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The Social Construction of Chinese Models of Teaching

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Recommended Citation

Pratt, Daniel D.; Kelly, Mavis; and Wong, Winnie (1998). "The Social Construction of Chinese Models of Teaching," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/42>

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Abstract. Five principal relationships, derived from long-standing Confucian values, are described as the cultural and social foundation for Chinese models of teaching. Three related models of teaching will be described during the presentation: Teacher as master; teacher as virtuoso; and teacher as coach.

Introduction

Most of the research and writing about teaching in adult and higher education takes culture and social norms for granted. For example, in Kember's (1997) recent review of conceptions of teaching in higher education, there is little evidence that the researchers made any attempt to probe the cultural traditions and social contexts that give meaning to the conceptions reported. This paper seeks to re-dress this omission by considering how the role of teacher is socially constructed through cultural and social norms. Broadly speaking, we are interested in the ways in which cultural and social contexts determine acceptable roles for both teacher and learner. Through surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups we have investigated a wide range of Chinese teachers of adults -- from Masters of Tai Chi and Chinese painting to teachers of accounting and computer systems. Our work, and the work which we draw upon, has been conducted in Canada, Hong Kong, and The Peoples Republic of China.

Cultural heritage

Most would agree that those societies that might reasonably be called 'Chinese' (e.g., Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan) hold several values in common, most notably those having to do with family, filial piety, loyalty, duty, and a strong work ethic. Most of these values, particularly the strong attachment to family and filial piety, can be traced back to Confucius. (Tu, Hejtmanek, & Wachman, 1992) Within Confucian thought, the individual is a developing part of a continuing family lineage. It is a progressive continuity of a specific ancestry of one's family; each individual is part of an ethnic continuity and is defined within those relationships. Thus, as one seeks to develop one must act in an exemplary fashion and in accord with an ascribed public role (e.g., father, son, teacher, student, worker)

Not all would agree, however, with our attempt to link models of teaching in contemporary society with ancient philosophical writings of Confucius. Indeed, Confucian scholars themselves are not in full agreement about whether any contemporary East Asian society can be characterized as 'Confucian'. There is even debate on the term Confucian itself, and whether it describes a set of values, beliefs, and roles, or whether it is simply a convenient way for scholars to communicate with each other about their perceptions of society and history. (Tu, Hejtmanek,

& Wachman, 1992) Yet, it would be difficult to imagine any Chinese society without its Confucian heritage. For example, Hong Kong, like other Confucian heritage cultures, has maintained a profound respect for education, for the family as the critical nucleus of society and repository of values, and for a pervasive work ethic, all of which have supported development and modernization. Much the same could be said for each of the other Chinese societies mentioned above. In fact, the debate has most often not been whether or not Confucian values persist in those societies, but rather with what effect on modernization. (Huntington)

From our vantage point there is no doubt about the contemporary vitality and relevance of the ideas of Confucius, and those that followed him, in Hong Kong society. Although he lived twenty-five hundred years ago, his views on education, merit, discipline, and work, continue to be an important driving force in such social structures as the family and schooling. This does not mean that it is an easy task to find a clear and undiluted philosophical path reaching from Confucius to present day teaching in Hong Kong. In fact, as King (1987) points out, that which one might point to as a legacy of Confucian thought is not a singular rigid belief system, but a group of guiding social principles for the conduct of familial and extra-familial relationships. Thus, while Confucianism is not the only source of philosophical values, it is certainly the one that most informs the cultural heritage of Chinese societies.

