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An inquiry into the delivering of a British curriculum in China

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Abstract

This paper reports a qualitative inquiry on teaching a British undergraduate management programme to Chinese students in China. The research objectives were to develop a deeper understanding of challenges students face in their academic learning within an English speaking and study environment, and to enhance organisational learning through developing practical pedagogical techniques to improve classroom interactions. A longitudinal participatory action research strategy was employed. The subjects were second and third year undergraduate students who were studying for dual-degrees in international tourism management at a Sino-Foreign educational institute. The inquiry found that various instructional techniques could help the students engage with fellow students and the lecturer in the classroom setting. We conclude that, in addition to linguistic factors, normative values of education in Chinese culture ought to be appreciated so that Chinese students' learning needs can be better served.

Keywords

international education, education philosophy, pedagogy, Confucianism, Chinese students.

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Introduction

The Chinese government has opened its education market and welcomes foreign universities to collaborate with Chinese universities to prepare its new generations (Mok 2005; Zhu and Lou 2011). Currently, there are over 730 Sino-Foreign educational projects, compared to only eight such projects approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Lu, Kang, and Yan 2013). Concerns have been raised by some Chinese academics (Lu et al. 2013) and Western educators (Woodrow 2001) about how international education should be implemented. However, little has been done to investigate operational issues in situ (Feng 2013). Thus, the present study initiates an exploration and debates on how to enhance the learning experiences of Chinese students undertaking a Western curriculum. The research has implications for international education.

Confucian Tradition in China

Over the centuries Confucianism in China has been developed and shaped by many Confucian thinkers, non-Confucian elements such as Daoism, Buddhism and contemporary socialist movements. Some initial Confucian values have been played down or modified to fit the modern Chinese social needs. For example, in ancient times, if the father requested the child to give up his/her life then he/she must follow the request. Such extreme form of respect for the senior generation is no longer practised nowadays. However, some other values are still deeply rooted in the society and function as moral rules guiding ordinary people's thoughts and behaviours. For example, *Lǐ* (e.g. the manner) between a student and his/her teacher remains to be a critical aspect in one's education whilst, under the influence of international education provisions in Mainland China and overseas, there is an increasing emphasis on individuality development in China's education. Indeed, as Ryan and Louie (2007) have pointed out, culture changes overtime, thus the validity of the dichotomy of 'Western' and 'Confucian' orientations in education is subject to debate and evolution.

Confucianism had been dominating Chinese education up till the foundation of the current socialist regime in 1949. Since then, education has been closely related to the political and social needs of the country. Education in China is deemed as the ‘cornerstone of the entire process’ of acceleration of ‘the socialist modernization’ (Gu 2010, 292). The first principle that underpins the formulation of the country’s National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020) is ‘adhering to the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics as the ideological foundation of the Guidelines’ (Gu *ibid*, 294). Onsman (2012) questioned, in the implementation of the China’s education reforms, whether the Communist philosophy overrode Confucianism? Or, would they complement each other?

Confucianism is said to have influence on executive autonomy and academic creativity, resulting in lower productive intellectual creativity than that of the USA (Marginson 2011). However, China has experienced the most dramatic increase in the Patent Co-operation Treaty applications from 10,000 in 1995 to over 960,000 in 2015 (WIPO 2016) - securing its leading position globally in terms of number of applications. Thus, this criticism of Confucianism is debatable, even if its influence at the macro policy level of education is not clear. Further, it is worth pointing out that moral education is given top priority in China, according to Gu (*ibid*), to educate young people to integrate the core value system of socialism. Thus, the intention to embed the government’s values in China’s education is evident. However, according to another research project that the first author is conducting (Li 2017), moral values appear to be tied up more with Confucianism at the individual level. Thus, the authors believe that the country’s socialist philosophy will inevitably continue to guide and drive education reforms; however it is not so clear where top-down macro policies meet and blend with bottom-up micro-level Confucian behaviours and how they influence each other.

