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References


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This is one of X commentaries on Wu’s ‘Interpretation, autonomy, and transformation: Chinese pedagogic discourse in a cross-cultural perspective’ (JCS, 43(5), 569–590). It highlights the paper’s demystification of Western pedagogic discourse and recovery of the meaning of Chinese traditional pedagogic discourse as a response to the long-lasting debates on the Chinese–Western/traditional–modern dichotomies seen in China’s modernization. However, the paper overlooks the complexity of Chinese pedagogic discourse: it over-emphasizes the formal or linguistic dimension of pedagogic discourse, and presumes the dichotomy of Chinese–Western discourses and the discontinuity of traditional–modern cultures. After elaborating the ends, substances, methods, and teacher roles found in Chinese pedagogic discourses, this study argues that contemporary pedagogic discourses are essentially inhabited in indigenous traditions, and actively entangled with Western discourse. The meaning of Confucian traditional pedagogy should not (and cannot) be ‘recovered’ from the past, but be ‘found’ in the present.

Keywords: Chinese–Western dichotomy; pedagogic discourse; tradition; traditional–modern discontinuity

After the breach with Chinese traditional culture and the disconnect with Western culture that were outcomes of the Cultural Revolution, China underwent a ‘cultural craze’ (文化热) in the 1980s and later a ‘national studies craze’ (国学热) (Tan 2008). These crazes reignited and revived the long-standing debates on the relation between Chinese traditions and Western cultures. The ongoing debates have led to a pervasive positioning against tradition, a taken-for-granted view that modernization is equivalent to the process of Westernization, and a repudiation and destruction of Chinese traditional cultures (Lin 1979, Gan 1986). Some radical anti-traditionalists, e.g. Chen (2004), have presumed that a Confucian-centred culture would be inferior to a Western culture characterized by the modern values—science, liberty, and democracy—and become an obstacle in China’s struggles for modernization. For them, tradition is something that must be thoroughly reconstructed, or even overhauled, in terms of its accommodation to the process of modernization.

This starting point has faced challenges from both traditionalists and modernists: Traditionalists reject it for its contempt for, or ignorance of, the fundamental functions of tradition. Modernists reject it for its failure to recognize the alternative paths towards modernization that might best fit the Confucianism-centred cultures of East Asia (cf. Lin 1979, Luo 1997, King 1999).

Because there is currently no consensus, Chinese scholars have been increasingly interested in rethinking the Chinese–Western/traditional–modern issue as it occurs in a variety of specific discursive fields such as politics, law, medicine, education, and so on. In his paper, Wu (2011) discusses the Chinese–Western/traditional–modern issue within Chinese pedagogic discourse. He makes a significant contribution to the contemporary debates as he recovers the meaning of the Confucian pedagogy as rooted in Chinese authentic language and he demystifies contemporary pedagogic discourse by underlining the Westernized language that pervades that discourse. He claims that the modern Chinese language has also been Westernized, not only in the new terms translated from the West and the syntactical structures appropriated from Western-derived grammars, but also in its ways of ‘doing things with words’. He suggests
that the Chinese people might not be aware of the hidden impact of Western discourse on the formation of Chinese pedagogic practices, and have normalized these practices as their own.

Wu (2011) is concerned that this lack of awareness can lead to a misconception of Chinese traditional pedagogy as inanimate and sterile, resulting in the dissolution of a genuine cultural diversity. He invites us to explore the vigorous and productive elements of traditional Confucian pedagogy and expose the deficits of a contemporary pedagogy that is alienated from its indigenous tradition and dominated by Western discourse.

The crux of the argument rests on his philosophical perspective on language. Wu (2011) attributes the modern shifts in Chinese pedagogic discourse to the transformation of the Chinese language system, a result of the ‘invasion’ of Western discourse that came with the advent of modernity. The rescue of education from the domination of Western discourse thus has to ‘find the Way back to an authentic language’ because the modern Chinese language ‘has already been hybridized and has lost this transparency and capacity of knowing’ (p. 585).

Plausibility issues aside, Wu’s (2011) paper demonstrates a serious concern about the contemporary meaning of a Chinese traditional discourse that has appeared to be supplanted by the Western-centred discourse of contemporary China. His analysis opens another door to understand the transformation of Chinese pedagogy in terms of the fundamental changes in the Chinese language since the advent of modernity.

It is obvious that Wu (2011) tends to reject anti-traditionalism. However, we must acknowledge that while his arguments for traditional pedagogic discourse appear to be persuasive, he overlooks the complexity of Chinese pedagogic discourse. He over-emphasizes the linguistic or formal explanations of both Confucian pedagogy and contemporary pedagogy, without seriously taking into account their divergences in ends, content, and mechanics. Wu presumes the dichotomy of Chinese–Western discourses and the discontinuity of traditional–modern cultures. This undermines the validity and plausibility of his argument.

