist trend”. According to him, there is a current trend amongst Taiwanese youth that

reaches university to become nihilistic. After diligently walking the single path, they reach their goal, only to realize that there is no guarantee of the “good life” that everybody had been promising them. The labor market in Taiwan has not been able to follow the rapid change in society, so there are not enough jobs for qualified university graduates. What then, has all the sacrifices been for? I used a quote from Thea previously, where she said that people study things that they don’t even know if they like or not, and that it is a big problem. She blamed it on the fact that people do not explore what they like properly when they are young. Many of the people I talked to outside of the interviews did not really have a special connection to what they were studying. Some said that they just picked randomly from a list, or chose a program that was not so popular just in order to make it into the most prestigious school. My roommate during my exchange year was studying forestry and resource conservation. When I asked him if it was an interest in nature that brought him there he bluntly said “No, I just want an office job”. I interpret this as an actualization of forbearance. He was patiently doing something he did not particularly like, in order to arrive at his “good life” one day. The nihilist students are not as patient and hopeful as my old roommate was.

## The Aporia of A Collective Individual

Geert Hofstede, a social psychologist and author of the cultural dimension theory, has conducted acknowledged comprehensive studies on national values. According to Hofstede's Individualism-index, Taiwan should be considered a highly collectivistic society. He defines a collectivistic society as one in which "individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (URL 6). Even though anthropologists usually frown at such simplification of complex subjects, I found support for them within Confucian ethics. His description converges well with the Confucians value of filial piety and the deeply rooted idea that it is a child's reciprocal duty to care for its parents in order to pay back some of the sacrifice and hard work that its parents carried out for it. These were also values that I had found amongst my informants.

According to Wu (1992), the Confucian conceptualization of happiness is achieved through "knowledge, benevolence, and harmony of the group" (1992:31). These attributes are most commonly achieved through a self-cultivation and introspection, constantly improving and practicing virtues. These practices are essential to live a meaningful and ultimately a happy life (Lou & Jian Bin, 1997). In Taiwan, more specifically, researchers have shown that harmonious interpersonal relationships, achievements at work and contentment with life are essential sources for happiness (Lu & Shih, 1997). Self-cultivation and the idea of being happy, or as I see it, to live a good life by following the single path, seems to be a collectivistic enterprise. A very important aspect of being happy or living "a good life" inclines taking other people's wishes and thoughts into consideration.

During my interview with Kitty and Bonbon, Kitty indirectly started to talk about collectivism in Taiwan:

K. I think...the relationship between people is very close, and I think that's a really good thing about growing up in Taiwan. We are educated to be friendly, in a way. But it's kind of double-sided because sometimes we don't really think about ourselves, we think about others all the time [...] I think that's a characteristic you get if you grew up in Taiwan [...] We have learned much more and started questioning ourselves, questioning our past and we are trying to get better, make things change, so, that's good

Here, Kitty brings up the aporia that many might be facing and at the same time she is confirming what the previously mentioned researchers were suggesting. It is

important to think about others in Taiwan, so important in fact, that sometimes you forget to think about yourself. It is another aspect of “loosing yourself” in order to “find yourself”, or an expression of the oedipal project concerning autonomy and dependency. When I asked Kitty about what she considered being the worst or most difficult thing about growing up in Taiwan, she said:

K. I think it's exactly what I just said about thinking about others in our lives. We take it too seriously [...] I think it's because of the fact that we receive a lot of judgment and we receive a lot of pressure from other people, because there is an expectation of what you are supposed to do. So that's probably the worst thing about growing up in Taiwan.

To live up to others expectation easily then becomes *your* self-cultivation ideal. Usually, what others expect of you is to live according to the single path. When the ideal way of living is to live according to other people's desires and suggestions, knowing if you truly did something because of *you* or someone else becomes extremely difficult to untangle. For some it does not matter and they treat it as one and the same. They fully adapt the single path as their own and thus make other's expectations on them their own as well, but for others it is not so simple. They start asking themselves if the self-subdued parts that they sacrificed in order to have time to fulfill the single path were what *they* really wanted. Did they really sacrifice so much time and put down so much effort for them or for someone else? Was it really fulfilling and did it really make them happy? If the answer is “I don't know” or plainly “no” to these questions, they find themselves at a crossroad. This is an important contributor to that which makes the time as a university student turbulent and which makes many feel lost.