Thus, the authors argue that if Confucianism is to have any impact at a macro policy level, such influence would be exercised through individuals' contributions in their everyday interactions with others and communities. Bruner (1996, 4) coined the culturalist theory of mind and argued that culture 'forms and makes possible the workings of [a] distinctively human mind'. Bruner maintained that learning and thinking had their dependency on the utilisation of cultural resources in a situated cultural setting. Bruner's views were well reflected in Li's (2003) study, who reported that learning was culturally conceptualised differently between Westerners and the Chinese. More specifically, the Chinese participants' perceptions of learning was heavily driven by Confucian values, such as the elements of heart and mind for wanting to learn, contribution to society, social and moral knowing. Confucius aimed to promote personal perfection for the good of the family and that of the society. State and society have no social value in autonomic groups, thus as Onsmann (2012, 170) has argued, '...[t]he notion of personal social responsibility consequently assumes different dimensions at different points along the individual-state continuum'.

In light of the argument, relevant defining beliefs of Confucianism are reviewed in the following sub-sections. In this paper, the focus is on the aspects of Confucianism commonly perceived to influence the performativity of learning and teaching in educational settings. By performativity we mean the conduct of Chinese students and their lecturers in educational interactions.

Lǐ (礼)

Lǐ can mean religious rituals, matters of etiquette and proper ethical behaviours in general (Van Norden & Bryan, 2002). It is concerned with norms of conduct that govern '...those in a higher and those in a lower position' (Legge 1960, 704). The Lǐ is deemed the foundation for an orderly society and the ideal basis for government (Shun 2002). In Confucius' time, the Lǐ required individuals to comply with the tradition of 'when your parents are alive, comply with

the rites in serving them; when they die, comply with the rites in burying them, comply with the rites in sacrificing to them' (Analects 2, 5, in Confucius [1979]). Confucius seemed to have an 'unremitting appeal' (Wilson, 2002, 98) to tradition that is characterised by respect for ancestors and sagehood. He advised one of his disciples 'Do not look at what is contrary to ritual, do not listen to what is contrary to ritual, do not speak what is contrary to ritual, and make no movement which is contrary to ritual' (Analects 12, 1, in Confucius [1993]). He could not accept his disciples' thoughts and actions that would diminish the traditions being passed on from bygone Sage Kings and ancestors. In contemporary Chinese society, 'Lǐ' can be used interchangeably with 'Lǐyí' (礼仪), meaning social distinctions and norms that regulate conduct appropriate to people by virtue of their positions in the society (Shun 2002). In that, the notion of reverence remains critical. Holding to the unity of the Lǐ (礼) is paramount. The young generations are told by the old generation to respect their parents, those who are senior and their teachers. Such Confucian values play a hidden and profound role in Chinese students' learning, which will be further elaborated on in the following sections.

The Lǐ between students and teachers is particularly relevant and interesting here. In the Confucian tradition the social position of the teachers is highly regarded. It is said that one should be respectful to your teacher as to your father, even if the teacher has taught you for only one day (Mencius 2005). What is more, to respect the father one should serve him by complying with the rites. If the father, or indeed mother, did something wrong, Confucius advised his disciples that they 'ought to dissuade them in the gentlest way' (Analects 4, 18, in Confucius [1979]). It is, however, not clear in the Analects what one ought to do to show one's respect to the teacher. Confucius was once questioned by Huan Tui, one of his disciples, who asked him how his views on ritual and virtue (dé [德]), which can be

explained as ‘moral force’ - charisma or a quality that one has over others that causes them to follow one’s lead, related to broader cosmological and metaphysical issues. Confucius responded to the threat by remarking ‘Heaven begat the power [dé 德] that is in me. What have I to fear from such a one as [Huan Tui]?’ (Analects 7, 22, in Confucius [1989]). On another occasion, a disciple asked Confucius for an explanation of the Ancestral Sacrifice. Confucius replied ‘I do not know. Anyone who knew the explanation could deal with all things under Heaven as easily as I lay this here’ (Analects 3, 11, in Confucius [1989]). Confucius saw himself as someone who was chosen by the Heaven to transmit (Csikszentmihalyi 2002), but did not innovate what had been invested in him. It is said that he has dismissed the threat by others to his position as the Master by remarking: ‘With King Wen dead, is not culture invested here in me? ... if Heaven does not intend this culture to be destroyed, then what can [those who threaten me] do?’ (Analects 9, 5, in Confucius [1979]).

Shim (2008) suggested that the ‘focus of Confucius’ teaching is to become a man of character rather than knowledge’, thus ‘... teachers should guide them in practicing good conduct in their relations with others’. According to Analects (1, 6, cited in Shim 2008), Confucius said to his disciples that one should try to emulate the ideal person, and that study is the last thing. For Confucius, the realisation of the ideal person is more important than having knowledge. In such a context, a teacher’s role is, or should be, to exemplify the good character to students. However, as recorded in Analects, when Confucius’ position as the Master was threatened by the disciples, Confucius turned to his faith that Heaven bestowed dé (德) in him for protection.