To highlight the cultural impacts of the Chinese language on pedagogic discourse, Wu (2011) selects two pieces of so-called ‘classroom text’ for analysis. One is a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Tsze-kung from Analects (1:15), which is presented as an exemplar of traditional pedagogy. The other, an excerpt from a contemporary language-arts lesson, is taken as a case of contemporary pedagogy. In the light of Cazden’s (2001) framework, Wu finds the ‘transcripts’ exhibit divergences in their presuppositions around knowledge, learning, and teaching processes. Confucian pedagogy conceives knowledge as a situated intuitive insight, learning as a modification of self, and teaching as a heart-to-heart encounter. Contemporary pedagogy regards knowledge as a series of propositions about truth, learning as an assimilation of information, and teaching as an enunciation. From his philosophical perspective on language, Wu attempts to attribute these divergences to the differences between the traditional, or authentic, Chinese language and the modern language that is hybridized with Western discourse. Drawing on the ideas
of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, the Daoists, and so on, Wu highlights the metaphysical dimension of language. Yet his approach is a critical analysis of discourse which has to deal with the sociological or political aspects of language. However, we have doubts about the extent to which these pedagogic differences could be explained in terms of linguistic transformation. His analysis of these two pieces of ‘classroom’ text strips away their historical contexts in general and their educational circumstances in particular.

As Wu (2011) puts it, in Confucian pedagogy ‘the ultimate purpose for learning is to become a better polished person (Junzi)’ (p. 574). In other words, the end of teaching, whether ‘an encounter of interpretations’ or not, is to facilitate the passage of learners to becoming a Junzi (君子). Such a person will polish the internal character of Ren (仁; humanity or humaneness) and satisfy the external commandments of Li (礼; rites or propriety), i.e. a moral person who embodies Ren and Li (Cua 2003). ‘Ren can be construed as an ethical virtue, as the summation of all virtues, and as a universalizing capacity within nature—a realization of goodness’ (Shen 2003), while Li can be understood as the rites or rules with respect to the moral, political, and even religious daily life of ordinary people. In this sense, Junzi is essentially a moral construct rather than a propositional concept.

It is this end of the cultivation of a morally excellent person that defines what knowledge is to be learned or taught, and what pedagogy is to be implemented. To become a Junzi, one must acquire value-based knowledge about ethics or politics; fact-based knowledge about the physical world is less important, or even worthless. As a result, ethical or political knowledge is most significant in Confucian learning, a matter of action and practising rather than knowing and theorizing. A learner who has acquired morality should be judged not merely by what kind of morality he or she is able to articulate or justify, but more importantly, by whether he or she behaves in accordance with what he or she has known and chosen (cf. Scheffler 1960). In this sense, value-based knowledge is not taught by telling, informing, or indoctrinating. Confucius attached greater importance to students’ self-cultivation or introspection and the teacher’s function as a moral model and facilitator in the real worlds they encounter and live within (Xiao 2009).

Confucius’ pedagogy is mainly composed of individual face-to-face dialogues rather than a dialogue in an in-group. In most cases, these dialogues are initiated by his disciples rather than by Confucius himself, which is different from the dialogues between Socrates and Athenian youths in Plato’s works that usually begin with Socrates’ questions (Chen 2001). How does Confucius respond to his student’s questions? By enlightening or straightforwardly? It depends on his students’ psychological state, personality, and social background. For instance, Fen (愤) and Fei (悱), as Wu stresses in his paper, exhibit two different kinds of readiness that students have for learning. Even if the students ask the same question, Confucius usually gives different answers to different students according to their roles in society (cf. Analects 6: 22, 30, 12: 1–3, 22, 17: 6). It might be inferred that Chinese traditional knowledge is not confined
to explaining the outside world or to self-introspection, but is directed to personal or public behaviour or action.

In its relation with the end of cultivating a *Junzi* with moral or political knowledge, an individualized method of teaching was determined by the conditions of the times. In ancient times there were no textbooks available for students; the teaching process relied on the character of teachers. Confucius’ success in conducting dialogues with his students is the outcome of the knowledge they grasped, the insight they developed, and the pedagogy he adopted. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for him to teach students like Tsze-kung, both a political leader and a successful businessman. In fact, most of his students were adults with rich experiences and the potential to become *Junzi*, and even statesmen. As Aristotle (1975) says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> experience seems to contribute a little, for otherwise they would not have become statesmen with political familiarity alone; hence it seems that those who aim to know politics need also experience. (para 1181a)

The Confucian pedagogy is usually undertaken by a *special* teacher and a *special* student. In this sense, there must be questions about the extent to which Confucian pedagogy can be regarded as the typical pattern of Chinese traditional pedagogy.

