Why does traditional China education system place less importance on critical thinking than western system? An evaluation of how to implement critical thinking in Chinese education effectively

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Abstract: Critical thinking is often regarded as a fundamental aim and overriding ideal of education. Israel Scheffler suggested critical thinking “is vital important in the conception and organization of educational activities” (Scheffler, 1989:1). Ken Brown (1998:1) also expressed the view that critical thinking is one of a number of core skills to promote eventual workplace adaptability when students leave school. Many educators and theorists have highlighted the importance of critical thinking and held the view that China has an anti-critical thinking attitude. Nisbett (2003) claimed that there are different thinking styles between East and West, and East Asians have a stronger tendency to think ‘illogically’ than do westerners. Furthermore, Ryan and Louie (2008) reported that the methods of thinking of Asian, particularly Chinese students, have been labeled ‘surface’, ‘harmonious’, ‘dependent’ and so forth; uncritical attributes rather than westerner’s ‘deep’, ‘adversarial’, ‘independent’ study attitudes. However, there has been little research reported on why Chinese students have the anti-critical thinking attitude in the contemporary educational system.

Keywords: critical thinking; education; students

Introduction
This essay is trying to explore why the traditional Chinese education system places less importance on critical thinking and how this critical thinking can be more effectively implemented in Chinese education today. In this essay, secondary research, which is mainly the literature review, will be used to examine as the main explanations. Besides I have been studying in The UK as an international student for about two years, so I will use my own knowledge and experiences as cases.

1. What is Critical Thinking?
Critical thinking has been begun researched by Socrates over 2,000 years ago; however, the definitions of critical thinking have never been isolated. Alec Fisher (2001:2) regarded John Dewey as the ‘father’ of the modern critical thinking tradition. For Dewey, critical thinking it essentially an ‘active’ process which people thinks things through themselves rather than learning in a passive way from someone else.
1.1 Robert Ennis’s skills conception

After the original definitions of Dewey, a widely used definition was given by Robert Ennis, “Critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do. (Cf. Norris and Ennis, 1989)” Ennis (1996) suggested that critical thinking should base on particular skills, such as observing, inferring, generalizing, reasoning, and evaluating reasoning. For him, the process of critical thinking is deductive: it involves applying the skills of critical thought to a particular discipline.

1.2 Richard Paul’s knowledge contextualization of critical thinking

Like Ennis, Paul (1982) emphasizes the skills and processes associated with critical thinking. For him, critical thinking requires a deep knowledge for oneself, which takes both intellectual courage and humility. A critical thinker ought to understand the bigger picture holistically, to see different worldviews and cultural backgrounds.

1.3 Harvey Sigel’s ‘reason assessment’ and ‘critical attitude’

Sigel (1988) highlights a strong conceptual connection between critical thinking and rationality. He defends both a reason assessment component in the skill aspect, and a critical attitude component in the dispositional domain. Sigel (1997) points out the essential aspect of critical thinking should need a deeper understanding of the nature of reasons, warrant, and justification. It is obviously that the crucial factors to be a critical thinker are reasoning and committed to give expression of critical reasoning skills.

1.4 Jane Roland Martin’s morally ground for critical thinking

Martin (1992) considered that critical thinking is founded in moral perspectives and particular values and emphasizes the dispositions of it. She suggests that critical thinking should be motivated by a concern for a more humane and just world. Just because people may give a conclusion by some brilliant critical reasoning, it doesn’t mean that the conclusion is morally acceptable. For Martin, the vital element is thinking and commitment with others that are oriented towards the development of a better world.

In conclusion, Mark Mason (2008) classified critical thinking have the trends that it is the skills of reasoning, a disposition attitude to be skepticism with commitment, or a moral orientation, and substantial knowledge of particular discipline. It can be seen that to be critical people should think things in a positive way rather than be forced learning from someone else, and also critical thinkers requires skill in about assumptions, in asking relevant questions, in drawing out implications (Fisher, 2001). In other words, critical thinkers should know when and how to use this kind of reasoned and reflective thinking in different situations appropriately.

2. The importance of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking plays a significant role in the history of education. According to Times Education Supplement, “the greatest educational revolution of the millennium may not lie in the computerized classroom. Instead, it is likely to be the simple but subversive concept of teaching children how to think (12-2-93, p.14).” It appears that the responsibility of educational institutions is to teach students to think effectively.