Four points have emerged from this discussion: First, there can be power struggle between teacher and his/her students; second, the directional Lǐ (禮) from student to teacher is respecting the teacher as one would do with one’s father; third, the directional Lǐ (禮) from

the teacher to the student should be to exemplify a good character; fourth, when dealing with the threats from the disciples, Confucius considered himself as the one chosen by the Heaven to transmit the knowledge (Dào [道] and Lǐ [理]). Indeed, Confucius was portrayed as a 'Heavenly teacher'. His compilation of the Spring and Autumn Annals was deemed as 'an exercise in recording the secret way of rulership, in effect an esoteric transmission, brought about in response to a sign from Heaven' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002, 140). It may not be Confucius' primary intention to transmit knowledge to his disciples, the authoritarian feature in knowledge possession is nevertheless noticeable.

Wù (悟)

It would be misleading to think that the authoritative teacher-student relationship would necessarily discourage individual reflections. It is quite the opposite in the Confucian tradition. Confucius advised his disciples to learn by keeping warm the old and appreciating the new (Van Norden and Bryan 2002) - a view still shared by present-day Chinese. Such practice is captured in the notion of Wù (悟), which, strictly speaking, is more about reflexive thinking than critical reflection. Confucian tradition gives great emphasis on Wù (悟) on the Dào (道), which involves routine reading and the memorising of past sayings and doings of the community. Confucian thinkers believed that if one could not even cite the old knowledge first, how could learning take place? Reading and memorising texts such as the Three Character Classic and the Analects were primary elements of one's learning in ancient Chinese societies. The former was used in Chinese primarily education for over 600 years (On 1996). It is evident in contemporary Chinese society that parents are proud if their toddlers can recite few lines of these classic poems. The latter was used in imperial examinations for selecting officials, from the Hàn dynasty (Csikszentmihalyi 2002) until the

latter part of the Qing dynasty. Memorisation of the past texts was considered as a significant part of learning in the Confucian tradition.

In Western cultures, memorisation is often equated with mechanical notions of rote learning (Marton, Dall'Alba and Kun 1996). However, this interpretation is not shared by many Chinese educators and learners (Li and Cutting 2011). The Confucian rationale of knowing is centred on the concept of Wù (悟): A new understanding comes from continuous pondering of the past. Ginsberg (1992) commented that Confucian heritage culture learners may be repetitive learners but there was no evidence suggesting that they rote learned any more than their Western counterparts. Biggs (1996) further argued that memorisation should not be equated with rote learning. On (1996) also supported the role of memorisation by arguing that it preceded understanding and that reciting, thinking and understanding reinforced one another, which is indeed fundamentally the essence of the Wù (悟) in Confucianism. In their study, Marton et al. (1996) discovered that memorisation, or repetition, and understanding were related and that this relationship presented itself within the memorisation process. Rote memorisation can be an element of deep learning (Entwistle and Entwistle 2003). Reflective and reflexive thinking is encouraged in Confucianism as a means to search the righteousness of human conduct and experience. The interplays between reciting, thinking and understanding are well captured in Chu's (1990, 138) words:

If we recite it then think it over, think it over then recite it, naturally it'll become meaningful to us. If we recite it but don't think over, we still won't appreciate its meaning. If we think it over but don't recite, even though we might understand it, our understanding will be precarious.

Collectivism

Confucianism shares some common ground with John Dewey's experiential pragmatic doctrine. Both Confucius and Dewey saw experience '...as the forge within which personal

and social change could be welded anew' (Grange 2006, 89). Beyond this, their views can be sharply contrasted through the lenses of individualism and collectivism. Dewey's doctrine gives more space to accommodate individual struggles in reflections and actions, thus to serve democracy within communities. Confucian thinking and subsequent corrections to actions serve the wholeness of social order, whereby individualised freedoms are most likely to be neglected (Grange 2006). This echoes Chang and Chu's (2002, cited in Onsman [2012]) finding that Confucian thought and democracy do not mix. Chinese culture is marked by collectivism and is centred on obedience and loyalty towards family and social groups, from which individuals derive their identities rather than own attributes (Hui 1988). Even achievement orientation in the Chinese cultural context is also based on collectivistic values rather than individualistic ones (Salili 1996). This has direct and/or indirect impact on the learning of the students from a Confucian cultural background.

