

The Call of A Third Space for Chinese Curriculum Studies

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Abstract: Zhang Hua and Zhong Quiquan posed the important question: “how can we create possibilities of dialogue between Chinese Curriculum wisdom and Western curriculum theories and form a dynamic relationship between the two”(Zhang & Zhong, 2003, p.260), in order to help create a bridge on which “we are in no hurry to cross over” (Pinar, In press) and on which we might gather and linger. In fact, such bridges lure us to linger. In this article, I will discuss my transformative process of ‘becoming’ through my master’s studies both in China and in Canada in hopes of building such a bridge that enabling us to converse across culture, enabling us, perhaps, to hear curriculum in a new key. I would like to travel through Foucauldian and Confucian discourses in my own realm of self-creation, struggle toward making sense, envision curriculum differently and yearn for a third space for contemporary Chinese curriculum studies in which “curriculum becomes self-generative through such a journey” (Wang, 2004, p.20). Chinese curriculum as a journey in this age of social change and cultural fluidity calls for this third space in which “individuality and relationality intertwine, collide, and interact, separate yet together, parted yet holding hands, alone yet with the other” (Wang, 2004, p.131). There’s a call for a simultaneous movement toward personal reflection and cultural transformation in Chinese curriculum. This is a call for internationalization of curriculum studies. In this third space, the West and the East can “build connections and relationships in such a way that differences and the alterity of both self and other can be respected and even promoted under certain conditions”(Wang, 2004, p.75). In this third space, hierarchy and discrimination do not exist anymore; instead a new democratic bridge will be built across both sides of the ocean. Chinese curriculum needs to search for “a third space as a result of the intercultural conversation, a space in which self/subject, other, and universe co-emerge based upon differentiation instead of non-differentiation between subject and object, together yet apart, a space in which individuality and sociality are engaged with each other in a journey of constructing new forms of life; a space moves and is alive.

Keywords: third space, curriculum, self, transformation, intercultural conversation

Chairman Mao once said that if you want to know the taste of the pear, you have to bite into it. I tasted the pear of the Chinese higher education in 1990s and then tasted another pear---cultural shock when I began my second master study in Canada. When living in Chinese culture, I dreamt of Western cultures. However, after I have experienced the Canadian cultures, my dreams of it are broken by a strange, new-found space. Losing the comforts of my inherent culture, I wander back and forth between the two, not knowing which I belong to and unable to establish roots in either.

Across the ocean I encountered Foucault. Fascinated by Foucault’s elaboration of a new sense of self-creation and power relationships, I would like to travel through Foucauldian and

Confucian discourses in my own realm of self-creation, struggle toward making sense, envision curriculum differently and yearn for a third space for contemporary Chinese curriculum studies in which “curriculum becomes self-generative through such a journey” (Wang, 2004, p.20).

Is it possible that what is the strangest can be a part of the self?

“The quest for the self is a personal yearning” (Wang, 2004, p.24). It is what brings me to the West. In Canada, I encountered a stranger Foucault who “not only elaborates the subject’s active role in constituting itself” (Wang, 2004, p.25) but also provides detailed descriptions of aspects of a society by examining the power relationships that sustain it.

“Foucault’s discourses on the subject are provocatively situated in an ambiguous zone, claiming for the subject neither complete independence nor passive enslavement” (Wang, 2004, p.25). For Foucault, “the constructed nature of the subject implies a potential to become different than it is; what is contingent can be changed. It is creative self-constitution through changing the situation and opening up new modes of individuality not controlled externally by religion, institutions, or media” (Wang, 2004, p.25). “Human nature is created, not given” (Wang, 2004, p.26). So Foucault calls for self-creation and takes up the opportunities to create a new space for the creative notion of the subjects. Foucault employs the strategy: self-creation to deal with the problematic of identity. His “devotion to a form of self-creation situated at the edge of limits with the potential to go beyond” (Wang, 2004, p.27). For Foucault, “transformation stays at superficial levels if it merely adjusts the same modes of thought. Deep transformation must break away from the same thought by means of an open and turbulent critique, bringing forth new modes of thought. Creativity is possible only at the limit and cannot remain within any sameness, even an innovative one” (Wang, 2004, p.27). Foucault opens a space for transforming the subject through a continuous process of formation and reformation. According to him “there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all”(Foucault, 1985, p.8).

