

# **From Laoshi to Partners in Learning: Pedagogic Conversations Across Cultures in an International Classroom**

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### Abstract

Under the impact of accelerating globalization in the education sector, classrooms in Canadian higher education are becoming more and more internationalized with respect to the diversity of students, curriculum, educational philosophies, and pedagogical relationships. This hermeneutic case study examined how critical thinking was conceptualized by Chinese students and investigated the highly contested pedagogic issue of developing critical intellectuals in a Canadian international graduate program where the majority of the students are Chinese. Findings of this study affirm that the fundamental educational value on criticality involve complicated conversations and deep cross-cultural understandings in a globalized learning environment. We argue that educators who teach international students should critique the unquestioned adoption of concepts that typify the academic fields' present circumstances and engage in a continuing dialogue about how to create the critical meeting ground where criticality meets harmony.

**Keywords:** globalization, internalization of higher education, criticality, harmony, Chinese international students

### Résumé

Sous l'impact de la mondialisation accélérée dans le secteur de l'éducation, les salles de classe dans l'enseignement supérieur au Canada sont de plus en plus internationalisées en ce qui concerne la diversité des élèves, le curriculum, les philosophies éducatives et les relations pédagogiques. Cette étude de cas herméneutique a examiné comment la pensée critique a été conceptualisée par des étudiants chinois et la question pédagogique très controversée du développement des intellectuels critiques dans un programme international canadien de deuxième cycle universitaire où la majorité des élèves sont des chinois. Les résultats de cette étude affirment que la valeur éducative fondamentale sur la criticité implique des discussions complexes et de profondes compréhensions interculturelles dans un environnement d'apprentissage global. Nous soutenons que les éducateurs qui enseignent aux étudiants étrangers devrait critiquer l'adoption incontestée des concepts qui caractérisent les circonstances actuelles des champs académiques et s'engager dans un dialogue continu sur la façon de créer le point de rencontre essentiel où se réunit la criticité et l'harmonie.

**Mots-clés:** mondialisation; internalisation de l'enseignement supérieur; criticité; harmonie, étudiants internationaux chinois

## From Laoshi<sup>1</sup> to Partners in Learning: Pedagogic Conversations Across Cultures in an International Classroom

### Introduction

Under the impact of accelerating globalization in the education sector, classrooms in Canadian higher education are becoming more and more internationalized with respect to the diversity of students, curriculum, educational philosophies, and pedagogical relationships. In 2010, about 90,000 full-time and 13,000 part-time international students were enrolled in Canadian institutions of higher education. This represents about 8% of full-time undergraduate students in Canada and close to 20% of full-time graduate students (AUCC, 2012). This internationalization of Canadian higher education has resulted in a salient feature of the globalized Canadian post-secondary classrooms where students have diverse ethnic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

In the past decade, China has become the top source country of international students on Canadian campuses (Canadian Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). Like other ethnic groups of international students, Chinese international students enrich the learning environment and perspectives within Canadian higher education and communities they are located while also bringing economic benefits to them (Davidson, 2011). Meanwhile, their unique educational background and cultural identity raises philosophical and pedagogic challenges and opportunities with respect to curricular issues and teaching practices. This paper reports a study examining the infusion of criticality in an international graduate program where a significant number of students are Chinese and the highly contested issues emerged in teaching practices. Findings of this study suggest that in a globalized learning environment heavily affected by Chinese educational traditions and cultures, the Western notion of criticality and the Eastern notion of harmony engage complicated cross-cultural conversations about the fundamental educational philosophies and values between the West and the East. Teaching and learning in such environment can serve as a meeting ground that was simultaneously critical and yet respectful of the cultural roots of our students.