Under the influence of collective-oriented Confucian philosophy, contemporary Chinese culture values, such as Chǐ (耻, shame or 'face disgrace'), impact on Chinese students' learning. The notion of face permeates every aspect of interpersonal relationships in Chinese collective culture, functioning at both the individual level and the person's family level (Ho 1981; Hu 1944). According to Hu (1944), face can be explained in two concepts, which are lian (face) and mianzi (image). The former is maintained by following societal norms whereas the latter is a person's reputation that is derived from success, such as being considered as a 'good' child. The value of face reflects '...the need to be respected by others and not be embarrassed in social interactions' (Hwang, Ang and Francesco 2002, 74). 'Good' children are judged by their obedience at home and in the schools. Scholars argue that the emphasis on conformity is not conducive to the development of creative and analytical thinking (Zheng 2010) and it discourages critical and argumentative discussions and joint construction of knowledge in class (Fung 2014).

Chinese students

From primary schools to Gao Kao, the national matriculation examination, to the completion of university studies, students in China tend to memorise learning content in order to pass examinations and have developed a different way of learning that is often not fully appreciated by educators in Western systems. Chinese students are described as passive-receptive learners (Turner 2006) e.g. reading and processing knowledge, responding to teacher direction obediently and so forth. The Western education, in general, promotes student-centred pedagogies that provide students with freedom and autonomy to pursue self-directed investigative learning. It encourages them to question the underlining assumptions (Shim 2008). It was reported that Chinese students underperformed relative to their international counterparts (Sun and Richardson 2012; Zhang and Watkins 2001). Chinese students are often 'unfairly pigeonholed into' the category of 'shallow learners' by Western lectures because they use different learning techniques compared to the Western students (McMahon 2011, 401). Indeed, Biggs (1996) pointed out that there was not sufficient evidence to suggest that Confucius heritage culture students did any more rote learning than the students in Western societies.

The context of the study

Located in the premises of Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (DUFE) in China, the Surrey International Institute (SII) is a Sino-Foreign Joint Cooperative School owned by DUFE, the Chinese partner, and the University of Surrey (UoS), the British partner. The Institute is jointly managed by both universities and is governed by a joint management committee and subordinate executive group committee. Membership is drawn from senior staff from both universities. The venture brings together different managerial and educational approaches, including expectations, and this necessitates an on-going professional dialogue within the aforementioned committees and operations. Many of the challenges faced by

competitor schools, as described by Li et al. (2014), Feng (2013) and Bolton and Nie (2010), are equally felt within the SII arrangements, though each educational ‘marriage’ will have its own features.

The Institution offers two business programmes, namely a BSc (Hons) Business Management (BM) and a BSc (Hons) International Tourism Management (ITM). Students enter the programmes on the basis of Gao Kao scores. The first two years of the curriculum fall under the responsibility of DUFE, and these studies are credited towards the UoS qualification at Year 1, the UK Higher Education Qualifications Framework level 4. The latter two years of study fall under the responsibility of UoS, which are credited towards to DUFE qualification at Years 3 and 4. UoS academics generally feel that it is often challenging to get the students to actively engage in discussions in class. The authors, thus, decided to investigate how to increase student engagement in the class with the aims to improve teaching practice at SII and also to initiate further debates on transnational education within the academic community.

Research design

A participatory action research strategy was employed. Action research is ‘a disciplined way of developing valid knowledge and theory’ (Greenwood and Levin 2005, 55), giving an emphasis on action and research simultaneously (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) distinguished different forms of action research, among which the current research strategy finds its close connections with critical action research, classroom action research, action learning and action science. Participatory actions are regarded as an integral part of field methods to yield insights that can improve the teaching practice at the Institution. The first author (hereafter referred to as the Lecturer) grew up in a Confucian heritage society and has lived in Britain for over 17 years. She has received university education in China and then in Britain. Therefore, in her teaching practice, her socio-cultural and educational values