Foucault’s studies on the power relationships “pave the way to understanding the human self as both constructed and constructive angles of self-self relation”(Wang, 2004, p.27). According to Foucault, power relations are extremely widespread in human relationships. Now this does not mean that political power is everywhere, but that there is in human relationships a whole range of power relations that may come into play among individuals, within families, in pedagogical relationships, political life etc (Foucault, 1984). Foucault seeks to show that Western society has developed a new kind of power he calls bio-power---that is, a new system of control that traditional concepts of authority are unable to understand and criticize. Rather than being repressive, this new power enhances life. Foucault encourages people to resist the welfare state by developing individual ethics in which one turns one’s life into something that others can respect and admire. He sought to describe structures of power that inhibit our potential freedom and uncover ways to counter their oppressive effects.

My encounter with Foucault in Canada carried me away, fascinated by his imagination and creativity and his promise of becoming different. Becoming different, that is my dream! But “can I truly become somebody else” (Wang, 2004, p.46)? This question brought me back to where I am from---my Chinese culture: Confucianism. No matter how many times during the last one hundred years we have witnessed anti-Confucianism because of the condemnation of Confucianism for the failures of Chinese culture and because of notoriety of Confucianism for suppressing women, I am amazed by how much we Chinese are still embedded in this tradition.

For Confucius, “personal cultivation is fundamental to the development of both individual and society, and social reform must be achieved through personal transformation” (Wang, 2004, p.56). Self-cultivation, according to Confucius, involved not only educating oneself, but also picking up on the good traits in others and imitating them. In what is called the Great Learning, Confucianism reveals the process by which self-cultivation is attained and how it flows over into serving and blessing humankind. This process of self-cultivation is the famous “eight steps” in the Great Learning: “those of the past who wished to express their clear virtue throughout the land would first govern their states; those who wished to govern their states would first regulate their families; those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate themselves; those who wished to cultivate themselves would first order their minds; those who wished to order their minds would first make their intentions sincere; those who wished to make their intentions sincere would first extend their understanding; and the extension of understanding lies in the investigation of things”(Confucius, 500BC, 1.2).

The refinement of knowledge lies in the study of things. Only after things are investigated, can understanding be extended; only after understanding is extended, can intentions be made sincere; only after intentions are made sincere, can the mind be ordered; only after the mind is ordered, can the self be cultivated; only after the self is cultivated, can the family be regulated; only after the family is regulated, can the state be governed; and only after the state is governed, can peace be brought to the land.

Therefore, from the emperor on down to the common people, everyone should take self-cultivation as the root, for if the roots are in disorder, the branches cannot be governed. “When personal cultivation as the root is firmly planted, harmonious human relationships and social peace grow naturally” (Wang, 2004, p.56). According to Confucius, such a journey of personal cultivation as an everyday and persistent exercise cannot be hurried. Hongyu employs an interesting fable in Mencius (3.2), in which it depicts a farmer who was so eager to harvest his crops that he pulled all the roots one by one to help them grow and after that, all his crops died. Personal cultivation like the growth of the crops needs to follow its own growing rhythm. Without everlasting and consistent effort, personal cultivation cannot work.

Confucius set up five fundamental relationships---sovereign and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger, friend and friend, for peaceful coexistence among people. These five fundamental relationships are based on benevolence and

righteousness and state that if everybody did their parts in these relationships, life would be better. For Confucius, self does not exist in isolation and must form relationships with others. It is obvious that the focus of Confucius self-examination and self-cultivation is almost exclusively on the relationships between self and other. In The Analects, Confucius response to the question about what principle one should follow throughout one's lifetime is "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to other" (Confucius, 500 BC, 15.24).

