

Confucian Heritage Cultural Background (CHCB) as a Descriptor for Chinese Learners: The Legitimacy

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews the commonly referenced idea of the Confucian Heritage Cultural Background (CHCB) Chinese learners from a cultural and historical perspective. It challenges the legitimacy of using this idea as a central reference point to explain Chinese learners' learning. Instead it examines the influence and the cultural and historical significance of the examination heritage framework. It argues that despite the continuous changes and external pressures that China is subjected to in today's globalization and rapid changing education scene, assessment still plays a vital role.

Keywords: Confucian heritage cultural background, examination culture, Chinese learners, assessment, political administration

1. Introduction

A critical juncture currently exists for the Western higher education system due to the increased flow of international students from Asian countries, especially from China (Ryan & Louie, 2007). The increased number of Chinese international students should be viewed as opportunities for "new ways of knowing, making meaning and interacting for those within these systems" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 404). Yet too often these learners have been labelled with concepts, such as 'Confucian Heritage Cultural Background' (CHCB) as "keys to successful teaching and learning when Asia prospers economically" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 404). CHCB is used in particular, to refer to Chinese students, who are deemed to be influenced predominantly by Confucian values (Rao & Chan, 2009). It is also used to explain "perceived undesirable behaviour such as plagiarism and uncritical thinking when Asian economies do not do so well" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 404).

Confucianism is commonly defined as "a system of philosophical, ethical and political thought based on the teachings of Confucius" (Li, 1993, p. 305). Despite the "'multi-dimensionality' and diverse manifestations" of Confucianism (Ryan, 2010, p. 48), Confucian values are continually referenced as attributing to the learning behaviours of Chinese students.

Although Confucian values have been identified as having an influence on contemporary Chinese learners, there exist dichotomies on the nature and interpretations of Confucianism (Rao & Chan, 2009). One dichotomy exists in values on whether these CHCB learners are 'deficit' or 'surplus' (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Operating within the 'deficit' framework, researchers often characterise CHCB learners "as passive, dependent, surface/ rote learners prone to plagiarism and lacking critical thinking" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 406). These values as Ryan and Louie (2007) argued can magnify the negative effects on these learners who accordingly tend to internalize these values and view themselves as passive; this negative effect can be magnified when Western academics operate on stereotyped, inappropriate assumptions of CHCB learners.

Watkins and Biggs (1996; 2001) tried to debunk myths that CHCB learners are rote learners and attempted to "redress the 'deficit' theories with a more positive spin on CHCB students' learning behaviour" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 408). However, operating within the 'surplus' framework, it is "doubly mistaken to imply that Chinese students everywhere are competitive or that Chinese culture is competitive" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 408). One of the consequences of this 'surplus' perception is that practitioners tend to believe the answer to CHCB learners' learning lies in Confucianism (Ryan & Louie, 2007). For instance, Lee in Ryan and Louie (2007) have assorted aspects of Confucian beliefs for explanations of Asian students' certain attributes (e.g., positive attitude towards

education) that have potential to lead to highly questionable over-generalizations. Another consequences of this 'surplus' perception lies within many researchers' assumptions that Asian values are "discrete, homogenous and unchanging" (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 405); these researchers for instance include: Tweed and Lehman (2002); Phuong-Mai (2005); Tavakol and Dennick (2010) and Flynn (1992). However, operating within the 'surplus' theory is equally unhelpful as many scholars had little experience in Asia and "do not adequately take into account the dynamics of cultural adaptability (particularly in China)" (Drake, 2011, p. 225).

There is much debate in the literature in whether Asian background international students are rote learners, and these researchers operate on the dichotomy between 'surplus' and 'deficit' values as illustrated above. In practice, these unanalysed assigned conceptions on one hand ignores "the dynamic and changing nature of cultures as starkly demonstrated by the rapid and profound physical, social, and cultural transformations that are currently occurring in China" (Ryan, 2010, p. 53). These unanalysed assigned conceptions on the other hand, can also be misleading, as they do not take account of the complexities and diversities of learning within these learners' educational system (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

