Making History through Making New Schools: A Case of Reinventing Freire in China

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Critical Pedagogy in China

As researchers, we have taken tentative pedagogical steps in China, leaving small footprints that we hope will lead Chinese educators to the literature on critical pedagogy. We are walking slowly and carefully, so that we can reach at least the end of our beginning. One of us, (Wang Yan) lived most of her life in Northeast China until she moved to the United States in 2012. Another, (Suzanne SooHoo) is Chinese American and was born and raised in Chinatown, San Francisco. Our other contributor (Peter McLaren) was born and raised in Canada and has spent half of his life in the United States. Both SooHoo and McLaren are Co-Directors of the Paulo Freire Democratic Project at the College of Educational Studies, Chapman University in Southern California and are also Honorary Directors of the Center for Critical Pedagogy Research, Northeast Normal University, in Changchun, the capital city of Jilin Province, the first center to engage critical pedagogy in China. McLaren is also a part-time visiting Chair Professor at Northeast Normal University. SooHoo and McLaren are full-time professors at Chapman University where Wang Yan is a doctoral student and member of the Paulo Freire Democratic Project. All of us are social justice educators within the Freirean tradition.

The contentious history between the United States and China is well-known and the recent rise of China as a world economic power has intensified concern among U.S. political regimes over the last several decades. The most recent administration is no exception. We have recently watched with growing alarm threats made to China by the administration of President Donald Trump. We are concerned that China and the United States, two state capitalist superpowers (with one of these describing themselves as socialist), could be on a fatal collision course, both economic and militarily, with frightening ramifications for the entire world. We are aware that so much of what happens in education occurs outside of the classroom, in the messy arena of capitalist social relations, and that the workings of these relations are often mystified through mechanisms invisible to the general public through propaganda and the public relations industry, creating feelings of powerlessness when it comes

to making necessary crucial changes that will improve the lives of students, and the world-at-large.

What has been kept hidden from the general public both in China and the United States is the crisis within the global capitalist system. William Robinson (2017) and others have written extensively on how the capitalist system "faces a structural crisis of extreme inequality and overaccumulation, as well as a political crisis of legitimacy and an ecological crisis of sustainability." Marxist and Freirean educators have been writing about this crisis for decades. But Robinson (2017) notes another aspect to this crisis that could very well lead to "world conflagration" and this has to do with the "disjuncture between a globalizing economy and a nation-state system of political authority" which "threatens to undermine the system's ability to manage the crisis." And this disjuncture, notes Robinson, is at the heart of Trump's attacks on China's economic policies. Today's global economy has fully integrated numerous countries and power blocs such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and other countries in the Global South. Just think for a moment of the myriad of ways in which the global economy is dependent upon China, especially in relation to its role in subcontracting and outsourcing and the role its market continues to play in keeping capitalism afloat. Not only does it remain "the workshop of the world" but it leads the way in foreign direct investment. As Robinson (2017) points out, "between 1991 and 2003, China's foreign direct investment increased 10-fold, and then increased 13.7 times from 2004 to 2013, from $45 billion to $613 billion." Robinson (2017) is essentially correct when he argues that we need "more balanced transnational state institutions that reflect the new realities of a multipolar and interdependent global capitalist system could deescalate mounting international tensions and the threat of war" and ideally this would lead to a more "interventionist capitalist state." While at the same time, Robinson harbors no illusions that an interventionist state is sufficient to combat the current capitalist hegemon. We need mass social movements and a massive redistribution downward of wealth and power to the poor and suffering masses of humanity that are growing larger, with little end in sight of their immiseration. But absent such a revolution from below, it is clear that we need more effective transnational state apparatuses of governance to resolve the disjuncture between a globalizing economy and a nation-state based system of political authority (Robinson, 2017). For example, Robinson (2017) notes that "The World Economic Forum has called for new forms of global corporate rule, including a proposal to remake the United Nations system into a hybrid corporate-government entity run by TNC [transnational corporate] executives in 'partnership' with governments." China

is ahead of the U.S. in this regard, since

Chinese capitalism has not followed the neo-liberal route to global capitalist integration. The state retains a key role in the financial system, in regulating private capital, and in planning. This allows it to develop 21st century infrastructure and to guide capital accumulation into aims broader than that of immediate profit making, something that Western capitalist states cannot accomplish due to the rollback of public sectors, privatization, and deregulation.