Social Norms

Embedded within Confucian values are five principal relationships, through which each person defines a sense of identity, duty, and responsibility. Within this set of relationships one can see the manifestation of several social values that characterize what it means to be Chinese and to teach and learn within Chinese societies. The five principal relationships are: ruler and subject (government and citizen), father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. In more contemporary terms, women are not so excluded, although the father and eldest son still hold positions of highest authority and responsibility. (Scollon and Scollon, 1994)

In each relationship, the senior member is accorded a wide range of prerogatives and authority with respect to the junior. (Bond and Huang, 1986) Three of the five concern the family, which is the building block of society and is organized on authoritarian principles and the most important of all virtues -- filial piety, or dutiful respect for parents. (Harrison, 1992) Thus, one's role and responsibility is traditionally linked to one or more of the principal relationships. As will be shown, the relationship between teacher and learner is more-or-less similar to that of father and son (or daughter), depending on the model; and the reciprocal role and responsibilities of teacher and learner are a reflection of the respect for hierarchy and authority in Chinese society.

Relationships are co-determinant. The five principal relationships are not, of course, the only ones; nor are they uniquely Chinese. However, they are notable because they are the social compass by which one defines correct behavior and a sense of role and responsibility in traditional Chinese societies. While the first four are relationships of superior to subordinate, responsibilities run in both directions for all five; each individual is constitutive of the other. In

addition, neither has a role without the other. Fathers cannot be fathers without sons (or daughters), and so forth. If both participants in the relationship respected their responsibilities, peace and harmony would be assured. (Harrison, 1992) Failure to follow the dictates of proper role behaviour could jeopardize the relationship and, potentially, disrupt the harmony of society.

As common as this might seem it is perhaps more well defined in Chinese societies than in the west. As Donald Munro (1985) has pointed out, in Chinese the word for role is 'fen', which literally means 'portion' and refers to one's portion of the relationship. One has no self except in relation to another as in the five principal relationships. A person is a 'self' to the extent s/he enters into one of those relationships. The person is less a self to the extent that s/he takes distance from those relationships. Thus, self is defined by one's role in the five relationships and the portion of the joint activity one is responsible for, as defined by that relationship. This is the substance of identity and role within Chinese society.

Authority and responsibility. And yet, while responsibilities run in both directions, conditions governing authority do not. Authority, which flows downward, is not contingent upon the behaviour of those with power. On the contrary, as Lucian Pye (1992) points out, the Chinese child learns from an early age that s/he must be dutiful and obedient regardless of parental behaviour. Filial piety is one of the most striking characteristics of the Chinese family. The child's first experience with authority is in the acceptance of the omnipotence of his or her father; the worth of the self depends completely upon the display of respect for a father's authority. To even think ill of parental authority means one would have committed a most serious crime. As Pye explains, probably in no other culture could parents be as harmful and yet deserving of respect, as in Chinese society. Indeed, "filial obligation is simply an absolute requirement and exists without regard to the quality of parental behavior." (p. 93)

Many Chinese teachers behave like Chinese fathers. They do their duty and fulfill their obligations toward their students with little, if any, concern for whether they are liked by their students. From their point of view, they are obliged to exercise their rightful authority over the content, as well as the individuals, they are teaching. Both teacher and students expect the teacher to exercise such authority as part of his/her responsibility and as a proper role for teachers.

This contrasts sharply with many western societies in which affection is such a powerful and complicating element in the father-son (parent-child) relationship, as well as the teacher-student relationship. Western teachers (and some parents) are sometimes compromised by their desire to be liked. There is a tendency to deny one's authority over others, while at the same time resisting the authority of others. While Chinese faculty and students acknowledge the pervasive hierarchy that defines their public self and gives them a sense of role and responsibility, western faculty are often nervous about exercising their institutional authority over students and even content. This can result in great confusion among immigrant Asian learners about who is in charge.

Authority and 'heart'. In traditional Chinese society, each person in the hierarchy must assume responsibility for those below; and conversely their own well being is the responsibility of those above them in the hierarchy. It is through this unambiguous hierarchy of authority that one finds the reciprocal relationship, and yet another kind of balance, between authority and heart.