Discourses of higher education in the West often position CHCB learners or Asian learners in general in terms of 'rote/ surface' learning and have uncritically attributed these attributes to the whole population (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Such approaches as Ryan and Louie (2007) argued frequently "rely on 'ideal' models that do not take into account the diversity and complexity of the contemporary social and cultural situatedness of such practices, nor of how they are played out within individual contexts" (p. 405). The rapidly changing nature of the Chinese education landscape on curriculum reform as well as pedagogy makes any stereotyped interpretations over these learners inappropriate and out of date (Ryan, 2010). The multiple manifestations of Confucianism and the diversities reflected by various Chinese ethnicities (55 minor ethnic groups) have put the unanalysed assigned generalized conceptions such as CHCB to Chinese learners into a questioning light (Ryan, 2010).

However, how inappropriate and why is it inappropriate to assign generalized conceptions to Chinese learners has rarely been examined deeply. Ryan (2010) suggested the need to extend dichotomies and binary logic, but to break the stereotypical thinking and the binary logic over these learners, a substantial understanding of the historically changing and complex character of the Chinese education system is required (Engeström, 2004). This paper thus put this very issue in mind and examines how the practices have been played out within the examination dominant CHCB context through unpacking the complexities and diversities of the Chinese higher education context and its corresponding effects on contemporary Chinese learning. Through the deconstruction of the complexities, dialogues can be facilitated within or between different educational systems (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Understanding these complexities has the potential to improve cross-cultural communication (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

2. Multiple Views of the Chinese Learner

As part of the ongoing interest in Asian students' learning achievement amongst cross-cultural research on learning, Chinese learners have been frequently found to learn and achieve better than their Western counterparts (J. Li, 2002). Most researchers contributed this difference in achievement to the high value placed on learning (J. Li, 2002). However, Li (2002) argued that most researchers have adopted an etic perspective (researchers' views), whereas views of those being studied (emic views) have rarely been examined. Li (2002) thus adopted the emic view and her findings informed the profundity of Confucian influences on contemporary Chinese learners. However, taking from this stance, we may ask which aspect of Confucianism we can attribute, giving the multi-dimensional nature of this thought and various manifestations of Confucianism, which has been "interpreted over the centuries to suit various political, economic, and social agendas" (Ryan, 2010, p. 48). These interpretations as Ryan (2010) argued are "varied and complex, and...are often far removed from the original ideas" (p. 48). Continuing to focus on Confucian influences can lead researchers to resort to single, isolated concepts, which ignores the complexities and diversities of the Chinese education system (J. Li, 2002; Ryan, 2010). For instance, giving the various interpretations of Confucianism by various scholars, there exists a controversy on whether Confucian thought encourages rote or active learning (Rao & Chan, 2009). Moreover, if Confucian influences are definable, is this adopted by every Chinese family? Chi and Rao (2003) believe this not to be the case. Nevertheless, we may argue whether Chinese learners are really solely under Confucian influences. Given the contextual changes happening in China, even paradigm shifts (Rao & Chan, 2009), there exists a need to debunk 'these other'.

Beside Confucianism, there is another aspect of the Chinese heritage that has always been admired, and that is "the public examination system for recruitment to the civil administration of the Chinese empire" (McMullen, 2011, p. 1). This examination system as a selection process was based on the meritocratic principle that

privileged worth over birth (McMullen, 2011). Despite the continuous changes and external pressures that China is subjected to in today's globalization, the examination system is still largely dictated school learning in China and seems unlikely to disappear (Jin, 2009). This respect for great duration and sophistication of this system points up the question: how has this examination system been played out in various periods and why assessment still plays a vital role despite the rapid changing education scene in China?

2.1 Examination Culture in Dynastic China (Confucian Heritage)

Education in China is historically tied to the nation's survival and stability (Gu, 2006). This is reflected in works of "The Record of Learning" cited in Gu (2006) that "education should be prioritized in the founding of a nation and in the governance of people.... through education, the ruler could become wise and the subjects could be 'civilized', thus becoming good subject" (p. 170). Confucian culture played an important role in dynastic period of China because of its stress on the patriarchal relationship among different classes. Confucius himself believed in families; children should obey parents, wives obey husbands. In society, disciples obeyed masters, common people obeyed ruling classes. To sanction these ethics, Confucius turned the rules of social propriety, also known as the five ethics of benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and honesty (Gu, 2006), into moral values and guidelines. The dominant role of Confucian thought as played out in the dynastic society was due to the focus on cultivating the obedient nature of the common people through education. Confucian education has thus become a media to bind individuals, families, clans, and the nation.