Sharon Bailin and Harvey Siegel (2003) claimed that critical thinking is often regarded as the fundamental aim and overriding ideal of education. Sigel gives four reasons for why critical thinking should be thought to be so important (Sigel, 1988, chapter 3). Firstly, it is necessary for students to think critically if they are to be treated with respect as persons. This requires students to think for themselves, to shape their own thoughts and lives competently and well,
rather than to ignore the substantial ability to determine for themselves, let them know the moral requirements to be a person and let themselves to determine how best to live and who to be. Consequently, students need critical thinking to judge such matters for themselves.

The second reason for regarding critical thinking as a fundamental educational aim involves education’s widely accepted task of preparing students for adulthood. Students must be self-sufficiency and self-direction.

A third reason for regarding the fostering of critical thinking as a central ideal is the needs of educational activities and efforts. Mathematics, science, literature, art, history and so forth, all these curriculums incorporate and rely on critical thinking. Students should be more critical to master or become initiated into these curriculums.

The forth reason is that critical thinking is a very essential component to the development of democracy. Because to be democracy, people should be reason well regarding political issues and matters of public policy, scrutinize the media and so forth, those requirements need people have the critical attitudes.

According to those four reasons, critical thinking can be identifying as a fundamental education ideal. People should to think critically to promote the ability of independent thinking, personal autonomy, and reasoned judgment in thought and action.

3. The Educational History of China and the anti-Critical Thinking Attitude

As the evaluations before, critical thinking is very important and people should have the critical attitude, so why does China have an anti-critical thinking attitude? For China, the reasons for anti-critical thinking attitude have two roots, the history root and the value root. The history root can be seen as the macro scale while the value root which is particular the Confucian moral values for China can be evaluated as the micro scale. This part will focus on these two scales and analyses the reason why the Chinese have an anti-critical thinking attitude.

3.1 The macro scale—the history of education in China

According to the history of China, Dillon (2009) has divided the education in China into five parts: “Traditional education”, “Missionary contribution to educational reform”, “Chinese communist party and the Cultural revolution period education”, “Education reform in the 1980s and 1990s”, and the “Further and higher education”. I will simply follow these five parts and use my own experiences or what I know about the history of my country to explain the anti-critical thinking attitude.

3.1.1 Traditional education

Before the middle of the twentieth century, the provision of education in China was “underdeveloped and uneven” (Dillon, 2009:66). Dillon (2009) suggested that for the imperial era, education had been provided only for the landed elite and its primary function was to ensure that potential administrators acquired a thorough grounding, not only in the literary Chinese language, but also in the philosophical and historical classical texts of the Confucian tradition, be skillful in it was believed to be important for ruling the empire.

This literati education involves a series of examinations at local, provincial and finally national level, which a process requires many years to complete. Only the candidates who have devoted themselves full-time to the study could have the possibility of being awarded the degrees. This process stresses the prevailing Confucian orthodoxy rather than
liberal, critical of scientific education, it is dangerous and discouraged to question the conventional wisdom.

One example of this I learnt from my Chinese class when I was studied in the senior high school. In the Qing Dynasty a candidate named Fanjin took the local examinations for several decades but did not succeed, every day he did not do anything but rote learning and parroting the texts of Confucian canon. Lots of friends, neighbors, relatives were laughing at him and called him ‘bookish’. Finally he passed the exam and he was so happy he went mad. When he recovered, his friends, neighbors and relatives were called him “the star of wisdom”. How can we count on this kind of persons to be critical thinking?

At the end of the nineteenth century as the Chinese empire began to collapse, consequently, China was sadly lacking in secular, critical, scientific and technical education. More seriously, majority of the conservative elite did not even recognize that this problem existed.

3.1.2 Missionary contribution to educational reform—the introduce of science and democracy

Christian missionaries arrived in China in considerable numbers in this period: “the China Inland Mission alone had 641 missionaries on its books in 1895” (Dillon, 2009:67). The majority of missionaries in China were Protestant, although “Catholic missions had established a small but influential presence much earlier” (Dillon, 2009:67), and education was one of their most important activities after the task of establishing churches and preaching the gospel to attract converts. For China, the missionaries not only introduced the Christian missionary education but also other aspects of Western education in China, such as introduce the elements of science and democracy. For example, missionaries supported schools, hospitals, libraries and the press: some colleges and universities that were set up under the auspices of European and American churches were to become very influential, such as the Peking University.

The traditional Chinese educational system fell into decline at the end of the nineteenth century. The role of Confucian classics was reduced due to the reforms and the main aim was improve the ability to read and write the modern Chinese language. Most of the new reformed schools were modeled on the educational reforms in Japan and they had a strong conception of being patriotic. Chinese students began to travel to Japan, Europe or the United States to complete their higher education. Those who received the western education began to know the critical thinking attitude and criticized the Confucian classis and lead the “New Cultural Movement” which brought the science and democracy in China.