inevitably shape her participatory actions and interpretations of the educational interactions between her and the students. This influence shall provide an extra pool of knowledge from which critical and reflexive thoughts and actions can derive so as to bring about a liberating educational transformation. The second author (hereafter referred to as the Co-author) was born in the UK and educated in Australia. He holds a leadership role at SII since 2010 and oversees the learning and teaching portfolio, *inter alia*. Thus, he possesses a comprehensive understanding of the academic, social and political dynamics that shape the strategic development of SII and its daily operations in both the administrative and academic perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected and generated between September 2013 and January 2015 by using participatory observation and professional journals. The Lecturer gave lectures and seminars over a twelve-week period to two groups of students, who were in their early 20s. One group comprised 31 students (hereafter referred to as the Seniors) who started the dual-degree programme in August 2013. This group studied Professional Ethics (PE) with the Lecturer. By August 2014, the membership had reduced to 27 Seniors, as 4 students transferred to the home campus for their final year of study. These Seniors were studying Critical Tourism in Contemporary Society with the Lecturer at the time of research. Another group of 45 students (hereafter referred to as the Juniors) started the dual-degree programme in September 2014. Outside of the normal teaching and tutorial sessions, Seniors and Juniors had personal tutoring sessions with other faculty members to express their concerns and/or problems, which are then shared among the academic team to improve practices in teaching. In addition to these ITM students, the Lecturer also provided personal tutoring sessions for around 20 BM students, which provided additional insights into the challenges that the students face. A personal tutoring session takes place on a one-to-one basis lasting on average 10 minutes.

Action research generally follows a spiral of self-reflective cycles of planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, re-planning, acting and observing again, reflecting again, and so on (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). McTaggart (1997) suggested an alternative approach that involves collecting some initial data and then reflecting before making a plan for action. Indeed, in reality the process of action research is more responsive, open and fluid. Following McTaggart's suggestion, the Lecturer took preliminary steps that involved observing classroom engagement in her own lecturer/seminar sessions, discussing challenges in teaching at SII with other colleagues and the Co-author, and talking to her personal tutees. The initial steps have enabled the Lecturer to reflect upon the issue of interest and developed the research question. The subsequent data collection processes were conducted by following the spiral cycles multiple times. Each stage of the cycles was reflected upon and monitored. Subsequent action was adjusted based on reflective evaluation of the previous episode and performativity in class. Students were invited to provide feedback on the modules at the end of the terms.

Data Analysis

The Framework Analysis method, which involves six highly interconnected stages (namely familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation) (Spencer et al. 2013), was employed to analyse the data. Guided by the research question, two key themes were identified: namely, memorisation and participation. Codes were created in observation notes and journal entries. The codes were then linked to the themes (e.g. indexing). Coded passages were charted in a table manually to facilitate the mapping and interpretation processes. Data interpretation were reviewed by the Co-author to ensure the appropriateness and accuracy of the interpretation.

Results

In line with Bruner's (1996) doctrine and Li's (2003) research, the authors of the present study have argued that learning has its dependency on the utilisation of Confucian values and that if Confucianism is to have any impact on education at the macro policy level, such influence would be excised through individual's performativity in Sino-Foreign educational settings. The performativities as demonstrated in the data are memorisation and participation.

It was found that memorisation learning practice has its cultural root linked to Wù (悟)

whereas in student participation Chǐ (耻) plays an important role. Lǐ (礼) underpins both the students' and the lecturer's thoughts and behaviours throughout the learning and teaching performativities.

Memorisation

There seemed to be a shared observation among the faculty members that both BM and ITM students tended to memorise content without really understanding it. This was observed by the Lecturer when ITM students answered questions about cases or articles they had studied; they constantly read from the material. This phenomenon was particularly evident with the PE module, which was documented in the professional journal:

Like the Senior group, these new students are able to identify the relevant part of the text when answering the questions and read out the text word-by-word. So, they repeat the content that they have read but seem to have difficulties to express the ideas in their own language. I wonder whether this is due to their lack of proficiency in the English language or that they are having difficulties in finding their own voice in that learning process. Or, is it probably both? (Journal 16/09/2014)

In order to help the students move away from memorising without understanding, suggestions were provided such as taking notes and formulating questions in English.