### Criticality: Infusion of Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy

In this paper, criticality is employed as a generic term referring to a range of critical pedagogical practices, including the infusion of deep critical thinking into a program of study. Despite the fact that developing students' criticality has become a core educational value in Canada and the other Western countries, few pause to examine the assumptions and concepts that are held about this value, nor do we properly consider certain essential distinctions. There is an important but not sufficiently appreciated difference between critical thinking and critical pedagogy (Burbules & Berk, 1999; Freire, 1989; Kincheloe, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2008). Critical thinking aims to develop the *individual's* skills to decipher and evaluate communication—be it written or oral, art or text, television, radio, movies, or speeches—but critical pedagogy, in contrast, is highly *social* and *political*. It seeks to alert students to the social, economic, and political conditions that give rise to the phenomenon that is under study and to look at power relations and the impact of these power relations in a given society including global society

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<sup>1</sup> Laoshi is a term of respect used for teachers in China and has the implication of a knowledgeable and respected authority figure. Our title "From Laoshi to Partners in Learning" reflects the need to transform teachers from unquestioned authorities to partners in the learning process.

(Burbales & Burk, 1999). Both critical thinking and critical pedagogy constitute important intellectual tools that prepare students to cope with communications and messages with which we are constantly bombarded in an increasingly interconnected world and to make informed judgements with respect to who benefits from the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions and arrangements locally and globally.

Criticality, valued as a fundamental concept in Western academic tradition and culture, is absent in Chinese educational philosophies and traditions (O'Sullivan & Guo, 2010). It has not emerged as an important value and discourse in Chinese education until the beginning of 21st century, during which time China is undertaking massive educational changes at both secondary and post-secondary levels.

### **Harmony: A Core Asian Philosophical Tradition**

Originated from Confucian traditions, harmony has always been a fundamental concept in Chinese society, where an individual is primarily a component of a collective and the unity of this collective is the most important concern. Underpinning Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions, harmony refers to peaceful co-existence among people, society, nature, supreme creator, and oneself as well as how conflicts and disagreement among people, classes, ethnic groups, and cultures can be settled peacefully (Wong, 2009). Historically, harmony is the fundamental principle of Chinese social and diplomatic relations, calligraphy, and the practice of Tai Chi. It is being increasingly emphasized in current Chinese political philosophy and remains an integral part of the psycho-cultural construct of Chinese mentality.

Harmony implies reconciliation of the interests and relations of all concerned parties, and provides a means whereby people's different opinions and social conflicts are settled with trust, equality, respect, and mutual understanding. It emphasizes the unity and peaceful relationship within/of the collective and signifies public argument and debate as less acceptable social behaviours.

### **Context of the Study**

This study is situated in the International Student Program (ISP) at the Faculty of Education at Brock University, Canada. The ISP is established in 1998 and a self-contained graduate program consists of cohorts of Chinese international student in their early to mid-20's. At the time of enrolling into the ISP program, very few Chinese students have studied and/or examined China—either its role as an emerging global power entering into agreements with other countries or its internal transformation from a starkly orthodox communist society to a modern, highly centralized, expansionist neo-liberal economy all within the life-time of the parents of these students. The fast socio-economic changes during the past decades have brought dramatic changes to schooling that these students actually experienced but never reflected upon. In devising such a reflective learning opportunity for the Chinese students who take the mandatory comparative education course in the ISP program, the instructor (co-author O'Sullivan) deliberately exposes the students to the growing critical scholarship coming out of and about China. A particular focus of the course was the process of educational reform that is taking place in China. Attention was paid to how the educational reform stressed the knowledge and skills required by an entrepreneurial society that needed competent owners and managers as well as literate and highly skilled workers. Being aware of students' sensitivities towards foreign critiques of China, all the articles, with one exception, were written by Chinese scholars.

Given China's rapid rise as a global power and the failure to date of the Chinese educational system to shed a light on Chinese neo-liberalism within the country or its global manoeuvring beyond its borders, O'Sullivan intentionally developed the course curriculum so as to provide Chinese graduate students the opportunity, in a culturally sensitive manner, to study the aforementioned issues in China from a deeply critical perspective. This, of course, is where the danger of neo-colonialism creeps in. If this critical perspective is not used within the framework of the same program to expose the Chinese students to a study of Western countries, including Canada, then indeed the exercise can understandably be viewed as being neo-colonial regardless of its intention. If, however, during their program of study, the students are exposed to critical perspective that is applied to both China and the West, there is less cause for complaint. While those who offer the ISP program need to be constantly vigilant about this balance, all of the courses, including those that situate their topics in the Canadian context, do so through a critical perspective, a fact attested to by all of the students that we interviewed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts a post-colonial framework in examining Chinese graduate students' experiences in a Canadian international program. Young (2003) argues that a post-colonial perspective must operate from the underlying principle that critical pedagogic approaches must transcend borders and that no country is exempt from such scrutiny. He emphasized that a post-colonial study should include topics such as "the position of women, of development, of economy, of social justice ... to force its alternative knowledge into the power structures of the west as well as the non west" (p. 7). As a result, students engaged in post-colonial studies are provided with an opportunity to change the way they think, the way they behave, and to produce a more just and equitable relation between different peoples of the world.