Even though schools of thought in traditional Chinese culture also included Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam (Ryan, 2010), Confucian culture was widely adopted. This is evidenced by the Wu emperor of the Han dynasty who "banned all other schools of thoughts [and] paid supreme tribute to Confucianism" (Gu, 2006, p. 172). When examination culture was introduced, the attractive nature of Confucianism was a natural fit for the political motivations of the Imperial Civil Service Examination system. The examination system as a recruitment process for civil administration of the Chinese empire was based upon its ability to recruit public servants from a broad social base and on the basis of test merit (McMullen, 2011). The establishment of this system also made it possible for common people to raise their social status, with the effect of inspiring the entire population to pursue education (Gu, 2006). Consequently, this meritocratic principle of the examination system also contributed to the dynasties' ability to "recruit public servants from a broad social base and on the basis of tested merit, [which] attributed to the longevity of the Chinese empire" (McMullen, 2011, p. 2).

The institutionalization of this examination system has regulated and shaped learning in China. These regulative influences have affected learners' choices of what to focus on and how to learn the focused materials. For instance, learners tended to learn mainly examination related materials with a predominantly achieving approach, aiming for the highest possible results (cf. Biggs, 1996). In the dynastic period, the examination mainly tested learners' "knowledge of the body of ancient texts known as the Confucian classics...[and] the ability to compose elegant...poems" (McMullen, 2011, p. 7), thus to do well in these examinations, "candidates had to have control of what has aptly been called the 'memorization corpus'" (McMullen, 2011, p. 7).

The adoption of Confucian classics as test content and criteria in the Imperial Civil Service Examination system has driven the wide adoption of Confucianism (Gu, 2006). The same value embedded in Confucianism led to it as the target of attack from both reformers as well as scholars of the late Qing dynasty and of the early Republic period of China (McMullen, 2011). Learners have been criticised for learning something they will never use and "examination learning was [thus often] called 'empty talk on paper'" (McMullen, 2011, p. 8). Those cultivated by this system thus, were criticised as lacking "in pioneering and innovating spirit" (Gu, 2006, p. 173). This led to Confucian thought being seriously criticized for prohibiting China to realize modernization (Bai, 2010). This change attests that Confucian culture, which dominated in the Chinese feudal society, acted as only part of the examination culture and was subsequently replaced by Western influences by the start of the 20th century. Chinese learners' ability to change their learning materials so as to excel in the institutionalized exams also confirmed Biggs' (1996) claims of those learners' making a strategic choice instead of using passive rote learning (similar claims as Biggs' (1996); also see Gardner (1989), Stigler and Stevenson (1992), O'Connor (1991)).

Criticism mainly centred on China's traditional cultural heritage and social instability, and as a consequence, "the first generation of specialized professionals [rose through] transplantation and copying of the system of Western academic disciplines" (Chien, 2007, p. 326). During this period, Western knowledge was introduced to China via Japan. Many disciplinary terms including pedagogy, teaching methods, and physical education etc. as well as disciplinary structure were directly transplanted from Japan (R. Yang, 2005). The focus of the curriculum in this period was the same as that in Japan. As a result, these imported disciplines aimed to transmit foreign knowledge

and thus existed in isolation of the Chinese context (R. Yang, 2005). The Qing government sponsored 120 children to study abroad, which also contributed to the formation of the basic academic system through those returned and their contributions. These, combined with direct translation of Western learning, contributed to the formation of the Chinese academic system in the Republic period of China by early 20th century (Chien, 2007).

