80

System Meets Lifeworld in the UK Classroom: Chinese Postgraduate Students Reject a 'Transactional' Pedagogic Relationship

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural and ideological dissonance experienced by Chinese postgraduate students in UK HE, where deeply rooted Confucian ideals of the pedagogic relationship collide with the neoliberal university model. Based on Habermas's system and lifeworld theory, it explores how Chinese students' moral expectations of reverent, ethically grounded pedagogic relationships conflict with institutional practices that frame education as a transaction. Based on interviews with 51 students across 24 UK universities, the study reveals widespread emotional, moral, and cultural resistance to being viewed as consumers. Students consistently reject the commodification of pedagogy, maintaining that teaching staff should uphold their moral role as mentors rather than service providers. The paper argues that the colonisation of the pedagogical lifeworld by systemic imperatives distorts communication and undermines trust, ethics, and the possibility of meaningful intercultural learning. It calls for pedagogies grounded in communicative rationality to reconcile these conflicting educational logics.

Full paper

The growing internationalisation of higher education (HE) has introduced diverse cultural ideologies into UK universities (Marginson, 2018), particularly through the increasing presence of Chinese postgraduate taught (PGT) students (Consoli, 2024). This paper explores the cultural tensions arising from the encounter between Confucian-rooted expectations of education and the neoliberal framework of UK HE. Applying Habermas's concepts of the lifeworld, the domain of shared meanings and values, and the system driven by instrumental rationality (Habermas, 1987), the study investigates how Chinese

students navigate an educational landscape where pedagogy is increasingly shaped by market logic.

Based on interviews with 51 Chinese PGT students from 24 UK institutions, the findings reveal a clear and consistent rejection of the consumer identity in the context of teacher-student relationships (Sheng, 2023). Chinese students come from a tradition where teachers are revered figures characterised as: morally upright, intellectually authoritative, and committed to student development. This Confucian ethic is deeply embedded in Chinese culture, as reflected in government policies, social attitudes, and students' expectations (Wu, 2016). Teachers are often positioned as "engineers of the human soul" (Li & Xue, 2020, p.79), responsible not only for transmitting knowledge but also for cultivating virtue and guiding personal development (ibid). However, upon entering UK universities, these students find themselves in an environment where education is framed through the lens of consumerism. Under pressure to operate efficiently and generate revenue, universities often position students as customers (Tomlinson, 2017). International student recruitment is a significant part of the UK international HE strategy (DBIS & DfE, 2013) and play an essential role in HE marketisation. This context often leads to the perception that education is a service and that teachers are providers.

Students expressed emotional and ethical discomfort with the idea that teachers might view them as sources of income. As Gao (M/Languages) stated, "I would be very sad if teaching staff see us as revenue sources." Such a comment reflects a strong belief that turning education into a commodity undermines the ethical core of the teacher-student relationship. This disjuncture stems from differing semantic preferences and a collision of moral worlds. In Confucian terms, the act of teaching is a moral responsibility, not a business transaction. Several interviewees used terms like "unethical" to describe teachers who exhibited business-like behaviour. The respect traditionally accorded to teachers in China presupposes that they are selflessly devoted to students' intellectual and personal growth (Du & Li, 2024). Students reluctantly accept the marketisation of HE at the institutional or governmental level but resist teaching staff from applying market logics in the classrooms. Moreover, many students maintain naïve assumptions about how the market impacts their teaching staff. There is little awareness that UK academics are pressured to compete for funding, publish research, and meet performance targets (Ball, 2012), often in tension with their teaching responsibilities (Jabbar et al., 2018). As a result, students interpret behaviours such as striking or reduced feedback not as systemic failures but as personal betrayals of the teacher's ethical role. This misunderstanding leads to

moral confusion and disappointment. Su (F/Engineering) remarked that she could not understand why teachers went on strike for salary raises when “we have paid a substantial rate.” Nevertheless, some students observed a shift in pedagogical styles driven by student feedback and institutional branding. Du (F/Historical Studies) noted, “Their carefulness of students’ satisfactions makes me feel it is like a service,” highlighting market imperatives’ subtle but significant influence on pedagogical relations. This ambivalence of appreciating attentiveness while resisting the consumer label reflects a deeper struggle over the meaning of education in a neoliberal age. A crucial insight from this study is that Chinese students, while critical of consumerist education, are not resistant to pedagogical innovation. Many value student-centred approaches and active participation. They reject reducing education to a transactional logic that severs the ethical bond between teacher and student. Ren (F/Medicine) said, “The relationship… should never ever be as impure as monetary.”

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the system has increasingly colonised the pedagogical lifeworld, distorting the communicative space between teachers and students. The challenge is cultural misunderstanding and a more profound normative disjunction between ethical worldviews. To move forward, higher education must embrace a communicative rationality pedagogy that acknowledges diverse moral expectations and fosters genuine dialogue. This requires institutions and teaching staff to see students not as consumers but as partners and learners in a shared educational journey capable of mutual learning, critique, and transformation.