A post-colonial framework was employed in this study to examine Chinese international students' study abroad experiences in the ISP program because it provided them with the space and the opportunity to deeply engage in reflection upon their lived experience back home and in their new setting through a lens dominating the Western academe. As China has a long semi-colonial past, it has inculcated in their students a strong post-colonial national sensitivity and consciousness through the school system and the mass media since 1950's. As a result, China is unquestionably seen by most Chinese international students as a staunchly anti-colonial country. Post-colonial perspectives remind us to be conscious of the potential for a neo-colonial conceit (i.e., imposing a view because of its presumed cultural superiority) to creep into the program and this research regardless of good intentions to the contrary.

### **Research Methodology**

Hermeneutics—the art of understanding discourses such as language, texts, translation, and explaining the meaning of such discourses (Gadamer, 2006)—was adopted as the methodological framework to analyze Chinese international students' lived experiences in Brock University's International Student Program and to understand how they conceptualize criticality as a prevailing discourse in Canadian academic context. Hermeneutics not only represents a dialogical process of cross-cultural understanding, but also requires a commitment to this process through culturally sensitive interpretation. In addition, hermeneutics questions the limitation of positivist research approaches founded on modern empirical science by attending to the

humanness of being in the world, and offers important insights into understanding the deeply inter-subjective nature of human knowing (Gadamer, 1989; Guo, 2010).

Philosophical hermeneutics is adopted as the inquiry orientation and approach for this study because it recognizes historical and cultural contexts as the interpretive conditions in which understanding and transformation takes place. The continuous and dialogical nature of understanding, connoted in the concept of the hermeneutic circle, signifies the opportunity for both instructors/researchers and students in this study to expand their horizons from confronting different educational and cultural traditions encountered in global classrooms.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants of this study consist of a total of 18 Chinese graduate students who were enrolled in the 2007-08 and the 2008-09 cohorts of the ISP program at Brock University. Conversation was adopted as the research method for collecting, analyzing, and making meaning of data. Conversation is not only “a process of coming to an understanding” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 385), but also a process of oral inquiry and interpretation (Feldman, 1999; Guo, 2010). Conversations in this study took two forms: i) those that occurred during each and every class as the students worked through the issues that made up the course content and the exchange of ideas, and ii) the one-on-one conversations conducted at the end of the course. All formal conversations consisted of a process of talking, listening, reflecting, and responding through questioning, anecdote-telling, and sharing and were audio recorded and transcribed.

It is worthwhile to note participants’ attitude towards participation in this study. Students from both cohorts took a compulsory comparative education course offered through the ISP program. During the first year of the study, “Comparative Education: Exploring Issues in International Context” (Kubow & Fossum, 2007) was used as course text, which proved to be too challenging for the Chinese students. Not only was the level of the language employed dense, but the case studies involved background knowledge of eight different countries (e.g., Brazil, South Africa, England, Japan, etc.) about which the students had little or no general knowledge. To base the course on something about which the students knew a great deal through personal experience but had not reflected upon, the course instructor O’Sullivan deliberately chose literature written by Chinese scholars on the challenges facing the Chinese educational system as well as on the socio-economic changes occurring in China caused by globalization. During the first year of the study, a number of the students in the first cohort declined to participate because they felt that the course was biased and unduly critical of China. The second cohort was far more accepting and appreciative of the course despite the fact that few changes were made in the course outline. All of the students in the second cohort agreed to be interviewed. This background affected the focus of the conversations with members of the two cohorts. Conversations with the first cohort focused on participants’ feelings and reaction towards the perceived critique of China. Conversations with the second cohort focused primarily on examining the relationship between the two concepts of criticality and harmony.