(Robinson, 2017)

When Trump attacks China, how seriously is he taking into account the fact that global capitalism is in severe crisis? To what extent does he have a critical understanding of China's role in the global economy? Is he, for instance, considering the fact that foreign direct investment between the United States and China has increased exponentially over the past several decades? According to Robinson (2017), in 2015, "more than 1,300 U.S.-based companies had investments of $228 billion in China, while Chinese companies invested $64 billion in the United States, up from close to zero just ten years earlier, and held $153 billion in assets." Is Trump factoring in the reality that "the largest foreign holder of U.S. debt is China, which owns more than $1.24 trillion in bills, notes, and bonds or about 30 percent of the over $4 trillion in Treasury bills, notes, and bonds held by foreign countries" and that "China owns about 10 percent of publicly held U.S. debt" (Robinson, 2017)? Robinson also points out that "deficit spending and debt-driven consumption has made the United States in recent decades the 'market of last resort,' helping to stave off greater stagnation and even collapse of the global economy by absorbing Chinese and world economic output" (Robinson, 2017). What would happen, we wonder, if China decided to withdraw billions of dollars in its investments in multiple industries in the U.S.? If the U.S. starts sabre rattling with China, the entire world economy could be in peril, and the world would be at risk of nuclear annihilation.

We believe that critical pedagogy is a necessary but by no means sufficient intervention in both the U.S. and China towards an understanding of the ways in which capitalism has impacted the educational system in both countries. The structural crisis of capital takes different forms in the United States than it does in China but the origin of the crisis is that of overproduction and the mechanisms involved necessarily involve the exploitation of human labor and the increased

reproduction of economic inequality. We work from the premise that an economic system geared towards the augmentation of value (i.e., profit) cannot foster an educational system built on equality and social justice.

Over the last several decades, China has been sending visiting scholars to study the U.S. education system which, as was the case with the Obama administration, is rapidly moving towards privatization under president Trump. We anticipate that given the rise of economic nationalism, racism, anti-immigration sentiments and tenets of fascism under the Trump administration, critical pedagogy will face increasing scrutiny and very likely there will be political attacks on Freirean educators. Critical pedagogy has always had its largest audience in parts of the world such as Latin America, where the violence of capitalism has been the most noticeable. But this will be the topic of another paper. For this paper, we are less ambitious. We have chosen to focus on what we have learned from only a short time in several elementary schools under the guidance of an extraordinary principal and are exploring possible roles and routes that critical pedagogy can play in China.

One of us (McLaren) recently wrote the introduction to the latest Chinese version of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* which was launched two years ago in Beijing. And while there is a growing interest in the work of Freire, critical pedagogy, and the Western Marxist tradition (such as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) among Chinese educators, we also know that this interest could be short-lived, given the political exigencies that are ongoing within Chinese higher education.

During various visits to Changchun, we were fortunate to be introduced to a renowned progressive principal, Dr. Yu, who was instrumental in establishing the Center for Critical Pedagogy Research at Northeast Normal University in China. He is both a faculty member at Northeast Normal University and a principal of three large and prominent elementary schools in Changchun, considered by many to be among the top schools in northeastern China. Dr. Yu is particularly interested in fostering creativity and problem-solving among Chinese students and also shares an important concern about the question of whether or not Chinese classical literature—such as the work of Confucius —can contribute to Chinese school reform efforts. He is also interested in engaging pedagogical approaches and philosophies from countries outside of China, in particular, critical pedagogy as it has been developed in the work of Paulo Freire and addressed by North American educational philosophers, teachers and teacher educators. As researchers, we were curious to know how Dr. Yu was incorporating his commitment to the importance of Chinese tradition, with what he calls “other” theories, that is, theories emanating outside of

China, such as the work by North American critical educators.