2.2 Examination Culture in the Republic of China (1911-1949)

The Xin Hai revolution in 1912 marked the end of the old Imperial system and the large scale uncritical adoption of mainly Western civilisation (Chien, 2007, p. 325). After the fall of the Imperial government, Chinese scholars experienced disorientation and frustration after a series of wars marked by the Sino-British Opium war. During this stage, schools developed. This was originally triggered by the 1898 Reform, which stated that schools were the place to cultivate talents and thus should replace the examination system (Liu, 2006). Consequently, the late imperial Qing government reformed education and abolished the Imperial Examination system in 1905 and issued new arrangements for schooling according to the Japanese education system. Colleges also emerged during this time. Around 30 colleges were built after the subjugation by Western military forces, all aiming to cultivate learners with English language and military skills. These colleges were all modelled on 'the West', although they emulated no specific country. However, the establishment of these colleges marked a different and a new meaning to the traditional education system previously associated solely with fame and gain (Li, 2001). As a consequence, Western civilisation was brought to China mainly through either Chinese scholars' promotion of Western disciplines in schools or by Western missionaries' funded private religious orientated schools (Chien, 2007). Some other means for promoting Western learning were through academic associations (for instance, the Chinese Association). However, these associations were all politically focused rather than academically orientated and they thus, "bore a strong political intention which was either to save the nation by Western culture or to strengthen the nation by the sciences" (Chien, 2007, p. 326).

There were no open criteria for selecting talent based on merit until the Republic of China; this period was also viewed as being associated with the rise of many "social evils" (Liu, 2006). Qian (1984) cited in Liu (2006a) further explained these evils: "people were competing with each other on personnel matters; factions were jostling against one another; government officials were ganging together for clandestine, illegal activities and petticoat influence and so on" (pp. 302-303). However, on the other hand, the lack of criteria for selecting talent also led Chinese education to experience a stage of freedom of thought. For instance in the discipline of educational philosophy, the foundation of philosophical thoughts incorporated Dewey's pragmatism, Catholic thought and Marxism (Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005).

Sun Yet-sen was the founder of the Republic of China (1912), and the Republic Examination Institute (Liu, 2006). This marked the beginning of emphasising both the examination as well as schooling in the Chinese education system. Sun proposed to use examination results as selection criterion for public servants at the first national meeting of the Republic of China in 1924, and legislation was passed in 1928 (Liu, 2006). The examination system in this period incorporated three levels: general, advanced and special examinations. All candidates either needed to have certificates of graduation from respective schools or needed proof of equivalent work experience (Liu, 2006). The Nan Jing national government had set up a set of systematic policies on examination regulations to ensure the system's meritocratic criterion for selection (Liu, 2006).

The Examination Institute was also viewed as the rehabilitation of the imperial civil service examination system; however, the test contents varied and mainly incorporated subjects focusing on research and administration instead of Confucian classics stressed in the Imperial periods of China (Liu, 2006). In 1929, the Chinese National Party in Nan Jing issued education regulations, which were similar to the one issued by the late Qing dynasty, but different in the sense that it abolished those subjects reflecting Chinese traditional culture, and broadened subject disciplines mainly reflecting Western teaching and learning pedagogies. The differences are also reflected through the broadened test subjects. For instance, the first advanced examination for public servants incorporated eight test subjects including Chinese language, law, history, economics, accountancy etc. (Liu, 2006). The reuse of the examination system with broadened subject areas for testing to select talents in the Republic of China also reflected earlier attempts of using Western advanced knowledge in coordination of the Chinese tradition. This attracted little attention compared to the mainstream attacks on Chinese reformers or scholars' blind absorption of Western civilization mainly centred on the disconnection between Western knowledge and the Chinese context (Pepper, 1990) in the form of direct transplantation of textbooks and course materials developed elsewhere and used directly in Chinese classrooms (Liu, 2006).

During the Republic period, examination for selection based on merit was re-established, subjects broadened under the wave of learning from the West, and schools developed into maturity. China was in civil war and was

fighting foreign invasions during the first half of the twentieth century. However, despite the social and political instability, some improvements in schooling were achieved. For instance, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, there were about "350 000 primary schools, 4000 middle schools and 200 universities and colleges" (Dept. of Employment Education and Training & National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, 1996, p. 2). Combined with the popularity and maturity of schooling, the examination tradition was also inherited in the PRC period.

