

Face and Authority: Cultural Challenges of Teaching in China

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Abstract

This article is meant as a reflection on the applicability of modern educational theories in a society in which embracing modernity does not necessarily imply the denial of traditional values. The theoretical divagations based on a comparison of arguments currently relevant in the western world regarding education and the historically dominant socio-ethical values in China will be followed by a short analysis of specific instances demonstrating the persistent nature of the latter. As there are undeniable advantages of the modern approach to education, the rift between western and Chinese views on the educational model is still quite apparent. The text will demonstrate the main points of divergence and will try to outline another possible approach towards modern education in a Chinese context.

Keywords: China, Chinese culture, Chinese education Chinese values, face, source of knowledge

Modern Theories of Education

The development of education in the late 20th and early 21st century has been marked by the shift from content-oriented and teacher-centred theories to the development-oriented and student-centred methods. Abandoning the “traditional” distinction between the “one who knows” (teacher) and the “one who wants to know” (student), modern pedagogical theories assert that the needs and predispositions of students are central to the entire educational endeavour. The first “modern” theories in this sense were rooted in the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and then later emerged in the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952) termed “progressivism” which championed functional psychology and was a tireless proponent of democracy and civil society. He argued that learning is a social and interactive process and as such, cannot be reduced to a simple “proper knowledge transfer” (1900). Dewey, on the one hand, emphasised the quality of the teachers and the content taught, on the other, the environment and the necessity of recognising individual students’ needs. Unfortunately, according to Dewey himself, many of his followers tried to minimise the role of the former and over-relied on the latter (1902). To a large degree, Dewey was further developing Rousseau’s ideas presented in *Emile, or On Education* (1762). His statement that a child is “immature and superficial” who must be “mature[ed] and deepened” (1902, p. 13) resembles Rousseau’s idea that “nature” can and should be “socialised” (civilised), and that this is the role of education. Progressivism that appeals to Dewey’s principles and following Rousseau accepts the possibility and value of science and culture but emphasises the process and students’ active involvement. In other words, education should be more of a comprehensive knowledge gaining process, through experiment and problem solving and less of knowledge giving – transferring well-established data from the “knower” to the “knowing one”. The main argument here is the conviction that such an approach allows for better utilisation of teaching resources and nurtures otherwise often lost talents of individual students.

Further development of educational philosophy led to an even more radical shift. Constructivism, for instance, added another idea whose origin can be traced back to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant denied the validity of the question about existence or non-existence of the ultimate nature of reality (noumenon). Constructivists concluded from this that there is no objective knowledge, independent from the knower (Phillips, 2009, p.7). Such an approach, along with all of its mutations, became very attractive to modern scholars and educators. However, as attractive as it is, it begs the question about the nature of the knowing subject and the existence of an independent world outside of individual cognition. As Phillips quite interestingly put it:

Perhaps everyone in a classroom (teacher and each of the individual students) inhabits a world constructed by themselves, with no genuine contact possible with the worlds of others...

(Phillips, 2009, 7)

Undeniably, the awareness of individual differences in the way individuals perceive, cognise and evaluate objects is beneficial for the process and advancement of education. However, a radically constructivist approach makes learning a dream that cannot reach anything lying outside an individual’s consciousness.

Inspired by Dewey’s philosophy, and heavily influenced by Marxism, Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) advanced another theory that he called “reconstructionism”. Like Dewey, he recognised the social nature of knowledge and championed its “transforming power”. In a

very Marxist sense, he believed that education should focus on critical thinking and lead to “social change”. In other words, education should serve two primary purposes: on the one hand, it “transmits the culture”, on the other, it should if necessary “modify the culture” (Brameld, 1965, p. 75). As innocent as such assertions look, in Brameld’s project, they mean nothing less than an acceptance of general principles of constructivism and an attempt towards employing education for the realisation of politically determined goals. Education being a bearer of a particular culture (ideology), can and might need to be used for reconstruction, or even replacement of one culture (ideology) by another, once such a change, due to socio-historical conditions is deemed necessary. Championed by Brameld, critical thinking can hardly be dismissed as an essential element of contemporary education. However, employing education as a mean for social change turns a teacher into a social/political activist entangled in socio-political ideology. What started as a student-centred endeavour could then easily become a means for political agitation, somehow missing the student focus, not to mention the appreciation of content/knowledge itself.