The underpinning analytical and interpretive framework for data analysis is hermeneutic in application, interpreting the situated meanings of Chinese students’ descriptions of and reflections on their lived learning experiences of criticality and/or harmony in the international graduate program. The authors of this article interpreted the transcriptions of the conversation based on their own perspectives and understandings and then exchanged their interpretation and understanding continuously through meetings, emails, and phone calls. The findings reported in

this study represent the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1989) the two authors have reached through this collaboration process.

## Findings and Discussions

### Criticality as a Challenging Concept for Chinese Students

The Chinese term *pi pan shi si wei* (critical thinking) was used in conversations to seek participants’ conceptualization of criticality. The majority of the students indicated that they were familiar with that term but had little or no experience with it. They had not made the connection between the concept and what they experienced in their Canadian classes. The recognition of this Chinese expression and the realization that they had practiced critical thinking in China was limited to a minority. None of the research participants indicated that they had been exposed to critical *pedagogy* in their undergraduate study in China. Talking about her experience with critical thinking, Amanda explained:

Before coming to Brock, [I had] no idea what critical thinking was. I came to think critical thinking meant taking the opposite position to the one taken in the article; now I think it means applying logic to the article. Back in China, we don’t use critical thinking because the teacher always gives you the answer the teacher wants. In most of the courses that I took in Canada, I always worry about what is the correct answer when a professor asks a question. Later, I realized that Canadian teachers are less interested in right or wrong answers but in active participation.

Based on her experience in China, Evelyn interpreted critical thinking as “learning to comprehend what a writer says but not to question what they write” and that this learning expectation was very common in Chinese education system. Evelyn said that she felt that in China, there was more freedom to express your own opinion or interpretation in elementary school but that as students progressed to the senior grades such free-thinking was discouraged. This opinion was repeated by several of her classmates, all of whom agreed that two things were primarily responsible for this: (i) class size which ranges from 50 to 60 students in secondary schools to over 100 students in many university classes and (ii) teaching and learning based on standard tests and preparation for the National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE). Some Chinese students commented that they were rarely given the opportunities to critique the texts in various subject areas. This is possibly the explanation why the students failed to connect the concept *pi pan shi si wei* with what they experienced in Canadian classrooms because their instructors had pushed the critical thinking concept beyond merely understanding the text and insisted upon a more critical understanding of the authors’ intentions.

Being encouraged to develop and express one's own opinion was a new learning experience, but it was not without conflict. Some students mentioned that they didn't feel comfortable with the group work in the ISP classes because they had always to deal with different opinions within the group. They emphasized that Chinese students preferred harmonious relationships and even if there were disagreement, they'd be reluctant to express it. Therefore, “taking on” a fellow student, especially a professor, provoked in the students both a psychological and pedagogical struggle. From the point of view of the instructor, “all” that was being asked was that the students learn the skills associated with raising vital questions, assessing and challenging relevant information, engaging in conversations from a variety of

different perspectives, and communicating effectively with others. For many of the students, however, this expectation was the cause of a great deal of anxiety.

Coming from an education system that in many ways is so different from the Canadian education system, Chinese students experienced tremendous ambiguity in their understanding of criticality and their sense of what it means to be critical. Such ambiguity also contributed to a sense of disorientation as they learned to cope with the expectations required of them in the Canadian academic context. The fairly short 14-month period of an intensive Masters of Education (M.Ed.) program and the linguistic barriers many students struggled with at the beginning of the program greatly increased the challenges for Chinese students to demonstrate their understanding and application of criticality in academic performances in and out of classes. Those who had already spent a year at Brock in the Professional Masters Preparation Certificate Program (PMPCP) made a successful transition to their graduate work as this program offered training on the necessary skills of academic writing, research, classroom presentation, small group participation, and, importantly, critical thinking. Such a program also gives the international students a year to practice their English in an academic setting prior to entering the graduate classroom. Students who participated in this program indicated that they were much better prepared to cope with the challenges in a Canadian graduate class and had an understanding from the beginning of their graduate studies of the expectations, including what is meant by critical thinking. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this article to explore the benefits of such a preparatory year, but clearly the better prepared a student is for an academic program, the better the chances that he or she will more fully benefit from it. One year, after all, is a short time to expect transformative learning to occur because, as Paul (1994) points out, such change does not occur overnight.