Role of Tradition in Remaking History

What role does tradition play in making new schools? What philosophical traditions are relevant in contemporary contexts? If tradition is like history, which "is the stories we tell about the past," (Boggs, p.79) who is telling and carrying certain traditions? Is a tradition shared by everyone? Or are certain traditions exclusive for certain groups such as official tradition versus popular tradition, bourgeois tradition versus working class tradition. There are also traditions of different forms, such as ideological traditions, cultural traditions, moral traditions, behavioral traditions, practical traditions and philosophical/educational traditions. What and how can tradition inform the present and thus the future to create what Freire calls a more humane, democratic and just world.

In the act of learning and thinking about what traditions to bring forward, are we also making history? What are our criteria for issuing passports to certain traditions into the future?

These questions have troubled Dr. Yu senior faculty member at North East Normal University (NENU) and headmaster of 3 prominent elementary schools, which are affiliated with NENU in Changchun, China. He was interested in identifying Chinese wisdom and its place in contemporary school settings while search for new theories from external sources to address the educational needs of his children and community.

We visited at one of his schools that served 2,000 children and over 150 faculty members on International Children's Day, celebrated in China since 1949. At Opening Ceremonies, 2,000 children in self designed, marker art t-shirts depicting dragons, flowers, and cartoon characters stood before us like Opening Ceremony for the Olympics with a designated flag bearer sprinting around the stadium igniting a cheering crowd. On the wall of the main building was a giant megatron projector featuring videos of classroom activities throughout the year. Under it was a stage area where students performed songs, hip-hop, indigenous cultural dances, and fashion shows of clothes designed and tailored by them. After the performances, the children conducted a swap meet with approximately 50 stations situated on the grass around the track, selling toys, stickers, stationery goods, hand made string bracelets, and snowy white bunnies in decorated cages. We see a teacher playing the guitar, singing to students. Architecturally, we find roof top gardens, open space

classrooms, teacher designed furniture that facilitates both individual and small group instruction, performance stages, children's art on the wall, display cabinets with ceramic and crazy dough sculptures, Chinese calligraphy scrolls, and 3 dimensional paper sculpted fashion designs. Clearly, individual creativity was encouraged as there were no two art forms that looked alike. Rather we witnessed a carnival of creativity and originality. In the classrooms on this special day, students have gaming events and culinary activities. We saw a formal demonstration on how to roll sushi by three seven-year-old chefs. Children rushed to give us food samples as we moved from class to class in trick or treat fashion. As the day rolled down, students were found skipping in the halls or sweeping the floors with an aura of joy, not of obligation. We came away from the visit with a sense of jubilance for this school's reverence of the minds, hearts and bodies of these children.

What became abundantly clear at our school visit was that the people responsible for developing this school have a high regard for children. We found evidence of freedom to intellectually and physically explore, to imagine, and to interact freely and comfortably with other children and adults. It was no surprise then when we spoke with Dr. Yu about his vision for this school. He told us he saw children as philosophers, artists, and dreamers. He (Yu, 2015 & 2017a) advocated protecting children's nature, respecting their uniqueness, and cultivating social consciousness (□ □ □□□□□□□□□□□□□). He named his educational theory "free-spirited education," which was inspired by one of the most famous Confucian classics, *The Central Harmony*(□□□□ also translated as *The Golden Mean* or *The Doctrine of the Mean*). The opening words of *The Central Harmony*: What is given for us is what we called human nature; to follow and fulfill this human nature is what we called moral law; and the way to protect this human nature from social contamination is through education (□□□□□, □□□□□, □□□□□ □). Dr. Yu started to put "free-spirited education" into practice in 2014, the same year he took the position of the headmaster of 3 primary schools in Changchun. However, the idea of "free-spirited education" did not come to his mind overnight. Rather, it has been planted, sprouted and continuously blossoming in his mind for over 15 years (Yu, 2017b). More importantly, his own theoretical and philosophical pondering has spread to whole team with several schools in praxis (Yu, 2017b).

Believing it is our human nature to be epistemologically curious, Dr. Yu's focus last year was to examine the conditions that prompt or evoke creativity and problem-solving. This question about how to infuse creativity and problem solving in Chinese minds was also asked by President Xi Jinping in his proclamation heard on a

televised newscast (May 2016) of the establishment of several international think tanks in different sectors in China. He urged the country to be innovative and creative thinkers. President Xi also added that new ideas be “within Chinese ways.” It is unclear what this meant. One possible understanding is a caution to maintain Chinese identity while reaching for innovation and modernization; to not allow globalization to shadow the distinct strengths and history China; to pay homage to China’s traditions and longevity.