3.1.3 The Chinese Communist Party and the distortion of the aim of education during the Cultural Revolution period

When the Chinese Communist Party came to power, the important aim of the new educational strategy was to redress the social balance, to correct the historical wrong and to create a system of schools for the peasant farmers who had been neglected by governments for centuries. The party considered that they owed the peasant farmers a political and moral debt, and this moral debt leading to problem down the road.

During the Cultural Revolution period, the organized educational system collapsed. Teaching and learning in all schools, from kindergarten to senior high schools and also colleges and universities, were pressed to afford more political education and students were forced to do the physical labor to express the closeness to peasants and workers.

The vast majority of well-informed Chinese now view this as a disaster, which ruined both of their own educational opportunities and careers. It created a ‘lost generation’ whose education was so disrupted by the Cultural Revolution.

3.1.4 Education reform in the 1980s and 1990s
When Deng Xiaoping’s reform programme began in the 1980s, the aims of the public education were to rebuild a national system with the government financial support. The political content was reduced. In April 1986, legislation setting out plans for a nine-year compulsory education system was passed by the National People’s Congress. The nine-year system is the key point of primary and secondary education. Primary education generally lasts for six year, but in some poorer rural areas children go to school at the age of seven rather than six and follow a five-year curriculum. Children usually spend twenty-four to twenty-seven hours per week in primary school which may teach for forty weeks each year. The study of the Chinese language occupies about half of the classroom time and considerable emphasis is placed on moral and ethical education, but children also study mathematics, science, history, geography, physical education, music and art.

Take my own case as an example, when I was young I lived with my grandmother in a small rural village and I attended my primary when I was six but followed a five-year curriculum. I was not allowed to ask questions and did a lot of homework every day, I still remember that I must to keep a clear-minded head to repeat wrote the Chinese characters till midnight every day even I was very sleepy. I also had to do what the teacher said like to recite the texts from textbooks or to practice the mathematics every day. There is no critical thinking tradition in the primary school, while the students who did well were considered as the “Three Goods Student” (good in study, attitude and health).

Secondary education is compulsory which lasts three years in junior high schools. Compared with primary school, the subjects studied are generally the same with the addition of foreign languages and science subjects, the students spend more than thirty hours in the classroom each week. Students must pass a competitive examination to proceed from the junior high school to senior level.

I remember at the third year of my junior high school, our summer holiday was only ten days, all of the rest time was spent on study and quite a few of my classmates did not pass the examination and could not continue their senior high school. There were still no ideas about critical thinking and we just use the old methods like recite or practice more and more to pass the exam.

3.1.5 Further and higher education

China has a system of vocational and technical schools which recruit students from junior high school and provide the further education like the west sector. There are also colleges and universities which provide more professional knowledge, such as agricultural and technical education.

The higher education system was promised to have considerable autonomy in developing their own curriculum and recruiting their own staff and a national examination system was established after the cultural revolution. These examinations are extremely competitive and are taken by all candidates for higher education institutions. In many households all normal family activities are delayed during the examination season and the combined efforts of all family members are directed to make sure the talented sons and daughters could get into the right university.

When I took the examination, my parents lived a luxury hotel with me which was near the examination hall; they made all their effort to help me to pass the exam. However it is not helpful but made me very stressed, when the exam was finished, my parents picked out the elite universities and applied them for me instead my own wishes.

During the 1980s with the expanded employment choices, the system under which all graduated were allocated
jobs by the government to break down. This could explain that why the students lack critical thinking, Fisher (2001) suggested that critical thinker should know when and how to use reasoned and reflective thinking in different situations appropriately. However, those who received job from the state do not require the skill of critical thinking; what they provide were their graduate certificates and to get the certificates they just do what the teacher told them to do; they did not even to attend the job interviews. However, when the job allocations break down and the employment expended, a lot of people still want to work in the Government-owned Corporations rather than private enterprises because Government-owned Corporations means steady, safe, and do not need critical thinking, just like the style when they were at school. Consequently, many classmates or friends of mine preferred to take the Civil Service Examination to a government officer rather to attend a job interview.

3.2 The micro scale—Confucian value of China influence the anti-critical thinking attitude

Another significant reason for China’s anti-critical thinking attitude is based on traditional Chinese ideas—Confucianism. Bell (2008:108) comments that Confucianism is the main part and also an “extensive and profound theory” of the traditional culture of China. Bell (2008) also suggested that Confucianism even played an important role in the contemporary society of China. According to Bell’s (2008) theory, I will simply follow the divisions by Bell to explore the reason for the anti-critical thinking in China into three sectors: “the aims of education in the humanities”, “people should question themselves rather than criticize others” and “the harmonious relationship”. For the classical Chinese—The Analects of Confucius, I have made use of the philosophical translation by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont (1998). In each sector I will add some examples or my own study experiences in China to make my points clearer.

