

Cultural Lessons Learned
When a U.S.-Trained Chinese Professor Meets
Home-Grown Chinese Pre/In-Service Teachers
in a Hong Kong Teacher Education Classroom

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Introduction

As more and more Chinese students go all over the world to study at varied levels, how Chinese students fare during learning and living in foreign countries as compared to other international students has recently become a hot topic. Much research has been done, albeit no consensus reached so far, to hopefully identify some culturally-bound differences between Asian/Chinese students and students in other countries regarding motivation to learn abroad (Dimmock & Leong, 2010), learning engagement (Sakurai et. al., 2016; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini 2005), cultural adjustment, social interaction, language use and academic outcomes (Tian & Lowe, 2009; Gu et. al., 2010), and/or new pedagogical practices, self-perceptions of learning practices, and satisfaction with their studies (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007). These research projects, using surveys and/or interviews, examine primarily students' knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and values about the varied dimensions related to their learning and living in a cross-cultural and international context.

Regarding the growing population of mainland Chinese students and pre/in-service teachers studying in Hong Kong, research has been done to explore their motives and future intentions (Cheung & Yuen,

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2016; Gao & Trent, 2009; Gao, 2008), cultural adjustment, commitment, and identity formation and negotiation (Gu 2011; Gu & Lai, 2012; Trent & DeCoursey, 2011). This article takes up a different object of examination and with a Foucauldian discourse perspective. It reflects upon the author's own pedagogical experiences as a U.S.-trained Chinese repatriate professor with some homegrown mainland Chinese pre/in-service teachers in a Hong Kong university teacher education program. By surveying and reading into the students' interview texts through a discourse perspective, it unpacks some shared Chinese historical-cultural-educational styles of reasoning as "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1973) that make it possible for the students to think as they do and not otherwise. In other words, not merely examining what the students say and how they say it, it treats their discourses as traces of historical-cultural styles of reasoning and explores how it is culturally possible for them to say what they say. This is what Foucault means by the history of the present.

Then what is special about the pedagogical interaction between the mainland Chinese in/pre-service teachers and the author in a Hong Kong classroom? Trained at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a critical curriculum scholar, the author highly endorses and has implemented a student-centered research-based project-learning pedagogy with the homegrown mainland Chinese students who have been used to a predominant spoon-feeding pedagogy from K-College. One key element of that pedagogy is for students to do peer presentations in class, hoping to create an engaging learning community for all. An interesting phenomenon occurred: while the students warmly welcomed the idea of project-based learning, they seemed to always hold a nonchalant attitude to all their peers' presentations. Nonchalant in a double sense of seldom looking at the presenters and rarely posing interactive questions. In other words, the intended goal of creating an interactive learning community through peer presentations was not fulfilled. In-depth individual interviews were conducted afterwards and a close analysis of their discourses finds some interesting Chinese historical-cultural-educational styles of reasoning shared among the students that help to account for students' seemingly nonchalant engagement, whether cognitive, behavioral, or emotional. Before unpacking these styles of reasoning, let's give a brief introduction of this Hong Kong university teacher education program, its appeal to (these) mainland Chinese students, and my project-learning pedagogy.

Teacher-Education Program & Project-Learning Pedagogy

Teacher education is a hot field in Hong Kong and local universities

offer one-year coursework Master of Education degree program to hopefully enhance the professional development of knowledge and skills of mostly local in-service teachers (Cheung & Yuen, 2016). Starting from 2012, the particular university teacher education program (this article examines) began to enroll students from mainland China and has achieved respectable success. The number and quality of applicants from mainland China has tremendously increased over the past few years, yet the overall number of admitted mainland Chinese students remains around 40s to ensure the program quality. In the past four years, over 100 mainland Chinese students have graduated from this program after completing the required 30-credit coursework on either general stream or specific major streams.

For the 2015-16 academic year, the author taught two courses for this Master of Education program with 24 and 29 registered students respectively. For the 24-student course, 12 are from mainland China, all female and the other 12 are local in-service teachers. For the 29-student course, 24 are from mainland China with one male student, and the other five are local in-service teachers. All the 12 mainland Chinese students enrolled in the first semester course took the 29-student course in the second semester. Since I adopted a similar student-centered research-based project-learning pedagogy for both courses, these 12 students became quite familiar with this pedagogy at the end of one year's study. (My interviews didn't include the other 12 mainland Chinese students who only enrolled in my second semester course.) As all the mainland Chinese pre/in-service teachers grew up with a spoon-feeding pedagogy, they hadn't done much project work in their K-College life.