Rather than cultivating the morally excellent person, contemporary pedagogy aims at fostering and training qualified citizens and experts who have mastered structured knowledge, specialized skills, and stereotypical attitudes. In such a context, as seen in Wu’s excerpt from a contemporary classroom, it is reasonable that Chinese teachers pay attention to structured knowledge about the grammar of the ancient Chinese language rather than lived experiences. What can be learned or taught in contemporary classrooms is primarily defined by unified curriculum standards, textbooks, and schedules, all far from the real life and real context. Meanwhile, contemporary pedagogy is different from Confucian pedagogy in its institutionalized structures. It is adapted to school systems with a division of grades and classes based on students’ abilities or tasks and where one teacher teaches a group of students simultaneously. The relationship between teacher and students has been transformed from one-to-one and face-to-face interaction to one-to-many and text-based instruction. It is

| Table 1. Confucian pedagogy and contemporary pedagogy. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Confucian pedagogy | Contemporary pedagogy |
| End | *Junzi* embodying *Ren* and *Li* | Qualified citizen/expert |
| Substance | Question-based | Fact/knowledge-based |
| | Manuscript-based | Textbook-based |
| | Lived experiences | Indirect experiences |
| Method | Face-to-face teaching | Classroom teaching |
| | Individualized/direct dialogue | Collective/indirect indoctrination |
| Teacher | Sage (Confucius) with classics | Teacher with specialized knowledge and expertise |
economically beneficial to teach a large group of students, but very difficult, if not impossible, to involve every student’s unique experiences and needs. The teacher in Wu’s excerpt sometimes faces an individual student and sometimes has to engage all students. Furthermore, current teacher education mainly focuses on the content of academic disciplines, with each teacher’s candidate specializing in the one or two school subjects he or she is going to teach—not a basis for teaching students from the perspective of rounded development. Table 1 makes clear the four principles of a Confucian pedagogy and contemporary pedagogy. The table does not seek to downplay Wu’s (2011) linguistic perspective but to offer a complementary framework for his comparison.

By making a sharp distinction between Confucian and contemporary pedagogy, Wu (2011) shows us how Chinese pedagogic discourses might be associated with Chinese linguistic transformations. However, as we have shown, this approach tends to be too simplistic: it overlooks the fundamental differences in ends, substances, and teacher roles between the two pedagogies. The approach’s problems result, at bottom, from the Chinese–Western dichotomy and the traditional–modern discontinuity that is Wu’s starting point.

In his paper, Wu (2011) also acknowledges that ‘contemporary Chinese pedagogy ... is the result of a cultural interaction embedding “modern” Western epistemology into a “traditional” Eastern framework’ (p. 571). This raises into view the complexity around contemporary Chinese pedagogy, a complexity that is not only rooted in Chinese traditions but also in reactions to Western cultures. In other words, Chinese traditional discourse is entangled with rather than replaced by Western discourse. Western discourse cannot be completely integrated and accommodated into the Chinese indigenous languages and cultures unless it is reinterpreted, modified, and transformed. For instance, Buddhism, Christianity, and even modern Western learning were historically reconciled with Confucianism when they entered into Chinese people’s social lives (King 1999). Furthermore, as we have mentioned, there has been a conception of modernization as complete westernization since the May Fourth Movement. However, this idea is believed to be impractical in scholarly circles and in social discourse.

Many cultural scholars tend to think that Chinese traditional cultures, if not obvious among elites, is found in the daily life of the ordinary people. For example, ‘guanxi’ ethics like Rqing (人情, feelings based on personal relationship) and a nostalgia stemming from Confucianism are still alive and well (Gan 2007). Other theorists of modernity also claim that the process of modernization is embedded within Chinese society and indigenous cultures—even if not totally different from the Western processes (Luo 1997, King 1999). If one takes these viewpoints seriously, it is necessary to locate the contemporary ‘classroom’ text—which Wu (2011) has mistaken as a paradigm of a contemporary pedagogy underlining Western discourse—within the social and cultural context of China in order to adequately interpret its meaning and significance.

Whatever stances are held, traditionalism or anti-traditionalism, modernism or post-modernism, the Chinese people inevitably have to confront
the issue of their indigenous traditions whenever they encounter Western discourse in the course of modernization. In what way shall we define a tradition? Does it only exist in the past, waiting for us to discover or recover it in the present? Or is it something originating in the past but continuing to exist in the present? Is it a pre-requisite or an obstacle for modernization?