Another philosophical approach that has had a significant impact on education in the 20th century West was Critical Theory. The very first principle of Critical Theory is the assertion that humans live in a state of enslavement (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244) and the main obstacle preventing human liberation is ideology (Geuss, 1981). Critical Theory is then interested in the ‘liberation’ of a human being from the domination of external (economy) and internal (ideology) factors enslaving humans and their potential. It is a call for transcending the bonds of traditional thought and social relations. During its reign in the 20th century, it can be perceived as going hand-in-hand with the cultural movement of high modernism. However, for main theorist of the second wave of critical theorists, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929), modernity itself descending from the 18th-century Enlightenment also marks a move from the liberation of Enlightenment toward new form(s) of enslavement. He proposes a “critical knowledge” that should be “self-reflection”- and “emancipation-oriented” (Outhwaite, 1988). Here, critical knowledge seems to be a process of never-ending re-assessment of cognition and its object. As much as this approach is attractive and insightful, in its post-modern guise, it can lead to the emergence of the politicisation of basically every socio-philosophical problem and a final rejection of the possibility of objective representation of the researched object. As constructivism doubted the existence of an independent object, postmodern critical theory is overwhelmed by a never-ending denunciation of “oppressive social constructs”.

Critical Theory found its way into modern education through the work of Paulo Freire (1921-1997). The hardship of life that he experienced from his early years on led him to the conclusion that the social conditions, such as poverty and hunger, are the main factors causing the backwardness of particular groups of people (Freire, 1996). In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), he championed quite a few revolutionary ideas that had a profound influence on modern education models. With the emphasis on the distinction oppressor-oppressed, he saw education as a mean for allowing the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity and overturn oppressive conditions. However, the latter need to find a will to participate in the process and constantly re-examine their thoughts and living conditions. It directly led to another assertion, that pedagogy cannot be divorced from politics and as such education is, on the one hand, a conscience of politics, and on another, a method of political agitation.

In his quest for the improvement of the human condition, Freire advanced two ideas, the critique of the “banking model of education” and “the culture of silence”. The first one is a further development of the ideas coined by Rousseau and later on advanced by Dewey. Freire

opposed the idea that a student is an empty vessel that must be “filled” with a teacher’s knowledge. Instead, he believed that education is a process of inquiry through which the world is being constantly “reinvented”. For those who saw the lack of involvement from the oppressed in the process of their liberation, Freire presented “the culture of silence” as the answer. “The culture of silence” is the state of passive acceptance of the state of affairs, a negative self-image of the oppressed. Freire’s educational model, standing in the stark opposition to the “education as banking” and meant as a remedy for the necessary condition of its existence, “the culture of silence”, so far has had an enormous influence on pedagogy in many countries around the globe. As the value of his efforts towards overcoming poverty and social inequality through education can hardly be denied, the whole system is a product of specific conditions and a firm rejection of “education as banking” as it puts the value, and the existence of, an objective, transferable knowledge into question. Indeed, it does not have to affect the consistency of the entire model. But what if the way to “liberation” leads not through inquiry and comprehensive development but through the acquisition of solid (technical) knowledge that he perceived as “education as banking”? What if the most efficient way of realising Freire’s, and earlier Dewey’s and even Rousseau’s, postulates show the way through an at least conditional acceptance of an independent, objective corpus of knowledge and methods revolving around the teacher as a knower? More importantly, what if due to cultural conditioning of the students, the aims set up by modern educators cannot be achieved through the application of their methods? It would not be an overstatement to assert that specific arrangements, being beneficial in one socio-cultural setting, might bring about less promising results, or even become counterproductive under another set of culturally determined values (Hwang, 1987, p. 968). For these reasons, some axiological scrutiny of a culturally-specific learning environment seems to be a necessary task before calling for their application.