I adopted a research-based project-learning pedagogy hoping to maximize their individual learning experiences and also creating an engaging learning community. Project-based learning is built upon a constructivist viewpoint that students learn better with greater autonomy in constructing their own understanding of the things learned. With that, I helped each student in finding a research topic they were interested and wanted to explore further, and provided them with some reading materials and guidance in terms of the design of the project, the research questions, and data analysis. I asked them to present their research findings in class for peer feedback which would help them with their final paper writing.

Throughout the year, I noticed that while the students warmly welcomed the idea of project-learning pedagogy, they didn't seem to engage much with their peer presentations in class. Through office hour chats with some of them, I discerned a more cultural than personal style of reasoning behind their seeming nonchalance of not having eye contact

with peer presenters or posting interactive questions. Intrigued, I sought the research ethic approval, and invited two out of the 12 students, two outgoing students who know the rest 10 pretty well, to do individual peer interviews for me in June 2016 for two reasons. First, the students then already turned in their assignments yet I haven't done the grading so my interviewing them myself would possibly jeopardize their final grades. The interviews were done on a voluntary basis and all the students signed a consent form and were told that I won't read their interviews till after the final grades are submitted. Second, students know each other better and would feel more comfortable sharing ideas with each other.

I discussed with the two student interviewers and we came up with the below guiding interview questions: (1) What is your learning or working background and why did you choose this particular teacher education program? (2) How did you like or not the project-based learning pedagogy? (3) We noticed that some students didn't look up at the presenters nor pose any interactive questions during the peer presentations. How did you respond in class and why? (4) How can we better engage students with peer presentations? All the interviews were done in Mandarin Chinese and each interview last for about 1-1.5 hours long. The two student interviewers helped transcribe all the interviews anonymously and I didn't read them till after I submitted my final grading.

A Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis

My research is to explore why students generally show a nonchalant attitude toward peer presentations. Specifically, what could be the cultural "conditions of possibility" (Foucault, 1973) that make it possible for the students to behave as they do and not otherwise. To that end, I surveyed and read into the students' interview texts through a critical discourse perspective, with discourse here treated as linguistic traces embodying cultural styles of reasoning. That is, instead of reading the interviews to understand their semantic meaning, I hermeneutically read into these discourses to scrutinize their form and structure, to render visible their presuppositions, and to under-go with their reasoning movement. Put differently, instead of seeking a semantic meaning of discursive expressions, I unpacked a style of reasoning of what was said with-in the discourses.

On an operational level, a Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is employed to analyze the "text" data at textual, inter-textual, and con-textual levels respectively (Fairclough, 2001). A textual-level analysis is to uncover the important themes and discursive strategies

related to individual ways of reasoning, whereas an inter-textual analysis is used to uncover the shared cultural-educational styles of reasoning. Finally, a con-textual analysis is used to further analyze the shared educational styles of reasoning in relation to certain social, historical, and cultural contexts.

The interview texts are very informative, and with a detailed multi-leveled discourse analysis, they manifest a shared historical-cultural-educational, rather than idiosyncratic, style of reasoning that expresses itself as a mentality of not wanting to be different from others. Intersecting education, culture, and society, this mentality foregrounds Confucian themes of golden means and shame as cultural technologies of governance that order students' educational reasoning and conduct in modern China, to be mapped out as below. Let's first look at a pragmatic "gold-coating" mentality that brought the mainland Chinese pre/in-service teachers to this one-year HK teacher-education program.

Coming to Hong Kong for a Better Career Development: "Gold-Coating"

Mainland Chinese students go to study abroad for a variety of reasons and motives just as all international students do. For example, Dimmock and Leong (2010) proposes a theory of "selective pragmatism" in mapping out why some mainland Chinese students select to study in Singapore and how they navigate their decisions around personal, societal, and international factors. With this theory, they classify the Chinese student subjects in Singapore universities as the "intellectuals" fundamentally motivated to study at prestigious world-class universities, the "opportunists" dependent upon funding and career development opportunities, and the "loyalists" with an enduring aim to serve the Mainland. Examining the motives and the future career intentions, Cheung and Yuen (2016) find mainland Chinese pre/in-service teachers come to Hong Kong also as "settlers" apart from the above three categories, planning to settle down in Hong Kong.