2.3 Examination Culture in the People's Republic of China from Mao (1949-1977)

The examination tradition was inherited in the Mao era and developed further into a national unified college entrance exam in the year of 1952 (Zhao, 2012). Further, in the same year, a reform focusing on large scale adoption of Soviet experience was undertaken in the Higher Education sector (Zhao, 2012). During this reform, the education system developed under the American influence was reformed and followed by the indiscriminate absorption of Soviet textbooks (R. Yang, 2005). Further comprehensive transplantation of Soviet experience into Chinese education, especially in the Higher Education sector was subsequently advocated by the Ministry of Education in the early years of PRC (Zhao, 2012).

This period was highly politicised and was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union in the sense that textbooks used in Soviet Union were translated and used directly in Chinese classrooms. This was influenced by the Chinese Communist Party's decision to learn from Soviet experience as the direction for building a new nation (R. Yang, 2005). The newly established government used Marx's materialism and Leninism as the political and moral guidelines in Higher Education. Marxism and Leninism were "worshiped as the one and only universally applicable truth" (R. Yang, 2005, p. 73). Further, Marxism and Leninism were and are still set as one of the major compulsory test subjects in school as well as in university examinations. Consequently, this also changed Confucian philosophy to Marxism as underpinning philosophical foundations for the government controlled examination system.

In 1956, the union between China and the former Soviet Union ceased, and China began to focus on its own educational studies. During these 20 years, due to the special international and national political environments, the Chinese Communist Party closed its doors and provided an effective national atmosphere for restoration of its traditional cultural heritage. However, the politicisation of education went further during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the examination tradition was interrupted. Higher education in China and the meritocratic examination system at that stage were disrupted by political movements. During this period, the central focus was on class struggle and education was one of the severely affected areas, with both its traditions and adopted knowledge radically denied and criticised (R. Yang, 2005). Political movements recurred in various university campuses during this period and did not stop until long after Deng reassumed his job in 1977 (Yang, 2011).

2.4 Examination Culture of the People's Republic of China from Deng (1978-Present)

The first few years under Deng was characterised as the recovery, reorganization and rebuilding-orientated period (Note 1) (Yang, 2011). During this time, the education system was rebuilt and recovered based on similar regulations in the 1950s, before the Cultural Revolution had begun (D. Yang, 2011). The tasks of education to set things right was believed only half finished during this period. Many issues were unearthed and of those issues, examination-orientated education is believed to be one of the problems stemming from this period (D. Yang, 2011). However, this is doubtful as the examination system has a long history in Chinese culture and examination-orientated education did not necessarily stem from this period.

In November, 1977, Deng re-instated the college entrance exam which had been interrupted for ten years (Yang, 2011). This stimulated the learning desires of the Chinese people and the criterion of "all are equal before the scores" was set up (D. Yang, 2011, p. 322). Deng Xiaoping raised the objectives of education as nurturing learners with "four virtues of ideals, morality, knowledge and discipline" (D. Yang, 2011, p. 323). Deng also raised the task of education as needing to modernise (D. Yang, 2011). Therefore, the higher education system was set to serve the socialist construction; educational thoughts, contents and methods that are not suitable to socialist modernization were thus been revised (D. Yang, 2011). The 1989 Tian Anmen square conflict reflected the tensions between students, society and reforms. Consequently, policies including "military training of college students, reducing enrolment, adjusting student numbers studying abroad and starting the education of anti-peaceful evolution" were implemented in the early 1990s (D. Yang, 2011, p. 326). This contributed to Chinese higher education re-entering the route of high politicisation (D. Yang, 2011).

Influenced by the 1998 Asian economic crisis, higher education in China was reformed in the area of enrolment expansion to expand internal needs so as to promote economic increase (D. Yang, 2011), which turned higher

education into a market-oriented system. This also changed elite-oriented to a mass-oriented system with the college entrance exam still performed as a selection criterion for more candidates to go to college to stimulate economic development. Premier Zhu Rongji supported this proposal and on June 16, 1999, the “decisions on deepening educational reform and promoting quality-orientated education” was issued, which included enrolment expansion of higher education (D. Yang, 2011). Tuition fees increased dramatically during this period and students’ enrolment expansion become “an important strategy to boost domestic demands” (D. Yang, 2011, p. 333).