Based on the foregoing, it might be suggested that a deeply engrained respect for teachers as authority, a history of dealing with the practical problems of class size, the cultural norm of avoiding public argument with other people, and the unfamiliarity with Western academic context make it a challenging task to engage Chinese students in the give and take of robust discussion and the expression of disagreement which can frequently characterize the Canadian classroom.

### **Criticality as Perceived Criticism of China**

The comparative education course was organized primarily around the notion of giving the Chinese students the opportunity to critically reflect upon the educational system within which they had spent 16 years. The philosophy underpinning this pedagogic orientation was that criticality was best learned in examining objects of study close to home and that it was too easy to critique the Other. As noted above, to avoid students' feelings of unfair criticisms by outsiders, all but one of the course readings were written by Chinese scholars. In addition to these selected articles, two documentary films were used as course materials for the first of the two cohorts under consideration: one of them was an American production entitled *China from the Inside*; the other one was *Manufactured Landscapes*, a documentary depicting Edward Burtynsky's photographic expedition to China in 2006. The former elicited little response, negative or positive, but *Manufactured Landscapes* provoked widespread negative reaction. The negative critique of *Manufactured Landscapes*, which came not only from those students who were manifesting a generalized resistance to the orientation of the course, also was controversial with at least some of the students who otherwise accepted the approach taken by the course. In addition to a discussion of the Three Gorges Dam project, the film documented the massive manufacturing plants with thousands of workers in each building and, perhaps most disturbingly



for the students, a town where used computers and TVs from abroad were disassembled for their salvageable parts, including heavy metals. The resulting pollution poisoned the town's drinking water. Because of the negative response to this particular documentary, the following year the class was shown *Up the Yangtze*, a documentary film by a young Chinese-Canadian film-maker Yung Chang. *Up the Yangtze* also focuses critically on the Three Georges Dam and, very importantly, its impact on both the people and the environment. In addition, it deals with social justice issues in China, the existence of severe rural poverty and the disparate impact that development projects have on the poorest of the poor. This film provoked lively discussion in class but did not attract negativity like the first film. The students who saw *Up the Yangtze* did not contest its essential message nor did they express frustration at "foreigners" criticizing China. Clearly, the reaction of the ISP students, when faced with the requirement to apply critical thinking to China and to Chinese educational practices, varies widely.

Each research participant was asked if he or she felt comfortable with the course objective that they examine the Chinese educational system and its neoliberal economic system as a broader context through a critical perspective. Julia said,

I appreciated the course expectations [with respect to] critical thinking. I think what Chinese students lack is critical thinking so when I saw the expectations, I thought it was very useful and meaningful to Chinese students.

Julia's comments indicated that critical thinking was not a skill familiar to her or to her fellow students. She commented that the comparative education class was more relevant to her because—whereas the critical thinking skills presented in other classes focused on North American examples—this class presented “the negative part of our Chinese educational system and society.” While this comment expressed a degree of appreciation for the exercise, it indicated that she continued to view the process as being negative towards China. Julia's comments reinforced the notion of the importance of developing critical thinking skills through topics that are “close to home.”

Some students equated criticality with negative thinking. This is a common understanding of critical thinking as reflected in Donna's comments:

I think your class was very useful because we learned to use critical thinking and we found some problems with our Chinese education system ... when I was a student in China, our teachers told us the way to think about our country, that it was great, and had no problems, but now I think this course helped in that aspect. We must realize the negative aspects so we can make changes and improve conditions to make our country better.

Lana brought a very personal perspective to the discussion. Living very close to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, she witnessed the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and knew that the real situation was different from the official version of the event on Chinese media. She attributed this life-altering event to her ability in critiquing China's political and education system. She said,

(i)n this course we learned more about our own system and have developed very clear ideas about the advantages and disadvantages of the system. In China, as students, we

just comply and never have deep thoughts about the system and, as a result, we ignore both the good and the bad.