“Freire always viewed historical awareness as an ongoing condition for human betterment, opening up the possibility of a better future” (Macedo, 2017, p 15). Revisiting history is part of the process of conscientization “a deepened consciousness of their situation … as an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (p. 28-29). Macedo, citing Freire (1970), tells us that to understand what is futuristically feasible, one must know where we have come from. Tradition then is not only the link between the past and present but it is what each generation selects to bring forward to inspire the future (Szacki, 1969). “A tradition must be continually reshaped and revalued to meet the changing situation of a group if it is to survive as tradition”(Mohanadoss, 1997, p. 436). Dalmia and von Stietencron (1995) explain tradition as “an entity that is neither a permanent unchanging heritage of the past, nor entirely fictitious, but constantly being selected and modified in response to social change and to visions of the future” (1995, p. 21).

Any educational theory grows from and carries certain cultural tradition. The existence of educational tradition from an ontological dimension is fluid. A tradition always exists simultaneously in the past, at the present, and in the future. Therefore, Dr. Yu (2014a) argues that the true foothold of a tradition is in the “future”, not the “past”(p. 216). Because of characteristics of fluidity and future-orientation, tradition or educational tradition is always in a state of “unfinishedness” (p. 217). What then are the considerations we must make as we integrate new ideas into our unique Chinese identity? We continue to struggle with the relationship between continuity and change.

“Others Theory”

Dr. Yu (2014a) adopted the concept of Others theory (□□□ □) to refer to theories, which originated and developed in another land or in another culture for the purpose of explaining specific phenomena or resolving special problems. “Other” here *does not* mean *marginalized* groups in reference to the dominant group.

Rather, “Other” means a *different* culture or a different social context. Dr. Yu recognized the value of different ideas by referring to an old Chinese saying: “Stones from other mountains could be used to carve and polish our jade”. Put differently, we can learn from others to improve ourselves by exploring other theories, external from our knowledge systems.

When an external theory travels to another cultural environment, conflicts may occur between two cultures. Using China as an example, if Chinese people accept an external theory, including the problems that the theory is trying to resolve in its home culture, Chinese people will forego the opportunities to figure out their own realities and the problems they are supposed to resolve. In this process, they may lose their cultural tradition, their national character and even the soul of their morality. We need here to remember that Paulo Freire asked North American educators not to transplant him into their North American soil, but to reinvent him in the contextual specificity of their particular personal and political contexts, with attention to geo-political specificity. This is precisely the advice that the late President Hugo Chavez gave to McLaren, during McLaren’s visits to Venezuela to support La Revolucion Bolivariana.

When an external theory enters a foreign socio-cultural context, according to Dr. Yu (2014a), interpreters from the guest culture must generate the meaning of this theory based on their own historical context (p. 219). Because the existence of any theory has a specific historical context, interpreting and localizing an external theory becomes a kind of creative behavior in finding the points of intersectionality or hybridity (p. 219).

Dr. Yu (2014a) stated that Others education/theory very often carries its unique discourse system, which is formed within its own academic community (p. 222). Dr. Yu reminded us that the beginning of building a modern Chinese educational system, which shares the same time frame with the beginning of the Chinese modernization process (roughly speaking, it started from the second part of the 19 th century), was the time of national salvation. Chinese elites at the time realized that Chinese educational theory and practice were far behind the Western world. Slowly, the modernization of Chinese education became equivalent to Westernizing Chinese education (Yu, 2014a, p. 232). Under this assumption, importing Western knowledge became a process of transplantation, not a process of localization or reinvention.

This is not to say we should stop Others’ knowledge from entering China.

Knowledge sharing no doubt is a way of reflecting upon oneself and learning from others. Rather, when importing certain kinds of Others' knowledge, the Chinese academic community should have their own discourse system in place based on their own historical context, so that the negotiation between Others' knowledge and Chinese traditional knowledge can be on a relatively equal-powered stage.