These tips were coupled with regular (short) group presentations where students were encouraged to deliver presentations in a more natural way and rely less on reading from notes. In one instance, a student was leading a group presentation on human nature using a conversational approach, but he was not happy with the way that the presentation was unfolding. He stopped talking in the middle of the presentation, standing before the whiteboard and frowning in silence. The Lecturer asked if he had finished. He replied 'No' and continued pondering how to express his thoughts. 'I could feel the pressure was mounting. I was aware that he was struggling to express himself in English and that he was being looked at by the rest of the class' (Journal 23/09/2014). To ease the tension, the Lecturer said gently: 'It is ok. Use simple words. What do you want to say?' After few more seconds, he finally managed to find the way to say what he wanted to share with the class. 'That was a brilliant and good effort! It can be indeed very uncomfortable to find one's thoughts in a second language. This is the learning that the students are going through. It appears to me that they are capable of generating their own ideas and opinions. They are not 'passive learners' as described of the Chinese students in some studies' (Journal 23/09/2014).

One group of the Senior students gave a five-minute presentation on the meaning of 'relativism'. They cited René Descartes' mind-body dualism and Zhuang Zi's dream of butterfly ¹. The Lecturer was pleased to see that the students still remember Descartes that had been taught last semester. Now they are making the connection of that remembered knowledge with the new term of 'relativism' to understand its meaning' (Journal 09/09/2014). Through the presentation exercise, the whole class was able to understand the new terminology and also discussed its meaning in English. Tait (2010) reported that students used memorisation as a strategy to overcome the challenges of assessments in English as a second language and to develop their understanding of knowledge. Indeed, the ITM students were expected to be able to use professional terminology in their assessments. In other words, it is not enough to only use ordinary language to demonstrate professional knowing. In

Confucian education, reciting the ancient poems and sayings is a step to show one's learning. The rationale of this is that learning starts from being able to use the proper language in the appropriate circumstance (i.e. Lǐ [礼]). Thus, Western education and that of traditional Confucian society in China both recognise the role of memorisation in learning. However, the former has now given more emphasis on critical and analytical thinking that is built on the known whereas the latter emphasises appreciating the old wisdom so as to bring about new enlightenment of the known. In either case, memorisation is a foundation for learning that can lead to deep learning (On 1996; Marton et al. 1996).

A particularly interesting observation in the previous learning episode was that the students made a reference to Zhang Zi. I was surprised to hear that they talked about the legacy of Zhuang Zi and his dream of butterfly. I can recall that last year these students were very enthusiastic in reciting poetic lines of Confucius' view of human nature from the Three Character Classic and the opposite view of human nature held by Meng Zi. I still remember vividly the pride shown in their faces about China's ancient civilisation and its philosophies' (Journal 09/09/2014). These Chinese philosophies were not part of the module content. However, the students naturally related to the socio-culturally acquired knowing of Chinese philosophical stances, in contrast to the Western philosophies that were previously unknown to them. This finding is consistent with Li's (2003) discovery and echoes Bruner's notion of culturalist mind. In that, these students have the knowledge of the legacies of the Confucian philosophers and the understanding of Confucian values such as learning to improve self as a way of being and learning to contribute to society, which were at the core of ancient Confucianism (e.g. virtue and moral learning toward self-perfection but also to serve utilitarian benefits of the kingdom). It was evident that some ancient Confucian values have been transmitted and shared among these students. The students' insight into Confucian philosophy drew a sharp contrast to the accounts of the participants in Francis and Archer's

(2005) study who put more emphasises on hardships and deprivations. This is not surprising given that the subjects in the present study came from wealthy and educated Chinese families, whereas Francis and Archer's participants were poorly educated Chinese immigrants whose offspring were in the UK. Hence, it can be said that the students' outlook is shaped by evolving Confucius values that are embedded in contemporary social changes in China, including the increasing recognition of extra-credential experiences gained from international education (Lehmann 2012; Pan 2011).

Participation

Some studies have suggested that Chinese students are often more reluctant to raise questions or speak up in class compared with Western students (Turner 2006). Indeed, student participation was an ongoing challenge to SII faculty members. To help the ITM students to engage in teaching sessions, the Lecturer published pre-lecture slides on the virtual learning environment (VLE), which outlined questions that they needed to consider in advance. 'Tan (2007) talked about questioning in classrooms and reported that questioning was used by teachers to check students' comprehension of text, to hold their attention, to establish a teacher's authority, and to gain students' respect and acceptance and so forth. The main reason that I introduced pre-lecture questions was to orient students towards forthcoming lecture content, stimulate thinking about related issues and encourage participation in discussions. My intention is to prepare them for open discussions.' (Journal 08/09/2013).