This comment was affirmed by other student participants in this study. A number of participants reported that in China they didn't get such access to the problems and issues existing in the Chinese educational system, therefore they had little opportunity to think critically how to improve the Chinese educational system. They noted that the comparative education course made them realize the "lack of equity" and the globalization framework adopted in the comparative course served as a broader lens for her to see the bigger social structure behind China's education system and practice. Several students actually chose equity issues in Chinese education as the theme of their program exit projects, a choice that suggested that students were capable of developing critical and multiple perspectives once they gained more awareness and understanding concerning a social problem about which they had no previous information.

In order to bring critical perspectives to the dominant intellectual frames of reference and world-views with which the students are familiar, they need to gain an understanding of other world-views so that they could compare and critique from different perspectives. However, considering these students' short stay in Canada and the brevity of the ISP program in which these concepts were introduced, it was not surprising that many of the students with whom we had conversations didn't demonstrate that they felt empowered to think critically in a strong and broad sense about China and its education. Furthermore, as instructors in global classrooms, we need to be more aware of the philosophical, pedagogic, and cultural differences that quite often become barriers in the acquisition of criticality, at least as we define it in the Western academy. It should not be taken for granted that all of our students, especially those from different educational systems and backgrounds, have developed a good understanding and skills within the epistemology and pedagogy pervasive in Western academic contexts. Important epistemological terms, such as critical thinking and critical pedagogy, need to be explained explicitly at the beginning of the course/program and consistently reinforced throughout the teaching and learning process. This is not only essential for the academic success of international students, such as Chinese graduate students in this study, but also highly beneficial for domestic students, who also need to be challenged to become critical intellectuals.

### **Factors Affecting Chinese Students' Development of Criticality**

Reflecting on various factors affecting their critical thinking skills in an international classroom, the majority of the Chinese students in this study stated that the biggest barrier for them to express their critical perspectives of a topic was insufficient English language proficiency. Because English is a foreign language to all Chinese students, the language issue affected each student in deeply personal ways. While all of the participants scored sufficiently well in language proficiency tests to meet the preconditions to program admission, a number of them found it difficult to express their ideas clearly and concisely in classroom discussions through the program. This is unquestionably a factor in students' ability to fully appreciate and participate in their program of study. This is the principle reason why Brock, not without controversy, has grouped the Chinese students in these classes. Although these students are given the opportunity to take one of the program's required courses in the winter semester with the domestic students, a surprising number of them elect to return to the ISP course after a class or two with the domestic students. They commented that in the ISP classes the professors can accommodate their linguistic challenges and that this is less likely to be the case in the domestic classes.

The National College Entrance Exam was repeatedly mentioned as being a huge barrier to developing students' criticality. Many participants in this study indicated the examination-oriented education they received in China did not provide much space for them to become critical learners. They realized that the examination-orientated teaching and learning had suppressed their motivation and enthusiasm in presenting any thoughts and ideas that differed from those of their teachers and fellow students.

A supportive atmosphere of trust and equality plays a critical role in motivating students' commitment to a learning process of critical exploration because the development of criticality involves learners' feelings of being accepted and respected. Instructors' patience, empathy, and understanding are important factors in creating a safe environment where students could comfortably share ideas and participate in critical discussions. One student said that she was far less comfortable speaking English "in the street" where native English speakers were impatient with her. This student's sensitivity about her level of (dis)comfort speaking English reminded us that students' reservations in sharing ideas and presenting arguments were associated with complex psychological, linguistic, and temporal factors. It is a teacher's responsibility to create an atmosphere of trust and openness where students from different cultural and educational backgrounds feel safe and free to explore their perspectives within this learning space.