3.2.1 The aims of education—not critical thinking but improving the “empathetic ability”

In the western education system, according to Bell (2008:108) the main aim of liberal education should be “the inculcation of critical thinking skills and attitudes”. This means that students should learn to critically reflect, debate, and challenge old dogmas. Different from the western education system, Confucius claimed that the aim of China’s education is emphasis the “empathetic ability” (Bell, 2008:109) which is the ability to understand and empathize with other people’s feelings and emotions. Confucius holds a limited attitude to criticism, for him, he said that “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.”(15.24) this means for students, being fully human is not only being good at winning debates and proving that they are right, but also being able to “put oneself in other people’s shoes”( Bell, 2008:109), to understand what other people’s feelings are, and to sympathize with other people’s needs and desires.

One example for this is that when I was in primary school, the “Regulations for Primary School Pupils” presented that love for the party and the nation, care for the collective, respect for the division commander, sympathy, unity and mutual help, and observing laws. I remember that every primary student should recite it. This shows the clear aim of the primary education is to develop and calculate the sympathetic ability, not critical thinking.

3.2.2 People should question themselves rather than criticize others.

Surely Confucius agreed with the aim of self-improvement, however, he thought that people should question themselves rather than criticize others. He said that “Exemplary persons make demands on themselves, while petty persons make demands on others” (15.21). People can improve themselves by learning from other people: “Even when walking in the company of two other people, I’m bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weakness, I reform myself accordingly.”(7.22) It is widely accepted that many Chinese still have a humble attitude
like the ancient motto said “Modesty helps one go forward, whereas conceit makes one lag behind.”

When I was young, I was told by both my parents and teachers to respect to others, especially teachers. No one told me what critical thinking is and how to criticize others, this might the reason that when Chinese students study aboard, they seldom to express ideas in seminars rather listen to other people’s opinions. In actual fact, when I was studying in the university in China, we never have seminars in timetable, every class is lecture.

3.2.3 The harmonious relationship

Confucius also said people can criticize each other but only in a “harmonious relationship” (Bell, 2008:112). For Confucius, maintaining a harmonious relationship is very important, like he said “Exemplary persons value harmony but not conformity; petty person value conformity but not harmony” (13.23). This harmony is very diverse which means that everyone can play different roles and make contributions to the harmonious society. Confucius thought that teaching that kind of empathy can promotes harmonious relationships, and he was worried about the consequences of critical thinking. He considered critical thinking can threats the harmonious of the society and may bring panic to citizenries.

As the evaluations above, it can be seen that Chinese indeed have the historical roots of anti-critical thinking attitude, however, Chinese also have their own philosophy about how to learning and how to communicate with others. As the rapid development of globalization, people should be more positive to adapt the new cultures from other countries rather than be forced to follow (Tomlinson, 1996). Consequently, Chinese should have the critical thinking awareness and try to learn how to think things critically.

4. How to Improve Critical Thinking?

In order to cultivate the positive learning attitudes of students, the author put forward some suggestions. The reasons evaluated above shows why Chinese students lack critical thinking, then it comes to the question that how to critical thinking. Firstly, there is a debatable question—do Chinese students have the capability to improve critical thinking.

4.1 The capability of Chinese students to improve critical thinking

As suggested above, Westerners are trained to think critically for their educational system emphasizes individualism, such as Margaret Thatcher suggested that individuals were responsible for their own successes or failures (Bilton, T. et al, 2002). On the contrary, Easterners are trained to think traditionally, respect family and country, emphasize what is good for society not the individual, such as the China aims to build a harmonious society. It can be seen that there is not really so many inherent differences between the Western and Eastern thinking styles, because people were trained to think as the traditions or government want them to think.

In actual fact, Chan and Yan (2008) suggested that Easterners and Westerners have the similar thinking styles. They use proverbs for examples: such as ‘With friends like X, who needs enemies?’ sounds very much like a Eastern counterpart of ‘Beware of your friends, not your enemies’ or ‘Keep your friends close; keep your enemies even closer’. Another evidence given by Medin and Rips (2005), they found that perhaps evidence shows that East Asians are more likely to organize the world in terms of family resemblance (for example, Chinese people use different words to show the distance of human relationships, there are not only grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, cousins; but also distinctions between paternal and maternal grandparents), but such a style of thinking is also common
in Western cultures. As these reasons point out, it can be seen that Chinese students have the capability to learn thinking critically through practice.