The resolve for many, is to try out many things, spend time doing “frivolous activities” and thus start creating their own path or at least diversifying the single one. Some leave the single path completely. Damien for example, was officially studying philosophy, but he had stopped taking his classes seriously. Instead he took both singing and guitar lessons and spent most of his time playing and writing music, dead set on pursuing a career as a musician. Even if his parents exhorted him not to, and his previous girlfriend's mother (who had been a professional musician before she got married) told him that he never would be good enough, he really feels strongly that becoming an artist is his vocation in life and that he is accountable to no one in

choosing his own path. His self-cultivation process is now completely constructed around this ideal.

Another resolve is to first realize that the single path was not one's personal path for self-cultivation, but rather something pursued for others. At this point, forbearance is no longer a personal value, but it still becomes the resolve that they choose, which makes some of them unhappy. When talking to my Taiwanese friends they sometimes mentioned that a lot of people end up with a job that they really do not like, but they suffer through it with forbearance anyway. They no longer feel like they cultivate themselves through forbearance, but rather they choose to live under the weight of forbearance in order to live up to the expectations of others.

Sometimes the suffering becomes too much, or they fail to live up to all of the expectations that they feel rest on them. Ian told me about a story that he had heard about someone having two doctors as parents that really pushed him hard to make him get into medical school. He had to retake the university entry exam three times in order to get in. During his first semester he committed suicide and his parents found a letter saying: "I've become a medical school student in this life and in the next life I don't want to be a medical school student, I want to be myself". Even if the story would not be true, it depicts the reality of some of the students. The story that Thea shared about a student at her school was similar and had a really tragic resolve.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have been trying to voice my informants as much as possible and highlight their experiences of growing up in Taiwan. I wanted to study the Taiwanese, to learn about their particular experiences and values and not go there to study and make conclusions about something more encompassing like “Chinese culture”. Even though some comparisons have been made with research conducted in China, my intention has been to highlight and make claims about the Taiwanese experience.

When I looked at Part I, it became evident that my informants had grown up in an environment fixated on academic performance. This is not hard to understand taking a Confucian point of view. Every time parents encouraged their children to do well on a test, they invited them to cultivate themselves morally and become the best version of themselves they could be; they would take one step closer to sagehood and benevolence. A life full of benevolence is a life full of harmonious social relations with your family, friends and with society. This desirous and bountiful life is reached through education and academic excellence, and thus academic excellence is in many ways equated with moral excellence. The importance of academic performance is so ubiquitous that it even encompasses the leisure time of the students. Those activities are being used as a measurement to evaluate their morality and their character in order to rank them appropriately. It seems like many have no other aspiration in life than walking down the single path. During their whole upbringing, it seems like they have been surrounded by systems and values that has been working to cement and reinforce this aspiration. These systems told them that as long as they walked along the single path, everything would be fine, but as soon as they deviated, they would suffer. They were openly praised and rewarded as long as they performed, they were given more freedom and trust as long as they performed, they were given gifts and perks as long as they performed and there was harmony at home as long as they performed. If they didn't perform however, their parents would punish them, sometimes even physically, they would be locked out, left out, made an example of or be completely ignored. My group of informants consisted mainly of elite students who had benefited from these systems and made it out on top. It seems like they either endured or endorsed the single path in order to do so in such a competitive environment as Taiwan.



Phong (2012) suggested that the Confucian ideal self-cultivation process is not an individual endeavor, neither is the single path. You cultivate yourself together and through others around you, aiming for harmonious relations with everyone and everything. In Part II I tried to observe some of the core relationships of the students. I wanted to see what kind of values they possessed but also how they positioned themselves in regards to the values of their parents. I found important to learn how they understood themselves in relationship to their parents and their peers, because it could be considered to help us understanding how they related to their self-cultivation.

My ethnographic material made it clear that none of the informants thought of it as good to have traditional parents. Traditional parents would force the single path on their children and not listen to them. None of the NTU students could relate to having these kinds of parents, but they all knew about someone else who suffered from it. They expressed that they grew up with relative freedom most of the time. I believe that they experienced this freedom and harmony at home because they were either enduring or endorsing the single path, thus living up to the expectations of their social role, and keeping harmony within the family. Being free from parental control was something that they expressed that they wanted. It was suggested that the parental social role towards their children should be negotiated into something like a tour guide, sharing advice and suggestions but not enforcing anything or expecting subjection.

