

Bridging understanding: Confucian values and concerns for the self-cultivation of academic identity in China (0374)

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Abstract

This is the final paper in the SRHE symposium 'Competing or converging paradigms of international higher education: emerging dialogues between East Asia and the UK' and it explores the concept of academic identity. The paper aims to present a dialogue between colleagues from East Asia and UK academics in order to bridge and deepen understanding of the underlying issues and challenges that confront researchers in global higher education. This paper is focused on the Xiamen Institute for Higher Education Research, the first centre established to research higher education in China. The paper initiates a dialogue exploring Confucian values and Chinese ways of thinking about academic identity formation and calls for a shift in the higher education system from quantity to quality. The question and answer format is designed to initiate a conversation to begin to surface Confucian values and Chinese ways of thinking about higher education research.

Outline

This dialogic paper seeks to bridge understanding of Higher education systems in China, through a question and answer dialogue with the current Dean of The Xiamen Institute of Higher Education Research. The Institute, the first of its type in China, was founded in 1956 by Professor Pan Mayouan. Hayhoe (2014:315) asserts that what is remarkable about Pan is that he pioneered the field of research in higher education from an entirely indigenous basis; he had never been abroad and does not speak foreign languages yet identified the need to establish China's first research centre in higher education in the 1950s. Pan recognised that Chinese Higher Education needed theoretical and pedagogical foundations quite distinct from those of primary and secondary schools. Hayhoe (ibid: 316) traces his influences back to Dewey's visit to China in the early 1920s and then later to the Soviet patterns of learning introduced to China in 1950s. It is interesting to note that the development of higher education theory as an area for research took shape as a field of study in China almost a decade before the establishment of SRHE in 1965 in the UK. Professor Pan, now in his nineties, continues as a venerated member of academic staff at the Institute for Higher Education Research at Xiamen University and continues to be a leading initiator of dialogue in global higher education.

Dialogues between Eastern and Western researchers have continued in the last half century and the juxtaposition of the work of Yang (2015) and Ryan (2009) is an example of this. Yang (2015) explores the challenges faced by Western academics in acquiring deep and nuanced understanding of the cultures and values underpinning Higher Education systems in China. Yang argues there is a dual tension in higher education systems in China: between official formal institutional values which mimic

Western models and unofficial informal yet powerful modes of thinking based on thousands of years of social and cultural heritage. The strikingly different cultural roots and orientations of these values and cultures mean that the two systems do not always support each other and often work against each other (ibid). He argues that a Western model of higher education has rarely been successfully practised in China, due to the constant tensions 'between the institutionalized yet invisible and powerful systems within Chinese universities' (Yang 2014) and this has led to ineffectiveness being a kind of norm (Yang 2014:153). It is undoubtedly very complex and difficult for Westerners to develop a nuanced understanding that informs research that reflects the true complexity of China's Higher education system.

Ryan (2009:3) agrees that although reform of higher education in China 'has borrowed from Western models and the American higher education system in particular, this has sometimes resulted in tensions and contradictions'. She reports that sometimes 'the enthusiasm to adopt foreign models of [higher education in China] has been accompanied by resistance to foreign curriculum and pedagogical imports or has led to tensions or outcomes different from those anticipated' (ibid). However, she also notes a growing confidence in China and increasing recognition of the need for the West to develop awareness of the strengths of China's educational heritage. 'China is seeking to maintain the best characteristics of its own indigenous intellectual traditions and wisdom while adopting and adapting international models' (2009: 4). Ryan calls on researchers in the West and East to develop mutually beneficial approaches to research and knowledge exchange and notes: 'In order for genuine learning to occur between these systems...there needs to be open and well-informed dialogue on both sides that is based upon contemporary Chinese and Western realities' (2009: 5).

The stimulus for this paper is a chapter of an edited book 'Universities Quality Development under Globalisation (Pan et al, 2006) authored by the current Dean of the Institute for Higher Education Research at Xiamen University. The question and answer format is designed to initiate a conversation with the Dean and an associate Professor to begin to surface Confucian values and Chinese way of thinking about academic identity and some of the current challenges facing academics in global higher education.

Questions to stimulate the dialogue:

1. I know that this was the first Centre for research in Higher Education in China established by Professor Pan Maoyuan in the 1950s. Can you tell us something about the aims of the Institute in the 1950s and your aims for the institute now in 2015?
2. In your article in 'Key to University Quality Assurance: Faculty /staff development in the global context' (2007) you talk about metaphors. You say that the relationship between teachers and students is often compared with that of a candle illuminating others while consuming themselves, but you are not satisfied with this metaphor. You prefer the metaphor of the academic as a

gardener. You also refer to Confucian conceptions of the tutor and student relationship can you explain this to us?

3. You talk about the impact of moving from elite to mass education with bigger and more diverse student groups and the challenge this presents to teaching quality. You highlight the need for different pedagogies to teach larger more diverse groups and have concerns about compromising elite scholarship for mass teaching. Is it possible to reconcile the Confucian conception of tutor student relationships with the massification of higher education?
4. You also talk about professional fatigue as a result of increased pressure to publish and teach larger groups. I think this is something all academics the world over can relate to, you suggest ways of countering academic fatigue can you tell us more about this?
5. You do not avoid contentious issues and you challenge us all to examine our own motivations when you say scholars in the whole of academia are more impulsive, short-sighted and more inclined to look for quick gains for their work. You say 'academic excellence is achieved by careful working over a long time', studying despite loneliness. Does this relate to the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation? Can you tell us more about this?

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