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A response to Professor Wu Zongjie's 'Interpretation, autonomy, and transformation: Chinese pedagogic discourse in a cross-cultural perspective'

THOMAS D. CURRAN

In response to an essay by Prof Wu Zongjie that was published in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* [43(5), (2011), 569–590], I argue that, despite dramatic changes that have taken place in the language of Chinese academic discourse and pedagogy, evidence derived from the fields of psychology and the history of Chinese educational reform suggest that patterns of Chinese thought and culture have proven resistant to change. Not only have deeply rooted tendencies to perceive the world in ways that may be distinguished from Western analogues persisted but, not unlike contemporary school reformers, educators in the early twentieth century typically found that their efforts to borrow Western models were frustrated by the alien nature of those models and the need to adapt them to Chinese realities; ultimately, the reformers had to accommodate their plans to the wishes of local patrons and the expectations of Chinese families. Thus, the lesson that contemporary Chinese educators may take from a study of the past is that, since elements borrowed from the West may have limited viability in China, they need not be excessively concerned that reforms will transform key elements of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Wu Zongjie; Yu Ziyi; China; education; language; reform

Professor Wu Zongjie has written an insightful and thought-provoking piece that provides an opportunity to reflect upon the light that the history of Chinese educational reform might shed on efforts currently being taken by Chinese to revise their educational practices (Wu 2011). This essay will comment briefly on an historical point Wu makes about Confucian pedagogy and then draw upon the writings of an early 20th-century Chinese educator, Yu Ziyi, to address Wu's larger point about the Chinese need to develop a discourse about teaching that is responsive to Chinese realities. It will also discuss the more general question of the vulnerability of Chinese culture to a process of cultural borrowing that some people believe threatens to undermine it.

Wu's piece begins by arguing that the language of Chinese pedagogy was transformed during the twentieth century as Chinese discourse was influenced by Westernized nomenclatures and forms of expression. Citing the work of Liu (1995), Wu states that Chinese discursive practices are 'to a large degree, 'translated' or imagined from the West' (570). This point seems to be beyond dispute. Any Chinese reader whose native

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tongue is a European language cannot help but notice the grammatical and syntactical similarities between contemporary Chinese and Western writings, as well as the vast differences between Chinese academic prose and pieces written in even a semi-classical style. On the other hand, the degree to which this transformation has altered deep-seated patterns of thought is not quite so clear, and it may be argued, as Richard E. Nisbett recently has done, that there remain significantly different orientations towards knowledge that lead to differences in the ways by which Chinese and Westerners perceive the world. For example, whereas Westerners harbour a penchant for categorical classification and an assumption that the world operates in accordance with natural laws that function with sufficient regularity to make events understandable and predictable using the tools of systematic reasoning, Chinese tend to take a holistic view of man and nature, perceiving events and individuals not in isolation but in terms of their relationships with others. In Chinese thought, writes Nisbett (2003: xvi), 'an understanding of events always requires consideration of a host of factors that operate in relation to one another in no simple, deterministic way. Formal logic plays little role in problem solving'. These and other differences are rooted in linguistic and cultural factors that are influenced by unique social structures, philosophies and education systems and are traceable directly to antecedents in the ancient world. Deeply embedded as they are in Chinese culture, Nisbett believes they have been resistant to change despite the undeniably profound impact Westernization has had on China in the modern era.¹

Having thus raised a doubt about the depth of the Western impact on Chinese habits of thought, it is important to note that Wu's main point is aimed in a different direction. Along with the transformation of language, he claims, there has occurred a corresponding 'transformation of pedagogical discourse'. The result has been that, as Chinese thinkers and educators have adopted the language of modern epistemology and instructional techniques that reflect Western categories of thought, traditional Chinese instructional practices have been 'marginalized'. Contemporary Chinese pedagogy, Wu writes, is 'the result of a cultural interaction embedding 'modern' Western epistemology into a 'traditional' Eastern framework'. This process of 'cultural hybridization' has produced a pattern of learning by rote memorization, and Wu points out that contemporary critics of Chinese education fairly describe Chinese students as 'dependent and silent', teachers as 'all-knowing' authority figures, and learning as merely a process of 'memorization and literary interpretation' (p. 570).