4.2 How to improve critical thinking?

There are many suggestions about how to improve critical thinking. Fisher (2001:14) implied that the tradition about improving critical thinking by considering “how we think in various contests, seeing a better model and trying to move our own practice towards that better model”. Chinese students can practice critical thinking by following steps as he suggested: identifying reasons and conclusions, knowing the language of reasoning; understanding different patterns of reasoning, use assumptions, context and a thinking map; clarifying and interpreting expressions and ideas; judging the credibility of sources; evaluating inferences: deductive validity and other grounds, assumptions and other relevant arguments; making decision upon different options, consequences, values and risks.

Using my own experience for example, I found that in the university in the UK, teachers are more likely to make students write essays as homework. My teacher suggested to us that a good essay will be written with an introduction (which has the background and outline), and the main body (which include the different ideas and theories). Apart from this, she emphasized that we should add the discussion or evaluation before conclusion, it can make us to thinking critically and know both the superiority and the limitation of those theories in the essay.

Another idea was given by Luntley (2008); he divided learning into two different parts: training and reasoning. He thought that learning by training is a fundamental study in which habits of mind and behavior that have been shaped by others are acquired; and learning by reasoning is a form of mental critical activity that is based on the students’ working out what to think and what to do. Learning by reasoning includes a critical evaluation of the learned activities and students taking responsibility for what they learn and assessing what they learn themselves.

This corresponds with the design of my curriculum; every course has one lecture and two seminars per week. In the lecture, my teacher gives out basic knowledge and theories which belong to the training part; while seminars belong to reasoning aspect which are very useful because they give me the chance to discuss and evaluate what I have learned and give out assessments. In my individual opinion, the methods of Fisher and Luntley have the feasibility, scientificity, rationality and effectiveness necessary to help to improve critical thinking.

Conclusion

To conclude, critical thinking is the fundamental and overriding ideal of education. During the past, educators found that Chinese students lack the critical thinking attitudes, such as Fox (1996) and Ryan (2002), who viewed that Chinese students lack academic values. They characterized Chinese students are more likely to plagiarism and lacking critical thinking attitudes, and they are usually considered as passive, dependent, rote learners. However, there has been very little research reported on the reasons that why China has the anti-critical thinking attitude. In the aspect of emotional factors, the great majority of students were interested in English. They also could objectively evaluate their English level and they had positive attitude towards English classes. However, many students had no obvious feeling in the process of English learning. A few students were happy when they learned English, so they would enjoy learning and feel relaxed. Naturally, their learning efficiency would be improved. The students who had the feeling of failure and inferiority feeling in the process of English learning would lose the self-confidence. That would make learning less efficient.

The purpose of the project was, therefore, to analyze the reason why the Chinese have an anti-critical thinking
attitude both from the historical scale and Confucianism values aspect. From the traditional cultures, China’s education system less likely to emphasizes to think critically, the students were trained to respect teachers and the Classics, they should not go against their teachers’ wills and they were forced to learn by rote to pass different exams. In addition, the emphases of Confucianism made them sympathetic, question themselves first before criticizing others, and should maintain the harmonious relationship with others as well. Consequently, the Chinese students rarely have the chance and awareness to think critically.

Because of the importance of critical thinking, critical think also can let the students prepare for their adulthood; mastering the traditional educational activities incorporating and relying on critical thinking; and the access to the democratic life; consequently, students, particularly Chinese students should be trained think critically.

The similarity of thinking ability made it possible for those Chinese students have the capability to be trained to think critically. Fisher (2001) suggested that improving critical thinking requires the ability to identify reasons and conclusions, use assumptions, clarifying and interpreting expressions, judging the credibility of sources, evaluating inferences and making decisions upon different options, values and risks. Educators can follow these suggestions to train Chinese students to improve their critical abilities.

However, not all Chinese students lack the critical ability, like not all Westerners like to think critically. Lee Wing On (1996) claimed that Chinese students are not only diligent, but they also have high achievement motivation. Ryan and Louie (2008:69) held the view that “not only can one be wrong about one’s students from another culture, but more importantly, the stereotyping of that culture can also mislead one into classroom interactions that are just culturally inappropriate”. With the globalization of the world, different cultures connected and mixed together, individuals’ study attitude can not only be identified by which country he/she come from, for his/her attitude towards thinking critically is not isolated and fixed. As a result, educators should treat students as individuals and deal with their learning status on a case by case basis.

Reference