This economic-orientated reform focusing on enrolment expansion and tuition fee rise has promoted educational development in the areas of quantity and scale. On one hand, this has reduced much pressure on the competitiveness among college entrance exam candidates, as the number of vacancies in the Chinese Higher Education system is still limited; as such, there is heated competition for those places. As a consequence, learning is often stressful. One study found one in four university students in Hong Kong suffer high rates of psychological disorders (S. Chan, 1999). However, on the other hand, this enrolment expansion has also brought many problems (for instance, unemployment of graduates) and the “marketization form ruined education’s publicity, equality and fairness” (D. Yang, 2011, p. 328). After the turn of this century, the government, led by Hu Jintao, initiated a meeting focusing on educational goals of learners’ individuality and creativity, detailed in “the National medium and long term Educational Plan 2010-2012” (Y. Yang, 2010). However, this has not been well reflected in the unified college entrance exams. Despite various efforts, the test content is still mainly about retrieval of information from textbooks, which has resulted in the focus of most students being how to get high marks on this test.

3. Political Administration over the Examination System

The Chinese higher education system rose and developed with a process begun from passive absorption to today’s voluntarily learning from Western civilisation and culture (Yan, 2009). The major question with this trend of copying mainly from Western models of learning is whether it suits to the Chinese cultural learning context. Pepper’s (1990) metaphor vividly describes and poses a question of “whether American branches could be effectively grafted on a Soviet tree planted in a Chinese garden” (p. 128). Even though Pepper’s (1990) metaphor reflected a major development period of Chinese Higher Education, his perspective reflected an inappropriate demonstration and a marginalization of the pervasive impact of the Chinese traditional culture. From Chinese historical, political and cultural perspectives, what happened was that the Soviet tree was dug out and replaced with an American tree. However, this paper argues that learning cultures do not change through digging out a tree and replacing it with another. Thus, it is not difficult to understand that although China has stopped learning from the Soviet model, Marxist thought and Leninism survives and still performs as one of the major compulsory subjects in Chinese education and the examination system today.

In the last century, due to social and political instability, the higher education system in China was always intertwined with politics. This on one hand, served and met the nation’s political needs; but on the other hand, this political control and administration also jeopardized the academic internal system striving to achieve academic excellence (Yan, 2009). This overly political administration and control over its higher education is reflected through the surfeit of historical reforms (Parekh, 2006; Wang, 2003). Higher education in China was not only set up for pursuit of knowledge; rather it was centred on meeting its national needs. Higher education was “ordered to simultaneously introduce major academic, economic and political innovations as well as absorb the sudden impact of direct contact with the West” (Pepper, 1990, p. 135). Ironically, “amid all the economic and political excitement, meanwhile, education reform in the sense of improving the content and quality of what is taught and learned appears to have been all but eclipsed” (Pepper, 1990, p. 136). The Chinese government has “turned Higher Education into a laboratory for virtually every innovation that caught their fancy” (Pepper, 1990, p. 136). Despite the irony, this is never-the-less legitimate from a Chinese standpoint. Higher education in China is more historically evident in the sense that it serves national needs rather than being a platform for pursuit of new knowledge, and this is reflected in the major reforms over the examination system and the developmental stages of its higher education system.

In 1978, management was delegated to the provinces instead of being kept by the three administrative authorities: the State Ministry of Education, central ministries, and provinces (Tang & Wu in Townsend & Cheng, 2000). However, a characteristic of the current Chinese higher education is of centralized government administration. This is evidenced by the set-up teaching plan, teaching outline and teaching materials developed by the Ministry of Education and its authorized related units (Wang, 2003). Thus, what needs to be taught, how to teach the textbooks, how many hours the course requires, as well as arrangements for assessment are all outlined by the Ministry of Education and other central ministries according to the Education law issued by the Chinese

government (Wang, 2003).

Centralized administration control is also reflected in the unified college entrance exams and the unified curriculum, which specifies which “courses both compulsory and elective, must be taught for each major; the sequence they are to be taught and the number of hours per course” (Pepper, 1990). The government control over the examination system predominantly contributed Chinese learners learning in the areas of what to learn and how to assess student learning. In relation to content of learning, government has clear guidelines on what to learn and how to test those. For instance, focus has been put on moral education with the general teaching plan and teaching outline as well as teaching materials set up by the Ministry of Education and its authorized related units (Wang, 2003). This government control over the examination system as well as the outside influences all have contributed to Chinese learners’ strategic choice of learning approaches to respond to the cultural heritage of the examination.