Well-structured instruction and engagement with differences and conflicts provide a meaningful scaffolding framework in which to develop students' criticality. One student commented that she learned to critically examine a text in her university literature course during which the instructor always asked them questions like, "What social class did the author belong to?" and "From whose perspective did the author write?" This line of questioning goes past the boundaries associated with traditional reading and reflects the objectives of developing students' reading skills with its emphasis on revealing power relations within a given society locally or globally. Such positive experience as a Chinese student with critical scholarship was unusual, at least among the students who participated in this study. This student's particular experience, however, demonstrates how a single teacher, or a small number of them, can play a powerful role in scaffolding the development of future intellectuals, whether that be in domestic or international learning contexts. It is equally important to note that making the connection between their past learning experience and the new learning objectives would allow students to more easily adapt to the expectations of becoming a critical learner and educator. This is the case because many of the students we interviewed were not as aware as Fan of the fact that they, in fact, had some exposure to *pi pan shi si wei*. Making such a connection serves to demystify the concept.

Cultural difference is another factor affecting Chinese students' demonstration of critical thinking. Most participants felt constrained by a deeply imbued sense that to contest others' point of view, especially that of a professor, was rude and inappropriate. Unfamiliar with the philosophical and pedagogic traditions of criticality, most Chinese students associated criticality with public criticism, which was against the typical cultural and social norm to which they were accustomed. The psychological and cultural struggles experienced by Chinese students affirm that understanding the intellectual history and national distinctiveness of the concept of criticality is the first step in developing critical intellectuals in the classroom where different cultures and educational traditions confront each other in the process of seeking mutual understandings and shared educational meanings. Both teachers and students need to understand the philosophical roots and pedagogic application of these concepts in different cultural contexts. This creates learning moments for instructors, who are well-advised to understand their international students' previous learning context, and students, who are not familiar with the philosophical and

pedagogic traditions in the host learning environment. If we can incorporate these distinctive understandings into a lexicon accessible to all, we will be getting closer to the point where we can claim that a cross-cultural and international form of criticality has been realized in our classrooms.

### **Criticality and Harmony: Paradoxes or Unity in a Holistic Pedagogy**

In this study, the concept of harmony and reflection on whether critical reasoning and harmony were mutually exclusive or reconcilable emerged as repeated themes in conversations with students. Harmony does not imply that one avoids conflicts and argument; it implies seeking similarities while dealing with differences in a non-confrontational manner. The conversation with one participant turned to how harmony might affect the teaching of criticality in the globalized Canadian classroom. Not seeing harmony as an obstacle as other students do, Donna argued that harmony is an integral part of sharing differences and problem-solving:

(h)armony does not mean that people don't debate or say 'I don't agree.' In different contexts it means different things. In an academic setting, I think it means we have different opinions, we talk, we discuss, we may or may not change our opinions. Whatever the outcome [of our discussions], it does not change the personal relationship between us. The opposite of harmony is conflict without debate.

Harmony in China is by far the hegemonic social value that has eclipsed the once dominant notion of conflict that prevailed during the era of Mao Zedong. The desire by both the country's leadership and the population as a whole to establish a harmonious society is completely understandable given the disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution. However much we may understand the desire for harmony as a response to a turbulent history, nonetheless, conflict and disagreement are ever-present and must be addressed if ideas are to evolve and people learn to give expression to their own perspectives. Therefore, in a learning context where Chinese students are engaged in developing their intellectual criticality, both teachers and students need to be aware that harmony can be used by the powerful to discredit dissent and encourage compliance with official thinking or it can serve as a tool to achieve and maintain a sense of community and common purpose, be it in a classroom, a workplace, a neighbourhood, or beyond. The issue for us is that harmony can never be thought of as being absolute—as an unchanging ideal set of circumstances. In even the most potentially harmonious of relationships—life-partners, best friends, a highly successful professional relationship—disagreements, sometimes major ones, will emerge followed by a period of conflict that, if harmony is to be restored, must be resolved on the basis of a new understanding.