Education and Authority – The Chinese Example

We can assert with a high dose of accuracy that every society needs commonly recognised rules of social behaviour that, being modified in time, perpetuate and often display a certain sense of stability. Awareness of these rules, habits and values and their roots seems to be indispensable for the success of an educational endeavour in any given socio-cultural environment. As has been quite well established (Cheng, 1986; Zhai, 1995; St. André, 2013; Kinnison, 2017), the sources of a specific Chinese corpus of rules, habits and values should be looked for in the philosophical and socio-political systems of the past. In the Chinese case, Confucianism, Legalism and Daoism, often accompanied by Buddhism, are the ones to be examined. Especially the first one, due to its historical ‘endurance’ and profundity of impact, will be of primary concern in this section.

For almost two millennia, Confucian values were the driving force behind basically everything related to the socio-ethical and political existence of the Chinese people (Pohl, 2016). Starting from the times of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (133 B.C. to 89 A.D.), in its various mutations Confucianism was not only official doctrine of the state but the ideology that was binding the state, the family and the individual together. The iconoclasts of the May 4th Movement (1919) called for the “Demolition of Confucius’ shop” as the sine qua non condition for the modernisation of China (Lin, 1979). Almost sixty years later, Mao Zedong still felt that launching an anti-Confucian campaign was an indispensable part of his project of making the “new Chinese”. (Gregor and Chang, 1979). As they are nurtured for centuries, values rarely disappear overnight, and it would therefore not be an overstatement to claim that they might still have a firm grip on the psyche of many Chinese. Recent re-appraisals of “Chinese values” (e.g. Gow, 2016) seem only to confirm such an assertion. There are quite a few notions derived

from the Confucian ethical and political thought that has determined the Chinese worldview. One important one is the appreciation of education itself. As the excerpt from the Analects states: “With education, there is no distinction between classes or races of men” (you jiao wu lei 有教無類). In these four characters, we find the definition of Confucius’s socio-political plan and the role education should play in it. They contain two important messages. First, the socio-political organisation is based on hierarchy, delineated positions and ascribed life-styles. Second, the only genuinely sufficient condition allowing for an upwards movement in the socio-political structure should be education. In short, social and political distinctions are something natural, but education is the means allowing for going beyond or somewhat above them. As such, it is a tool that can upgrade one’s position in the social structure. In Liji (禮記), another classic of Confucianism, we find further justification for the nearly cultic appreciation of learning. Education, literally “the process of teaching-learning”, plays two other significant roles. As it states, “should one want to build a country (strong) and make people virtuous, education is a means of the foremost importance (and applicability)” (jianguo junmin, jiaoxue wei xian, 建國君民, 教學為先). If education is of such importance, the inevitable question is, how did Confucians understand education? The central notion is the one used in Liji and contains two characters, jiao (教) and xue (學). To better understand their meaning, and also the psychological impact of these two, that is, that being intertwined represents two different ideas, Wang and Zheng (2015, 344–353) employed linguistic analysis as their method of enquiry. As they noticed, how the notion is often being presented, is influenced by the western understanding of education, that is not necessarily compatible with its culturally determined and locally internalised meaning. (2015, p. 345). They then first put aside the contemporary term, jiaoyu (教育)—nurturing by teaching, and focus on the above mentioned jiao, xue and xi (習), that is a part of the notion of xuexi (學習)—learning, studying. Starting with a detailed analysis of the character and its history Wang and Zheng claim that jiao, usually rendered as “teaching”, is nothing less but “to transform or enlighten” (someone who does not possess the necessary knowledge by someone who does). Their inquiry leads them to the conclusion that jiao presupposes an action of someone who is in possession of knowledge towards the transformation of someone who is not, through the necessary means of instruction. As promising as it might look to modern scholars, it emphasises two things, that are not necessarily in line with most of the ideas championed by modern educational theories. (Wang and Zheng, 2015, p. 347) First is the emphasis on the “knowing one” as an essential element of the entire process; second is the effectiveness of the applied method that should be designed by the “knowing one”, with little if any input from the “unenlightened one”. The relation here is a hierarchical, functional and ethical one, the “one that knows” has a moral and practical obligation to make the one who does not, enlightened (Wang and Zheng, 2015, 348). However, one could argue, wherever there is teaching there must be learning, a fact that presupposes, at least to a degree, an active involvement of the one who is supposed to be enlightened.