Back to my Chinese root, I see the difference between Foucault's self-creation and Confucius self-cultivation, between Foucault's power relationships and Confucius five fundamental relationships. These two thinkers---Foucault and Confucius, coming from different intellectual and personal background, focus on the notion of the self from different traditions. "Foucault's self-creation puts the self at the center of his discourse in his later work, identifying social and cultural constraints as what need to be transgressed by a creative subject"(Wang, 2004, p.119). The Confucius self-cultivation pays more attention to the inner transformation as a lifelong project with an ideal which never can be mastered. "Foucault argues that the normalizing disciplinary power of modern society is behind the screen of abstract individualization"; but "Confucius has a more uneasy relationship with the concept of norm. While *ren* (human) can be said to be a social and political norm, what *ren* (human) represents is not fixed. Its meaning shifts in different settings, referring to a complicated, multilayered, and non-unitary notion" (Wang, 2004, p.119).

Is it possible that what is the strangest can be a part of the self? I flid back and forth between China and Canada seven times within 2 years and six times I went back because the question--- whether I want to change myself in some way haunted me all the time: I do not know where I am going and I do not know who I am going to become, but I do know the path is difficult. Traveling from Beijing to Vancouver, I constantly asked myself: am I prepared for the change? Who can I become? I am who I am.

Like Hongyu's supervisor who held a flashlight behind her to light the path under her feet, my supervisor told me when I went back to China the six times that I will never know the taste of the pear unless I bite into it by myself. So I decided to try the pear: I bit; I struggled and I experienced. I realized that I do not belong to where I am from and I also do not belong to where I am, but I do belong to the new place where I do not know. Reading Foucault, Heidegger and Kristeva, reflecting Confucius, Mencius and Taoism, I will continually weave the West and the East together through my body and soul, destroyed and reborn in the clash of two cultures.

My thoughts fly to the Chinese curriculum reforms which followed the tortuous journey of social changes: during the first half of the 20th century, Chinese drew fully on "the experience of Western educational ideas and institutions of which the United States was a representative" and tried to "transplant American educational culture into China"(Zhang & Zhong, 2003, p.260); after the establishment of the new country, "China modeled itself after the former Soviet Union and built up a highly centralized socialist system" (Zhang & Zhong, 2003, p.262). Which way should China go? An urgent call for Chinese scholars is how to

develop their own Chinese curriculum based on Chinese culture and merits of other nations. Instead of Westernize and Sovietize totally, can we find a third space where what is the strangest can be a part of the self? “One way is to join in the complicated curriculum conversation to open new horizons of understanding” (Wang, 2004, p.55). What we need is a third space embodying both curricular of “different cultural, political, global, and spiritual understanding” (Zhang & Zhong, 2003, p.268) but at the same time, “honoring the otherness of each and encouraging passages and interactions between them”(Wang, 2004, p.16). Such a third space is a transformative space in which different curricular shift, intersect, and constantly reform.

“This effort to promote interaction across differences refuses the position of “either/or”, addresses the tensions produced by “both/and,” and utilizes the in-between interstices for cultivating new thoughts”(Wang, 2004, p.16). Such a dialogue between the West and the East aims at “a deeper and richer understanding of each, providing space for multiplicity and contradiction which can further generate more singularity and more passages” (Wang, 2004, p.16). Through such a journey, Chinese curriculum will become self-generative, maintain its strong tradition of historical studies and traditional curriculum wisdom, participate and contribute to worldwide curriculum discourses, reflect on the reality of curriculum practice and finally construct its own curriculum theory.

Can I become somebody else?

For Foucault, self-creation needs to “break with one’s traditions and one’s self”(Wang, 2004, p.46). He is certain that “what must be produced is something that absolutely does not exist, about which we know nothing...the creation of something totally different, an innovation” (Wang, 2004, p.48). Such a rupture requires an aggressive tearing away from both institution and oneself. It is conspicuous in Foucault’s discourse that the image of a transgressive self is against the conservative and normalizing culture and institutions. In Foucault’s later work, the rejection of external control is transfigured into a rupture with oneself and a consequent conversion of that self. Foucault’s deep concern is the unique individuality, free from control of the state and from the totality of individualization. “He is more concerned about self-creation than about searching for a nonexistent essence of the self”(Wang, 2004, p.47). “In his several interviews, Foucault claims repeatedly that he writes in order to become somebody else”(Wang, 2004, p.47). Foucault’s dualism between self and society forms a contrast with the Confucian self, which focuses on unity. Foucault’s hope of rupture of tearing self away from both institution and culture is in contrast with Chinese notion of creation in a continuum of flow and Chinese notion of unity.