Wu believes that it is false to assert that this stereotypical view of Chinese pedagogy is derived from China's Confucian pedagogical tradition. He uses a sample of Confucian discourse chosen from the *Analects* to show that, rather than a form of instruction in which the teacher poses as a more or less infallible authority figure whose task is to convey knowledge to his pupils, authentic Confucian pedagogy is one in which the teacher's role is to deliver to the student not knowledge but an opportunity to enter into a conversation in which teacher and student share the experience of learning. In an argument reminiscent of Richard Nisbett's, Wu (2011: 575) asserts that the Confucian approach to teaching differs

from that of the West in that it does not seek to provide a 'set of propositions about truth' that form premises upon which to build 'complicated arguments'. Rather, its purpose is to create space for 'situated understanding', as 'brief conversations, short axioms, verses, stories, etc' are offered as simple, poetic and indirect vehicles by which to access deeper meanings. In the pedagogical pattern that is a byproduct of this orientation, it is the student who 'initiates the inquiry'; the student does not merely accept what his teacher tells him but is inspired to seek knowledge by his own curiosity—Wu (2011: 572) speaks of Confucius's use of the term *fen* to describe the 'inner frenzy' within the human heart that seeks understanding.²

As a matter of historical accuracy, whereas Wu appears to trace the diversion from the classical model to the importation of Western theories, pedagogy in China's schools had departed from the Confucian model that Wu describes centuries before Western theories became a significant factor in Chinese education. As late Qing dynasty critics such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao pointed out, academic preparation had long been dominated by textual recitation and the mastery of complex literary forms—learning had become substantially a process of rote memorization and repetition in the expectation that mastery of a set of canonical texts would result in absorption of the received wisdom of the past. Thus, instruction in Chinese schools had long ago abandoned the formula for self-directed pursuit of knowledge inspired by the student's desire 'for the attainment of self-attainments' that Wu (2011: 573) believes characterizes the Confucian model.³

No doubt, this was to a substantial degree a result of the state civil service examination, the *keju*, which had come to dominate Chinese education long before Western ships began to ply Chinese waters.⁴ By the late imperial period, the instructional method and the requirements for success in the *keju* had already become highly stylized. Poetry, calligraphy and the notorious eight-legged essay have emerged as powerful symbols of an intensely competitive educational methodology that concentrated on memorization and the mastery of stylistic skills that could be evaluated efficiently within the context of an increasingly competitive examination-based upward mobility mechanism.⁵ Together, these practices constituted an authoritarian model that was in some ways similar to the modern stereotype and critics, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who noted its destructive effects were on to something important; their assessment of the rigidities of contemporary schooling was fundamentally sound.⁶

In fact, decades before Western influences began to make themselves felt, there were already serious Chinese critics of the rote memorization-based instruction prevalent in Chinese schools (Ridley 1977: 34–49). One such critic was Wang Yun (1784–1854), a Qing dynasty educator who complained vigorously that China's traditional approach to teaching was bankrupt; it was, he wrote, like forcing students to 'recite Buddhist scriptures or chew wood shavings'. Only after a decade or so of study would the meaning of an assigned text begin to become clear. Thus, 'to waste many years of effort this way is like pouring manure into a student's mind. It is then necessary to spend many more years simply to wash it

away. Wouldn't it be better not to pour it in the first place?' (Wang 1895: 1.94–95).⁷ This type of critique had become common by the last decades of the Qing period and, as is well known, it was an important part of the rationale for the dramatic changes to Chinese education that were introduced as part of the New Policy reforms of the last imperial decade (1901–1911).

The driving force that motivated the educational reformers, of course, was concern over content. Nevertheless, the reforms that were ushered into being also included major changes in the educational delivery systems, and in light of Wu's point about the impact of Westernization it is important to note that they took their inspiration almost entirely from the West. Rather than relying on traditional Chinese methods while introducing new content, the reformers borrowed Western instructional techniques more or less uncritically. Among those techniques were large classes in which instruction was synchronized in such a way as to minimize the opportunities for individualized instruction and foster the development of an authoritarian teacher–student relationship such as that which critics of Chinese education find prevalent today. Ironically, however, as Chinese educators pondered the consequences of these changes, many of them came under the influence of an altogether different movement in Western pedagogy, one that in some ways approximated the model which Wang Yun imagined and Wu favours: a child-centred pedagogy that its advocates labelled developmentalism. Drawing heavily upon the theories of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841), these reformers attempted to move away from the dry sterility of the traditional Western-style classroom and create a learning environment that could capitalize on the student's natural curiosity.⁸

