

Confucian Legacy in Classrooms: The Cost of Moral Hierarchy in Learning

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Abstract: This report examines the dynamics of teacher-student relationships within the Chinese cultural context, emphasizing the influence of Confucian traditions on educational roles. The study identifies a historically unequal relationship, where teachers are positioned as authoritative figures and students as passive recipients of knowledge, reflecting Confucian ideals of hierarchy and moral exemplarity. Teachers are expected to embody virtue and serve as role models, while students are trained to respect authority and prioritize diligence over critical thinking. The analysis highlights pedagogical challenges, including unilateral teaching modes, limited classroom interaction, and overemphasis on rote learning, which hinder creativity and independent analysis. Furthermore, the hierarchical dynamic negatively impacts student motivation and classroom atmosphere. The report concludes that while Confucian values foster moral development, modern educational practices should balance tradition with strategies promoting equity, critical engagement, and student-centered learning.

Keywords: Teacher-Student; Relationship; Chinese; Cultural; Context; Confucianism

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Introduction

Gunther (1988) defines culture as customs that result in meanings and the final goals that the customs bring about. Similarly, Peace Corps (2002, p. 14) asserts that culture is a succession of ‘beliefs’, ‘values’, and ‘assumptions’ associated with life that guide people’s behavior. It exists in a particular group of people who will not change it by reason of exterior factors and it usually remains in offspring. Therefore, culture is different from ethnic group to ethnic group or from one country to another.

According to Gunther (1988), communication drives at meanings and their ‘conscious’ or ‘unconscious’, ‘deliberate’ or ‘accidental’ interaction among multiplicate cultures or among groups that are closely connected with culture. Similarly, Cooper and Simonds (2007:8) point out that communication in classrooms exhibits both verbal and nonverbal intercourses among teachers as well as learners and among learners in the process of apperception. Nonetheless, the apperception is affected by previous experience, beliefs, senses, values, race, gender, or culture. Thus, communications between teachers and students vary from country to country or from one ethnic group to another. Therefore, this assignment aims to explore the roles of teacher and students in Chinese cultural context.

1 The relationship between Chinese teachers and students

The proverb ‘The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up’ can be used to describe the close connection between Chinese teachers and learners. They are inter-related and inter-dependent. Neither of them is dispensable. In the process of teaching and learning, the most essential relationship is the relationship between teachers and students. They rely on and influence each other. Therefore, the key to organizing an effective teaching activity is to construct a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.

However, the relationship between teachers and students is unequal since the initiation of Chinese education. Han (Tang Dynasty, cited in Luo, 2005) defines ‘teacher’ in the ‘Theory of teachers’ as people who preach, instruct and disabuse. Generally speaking, Chinese teachers mainly focus on preach and instruction. Therefore, the traditional relationship between teachers and students can be compared to the relationship between buckets and cups. Namely, teachers must have a bucket of water if they intend to offer a cup of water to their students. The relationship that bases on the conception of containers is

an obstacle of innovation due to its inequality and expository teaching mode (chalk-and-talk).

2 Teachers' roles in Chinese culture

Chinese traditional Confucianism persists on a certain particular criterion (such as differences between governor and subject, male and female) and identify with different ranks of people. Thus, teachers are considered to be superior to their students. According to record in 'Rites'(Kong, Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Luo, 2005), if a teacher is respected, his knowledge and principles will also be respected. Moreover, learning will be respected (Kong, Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Luo, 2005). Similarly, the proverb 'He who teaches me for one day is my father for life' shows teachers' highly regarded status in China. These traditional conceptions have influenced teachers and students since thousands of years ago. As a result, they lead to a barrier between teachers and students: teachers stand high above the masses, and they have absolute authority to their students; students are not allowed to put forward their dissidence; students give a wide berth to their teachers and dare not communicate with their teachers freely; teachers can not throw off their airs to communicate with their students; each of them hide their soul-searching from the other; students are even required to bow or salute to their teachers whenever they meet them in some primary and high schools. In addition, Chinese teachers not only have power to pay attention to their students' study but also have authority to care about their life, even choosing friends and falling in love with others.

On the other hand, the unequal status of teachers and students as well as the traditional Confucian conceptions bring about unilaterally expository teaching mode in the process of teaching. Teachers are dominant in teaching activities. Students are not allowed to interrupt teachers in class even if they have important questions to ask, because such behavior is thought to be impolite or even rude in Chinese classrooms. Just as Hall's (1976, in Holmes, 2004) statement, 'student-teacher interpersonal relationships are hierarchical' and 'communication tends to be indirect'. Teachers usually will not require students to put forward their diverse opinions or to say their say in class. There is a lack of relaxed atmosphere and friendly interactional mode in teaching-learning activities. Sometimes, teachers almost do not communicate with students in classroom at all, in particular, in large-size classes of universities.

Education is highly attached importance by Confucianism. Confucian education primarily aims at character-building and its jumping-off point is to cultivate students' morality (Cao, 2001). According to Confucius (Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002), learning's leading objective is to improve behavior by virtue of students' deep internal transformation because individual success and social harmony are determined by people's behavior. He (Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002) also asserted that virtue is acquired mainly by means of learning from those who can offer virtuous models. Therefore, students are aroused to find virtuous people as examples so as to learn and imitate them (Kong, Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002), which exhibits the significance of self-determination and constantly striving to become stronger in terms of morality and ideal. Namely, educational function is to make a person become a worthy and qualified person through learning. In the process of humanization, people present their inherent humanity and influence surrounding people or even the entire society.