Responsibility, authority, and morality (heart) are all part of the same hierarchy of relationships. For example, the Chinese practice of scolding the older child for the misbehaviour of a younger one is not an injustice; the older sibling has responsibility for the guidance and behaviour of the younger. In turn, the younger has responsibility for following the guidance of the older. (Scollon and Scollon, 1994) Just as it is the responsibility of an older sibling if a younger sibling misbehaves, so too, the older child is charged with setting a moral standard and demonstrating benevolence toward his or her younger siblings. Thus, caring, benevolence, and the demonstration of heart are intimately and unambiguously linked to the responsible exercise of authority.

Inside-vs.-outside of relationships. Behaviour is also determined, to some extent, by whether one is inside, or outside one of the principal relationships. (Scollon and Scollon, 1994) For example, it is not unusual for Westerners to be confused by Chinese who are sometimes polite and deferential, and other times appear quite indifferent and even aggressive. It can be in the super market, in an airport, or any number of social settings. In those situations deference is shown inside a relationship; indifference, and even aggressive behaviour, is expressed outside those relationships. This is often misunderstood by Westerners who are conditioned to expect signs of personal regard and affirmation, even from strangers who happen to be waiters at their table.

In classrooms this can be seen in the behaviour of students, as they negotiate the public presentation of two relationships -- teacher to student, and friend to friend. In this setting two dynamics are at play. First, the competing of two principal relationships -- the relationship between teacher and student (similar to that of father and son) and that of friend to friend. As with other situations, the higher relationship (teacher-student) prevails over lower relationships (friend-friend). Not only is the relationship between teacher and student higher on the hierarchy, it is also a public setting in which the public self must be seen as respectful and compliant with that relationship's authority and duty.

It is slightly more complicated by the inside-outside aspect of the friend's relationship. Within the classroom, students are outside the relationship of friend to friend. Whereas, outside the classroom, students are inside their relationship of friend-friend. (Scollon and Scollon, 1994) In this case, the setting determines whether one is inside or outside a principal relationship. The combination of teacher-student relationship in a public setting, with the students being outside their relationship with friends, may lead them to be passive, quiet, and reluctant to ask questions or even engage in whole-class discussions. In part, their reluctance to speak is based on their respect for the teacher; they may feel that asking questions suggests the teacher did not teach the material well enough. Their reluctance to speak in front of each other, for example by offering their own opinion, may also be based on respect for the knowledge of the teacher. By speaking out, they may be perceived as assuming authority comparable to that of the teacher and, therefore, wasting others' time when they could be listening to the teacher. (Pratt, 1992) All this changes when outside the classroom, and inside the friend-friend relationship. Here students can discuss openly and challenge each other. They may even ask the teacher questions, in a more private and respectful manner, so long as they remember their position in relation to the teacher and do not directly challenge his/her authority.

Public vs. private self. In the examples above there is a hint of yet another dimension of these principle relationships and the roles and behaviour engendered through them -- that of public vs. private self. Westerners move between individuation and social groups depending on their perceived need for solitude or support. This movement is, in part, meant to facilitate the break from dependency and move toward autonomy that characterizes psychological development. That path of development, and the easy movement back and forth between separation and group affiliation, is not found in Asia. In a Chinese culture, the self to be realized (educated) is not an ego-driven, private self, but a collective and relational self. (Pratt, 1991) The very definition of self is always in relation to, rather than apart from, one's family and kin. Within Chinese societies one can no more separate from the family, or even the government, than one can from one's skin. Thus, the focus of education in a Chinese society is on the development of the 'public' self, that is, the roles one is expected to take on within one or more of the principal relationships. Students are expected (by parents and teachers) to be disciplined in the fulfillment of their role, duty, and obligation as prescribed by their public self.