When Others theory travels to a different socio-cultural context, the existence of the Other's theory will be a kind of "rootless" existence (Yu, 2014a, p. 225). We must find a new location for the Others theory to grow, which has to be on a practical level in daily life. Simply reinterpreting the Others theory on a theoretical level is not a process of re-rooting. In other words, there is an "in-between space" between Others theory and the local practice within which the Others theory has to be settled (p. 224). For Dr. Yu, this is a space of creativity and possibility. Since the relationship between one theory and its correspondent practice is actually not a strict one-to-one relationship, one theory has the potential to be applied to multiple contexts and similarly, based on one practice, we can always extract different kinds of theories (p. 228). Therefore, the point, for Dr. Yu is to raise localized questions and to ask: What theories help us solve our problems? What are the different ways Others theory can be applied? What theories and practices can be reinvented when considering local context? Who should be involved in this process? And finally, how can school leaders broaden the conversation to various stakeholders and democratize their schools.

One of the external Others theory Dr. Yu and his combined team at the university and primary schools has been studying is philosophy for children. In one of his recently published articles, Dr. Yu (2017c) stated that globally there are two core approaches to this topic. The first approach is to develop textbooks on philosophy of children with a focus on children's unique process of exploring and developing their own philosophy, such as in Matthew Lipman's work (citation). Gareth B. Matthews (citation) represents a second approach, which advocates power sharing conversations between adults and children. Matthews thinks that children can help adults to reflect on some serious philosophical issues. At Dr. Yu's schools, teachers not only study the works of people such as Lipman and Matthews but as practitioner researchers, they collect children's questions, thoughts, and ways of learning in and outside of the classrooms as their database. Teachers get to know children better in this process and also try to build Chinese children's philosophies from scratch (Yu, 2017c).

Dr. Yu's unique position of being both school principal and university professor

allowed him to conduct a participatory action research project of bridging theory with practice. This involved experimenting with connecting university faculty and students with elementary school teachers and students. Some of the teachers in his elementary schools were simultaneously his Master's or Doctoral students in the university. These groups rarely meet altogether yet all share the same goals of improving the educational success of children. He held academic conferences at his elementary schools, so that school teachers can be more connected to the academic world. At the same time, he held doctoral seminars at the elementary schools to ground university students' experiences thus bridging university theory based knowledge and primary school practice based knowledge. As a school leader and public intellectual Dr. Yu extended these conversations to parents who were invited twice a year to talk about topics such as child growth and development. On the international stage, in 2015, Dr. Yu held the 1 st International Conference on Critical Pedagogy [1] in China and opened the Center for Critical Pedagogy Research [2] giving his people access to international scholars and practitioners.

Simultaneously when considering outside influences and contextualizing new knowledge with his constituents, Dr. Yu feels he must attend to the third element of his "free spirit" educational philosophy – social consciousness. To the extent that Dr. Yu's definition of social consciousness is related to civic engagement, one can conclude there is much work to be done in cultivating this noble and democratic vision. A recent Gallup report on global civic engagement was conducted with 140 countries in 2015. The research methodology was telephone and face-to-face interviews with approximately one thousand adults per country, with the age range being 15 years-old or older. The questions Gallup proposed included: "Whether they had donated money to a charity, volunteered their time to an organization or helped a stranger in need within the past month" (2016, p. 3). Gallup compiled the "positive" responses to the three questions above into a Civic Engagement Index score (the possible score range is 0-100) for each participating country—the higher score represents a greater proportion of the population that is civically engaged. According to this Gallup report, which was published in 2016, among all 140 participating countries, China ranks the last on Civic Engagement Index, with its Index score being 11. United States scored 61, and took the second place on the list. The leader in civil engagement turned out to be Myanmar with a score of 70.

Conclusion

What can we learn from Dr. Yu's educational theory and practices? Examples in this

essay of balancing external Others Theories and Chinese Classics indigenous knowledge show careful and conscientious deliberation in maintaining tradition and cultural sustainability. Dr. Yu encourages us to cultivate a consciousness that compels locals to construct their own realities and solutions to problems within their historical, socio cultural contexts. In this way, we preserve and protect localized knowledge from (Western) modernization.