Such a pragmatic priority is also embodied by the 12 and all female mainland Chinese student subjects for my project, among whom only three did an undergraduate major in education, seven in English (three with 1-year, one with 3-year, and one with 5-year English teaching experiences), one in teaching Chinese to foreigners, and one in history. Except the five English majors, all the rest are fresh college graduates with no teaching experience at all. When asked why they chose this particular teacher-education program in Hong Kong, pragmatic career development is the first choice, plus "convenient geographical location," "cheaper tu-

ition,” “shorter time period” (one year compared to 3-year master-degree program in mainland China), and “good reputation of this university in mainland China.” They are more of opportunists than intellectuals, as it is only a one-year coursework, not research, program. They believed that with this one-year master-program experience in Hong Kong, they would find a better job after a year.

Their belief is justified in two senses. First relates to the factual “lack of an English environment and internationalization in universities in mainland China” (Cheung & Yuen, 2016). Second relates to a Chinese societal common sense, which generally “places a lower value on its own mainland universities in comparison with overseas counterparts, with the exception of its own few elite and top ones” (Dimmock & Leong, 2010). Yet, students from the elite and top universities often pursue further studies abroad with the U.S., Japan, the UK, Australia, and Germany being the most popular destinations over the past few decades. Currently, approximately 400,000 mainland Chinese students are studying abroad (Institute of International Education, 2014).

Such a societal and cultural common sense is expressed in the way college graduates from local and international universities are called, the former derogatorily as *Tu Bie* (ground turtle with a very limited horizon) whereas the latter favorably as *Hai Gui* (returning overseas turtle who has seen and learned a lot). Henceforth, to Chinese people, going abroad and returning marks a status upgrade, a “gold-coating” which carries pride, prestige, and honor for the students and their families (Dimmock & Leong, 2010). Such a colonial mentality of *admiring the foreign blindly* that had its heyday in late 19th and early 20th century is still visible in current China. Even though it is becoming more and more difficult for average *Hai Guis* to get good job offers when they return to China, such a gold-coating mentality still holds sway and going abroad is believed to make one different from the homegrown counterparts.

Such a “gold-coating” mentality brought the 12 Chinese students to Hong Kong, albeit the fact that most of them were not very clear about this teacher-training program itself and some applied through agency services, and this “gold-coating” experience in an internationalized learning environment indeed gains them a vantage point when hunting jobs back in mainland China upon their graduation.

Not Wanting to Be Different from Others: “Golden Means” + Shame

When asked how they responded to peer presentations themselves in class, most students admit they, not merely occasionally, didn’t look up

at the presenters or ask questions, even though most of them agree that eye contact symbolizes respect and not looking up at the presenters in class is a gesture of non-respect. While it does need pedagogical strategies to enhance the interactive engagement between peer presentations and listeners, what strikes out most is their shared reasoning on why preferring not to ask (peer presenters) questions in class in general. That is, *they don't want to be different from others*. This shared sense of “not wanting to be different from others” carries varied tones and textures that are historically, culturally, politically, and educationally entangled, embedded, and effectuated, pinpointing the way “difference” is understood in the Chinese culture. The *not-wanting-to-be-different* entanglement can be unpacked as follows.

First of all, an attitude or disposition of *not wanting to ask questions in class* is more of an educational habit or effect than of a born character trait. Only one student mentioned that it is part of her born character that she doesn't like to ask questions and she has seldom asked questions so far. Five students said they used to be very active in primary school classrooms, but later some unforgettable learning experiences turned them into *quiet* girls in class. Here are two stories:

In one high school class, the teacher liked to ask students to share ideas, but nobody raised his/her hands, and the teacher would wait and wait for students to do so. Feeling that was a waste of time, I raised my hands and shared my ideas. At that moment my classmates all glanced at me and later some gossip went around that *I like to show off and teachers only call on good students to answer questions*. Considering the fact that showoff students would usually be alienated from the bigger silent group, I no longer shared opinions in class and became a quiet student ever since. (Student 1)

I like to talk and even more so when I was a student. One learning experience in high school totally changed me into a girl that obediently complies with norms. In one literacy class, we were discussing one Chinese legend (*Peacock Flying Southeast*) wherewith the miserable heroine ended up literally hanging herself up on a tree. At that time, I thought the girl was so silly, so I blurted out in class: how could she take her own life like that?! My radical viewpoint surely shocked the teacher on the spot and all my classmates who felt that I wanted to say something *different* in order to catch their attention. So humiliated, I no longer spoke in class and became over conscious of peer evaluation ever since. (Student 9)

According to these two students, asking questions and/or sharing ideas in class is, in peers' eyes, a gesture of showoff, a way to attract teachers' attention, with a possible consequence of being alienated from

others. This is a concurred understanding and experience that the students had when they were middle-high schoolers, i.e., peer judgement and peer pressure largely constrains a teenager's being and living. Another student commented on one of her middle school classmates who liked to ask questions so much in class that he was given a nickname of Mr. Showoff. "Being different from others is often viewed as a showoff gesture, inviting a sense of envy from peers, not just peer students but also peer teachers" (Student 5).