In practice, this method worked well with the students who were already active in class, but it had a number of issues. First, the students tended to give brief answers. Second, the majority of students remained silent. Third, there was learning content to be covered during teaching sessions, thus it was not practical to have in-depth discussions due to time constraints. However, open discussions were facilitated in tutorials. A number of studies have addressed socio-cultural factors that underpin the phenomenon of the 'silent Chinese student'

(Yang 1992). According to Hwang, Ang and Francesco (2002), in a classroom setting, if a Chinese student gives a wrong answer or asks an inappropriate question it would be considered shameful and embarrassing, whereas Westerners often quickly dismiss such feelings. 'The question for me is what I can do to encourage the students to participate without worrying about losing face?' (Journal 10/10/2013).

Lower cognitive questions have been used by teachers in class to enhance and protect both teacher's and students' faces, and to establish teacher authority (Tan 2007); however Tan criticised this questioning approach because it deprived students of the opportunity to think independently and critically, and to explore new possibilities. When Confucius was challenged by his disciples, he saved his authority as the Master by stating the Heaven had given him the answer that he had transmitted to them. Confucian tradition emphasises respect and obedience of the authorities in hierarchical social systems. The authorities include not only the governments but also individuals such as parents, teachers and line managers. It would be considered disrespectful to challenge what a teacher says in a Chinese educational context. This is also reflected in the discourse of collectivism and power distance dimensions. According to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010), in a collectivist society, such as China, the power distances are bigger than those of many Western countries, which means that individuals are more reverent of authority. When a Chinese student questions someone in power, such as an instructor, it may be considered inappropriate because it may imply a challenge to the knowledge and authority of the instructor. Thus, 'another question for me is what I can do to remove the barrier of "authority" but still be able to manage the learning environment.' (Journal 10/10/2013).

To encourage students to participate in discussions and to remove the possible barriers of the teacher being seen as the 'authority of knowledge', role plays, as a new intervention, was regularly employed in tutorials. In one particular exercise the students were asked to form into groups and choose one tourist product from a given list. As a group, the students needed

to consider the concepts of performativity, everydayness, embodiment and otherness to develop a marketing message and use it to 'sell' their products to other groups, and also to think of reasons for not buying it. The task was set to encourage the students to use new notions in tourism marketing creatively and to challenge their peers' ideas in the negotiation of trading. During the 'trading' time, the Lecturer listened to and observed the students' acts. Reflecting upon the session, the journal read: 'It was really noisy in the class. All the students really engaged with each other in their group discussions and showed high enthusiasm in the free trading time. The interactions took place within, as well as between, the groups. It appears that they are more relaxed to express their ideas and opinions' (Journal 18/09/2014). This method mirrors Holmes' (1997) technique of 'vote with their feet', but it is different. By letting individual students work in a group and then letting the team to interact with other groups, the method has created a group norm of participation. It essentially plays with the collectivistic value of following the group norms. Hwang, And and Francesco (2002) may have argued that such practice would introduce surface learning. However, another author contended that this method nurtured an open discourse (Liu 2005). In this study, it has encouraged the ITM students to think creatively and given them opportunities to question others' ideas, which was evident in the students' active interactions with each other in completing the task. Thus, this particular role play has functioned as a means to partially remove the perceived authoritative barriers and thus facilitating a deep learning experience that is appreciated in Western education.

Final reflection

This investigation was conducted in the context of the Chinese Ministry of Education promoting Sino-Foreign projects to strengthen its educational systems. As such, the number of Sino-Foreign institutions in China, which includes SII, has been increasing since 1998. Operational challenges in teaching and learning exist within such educational 'marriages'

which, generally, have been under researched. In this study, the UoS academics generally felt that it was often challenging to get the students to actively engage in discussions in class. Therefore, the authors have embarked on this research to investigate how to increase student engagement in the class.

The students in this study grew up in a Confucian heritage society guided by socialist educational policies. Prior to joining SII, they had gone through the authoritative-oriented Chinese education system. Within the British curriculum, they are feeling their way through the system in order to adapt to the new academic paradigm. In this investigation, various pedagogical approaches were introduced to facilitate the adaptive transition. One of the significant learning points that emerged during this inquiry was that the change of students' perceptions of knowledge has greatly impacted on their participation in class and written work over the period of the study. The students have been encouraged to question what they read and to question what the Lecturer said, which is not commonly practised in the current Chinese educational settings, neither was it permitted in the traditional Confucian education. The authors have learned that this change of ontology has opened up the door to a collaborative and constructive learning atmosphere, but at the same time this study has raised other challenges.