As we deliberate about the place tradition holds in our society, we are cognizant that the process of contemplating history is part of our future as well as our past. As public intellectuals, we have a responsibility to bring forth these conversations within a wider democratic constituency so that the people may determine their fate and design their tomorrows through an examination of their localized core values. Tradition links the past and present and necessitates conscious acceptance or rejection (Mohanadoss, 1997). This historical awareness and careful deliberation are the critical tools that Freire (1970) urged us to use as we contemplate the space between continuity and reinvention. Hope is the guardian of this space as “untested feasibility” plays out among the innumerable social/political/economical “limit situations”. Hopefully, when our leaders give priority to economic and technological development over human and community development (p.88), we are prepared to protect and preserve tradition while thoughtfully considering what possibilities Others bring to us.

As we continue our research in Chinese education, what strikes us is the need to develop a solidarity of purpose across whatever differences may exist. Our foray is only beginning and we are not left with answers but only more questions: Is there a meeting place between Freire and Confucius? During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Yang Jung- Kuo (1974) described Confucius as the “sage” of the reactionary classes. Confucius was accused of teaching his pupils to accommodate themselves within the feudal ruling class. He was described as offering students “reactionary ideas to bring their thinking into conformity with the political and moral standards laid down by the slave-owning class, every word and deed in accordance with the rules of the slave system” (Yang, 1974). The Chinese government no longer ascribes to the revolutionary ideology that informed the Cultural Revolution, having made the pivot to capitalism after 1976 under Hua Guofeng, an economic modernizer who launched “the Leap Outward” (a state-led, investment-driven program with an emphasis on heavy industry) and afterwards, under the economic development programs of Deng Xiaoping. Yan Wang remembers that in capitalist China, leaving food on your plate in a restaurant meant that you weren’t poor,

because you didn’t feel compelled out of hunger to eat everything that was served. Also, the host that might be treating guests felt relieved that he or she did not have to order more food, since the guests had left food on their plates. The more food you left on your plate, the wealthier you appeared to others in the restaurant.

While it may be understandable why Guoxue (the study of traditional Chinese culture) came under attack during the Cultural Revolution, it remains undeniable that there is much beauty and knowledge to be gained from engaging with Chinese classical works, such as the work of Confucius. And while they remain important works to be engaged and appreciated in China and beyond, they are certainly not above normative critique.

To what extent, then, can Freire’s work and the teachings of Confucius be part of a larger pedagogical project without the collision of major contradictions? Are there synergistic possibilities for the development of critical subjectivity and agency among students? Are these two pedagogical approaches to philosophy (and philosophical approaches to pedagogy) able to successfully overlap or are they destined to remain interminably discrete? Can the wisdom tradition of Confucius serve alongside the pedagogical praxis of Freire—a praxis that ultimately challenges the asymmetrical relations of power and privilege of the power elite? Over time, how will the Chinese Communist Party react to the work Freire? Over the next decade, how will the two most powerful capitalist economies attempt to disciple their various educational systems, and how far will their official educational mandates impact what can and cannot be done to improve the lives of their respective citizens. How will they try to use their educational systems to serve as tools to, in Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) view, “manufacture consent” around issues such as nationalism, global ethics, civic engagement, and pending ecological destruction? Will Freire’s work ultimately emerge as a space for recognition and reconciliation? These are the questions that will continue to haunt us as we move ahead in our research, tentatively, and with soft steps, so as not to wake the dead.

Note: Dr. Zhang Cong, from Northeast Normal University has been visiting Chapman since October 2016. We had several conversations with him during the period of writing this article. Dr. Zhang shared with us his understanding of Dr. Yu’s philosophy and practices. A special thanks to Dr. Zhang.

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Notes

[1] A Chapman University blog on the conference in China: https://blogs.chapman.edu/ces/2015/10/23/ces-faculty-members-head-to-china-for-1st-international-conference-on-critical-pedagogy/

[2] Another Chapman University blog on critical pedagogy in China: https://blogs.chapman.edu/ces/2016/08/12/critical-pedagogy-in-china-really/