Indeed, the process of “knowledge transfer” can hardly be so one-dimensional. The significance of another factor, xue (learning) for the realisation of the fundamental objectives of jiao cannot be overemphasised. Learning, understood as the process of acquiring knowledge, if not as a discovering one’s potential, is a process that requires some involvement from the learner and as such it determines the way teaching is being delivered. In other words, there exists some dialectical and organic interdependency between both parties involved. At least, modern scholars would like to see it that way. For Confucian philosophy, which played the roles of state ideology, religion and ethical framework for Chinese society for hundreds of years, xue (learning) contains a very different meaning. Xue is not to be an active force in the process. Learning in a Confucian sense is to attain desired results, as xue is being characterised by the notion of xiao,(效) effectiveness. Xue is not to experiment and look for “hidden potential” in

the student, but to follow a pattern, to imitate “the enlightened one”. The “hidden potential”, so cherished by modern educational experts, does exist for Confucians but cannot be discovered by an unenlightened one. Learning then is the bringing about of a desired effect by the “knowing on” who is responsible for the design, delivery and the examination of the effects, with the one who learns to be a passive receiver of the desired content (Wang and Zheng, 2015, p. 348).

One should not, of course, forget about the well-known quote from the Analects that states: “Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous” (xue er bu si gang, si er bu xue dai 學而不思罔，思而不學殆). This verse is often presented (i.e. Rošker, 2016) as an argument in the discussion about the role of a critical approach in Confucian thought. Unfortunately, many scholars miss the point of this verse by focusing on its first half, neglecting the negative connotations of the second part. It asserts the necessity of putting learning as a guardian that restricts thinking (si, 思) which otherwise leads to dire consequences. However, there is another critical notion that presents a traditional understanding of education in a bit of a different manner. The character xi affords more room for an individual’s intervention and what we would call ‘discovering and developing’ one’s potential. As its first entry in regards to this character in the Grand Chinese Dictionary (漢語大字典) reads, xi is literally a “young bird learning to fly”, it is used as a compound for many repeatable activities that lead to attaining the state of ‘being able to do, or to know what is doable, or knowable.’ In a way, its meaning is similar to xue, following a certain pattern of doing things, learning from the ones who already know it. But, on the other hand, what is being learnt is something that is in a latent state and must be discovered or worked out through practice and experience. And this brings us closer to the main principles of a more western, modern education.

Xuexi, learning, xi does not nullify the necessity of following the example and imitating those who know. It instead indicates the necessity of repentition of the correct pattern. Moreover, the Confucian emphasis on the association of learning with its practical application, mostly in the field of morality and behavioural etiquette, makes the very subject of learning an element of the bigger picture. There is not much room left for knowledge for its own sake, not to mention for the learner as an independent individual not serving a higher purpose. Learning is the mastering of the six, practical but also morally validated arts of the ancients¹ (Schwartz, 1985, pp. 86–99). A learner is worth anything only if his/her efforts are directed towards spreading moral values, which can be achieved through following the example of the ancient sages. There is a hidden potential in a learner, but the potential is valuable only if it is being brought to a desired form of fruition. Those who attain this level of “desired fruition” are those whom Confucius and his followers call junzi (君子), gentlemen. Those being products of education and moral realisation are almost substantially different from xiaoren (小人), petty men. They are second only to shengren (聖人), ancient sages who attained ‘enlightenment’ without being taught by anyone else. Education, understood the way expounded above, is thus not only a way towards exceeding social boundaries, but in post-ancient times the only means for realising a moral ideal. Knowledge is not just an element among others but a morally valorised quest and as such unnegotiable objectivity. Society should reflect that objectivity through properly established social relations. Confucian society is everything but “democratic”, in a sense that everyone, regardless of his/her status, has equal rights. Confucian society is a society of “moral meritocracy”. Those who know occupy a higher position, enjoying certain privileges, but at the same time, are responsible for the intellectual and moral elevation of others. Understanding

¹ Six Arts (六藝) included: Rituals(禮), Music(樂), Archery(射), Charioteering(禦), Writing(書) and Mathematics(數).

and realisation of social stratification understood in this way is Confucius's very first postulate, *zhengming* (正名), the rectification of names. Since there is not much of the divine involved, this proper learning and realisation of social relations is what makes humans human. By no means can education then be a student led, since this would distort the entire structure and would make the realisation of a traditional moral quest impossible.