Possibly, the reformer who worked the hardest to promote the developmentalist cause in China was Yu Ziyi (1885–1970). A pedagogue who spent most of his career trying to find a way to modernize Chinese education while preserving something of what Wu might consider an authentic Chinese model, Yu wrote extensively about the need for Chinese educators to be very careful about implementing Western-inspired reforms. He had no love for China's examination-based educational tradition, and he castigated the 'pouring-in' type of methodology that he believed dominated traditional pedagogy and stifled precisely the kind of passion for learning that Wu finds characteristic of the Confucian tradition. The alternative Yu preferred was to blend Western theories and Chinese realities in such a way as to stimulate a student's interest in learning. He believed that the major problem that educators faced in the new schools was to generate student interest and motivation, and he thought a solution could be found if the student were permitted to select his own topics for study from real-life situations; the teacher would induce the student to choose the subject, formulate an hypothesis, develop a plan to test it and proceed to reach a conclusion. The teacher's role would be to guide, not to direct (Yu 1922a: 20–21). As Yu (1939: 263) put it, the teacher would merely 'act as a mediator, an introducer, introducing the text to his little friend, helping the little friend and the text to become friends'. Termed the Project Method, by the 1920s, it had come to occupy a prominent

place within the Chinese educational establishment—Yu (1922b: 32) referred to it as ‘an advanced stage in the history of pedagogy’.⁹ Yu’s critique seems quite reminiscent of Wu’s. Indeed, although the two men are separated by a century, both individuals seem to be searching for an authentic Chinese pedagogy that rests upon a teacher–student relationship similar to the one that Wu found in the *Analects*. It is also important to note that Yu Ziyi said something that is relevant to the larger point that Wu makes about the need to be cautious in adapting foreign models to Chinese schools. In short, Yu argued that the new schools had gone much too far towards borrowing foreign techniques that were not suited to Chinese realities. Chinese educators under the influence of Dewey and other Western thinkers, he asserted, had become addicted to the new theories, and when these theories were applied within a Chinese context indiscriminately they were essentially useless, like ‘walking in air’ (Yu 1923a: 48). In an important piece that Yu published in the fall of 1923, he argued that Chinese families did not welcome the new schools precisely because the new-style teachers had abandoned traditional methods that they still valued, such as drill and textual recitation from memory. Inspired pedagogy would, therefore, strike a balance between old and new—Yu (1923b: 69) suggested that the proper ratio should be half and half—and any reforms that were conducted without taking into consideration local culture and the expectations of Chinese families would result in a waste of resources, a waste that would in effect render the reforms a kind of ‘policy suicide’.

What sort of lesson can be learned from Yu’s writings? Perhaps, the most important one is that, as Yu and other early 20th-century reformers pointed out, pedagogical theories formulated without reference to Chinese realities are not likely to be effective in practice.¹⁰ This is certainly not news to contemporary Chinese educators,¹¹ but two things are worth noting here: (1) the problem of adapting Western theories to Chinese practices has been faced before, and (2) Chinese educators who participated in the first wave of innovation following the importation of Western models had a lot to say about their experiences that contemporary theorists might find instructive. The writings of educators such as Yu Ziyi suggest that, when all is said and done, it is unlikely that any foreign institution can be transplanted successfully in Chinese soil without in the process adapting itself to some core elements of Chinese culture. Wu is right that Chinese discourse has been adulterated by the absorption of Western patterns of expression. Nevertheless, one must wonder if the result has been the replication of a Western model that is capable of alienating the Chinese people from their past. In borrowing from the West, is it really the case that the Chinese have lost contact with the wellsprings of their intellectual and educational traditions? If Richard Nisbett is right, the answer probably is a qualified ‘no’. Despite the importation of Western linguistic structures that appear in some ways to have been transformative, there still remain deeply-rooted habits of thinking and perceiving. Likewise, if there is wisdom to be derived from the history of modern educational reform in China, it must be that there are characteristic patterns of Chinese thought and behaviour that have proven and will continue to

prove resistant to foreign influences. As determined as early 20th-century Chinese reformers were to transform Chinese education, the most observant of them realized that no imported system would work if it were not rooted in Chinese realities, and it is very likely that the argument that Yu and others like him made will remain valid for the foreseeable future. Indeed, one might argue that, in the final analysis, if the past is a predicate for the future, one need not worry too much about China remaining substantially faithful to its heritage.