Development of the higher education also reveals that Confucianism, rather than playing a major role in Chinese learners’ learning, has actually been omitted during this time, even until today. However, “cultures do not coexist peacefully; they compete, come into conflict, and struggle for domination and mastery” (Parekh, 2006, pp. 97, 241). This argument articulated the existence of constant conflicts among cultures as well as between cultures and political interventions within the academic system. The existence of the government controlled examination tradition reflected its invisible political intervention in its education system.

Due to the various interpretations over Confucianism as well as the existence of 56 ethnic groups in China, educational beliefs and values about learning are interpreted differently among these groups (Ryan, 2010). In Chan and Rao’s (2009) edited book “Revisiting the Chinese learner: changing contexts, changing education”, which focused on how numerous educational reforms have impacted their learners’ beliefs about learning as well as teachers’ beliefs and practices (Tan, 2011). Even though there exist positive evidence on that both teachers and learners responded well with collaborative and student-centred learning as this book reported, “many tensions persist as both parties attempt to reconcile the novel learning and teaching experiences with more traditional ones” (Tan, 2011, p. 228). This claim resonates with Hue’s (2007) study, who researched Confucian influences on secondary school teachers’ definitions of guidance and discipline in Hong Kong finding that Confucianism still has a paramount role, but the author meanwhile also warned the mistake of referencing solely to Confucianism for certain static patterns of Chinese learners’ social behaviour, rather the impacts are multidimensional including the wider context as well as Western ideological and economical influences.

Empirical studies have shown that China now does practice a more student-centred approach and learners are active in classroom activities (C. K. K. Chan, 2009; Rao, Chi, & Cheng, 2009). However, despite the intensity of external changes and great efforts made by various governments and intellectuals to transform Education in China, to a large extent, schools in China still demonstrate “the continuing salience of some traditional cultural beliefs and practices” and tend to “resist some cultural influences in order to retain what they value collectively in their own culture” (Hue, 2007, p. 6). This reflects the various negotiations amongst the Confucian, examination, globalization as well as political forces. These negotiations reflect different combinations of various forces in various religions, ethnicities, and geographical areas (for instance, Hong Kong might reflect a more Western dominant influences in classroom practices (C. K. K. Chan, 2009), whereas, mainland China might reveal a predominant examination influence (Bai, 2010). This informs the need for any practitioners interested in supporting Chinese learners to understand the complexities and diversities of the Chinese student cohort.

4. Conclusion

Through the re-examination of the complexities of the Chinese education system in dynastic as well as the contemporary China, the examination heritage has been revealed as playing a dominant role. Even though Confucianism was replaced by Marxist philosophy in the early periods of the PRC, the political administer flavoured examination heritage culture was prevalent in the Chinese historical framework. Chinese government controlled and regulated examination culture played a dominant and regulative role in Chinese learners’ learning, as Bai (2010) claims that the examination system was an integral part of Chinese society. He further argues that despite the changes of the political systems and the constitutions in the Chinese history, “schooling and examination, examination and better emoluments, could never be separated” (p. 107). And thus the examination-oriented education model has never disappeared, which constrained learners’ free choices of other learning methods.

Through the re-examination of the examination dominant cultural context, Confucian values have revealed limited influences on contemporary Chinese learning. However, take one step further; it is easy to tell even the

examination culture is a complex, multidimensional and evolving entity itself. Here, what needs to be cautioned is that even though resorting to central reference points like Confucian values is problematic, it is not recommended that we thus should resort to another single reference point, the examination culture. The embedded point here is the not the either Confucian values or examination heritage, but the complexities, multi-dimensions and diversities of the Chinese education culture.

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Note

Note 1. During this recovering stage, 169 universities were recovered or added by the end of 1978. Academic degrees in universities in China were classified into three categories of Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees on the fifth CPC National Congress (D. Yang, 2011). Self-sponsored overseas study was allowed in 1981, since when, there have been large scales of students went abroad pursuing their degrees.

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