Authority and Face (Social Positioning and Social Roles)

As I tried to clarify, education in the Confucian context is not just “knowledge transfer”, and it is even less the development of one's intellectual potential. It is a way to realise socio-moral ideals, and as such a sacred rite that, as any quasi-religious activity, cannot be arbitrarily altered. This is not to say that it cannot be modified at all. However, modification is acceptable only if it is being presented as an even more accurate display of a holy rite. The appropriateness of the ritual can only be assured by the officiant who is recognised as the bearer of relevant authority. As education is a means of determining the boundaries of social stratification, there exists another notion that derives from, and embodies, the Confucian model of social stratification based on (recognition of) moral achievement, literally translated as face (臉) (Kinnison, 2016, pp. 34–36).

The notion of face has been widely discussed in literature (Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976; Cheng, 1986; Hwang, 1987; Chang and Holt, 1994; Zhai, 1995; Zuo, 1997; Jia, 1997; St. André, 2013; Kinnison, 2017). Despite its apparent easy applicability, researchers are far from any consensus about what face is and if there are one or rather two different notions that only English renders as a single word (Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976). It is also debatable whether face pertains to the social or psychological dimension of human existence (Ho, 1976; Zhai, 1995; Zuo, 1997). There is also ongoing discussion about whether face is a universal or only a local phenomenon (St. André, 2013, pp. 77–81). To have a better grasp of the notion and how it applies to education, I will first put aside theoretical conceptualisations and discuss three actual cases that illustrate quite explicitly how face applies in a more-or-less classroom situation.

The first one is an exposition of the notion of face as a “collective perception” of the roles of an educator and a learner and happened to me when I was a PhD student. During a class, L., a distinguished professor of Chinese literature, proposed a particular solution to the philosophical problem that had appeared in the text we were analysing. As all other classmates, who were local Chinese, expressed their satisfaction with the professor's idea, it seemed to me that what he had proposed was not very well thought through. I was then not shy to express my doubts about the proposed solution, pointing out some flaws in the argument. Once I had dared to speak in a non-affirmative tone, my classmates froze. Consternation mixed with disgust could be seen on their faces, and they held their breath waiting for the professor's reaction. After a minute, the professor admitted that his solution did not help much solving the problem that the text was posing. People around the table seemed to be, on the one hand, relieved, on the other, surprised with the teacher's reaction. The consternation lasted until the end of the class since everyone seemed not to know what to say and how to behave. Everyone had been delighted with the teacher's idea, and now the teacher had himself admitted that it was not a perfect solution. Everything had been in the right order until I had ruined the balance. Interestingly enough, as the professor never expressed any resentment, my nevertheless classmates distanced themselves from me, being less friendly all the way until the end of the semester. I could not understand their behaviour until another similar situation happened a few months later.

As a passionate practitioner of martial arts, I developed close relationships with instructors in my school and was allowed to practise with them apart from the regular group class. As they recognised my background and commitment to the art, I used to discuss with them applications of specific techniques. Once, when practising in a group, I openly expressed my dissatisfaction with the instructor's presentation of a technique. Similar to my school experience, the instructor himself was very open to suggestions, and we eventually figured out what had not worked that day. However, after class, one of the senior students came to me asking about my "understanding of Chinese culture". He went on at length about his and other students' dissatisfaction with my "errant behaviour". "We are here to learn from the teachers, not to correct them!", he exclaimed. After my comment that instructors might also make mistakes and progress also required a critical approach, he replied, "It is not like we do not see their mistakes. They might be wrong from time to time, but you are not in a position to point it out. It is not your job, and it hurts not only their position but also ours (other students), especially the ones who are senior to you. You shall not do it again!" he expressed categorically with some others standing behind him and nodding their heads. It became quite evident to me that at stake was not just the teacher's position and his recognition by the students, but the students' perception of their position and the obligations they should fulfil. Collective harmony and individual socio-moral identity (a certain position that is expected to be performed in a certain way) had been disrupted (Zhai, 1995, pp. 238–239).