Second, *not wanting to be different* is not just an educational experience and effect, it is historically-culturally-politically embedded and effectuated. In other words, culturally speaking, difference or being different in Chinese history more likely invites suppression and execution than recognition, praise, and support. "Being different from the majority" is often derogatorily called "yilei" (alien, weird, abnormal) (Students 3, 4, and 5), treated as potentially dangerous and revolting to the norm (Student 3), and henceforth "more likely to be suppressed, marginalized, and exterminated" (Students 3, 4, 5). Just as a cultural saying goes, "guns shoot tree-top birds" (Students 1 and 2), so people are often warned not to be on the tree top for the sake of safety, i.e., becoming apparently and uniquely *different* from the others in terms of how they look and what they say and do.

Underneath such discursive-cultural reasoning is a presupposition of difference as "confrontation, strife, disagreement, and revolt" (Student 3), to be exterminated if not assimilated by the normalized majority. To borrow Deleuze's thinking (1994), difference here is ordered against the sameness, the identity, as an effect of the latter, rather than as an ontogenetic differential that scatters through and preconditions identities in the first place. Such a common aversion mentality to *difference* or *being different* discourages a cultivation of individuality and creativity in schooling, whether consciously or unconsciously, just as the below student comments.

Our education system trains good-obedient, i.e., not-questioning, students. In class, teachers don't encourage students to express themselves or question others. Parents don't have a consciousness to guide and help their children to form their own opinions either, nor will they encourage the latter to have different opinions or discuss issues of equity and justice. Acculturated in such a cultural-societal-educational environment, children gradually lose their will or consciousness to express themselves before they know it. (Student 3)

Embedded within such a cultural context, learning in Chinese schools is mostly to listen to teachers' lecturing of knowledge points, and successful learning means to give *right*, not new, answers to standardized tests

(Student 10). In a word, Chinese students still like to be spoon-fed even though the government has been advocating constructive curriculum reform over the past few decades. A good teacher means someone who can give students the knowledge points very clearly such that students will understand them and do good in exams (Students 7 and 9). A good student is supposed to give *right* answers in class and giving *wrong* answers would be a big *shame* (Student 10).

Furthermore, with such a cultural understanding of difference as opposition, confrontation, and strife, asking peer presenters questions become a way of “challenging the correctness of their viewpoints, finding fault with their arguments, and embarrassing them in public,” and they don’t want to embarrass peers in public (Students 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, and 12). To the presenters, if the students would just listen and keep quiet, they would feel their presentations are correct with no big problems (Students 8 and 3). Being silent to peer presentations, albeit seemingly nonchalant, then means respect for the peers (Students 1 and 5). But if some students pose questions that the presenters can’t answer, then the presenters will think “why find fault with me? We don’t even know each other well” (Student 8). Most students agree that if they indeed have questions to ask peer presenters, they would prefer to ask after class.

Their word choices of “shame, embarrass, respect, find fault with” actually bring out the third well-known cultural theme, i.e., “golden means or walking middle way,” related to a mentality of not wanting to be different and not posing questions in public. “Walking the middle way” is claimed to be a safe survival and face-saving strategy in Chinese culture. Basically, walking the middle way would guarantee that “one is in the safe zone, find a sense of belonging, won’t become the focus of attention, and won’t be laughed at by others” (Students 1, 5, and 11). And being safe in Chinese schooling and means following the majority, a sense of conformity, not being different from the others, not being on the tree-top (Students 2, 3, 5, 11).

What is cross-culturally noteworthy about the students’ viewpoints *on not wanting to be different from others* is a cultural interlocking of not posing questions in public/class with a sense of shame or embarrassment in a double sense (Students 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 12). On one hand, posing a question which peers can’t answer would be a gesture of shaming or embarrassment to the latter. On the other hand, posing a question that would seem silly or foolish to peers would be a shame to the question-raiser him/herself. I am not saying that other cultures do not have a cultural sense of shame, but rather, the Chinese Confucian culture puts great weight on shame as a cultural technology of governance of self and others in a Foucauldian sense.