First, the students tend to address the 'how' question, e.g. how one phenomenon can be explained by using a particular theory. The students can competently make connections of the content, the process and the context of an issue under discussion. Such associative and comparative reflective thinking forms critical elements of experiential learning (Li et al., 2013). They seem to struggle, however, to address the 'why' question, e.g. why is it that this phenomenon is taking place? Such critical thinking demonstrates one's ability to question the assumptions underpinning a phenomenon. In a critical discussion with the Senior students about the power of the Chinese government in shaping tourism activities, the majority of the

class did not say anything whilst a couple of them said, almost inaudibly, 'that is anti-social'. Their reluctance to voice may show their respect for authority and/or their way to keep a harmonious society. One key function of Confucianism is to educate individuals to be obedient and follow the rules and principles of Lǐ (礼) and Dào (道) so that families, communities and the nation can be prosperous in harmony. Such group conformity through underplaying individual's voice is also a feature of collectivism. As argued previously, if Confucianism is to have any impact at a macro level of education, such influence would be exercised through individuals' contribution in their everyday interactions with others and communities. In this study, the students chose not to fully express their views publicly, which echoes Marginson's (2011) argument that Confucianism weakens one's executive autonomy; however the authors argue that it is presumptive to conclude that their academic creativity is limited due to their held Confucian values.

It is evident that the Chinese socio-cultural and political discourse strongly influences their way of reasoning and that of publicising personal opinions; however, the muteness of academic creativity is not helpful in encouraging individual creativities to be publicly shared to enable the development of a knowledge-intensive country. Indeed, as Onsman (2012) remarked, although the country is working towards an internationally competitive HE system, the Chinese government is reluctant to encourage Western-style questioning of authority and confrontational thinking that underpin social sciences. The Chinese government has recognised the importance of academic freedom, according to its National Guidelines (Gu 2010). It was certainly not a straightforward matter for the students to freely express any confrontational thoughts. Thus, how academic freedom at large is to be unfolded remains to be seen. The foreign faculty members of the Institution and other academics in Sino-Foreign schools need to recognise this hidden social and political influence on the Chinese students.

Second, none of the students had challenged the Lecturer by the time of writing this paper. This may suggest that the Confucian notion of Lǐ (礼), which governs the teacher-student relationship, is deeply rooted in their 'habits' (Bourdieu 1973). It may also suggest that they do not know how to question the teacher in a manner that would be socially acceptable. Given that they are studying in a collective society but are expected to take up a more individualist outlook, it may be confusing as to how a student could question a teacher's authority of knowledge. Student-centred pedagogy can facilitate students' development of critical and creative thinking skills (Liu 2005; Yang 1992); however, in practice, the authority of teacher in the classroom is important in terms of maintaining a learning environment that can lead to desirable learning outcomes. Thus, the pedagogical challenge is to balance the creating of an open discourse on one hand and managing the validity of learning on the other. In this research, the group-to-group interactions have facilitated the co-creation of egalitarian and decentralised means of teaching and learning.

'No education is without values and whilst those values should be recognised they should not be universally imposed' (Woodrow 2001, 5). The authors argue that international educational conventions that combine the strengths of knowing in the West and the East can create more meaningful learning experience for Chinese students. Following Rhee (2010), one-size does not fit all.

A way forward

Knowledge derived from this study is context bound. As such, comparison of results across cases and the creation of generalisations is challenging (Greenwood and Levin 2005). Knowledge generated in this study can be transferred to similar settings. However, Chinese students who study in the UK face greater difficulties (McMahon 2011) which can impact on their classroom engagement. Future research may take a comparative approach by

investigating cases from leading recipient countries of Chinese students from mainland China so that a higher level of generalisability can be achieved.

Note

1. Zhuang Zi was a Daoist philosopher in the Warring States. It is documented that he once had a dream, in which he became a butterfly. The happy feeling in the dream was very real. When he woke up he realised he was Zhuang Zi again. He questioned if he had become a butterfly in the dream or the butterfly had become him in the dream. His philosophical claim was that there was no absolute meaning of object. (Fang 2010)

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