It then appeared to me that in the first example, everyone was doing what one was supposed to do, that is, the teacher provided a solution and students recognised it as a plausible one. It was not appropriate to object or question the professor's view. Denouncing it as not plausible was a challenge to the whole socio-morally sanctioned structure. That is why the ones who were most dissatisfied were my fellow students who suddenly had the structure they felt very comfortable with shaken up. Not only were the teacher's social position and the level of social obligations fulfilment put under pressure (Hu, 1944), but the students' self-perception as those fulfilling their obligations were openly questioned. Before the next class, being equipped with some previous experience and driven by pure curiosity, I went to that senior student and apologised for my lack of understanding with a solemn promise of being more considerate about others' feelings. Surprisingly, this did the trick, and soon I was accepted back into the pack. I just had to remember to keep my debates with other teachers about techniques private, letting my fellow students save their face as students.

The third situation that can shed some light on the importance of face, understood as behaving in an expected manner, happened during one of the Student Staff Liaison Committee meetings that I attended on behalf of my department at a university workplace of mine. During the meeting, one of the First Year students came up with a project of establishing a student society that would provide certain services to the university community. As much as he tried to be detailed in his presentation, for the mostly foreign staff in attendance, the conclusion was that the student wanted to start a new club and the whole thing was about having more opportunities for socialising. The student was not entirely satisfied with this conclusion and, in a very polite and deferent manner, tried to explain his project again. As the chair of the committee was not yet well versed in formal Chinese modes of communication, he kept insisting that if the student wanted a new society for socialising, he needed to apply to a relevant committee. The student kept trying to explain that that was not the sole purpose of his project. Then, it came to my mind that since students at the university needed to do a work placement in order to graduate, he might be proposing something like that for the students. After my question to that effect, the student was relieved and said: "That is precisely what I wish to do." What is interesting here is the fact that the student came up with a very interesting project but, as a junior student

accustomed to a Chinese educational style where the initiative is to be found more on the teacher's side, he did not dare to make his request directly to the chair of the committee. As a result, despite the student's quite good English language proficiency, the chair could not understand his real intentions. Only by having his intentions spelt out by another teacher, was he able to finally confirm the purpose of his endeavour without fear of being disrespectful to/hurting someone's face and disrupting a for him unwritten agreement.

Authority, Face and Communication in Classroom Settings

Summarising the three stories above², it is clear that a particular pattern of interaction between a teacher and a student, originating in Confucian socio-ethical ideals (Cheng, 1985; Kinnison, 2017, pp. 34–36), is being perpetuated despite changing socio-economic and even political realities. It might surprise many that despite the declared intention to “modernise” and “become a global citizen”, not to mention Communism and the Cultural Revolution, the dynamic of the interaction between students and their teachers is not without a resemblance to the past. For the ones believing in the “universality of the modernising process”, the way students may approach their instructors is everything but a display of “globalisation of social values”. For instance, one of the main problems that many educators, especially western ones, are facing in China, is the passiveness of students and their lack of involvement in discussions and debates. It may come across as a great surprise to those who grew up in the western tradition to have students being present but unwilling to participate actively in classroom activities, especially as individuals. There is also an observable tendency towards awaiting “a proper answer”, something that in the humanities and social sciences can be a source of great frustration for many western educators, many whom believe in dialogic reason. It leads many to quite negative conclusions such as, “Chinese students lack critical thinking skills”, “Chinese students are not creative”, “All they know is just copying”, and so on. As from a certain point of view such claims could be classified as “biased” or “stereotyping”, from the practitioner's perspective, they are not entirely false. However, what matters, especially from a Chinese perspective, is not the ideological debate, but the effectiveness of education. And this cannot be easily achieved without a proper understanding of the nature and origins of these obstacles. For instance, what appears as seeming plagiarism might not have to be a result of academic dishonesty. It can rather be the result of a conviction that published research, is “authoritative” and such should be, and is expected to be, replicated. I believe it is worth considering the structure and application of some culturally determined factors in education that might be crucial for the effectiveness of the entire endeavour.