Foucault uses “technology of self” to describe “individuals effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves” (1988, p.18). In China, the Confucian accent on shame (*chi*), together with propriety (*li*), righteousness (*yi*), integrity (*lian*), has always played an important role in ordering the social conduct of conduct of and among people (Zhao, W., 2014). In other words, unlike Bjerg and Staunæs’s claim (2011) that governmentality can be united with a sense of shame along with the current affective turn, in Chinese thinking, there is no separation of the affective gesture from rational governmentality in the first place. Relating back to the students’ stories and viewpoints about shameful educational experiences of asking questions in class, it is worth noting that Chinese shame as a cultural technology of governance of self and others works in a way different from law. Specifically, unlike law governance, shame does not say that you are wrong, but you are shamed before others. In other words, social shame rests its judgment with what others say about your act, not your own principle. Social shame is a matter of losing one’s face and dignity.

To summarize, *not wanting to be different* is a complex acculturated and effectuated mentality which not only orders the way students, actually the majority Chinese, reason and conduct in schools but also in society. Among other factors, Confucian themes of walking the middle way as a safe survival strategy and of shame as a cultural technology of self and others are historical conditions of possibility that have enabled and delimited the current Chinese students to think as they do. It (re)produces the spoon-feeding pedagogy in Chinese schooling which in turn discourages students from expressing themselves and developing a critical thinking mentality. Then how is it possible to re-construct the legitimacy of a student-centered pedagogy with Chinese students?

Re-Constructing Student-Centered Pedagogy with Spoon-Fed Chinese Students

As explained above, my student-centered research-based project-learning pedagogy with the students was designed to hopefully create an engaging learning community and maximize students’ learning experiences. When asked how they like or not the research-based project learning, all of the students gave a positive response. Coming from pretty good universities in China, only a very few of them had some project presentation experiences from K-College because students usually don’t have much chance to present their viewpoints in Chinese classrooms (Student 5). Having been very accustomed to a spoon-fed pedagogy, they

all agree that project-based learning does mobilize their learning agency and autonomy, and also helps them develop basic research skills in selecting a research topic, doing literature review and data analysis, and presenting their research findings as well (Students 9, 11 and 12).

When asked how students can be better engaged during peer presentations in our courses, a shared suggestion that came up is to *grade* peer questioning, which is indeed pretty surprising to me as they are already post-graduate students. It is unanimously concurred that grading is the most effective factor to motivate, or rather force, them to learn even at a master-program level, which they illustrate with the example of another *successful* course instructor. One student, though, mentioned that whenever she saw the other teacher holding the grading sheet during peer discussion in class, she felt like learning is just for grades rather than for sharing and learning's own sake (Student 2). The concurred treatment of grading as the most motivating factor for their learning even at a master-program level is an expression of how deeply bound their mentality is to testing (and testing into a good college) as largely the sole purpose of learning in China. China has undergone waves of curriculum reform to hopefully revive its human-based humanistic education, however, unless the testing-driven educational system would be largely revamped, it would otherwise be hardly possible to humanize Chinese education in a real sense.

As a self-reflective case study on pedagogical experiment, this paper actually showcases and foregrounds a potential confrontation, discrepancy, and/or gap between cross-cultural pedagogical models and practices in the context of educational internationalization or international educational transfer. This confrontation speaks to a growing complaint voice in China that western introduced student-centered pedagogies don't actually work out in Chinese schooling and with Chinese students (Tan, 2015; Cai & Jin, 2010). One reason is that Chinese epistemological reasoning on teaching, learning, and teacher-learner engagement is culturally and categorically different from the Western counterparts. For example, Tan (2015) explains why teacher-centered pedagogy is historically-culturally preferred in China over the student-centered pedagogy.

The 2015 BBC coverage on the Bohunt Chinese School Experiment in UK also vividly shows a confrontation between a Chinese teacher spoon-feeding pedagogy and British students who are used to student-centered learning. Specifically, five teachers from China were invited to teach four weeks in UK using traditional Chinese teaching methods as an experimental Chinese school. Even though the Chinese school well outperformed its British counterparts in the exams of all the subjects taught, its didactic teaching, strict discipline in class, long school hours,

and rote-memorization were strongly resisted by the British students at least at the very beginning, incurring another wave of global discussion on the Chinese (Confucian) style of teaching and learning, and its apparent (in)compatibility with the Western students-centered pedagogy.

Foucault once said education can't change a society but can possibly change a person's style of reasoning. To me, to possibly change a person's style of reasoning is preconditioned upon revealing the legitimacy, presupposition, as well as limit of one's own reasoning. In other words, how is it possible for a person and a society at large to think as he/she does? This article, by unpacking the shared historical-cultural-educational styles of reasoning that legitimate and constrain the way the mainland Chinese pre/in-service teachers think, hopes to provide some implications for inter-nationalized or cross-cultural pedagogical engagement with (teacher) education programs in mainland China, Hong Kong, and beyond.

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