In his fascinating book *Tradition*, Shils (1981) defines ‘tradition’ in its barest and most elementary sense as *a traditum*:

> [It] is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. ... The conception of tradition as here understood is silent about whether there is acceptable evidence for the truth of the tradition or whether the tradition is accepted without its validity having been established; the anonymity of its authors or creators or its contribution to named and identified persons likewise makes no difference as to whether it is a tradition. The decisive criterion is that, having been created though human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from generation to the next. (p. 12)

In this sense, tradition is something dwelling in rather than remote from our present life; it is not the past *per se* but *from* the past.

What can be regarded as a tradition does not depend on whether or not it is true, or whether it is created by the figures like Confucius or ‘ordinary’ people. There is no doubt that the Confucian pedagogy was produced by Confucius and practised in the past, but whether Confucian pedagogy can be construed as a pedagogic tradition depends on whether it has been handed down from the past to the present. In our view, Confucian pedagogy is a ‘traditional pedagogy’ which existed in the past, but is not necessarily a ‘pedagogic tradition’. Wu (2011) seems to equate tradition with elements of the past which are believed to be static and available for our discovery or recovery in the present. As Gan (1986) puts it, this stance is mistaken in its understanding of the concept of tradition: it has the negative consequence of weighing and framing the meaning of the present and/or the future in terms of the past, and confining us to the repetition of past lives.

Tradition is not only a link of the past, the present, and the future, but also a pre-condition under which we think, speak, communicate, and act. After his criticism of conceptions of tradition as an obstacle to social progress in the post-Enlightenment Romantic and Rationalist Europe, Gadamer (1975), the German philosopher of hermeneutics, wrote:

> Tradition is not simply a precondition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves. (p. 261)

We are unable to escape from the traditions we inhabit.

Whether we like it or not, tradition resides in our lives; it shapes who we are, what we do, and where we go. We are living in tradition, *with* tradition, and *through* tradition. Modernity is not the opposite of tradition but its offspring; there is no basis for a perceived discontinuity of tradition and modernity. It is then unjustified for Wu (2011) to suppose that contemporary pedagogic discourse has no traditional elements and that we
could in some way recover the meaning of Confucian pedagogic discourse by finding ‘the Way back to authentic language’ (p. 585).

As a matter of fact, even if we settle the Chinese–Western dichotomy and the traditional–modern discontinuity, we have still to figure out what traditions we are living with. Gan (2007) contends that there are three traditions permeating Chinese people’s lives: (a) Deng’s Tradition with its emphasis on market competition since the implementation of ‘Reform and Open Policy’; (b) Mao’s Tradition with its emphasis, since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, on equality; and (c) the Confucian Tradition underlining the social lives of the Chinese people. With reference to the continuous cultural debates we mentioned briefly earlier, we would claim that within the current movements of modernization and globalization, people in China have to deal with three cultural, or even political, forces: (a) orthodox Marxism (pertaining to Chinese socialism), (b) Chinese traditional cultures dominated by Confucianism, and (c) Western civilizations. Undoubtedly, Marxism is positioned as politically and culturally predominant, although most cultural debates about the general relationship between the Chinese and the Western emerge from an anxiety about Western domination as well as for the reconstruction of the national identity of Chinese people. We cannot really make sense of the complexity of contemporary pedagogic discourse if we focus only on the ‘hot’ debates on the general relationship between the Chinese and the Western without considering the roles of Marxism in our discursive practices. Marxism is a political and cultural mechanism which weights what is positive or negative, higher or lower in Chinese traditional cultures and Western discourses. Wu (2011) extracts only a very short text from the Chinese lesson in his paper for his special purpose, without reference to the political context in which the lesson was taught. Yet what is taught and how it is taught are not neutral and disinterested, but reflect the values and interests of the powerful (Young 1971).

In conclusion, it is enlightening to see an attempt to clarify Chinese pedagogic discourse from the philosophic perspective of language. However, it is insufficient to seek to understand the transformation of Chinese pedagogic discourse without regard to a context and the dialectical relationships of Chinese–Western or tradition–modernity. Contemporary pedagogic discourses are essentially inhabited in indigenous traditions, and actively entangled with Western discourse in the course of modernization as well as globalization. The meaning of Confucian traditional pedagogy should not (and could not) be ‘recovered’ from the past, but should be ‘found’ in the present.

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Notes

1. Wu mistakes Fen and Fei as metaphysical in comparison to Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics. They are psychological rather than ontological concepts because in this case language acts simply as a tool of expressing and interpreting rather than ‘the house of being’ (Heidegger 1971).

2. A nationwide anti-imperialist movement sparked by student demonstrations in Beijing on 4 May 1919. In a broad sense, the phrase covers the period from 1915–1921. It is also regarded as the Enlightenment in China.

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