From the examples above, we might learn that the teacher's authority as “the one who knows” is an integral part of the perception of the process of education. It denotes one's status but also one's obligations. The authority of the teacher is pre-assumed, by both the teacher and the student, a reality that might not and should not be arbitrarily altered. It is directly related to the crucial for the Chinese culture notion of face (Ho, 1976). I will now return to the conceptualisation of face, that I put on hold above.

Hu Hsien-Chin advanced the first and still influential theory of face in 1944 in which she proposed the distinction of social (*mianzi*) and moral face (*lian*). As Hu clarifies, the former is “a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation” and the latter “is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation”. (Hu, 1944: 45.) Regardless

² Due to the limited scope of this paper, an analysis of further similar instances is not possible. May it suffice to say that these were not isolated cases, and numerous instances of similar behaviours have been observed and reported in literature (i.e. Zhai 1995; Zuo 1997; Wang and Zheng 2015).

of further criticism of this distinction (Ho, 1976), Hu's conceptualisation explicitly and systematically expounds the social origin and the psycho-moral effects of this notion. It is clear from her analysis that the essential terms for the conceptualisation of face are "prestige" and "respect". As much as Hu's analysis laid foundations for further investigations of the concept of face, David Ho (1976), drawing heavily on Hu's argument, opposed too close identification of face with notions of "prestige", "honour" or "dignity". He emphasised that despite similarities between the notion of face and "a standard of behaviour", "a personal variability", "status", "dignity" or "honour", face is something more than any of these terms separately.

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social net-work and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct (...) (p. 686).

Ho's approach is important for two reasons. First, it points to the social nature of the notion and its importance "in the maintenance of social structure" (St. André, 2013, p. 76). Second, it connects individual and social features by indirectly pointing to personal identity as a result of the interplay of social forces. This aspect of Ho's theory is rarely noticed, but later developments of theories emphasised this relation between the face and identity. Thus, Helen Spencer-Oatley has presented the most "holistic" view in this respect:

I propose that in cognitive terms, face and identity are similar in that both relate to the notion of 'self'-image (including individual, relational and collective construals of self), and both comprise multiple self-aspects or attributes. However, face is only associated with attributes that are affectively sensitive to the claimant. It is associated with positively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and with negatively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others NOT to ascribe to him/her.

Furthermore, I propose that interactionally, face threat/loss/gain will only be perceived when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed (or denied, in the case of negatively evaluated traits) and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others. (2007, p. 644)

As such, face is not only a "surface", a tool used in the game of social relations and interpersonal communication but a factor that touches upon the very core of any interaction between socialised individuals, personal and socially assumed identity. Face is based on claimed/ascribed social position and authority. Authority is the factor that determines the success of the educational efforts which are equal in meaning to a religious ritual. Students are then getting used to the situation in which they are "being taught" instead of "learn" early on because it is the staff's role (face) to teach and student's role to be the recipient of this teaching. On the other hand, students as students also assume a specific role. They are all learners, as such equal, and disruption of such arrangements is a disruption of interpersonal identity. As a consequence, students who stand out or do not keep up with others, lose their own or harm their classmates' face (position, authority but also moral standing), and they need to re-establish the balance. It can be a source of massive stress and lead to errant behaviour or/and further withdrawal. Even more importantly, since face is endowed in social relations and a part of power-games (Hwang, 1987; 2005), losing or gaining face is not an individual but a collective business. As long as one plays according to the commonly accepted rules and wins,

then the face of the group is being enhanced. If one plays according to the rules but fails, it hurts the group's face, but the failure can be redeemed. However, if one wins playing against the rules, not to mention losing, s/he does damage to the shared perception of the power balance, and even the winner might expect exclusion from the group (Zhai, 1995, pp. 243–244).