For Confucius, unity between *tian* (heaven) and *ren* (man) is a common theme. The oneness between heaven and man reaches its maturity and culmination in Neo-Confucian thought. Mencius’ dictum about understanding *tian* by understanding *xing* (human nature) forms the ancient notion of the unity between universe and humanity. According to Confucius, the distinction between the self and external objects is vague and permeable, that means being a human can be achieved by understanding the universe. Human participation in Tao is the key to the unity between the universe and humanity. Confucius’ thoughts about *tian* are

generally implicit, but Mencius clearly brings the unity between *tian* and *ren*. He says that “knowing his nature, he knows *tian*” (heaven) (Meng, 300BC, 13.11), earth, and all kinds of phenomena and things are all unified with man, whose nature is basically good. According to Mencius, *xing* (human nature) is intertwined with understanding heavenly Tao.

I was brought up under the unity between heaven and man and the theory that human nature is basically good (unlike what Foucault argues that human nature is created, not given). I doubt the “full break” when reading Foucault. Is it necessary and possible to break with my tradition and myself in order to seek the new self? Can I become someone else? Is it possible for anyone to create a completely “different kind of person with a different kind of soul and a different kind of body” (Wang, 2004, p.49)?

I traveled from city to city, from country to country and I had the enthusiasm for something completely new, absolutely other and utterly beautiful, I could work on myself to create and recreate my body and my soul, but “I could never become someone else, how much I want to. I can never be totally different from what I have been ”(Wang, 2004, p.47). I would like to say that “I write in order to become myself”(Wang, 2004, p.49).

Looking back to Chinese Curriculum studies, can it break with the tradition and become a completely new one? Does it need to become something else before it can be itself or does it need to become itself before it can be something else? “The issue is more about how to deal with self-denial and transform it toward creative directions rather than about simply rejecting its existence” (Wang, 2004, p.49). The struggle to search for a path for Chinese curriculum studies is to accept what it is, embrace the wonder and mystery and then climb the top of the mountain to become more than what it is. “Within curriculum studies, this means studying the work of others, especially scholars working in other nations... to begin, we must study the work of our colleagues who are not like us, who do not share our history, who may not share our interests”(Pinar, 2005, p.24).

The Third Space of Chinese Curriculum Studies: How can the alternative ways of East and West in dealing with dualism and unity be negotiated in a new space in which new paths of individuality and sociality can be opened up?

Chinese curriculum as a journey in this age of social change and cultural fluidity calls for this third space in which “individuality and relationality intertwine, collide, and interact, separate yet together, parted yet holding hands, alone yet with the other” (Wang, 2004, p.131). There’s a call for a simultaneous movement toward personal reflection and cultural transformation in Chinese curriculum. This is a call for internationalization of curriculum studies. In this third space, the West and the East can “build connections and relationships in such a way that differences and the alterity of both self and other can be respected and even promoted under certain conditions”(Wang, 2004, p.75). In this third space, hierarchy and discrimination do not exist anymore; instead a new democratic bridge will be built across both sides of the ocean. Chinese curriculum needs to search for “a third space as a result of the intercultural conversation, a space in which self/subject, other, and universe co-emerge based upon differentiation instead of non-differentiation between subject and object, together

yet apart, a space in which individuality and sociality are engaged with each other in a journey of constructing new forms of life; a space moves and is alive.

Do not wait! Let's restart our journey with the new generation to embrace the unfamiliar, no hesitation; let's return to the call of the Chinese curriculum reform; let's rebuild our homes to create new realms, no regret. Our own home is in a "shifting third space"(Wang, 2004, p.182). We and our children are forever on the road to a third space. "Please listen, listen carefully, listen to yourself, listen to the other, listen to the distant, strange, yet intimate calling from other worlds"(Wang, 2004, p.182).

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