Some of my informants told me about how they tried to share personal things with their parents but were neglected repeatedly. Especially the father seemed to have been distant for many. I assume that this could have been a way that the parents showed their children that they were not interested in personal things, and by so doing they would simultaneously showcase a behavior that they wished their children to mirror. Maybe some of the reluctance towards opening up comes from learning how sharing your emotions is something that other people do not want to listen to, and when you do, you feel like a bother.

In Part III I set out to expose the Aporias of the Taiwanese self-cultivation process. I found that one of their most prominent existential dilemmas spring from the aporia of having to loose oneself in the early years in order to become the ideal cultivated self of the single path. In order to become what they wanted (and what others expect them to as well) they had to stop doing things that they enjoyed and that they conflictly felt were important for their cultivation of themselves. They negotiated between different ideals and directions of their self-cultivation and tended to choose that which they felt corresponding the most with the expectations of others during the early years i.e. the single path. When they reach the university, they seemed to have reevaluated their ideals and many chose to focus on the previously subdued ideals, as they felt that important parts of themselves were missing. They recognized this when they became surrounded by people who were diversifying the single path and seem to do so successfully. This is not the case for everybody, Some stayed on the single path even if they knew that it would not bring them fulfillment but rather self-denial, and they did so willingly, practicing forbearance. This could be a result of the importance and pressure of living for others. For these individuals, it might be so that they are so caught up in living for others that they cannot find time to live for themselves, or are afraid of the consequences of doing so.

It seems like they had to loose almost everything that was not directly associated with academic performance following the single path. A common strategy to deal with it amongst my informants was to self-subdue conflicting ideals within themselves and also making the single path into their own completely. However, many of the subdued ideals and inclinations were accepted and pursued during the liminal university period that they currently found themselves in. Even if the single path had become absolute in some peoples' life at that stage, those people would have been surrounded by others who actively were diversifying it.

For some, the questioning and diversification of the single path is harder than for others, and for some, realizing that that the single path is not what they actually want to follow, creates feelings of confusion and hopelessness. It seems like they choose to live their life according to forbearance as much as they possibly can, but some eventually get lost in the void of meaninglessness, and some choose to give up.

The single path more or less required of the students to give up most of the time they could have spent cultivating interests and discovering other aspects of themselves; defining individual aspects of themselves that they could have taken pride in. Many do not take the time and then, when they are almost “fully cultivated” they no longer know for what or for whom

I want return to my initial question, the one I asked myself in the beginning when faced with what I found to be puzzling facts about Taiwan and its people. What would it be like to grow up there? I do not claim to have found all the answers but I do suggest that I have found some. By looking at my ethnographic material, and being around the Taiwanese elite students, it become evident to me that they all have to face the single path in their lives. Not all of them choose to pursue it, which might lead to unwanted consequences, but its presence is as ubiquitous as the teachings of The Master himself. Many of the aspects of the single path, are based on Confucian values and the path is in many ways cemented and reinforced through moral exhortation. Growing up in Taiwan would then suggest being told that there is one way to actualize or cultivate yourself and ultimately one way to be successful and happy. Being faced with this, they would have to choose one of the following: (1) embrace it, (2) endure through it or (3) reject it. Looking back at how they experienced their upbringing and where they ended up I would suggest that my informants mostly did number one and two. Nicky is an example of someone who chosen number three early and she was ostracized by her father and her peers because of it. Others, such as Rick and Kitty, embraced it and willingly made their life all about academic performance and therefore seemed to have enjoyed it more. However, when the elite students reached the university, many seemed to have reevaluated their early choice and ended up with an aporia. The university seemed to be a place where many students really started to negotiate with and diversify the single path.

The last thing I want bring up is the part of the oedipal project that is going from dependent to autonomous. As they grew up, they became more independent. The university could be considered a token of their emancipation in many ways, and when the students became emancipated from their parents, their self-cultivation naturally becomes a more individual affair. I believe that when you are standing on your own

feet, it becomes more important to answer the question of why you are doing what you do, and to make sure that your wishes, hopes and dreams are truly yours. Even if you choose the path of forbearance, you would have to remind yourself that it is what you really want, because no matter how self-sacrifice-oriented your self-cultivation might be, the core is always you, and your subjective feeling of happiness and fulfillment.

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