As a result, there exists the fear of demonstrating lack of abilities to confirm one's assumed and ascribed self-image by others, to use Spencer-Oatey's terminology. However, not following the established pattern might be perceived as a challenge to the face, the authority of those who administer the "proper knowledge" and those who accept them as such. That is precisely the reason why my classmates were more upset with my critical comments about the teacher's solutions than the teacher himself. In a way, it is reminiscent of what Freire calls a "culture of silence" since there is a well-internalised conviction that no one should stick out and those who do should be punished. The silence and passiveness at first resemble and fit Freire's postulates quite well. The problem starts when we find out that those remaining silent do not come from the non-privileged class, and by no means, they have ever experienced the hardship of life he did. Moreover, we might soon find out that the same individuals are quite outspoken when they are being allowed to work in groups when the responsibilities are shared between all members. The gains are then somehow shared, the more substantial portion might even go to the best performing one, reducing the resentful feelings of others of the same face. Losses, on the other hand, are not individual but group ones, that significantly reduce the fear of failure and allows for performance improvement. As a result, we might find that Chinese students do not lack creativity or are inevitably inclined towards copying well-established patterns. As mentioned above, there is quite a different socio-cultural set up at work that still recognises the importance of authority and that builds self-esteem from this socially shared self-image called face that determines the nature of class dynamics. This self-image is certainly socially-constructed, and the face/authority as independent objectivity cannot be easily and clearly assessed (Lu, 1934). However, and that is where many modern theorists fail, socially-constructed does not equal less valid or being imbued with less factual influence. Students who are experiencing the western educational model for the first time, and their instructors alike, seem to be particularly prone to be affected by the discrepancy in the perception and application of educational models. What seems to be crucial is the recognition of constraints on both sides. As students are required by their teachers to embrace the modern/western teaching style, teachers on their behalf should be more aware that the way toward the realisation of their goals might lead through the (conditional) suspension of their anti-authoritarian principles.

"Respectability", however, is inevitably entangled with "responsibility" and is socially sanctioned. It seems to be a self-perpetuating pattern, and only recognition of this reality can bring about more desirable results. Even the most "modern" teacher must then recognise the fact that s/he is supposed to be an "authoritative knowledge administrator". As a result, at least in the initial stage of the process, the teacher might have no choice but to assume such a role, and by the power of his/her authority direct students beyond the limits of the "cultures of authority" (Pye, 1985). Otherwise, the situation in which students misread the "relaxed teacher", believing that s/he would not give a serious exam and are gravely disappointed afterwards when the exam was difficult, will become a common occurrence.

Conclusion

For any educational endeavour, attaining specific results is one of the primary goals. It indeed encounters numerous obstacles and as such is a process of constant re-assessment and re-adjustment. A particular subject, the students, and a particular learning environment determine

methods applied and their efficiency. In this paper, I tried to point out that modern/western education is based on theories that are an outcome of the development of particular (western) philosophical and social principles. Despite their undeniable merits, they represent a specific approach to an individual and society and pertain to a particular socio-symbolic reality. Socio-symbolic realities are socially-constructed. As such, it is subject to change and continuous modifications. However, any socio-symbolic reality arises under specific circumstances and is a result of the appreciation of particular values.

Consequently, a socio-symbolic reality, even if modified repeatedly, conveys a particular set of values perpetuating specific attitudes and behaviours. And even if their display can be affected by a changing socio-economic and political environment, certain tendencies remain. For education, it is crucial to recognise the cultural reality of the teaching and learning environment. Progressivism, constructivism, reconstructivism and Critical Theory all have their significant contribution in many fields, including the development of educational philosophies. However, given that they emerged as a protest or at least a reaction to the shortcomings of education understood as “transfer of knowledge”, they cannot be taken as the ultimate answer to the challenges of teaching and learning. Notably, in a culturally specific environment, even the realisation of their main objectives can be significantly affected by the unsuitability of the methods applied. As I tried to argue, Chinese society, as based on an appeal to authority, its display and appreciation, is no less democratic and creative than any other. However, to become aware thereof, it might be necessary at times to go against modern educational principles and accept the role of an “authoritative source of knowledge”. For the realisation of pre-assumed objectives, it might be necessary to adjust methods the way that would allow for minimal face loss and maximum face enhancement of all parties involved. To overcome authoritarian bias, in an authoritarian society, it might be necessary not only to recognise the authority, the face of others, but also to assume the prescribed role of authority. In other words, to overcome the constraints of “authoritarian” education, it seems to be necessary to accept and enhance the role of authority and behave according to the requirements of the face attached to it. At least at the initial stage of immersion into western-style education, such a “localisation” seems to be a necessary and useful adjustment.

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