Consistency between family and schooling. The place of family in the social fabric and socialization process of Chinese societies, is indisputably central and dominant. As mentioned above, family is directly related to three of the principal relationships. Within those relationships responsibility is reciprocal, but authority is always from superior to subordinate, beginning with the acceptance of the omnipotence of a father's authority and culminating in the worth of the self as dependent upon the respect for a father's authority. Within Chinese societies the individual's ego disappears into the family. Consequently, a student's achievement, or lack of achievement, is a reflection on his or her family. Students are well aware that their behaviour, their perseverance, and ultimately their accomplishments are on behalf of the family's well being and reputation. Within the Chinese family, today's child is tomorrow's ancestor. (Harrison, 1992, p. 83) Thus, in the arena of schooling, an individual represents the family's social reputation as well as its social and economic viability into the future.

There is, therefore, a high degree of consistency between the primary (family) and secondary (schooling) socialization of the 'public' self in Chinese societies. (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) Unlike the West, where there is often a mismatch between what is expected of children at home and what is expected of them in school, there is great consistency between home and school in the expectations and relationships that govern children's behaviour. This consistency is nicely illustrated by the work of Hess and Azuma. (1991) Although their comparisons are between Japanese and American societies, much of what they found is characteristic of other Confucian Heritage societies, such as Hong Kong and Mainland China.

In summary, there are several propositions which link Chinese models of teaching with cultural heritage and social norms: (1) the individual's role and identity are defined by one or more of the principal relationships; (2) social behaviour is quite different, depending upon whether it occurs 'within' or 'outside' the bounds of one of the principal relationships; (3) these relationships are hierarchical, both within and between relationships; (4) social order and individual responsibility is defined and ensured through everyone honoring their part in the role relationships; (5) authority flows one way and is not contingent upon the benevolence of those with more power; (6) 'heart' or a sense of caring and morality is, in part, enacted through

fulfillment of one's responsibility and authority; and (7) there is a high degree of consistency between socialization that takes place at home and the socialization processes of schooling.

Three Models of Teaching

Teacher as Master. Drawing on the study of five Chinese Masters (martial arts, pharmacy, cooking, painting, and calligraphy), this model characterizes the most traditional relationship and responsibilities accorded to teacher and student (literally called student in all cases). Within this model the teacher acts in loco parentis, that is, in place of the parents. His or her (some of the Masters were women) responsibilities are profoundly similar to those of parents.

Teacher as virtuoso performer. Drawing on the study of several teachers in Mainland China, this model highlights the role of teacher as performer. What is important is how the teacher presents the material, how she or he adds a particular interpretation to the rendering of accepted knowledge. The "general structure" of teaching includes: organizing instruction, inspecting and reviewing, lecturing on the new material, firming up the new material, and arranging homework. Thus, as with music, true virtuosity in teaching means more than mere "technical wizardry;" or mastery of one's knowledge. It also means having "heart" which means transcending the technical base of knowledge and adding a part of one's self in the representation of that knowledge.

Teacher as coach. As with the other models, effective teachers here are strict, with high expectations, but with a slightly different kind of relationship to learners. The relationship is more like that of coach and athlete, than parent and child. While there is a clear sense of authority and place within the relationship, and inside class a teacher's manner might appear to be formal and distant, outside of class teachers are expected to be more friendly and informal. Overall, there is in this model less of the life time, absolute obedience and deference to authority that is implied in the first two models.

Commonalties and Contrasts. All three models have several things in common, most of which contrast with North American models of teaching. First, there is a profound respect for basics, that is, the foundational knowledge of one's art, craft, or discipline. This knowledge is considered a necessary and respectable foundation, worthy of both teacher's and students' time and effort. Second, teacher and learner relationships are consistent with other social structures, which clearly spell out each person's responsibility and duty. This stands in sharp contrast to much of Western society, where learners move between authoritarian schooling and libertarian society. Third, each model assumes a dialectical relationship between different (but equally important) forms of knowledge: perceptual, rational, and moral. Thus, all learning starts with memorization, then to understanding and application, before questioning or critiquing the knowledge to be learned. There is no rush to critical thinking or problem solving before the learner has demonstrated mastery of basic knowledge. Fourth, successful learning is largely attributed to effort, rather than skill, ability, or individual differences, as in the West.

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