While harmony emerged and evolved as a central philosophical concept in China at a very early development period of Confucianism and Taoism (about 500 B.C.), it also became a core philosophical concept through the thoughts and works of many Western philosophers, including the ancient Greek philosophers Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle. This concept re-emerged hundreds of years later in the writings of philosophers such as Kant and Hegel and in Marxist dialectics, which built the harmony/conflict tension into its core philosophical understanding of how society works. The value of harmony has not found its way into Western thought to the same degree that it characterizes Asian modes of thinking (Nesbitt, 2004; O'Sullivan & Guo, 2010). Despite the fact that some of the Chinese students, most notably Fan, had encountered critical thinking in China, nonetheless, the majority of our participants felt the role of harmony in Chinese philosophy and practice both inside and outside of the classroom is

in sharp contrast with the Western tradition of questioning. Therefore, learning to learn within the context of the Western classroom demands philosophical and psychological adjustments for these students if they are to express their world-views and interpretations that are different from those of their instructors and fellow students. The issue we are exploring is, given the dominance of harmony in traditional Chinese thinking and in current practice, if we can make our globalized classrooms meeting places for a rich discussion about equality and democratic possibilities given these two apparently contradictory intellectual and cultural traditions?

We argue that criticality and harmony are not as inherently contradictory as they are often seen. They can be viewed as constituting a contradictory unity that is constantly in need of being constituted and reconstituted but also constantly in danger of flying apart. Indeed, that is the essence of dialectical thinking—opposites find their synthesis that creates harmony where disharmony once existed but that new unity will generate its own contradictions. Surely this provides all concerned, instructors and students, with a rich learning experience where nothing is taken for granted and nothing is permanent. We remain optimistic, despite the challenges, that a holistic pedagogic approach is possible. This approach is both a characteristic of critical pedagogy and is consistent with what Nisbett (2004) calls ‘the Asian mode of thinking’. This approach should seem familiar to Chinese students whose culture is based on understanding things in context. Working to ensure that our global classrooms are based on a holistic pedagogical approach could well result in creating an open and safe space where Asian students could play a leadership role in developing the criticality in their perspectives and actions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In a globalized learning environment, the fundamental educational philosophies and values have become complicated conversations between instructors and students as well as among the students themselves. Criticality is concerned about the relationship between power and knowledge. For Chinese students, knowledge has been separated from power. This, of course, is not a unique feature of Chinese education as the same phenomenon has occurred in the West and is true for the majority of domestic students. Knowledge/text is obvious but power issues are undermined or absent from the discussions in education. The enormity of the challenge for classroom instructors confirmed in our data shows that Chinese students need to learn that they have permission to think critically and develop critical skills before they can engage in critical learning and critical pedagogy.

International education as a field of study includes the critical investigation of the processes involved in engaging with diverse knowledge structures and educational traditions. As practitioners in this field, we believe that we are obliged to engage in an ongoing self-reflective investigation of our own processes of learning. We are obliged to critically examine knowledge structures and cultural traditions, explaining their genesis, their functions, and their meanings. We are also obliged to critique the uncritical adoption of concepts that typify the field’s present circumstances. A better understanding of Chinese graduate students’ learning experiences in a Canadian classroom enabled us to conceptualize a global classroom as a critical meeting ground where different cultures and educational traditions engage and expand each other in the process of seeking mutual understandings and shared educational meanings.

In her comparative examination of philosophies and educational traditions in the West and East Asian societies, Hayhoe (2008) reminded us that it is important to learn about the religious and philosophical traditions of a society or region when seeking to understand educational policy, schools, curricula, and teaching practices. Similarly, as instructors in global

classrooms, it is essential that we learn about international students' previous educational contexts and learning experiences in order to provide them with meaningful learning experiences. As Chinese international students are from a society whose dominant values regarding society, knowledge, and personal development are steeped in harmony, not critique, in contrast to its counterparts in the West, we feel obligated not to homogenize their educational experiences by introducing educational concepts and practices uncritically in globalized classrooms. We submit this account of our experiences as an invitation to utilize internationalized teaching and learning environments as meeting places for a rich discussion about equality and democratic possibilities given these two apparently contradictory intellectual and cultural traditions. We also invite educators who teach international students, especially Chinese graduate students, to critique the unquestioned adoption of concepts that typify the academic fields' present circumstances and engage in a continuing dialogue about how to create the critical meeting ground where criticality meets harmony. A deeper or renewed understanding of students' cultural identities and intellectual backgrounds will enhance our ability to reach a point of synthesis—a contradictory unity if you will—in each and every class we teach where East and West meet.

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