Influenced by Confucianism mentioned above, Chinese teachers have to try their best to become persons with exemplary virtue so as to be models of their students in most situations. China is a country which attaches importance to moral education. Therefore, moral principles and norms of teachers are considered to be extremely vital. In China, being exemplary role-models is viewed as an important educational power and it is significant to growth of students. Visage that teachers show is just like a mirror by which students understand the society, problem and relationship between people because education is contact of spirits of teachers and students. Thus, teachers are direct and vivid models of their students in moral. Teachers combine 'being a good person' with 'being a good teacher' in order to serve as their students' examples ever and again. They should impel and edify their students by the silent and invisible impetus resulted from their decent appearance, elegant behavior, kind attitude, polite language, steady-going action and high-minded moral sentiment.

In addition, teachers are called on getting a commitment to their work in Chinese traditional culture. In China, teachers will be regarded if they devote themselves to teaching work and their students. In general, Chinese teachers are always ready to help their students in terms of both study and life. They will not decline to help their students when they tend to enhance themselves in learning or have difficulties in life. In addition, Chinese teachers who serve their students dedicatedly and

sincerely are considered to be employable teachers. In fact, a good number of Chinese teachers make advantage of their spare time to supervise their students, in particular, primary school teachers and high school teachers.

3 Students' roles in Chinese context

According to Lee (1996, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002), Chinese traditional education affects the nature of interaction in classroom and behavior of Chinese students in learning because the Confucian tradition expects students to make efforts, be respectful of 'knowledge' and 'authoritative sources', and demonstrate improved behavior. Currently, in most Chinese schools (including colleges and universities), learning is putting knowledge into students' brain and teaching is telling students the results and then asking them to remember and understand in order to apply them in the future. Thus, students' brain is crowded with a variety of conclusions that do not need to be checked or questioned due to excessive emphasis on authority of textbooks and resources as well as teachers. In that situation, although teachers sometimes may invite students to ask questions or organize students to discuss, nevertheless, almost all the questions have a clear and normal answer which has been in teachers' mind. Teachers are students' direct and absolute judge. In this case, students may bear abundant knowledge but lack of analysis and criticism on their own.

Confucius (Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Luo, 2005) deems that learning is a repeatedly practical process and thereby emphasizes on repeated practice to remember what students have learned. In addition, learning is closely concerned with diligence and efforts to Confucius (Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Also, he regards single-minded effort and diligent practice as means to achieve success (Kong, Spring and Autumn Era, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Therefore, a good Chinese student must be a diligent and hard-working person in Chinese culture. As a matter of fact, students in Chinese primary or high schools usually finish their homework and review or preview their lessons till 11:00 to 12:00pm.

In Chinese culture, if a student is good or not usually is judged by if he pays attention to listening to what teachers are saying in class. However, traditional teaching method just attaches importance to instruct, which result in a lack of strategies regarding how to learn effectively. Most students do not know how to find out questions and useful information, how to listen to teachers, how to take and clear up notes, how to summarize or how to read materials even though they are listening. Listening is the leading means to acquire knowledge in Chinese traditional teaching mode. Nonetheless, what to learn, how to learn, what is correct, and what is superior are all determined by teachers' instruction and evaluation. Students just accept knowledge passively and submissively, which makes students depend on their teachers mentally and dare not envisage their own capability or exert their creativity.

4 Disadvantages of the teaching and learning roles in Chinese culture

According to Lu (1996), Yoveff studied on 1672 students and 43 teachers in 28 schools in 1972 and found that interest of students in subjects was proportional to their evaluation of teachers. Friendliness and solicitude of teachers is an important factor to form students' positive attitudes towards learning. They will promote students' confidence which is necessary to make students persist on and devote to study because some students need sincere solicitude and they will make their efforts to study after they feel it.

Another influence of the relationship between teachers and students on students' study is that classroom atmosphere resulted from the teacher-student relationship negatively affects the study of student. If the classroom atmosphere is harmonious and relaxing, students will feel inspired and pleased, and their mind will come alive. On the contrary, if the classroom atmosphere is tensional and hidebound, students will feel nervous, be on thorns and silent. In such a classroom atmosphere, students will unconsciously escape, which will necessarily influence their learning interests and learning in itself.

In addition, the relationship between teachers and students impacts the development of students to a large extent. Currently, studies concerning teaching and learning mainly focus on how to teach, and a lot of Chinese people deem that the relationship between teachers and students is a kind of affiliated relationship, which inevitably results in an obstacle related to superior and inferior. Accordingly, it not only decreases students' study effect, but also oppresses students' enthusiasm, go-aheadism, creativity and imagination.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, although Chinese traditional culture contains a lot of positive things that deserve learning as well as using for reference, and cultivates a great number of outstanding, diligent and virtuous people, it also brings about bad effects in teaching and learning as well as the relationship between teachers and students, such as, unequal status between teachers and students, unilaterally expository teaching mode, twisted criteria on judging a good student and ignorance of students' ability to analyze and criticize independently. Therefore, the good of Chinese traditional culture should be accepted and the bad of it should be rejected when it is utilized.

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