Notes

1. Tu Wei-ming (1998: 2–21) makes a similar case about the Confucian perspective. He argues that it considers human beings to be fundamentally social beings for whom interaction with others is necessary for survival and flourishing.
2. Professor Wu draws heavily upon the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), to help clarify his understanding of the Confucian pedagogical tradition. Heidegger believed the authoritative mode of instruction to be an obstacle to learning because of its tendency to impede communication between teacher and pupil, and he argued that the most effective form of pedagogic dialogue is one in which the teacher leads the student along a journey of self-discovery in which ‘what is said remains unsaid’(see Heidegger 2002:41).
3. As Evelyn Rawski (1979: 44, 174) found in her study of late -Qing primary education, even elementary pedagogy in the late imperial period was characterized by rote memorization, oral recitation and the explication of texts, and teachers were powerful authority figures. In fact, textbooks that were introduced after 1900 were designed specifically to break these traditional customs.
4. Apparently, one effect of the examination system’s domination of China’s educational culture was to raise the stakes of examination success such that both elite and popular education was typically conducted in a style that reinforced patterns of behaviour—notably self-discipline and the determination to master a prescribed body of information—that would serve a student well within an examination-based upward mobility structure. Pedagogy was powerfully influenced by the attraction of examination degrees, and learning for most Chinese students had for centuries been characterized by the imperative of mastering texts and the often severely stylized techniques governing written expression that would enhance one’s chances of success.
5. The eight-legged essay was a highly stylized, standardized essay format that was used by candidates taking China’s imperial civil service examinations from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries. While its defenders argued that it was an efficient mechanism by which to assess a candidate’s knowledge of the classical canon and facility with the language of elite communication, it was criticized severely for its rigid and somewhat pedantic nature and was dropped from the examination curriculum in 1901. For a history and analysis, see Elman (2000).
6. This does not mean that Chinese education had become intellectually sterile. As Benjamin Elman and Hoi Hsuen and Wu Qiong have shown, the examination-driven curriculum was both culturally rich and capable of stimulating the development of students’ capacities for abstract thought. The graduates of the system were not pedantic bookworms; they had proven themselves to be knowledgeable about Confucian philosophy, the classical canon and national policies, and they had demonstrated literary skills that had come to be valued as markers of intellectual competence (see Elman 1997: 58–82, Elman 2000: ch. 2, Hoi and Wu 2006: 267–279).
7. As an antidote, Wang advocated the employment of instructional methods that would arouse a child’s interest by presenting material in such a way as to be related concretely and tangibly to the things he experiences in daily life. ‘As a child begins his education’, Wang wrote, ‘he must be introduced to characters

- not by reading but through the use of simple materials that are concrete and, whenever possible, interrelated'. Beginning with pictographs or ideograms, the meanings of which are more or less self-evident, the teacher should proceed by adding characters that are related to them by meaning or similar in shape, moving in this fashion from the concrete to the abstract while focusing as much as possible on what is real to the student. 'Progress', Wang added, 'should always be determined by the child's own rate of advancement' (see Wang, in Shu 1895: 1.93–94).
8. Developmentalist thought emerged in the early twentieth century in a variety of guises, including the progressive education movement popularized in China by John Dewey and his followings. Together, these trends spawned movements such as the Life Education Movement for which Tao Xingzhi's contributions are most memorable.
 9. The Project Method emerged directly from the influence of the progressive educators, John Dewey and William H. Kilpatrick, both of whom visited China in the early 1920s. It attracted considerable attention within educational circles until it and the theories of the progressives were repudiated with the development of class struggle as the driver of educational reform in the early 1950s. It has recently reemerged as a topic of interest to Chinese educators (see Zhenyu 2012: 608–634).
 10. In 1929, for example, Zhuang Zexuan, wrote an important book about the need to sinicize Western educational theories (Zhuang 1929), and in the 1930s, advocates of popular education such as Zong Jingwen argued that in order for educational reforms to work, reformers would have to use indigenous local traditions to mobilize the public and induce people voluntarily to engage in reforms (Zhou 2012: 28–289). In addition, one of the major points Zhou Huimei makes in her new book is that effective popular education programmes were ones that found ways to utilize traditional local institutions and customs in precisely this way (see Zhou 2012).
 11. Ye Lan, for example, has built a successful career around a project to launch a New Basic Education movement that attempts to harmonize educational theories with the interests and needs of Chinese youth (see Ye Lan 2009, Bu Yuhua 卜玉华 2011:19–28, Hayhoe 2006: 324–358).

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