DRAFT

Education Policy Borrowing and Cultural Scripts for Teaching in China

Abstract

China’s recent education reforms are a result of selective policy borrowing from ‘the West’. Although comparatists have highlighted the importance of cultural context in policy borrowing in China, what remains relatively under-explored is the epistemological basis for cultural views on teaching that mediate policy transfer. This article argues that the prevailing cultural factors (‘cultural scripts’) for teaching in China – students’ respect for the teacher, student attention and discipline in class, and the importance of practice – find their genesis and justification in the Confucian worldview. Focussing on a Chinese classic text, Xueji (Records of Learning), this article elucidates the ancient Chinese’ views on the nature and transmission of knowledge, and explains why the ‘teacher-dominated’ pedagogy is believed by many Chinese educators to be indispensable for ‘good’ teaching. An appreciation of the epistemological foundation of culture, it is argued, is salutary in enhancing our understanding of policy divergence across societies despite their similar adoption of global/‘Western’ educational ideas and practices.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, China has launched a series of ambitious education reforms in its effort to revamp its basic education and prepare its graduates for the challenges of the 21st century. A number of researchers have observed the trend of China borrowing its education policies and practices from Anglophone countries such as the United States and the European countries (‘the West’) (e.g. see Hayhoe 1987; Shen 2006; Jin 2007; Wu 2007; Zhong 2007; UNESCO 2007; Ryan 2011a, b, c; Ha, McPherrson and Van Que, 2011; Seah 2011). In interpreting this phenomenon of education policy transfer, it is important for policymakers, academics and practitioners to consider the mediating role of culture in the local reception, adaptation, and appropriation/domestication of ‘foreign’ knowledge and education (Lingard 2010; Phillips 2012; Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2013).

Although there has been fairly extensive research carried out on recent education reform and policy transfer in China (e.g. see Hayhoe and Bastid 1987; Hannum and Park, 2007; Ryan 2011a; Hayhoe, Li, Lin and Zha 2011), what remains relatively under-explored is the epistemological basis for cultural views on teaching that mediate policy transfer. To be sure, the topic of indigenous knowledge and teaching practices with respect to China has been researched and written about fairly extensively (e.g. see Cheng and Wong, 1996; Yang and Sternberg 1997; Hu 2002; Fan et al 2004; Gu 2004; Nguyen et al 2009; Han and Scull 2010; Xu 2011). However, not much has been written on the Chinese’s interpretations and assumptions on the nature and transmission of knowledge that account for and justify their cultural views on educational matters. Such an exploration is essential as policy translation takes place when people at the receiving end necessarily reconstruct ‘foreign’ meanings based on their existing worldviews and resources (Anderson-Levitt 2012). The ‘existing worldviews and resources’ vary from community to community, depending on the belief (or ‘epistemic’)
system the community subscribes to. In other words, how a group of people interprets the meaning of ‘knowledge’ and its associates such as ‘truth’, ‘evidence’, ‘critical thinking’, ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ determines and shapes their cultural values, attitudes and behaviours on education. Understanding the epistemological foundation of belief system enables comparativists to understand why some indigenous beliefs are regarded as more important than others by a group of people, why these beliefs are more likely to persist over time and resist revisions or replacement, and why they play an influential role in interpreting, interacting with and modifying foreign ideas and practices.

As I shall argue, the experience of China in importing ‘Western’ education policies and practices exemplifies what Schriewer (2012) describes as “the co-existence of Western-style isomorphic structures at the surface level of ministries, constitutions or management practices and, behind this front, a complex interplay of cultural deep structures, entrenched attitudes, specific meaning-processing schemata, and vested interests” (417). In terms of its interpretive framework, this article builds upon the existing literature that critiques the neo-institutionalist world-culture theory of global policy convergence that overlooks the divergent ways in which a policy is being translated at different localities due to diverse cultural contexts (for a critical discussion of neo-institutionalist world culture theory, see the collection of essays in Comparative Education, 48(4), 2012). Contrary to the expectation of proponents of modernisation theory, neo-institutionalist world culture model and Luhmannian world society theory, the belief and value system in China, as this article shall argue, has not converged with the West, but has instead continued to develop in accordance to its cultural legacy (Schwinn 2012).

This article argues that the prevailing cultural factors (‘cultural scripts’) for teaching in China – students’ respect for the teacher, student attention and discipline in class, and the importance of practice – find their genesis and justification in the Confucian worldview. Focussing on a Chinese classic text, Xueji (Records of Learning), this article elucidates the ancient Chinese’ views on the nature and transmission of knowledge, and explains why the ‘teacher-dominated’ pedagogy is believed by many Chinese educators to be indispensable for ‘good’ teaching. It should be clarified at the outset that this article does not discuss how and the extent to which cultural scripts interact with and shape education policy borrowing in China. The focus of the article, rather, is to elucidate the epistemological basis of these scripts for the Chinese through a short textual analysis of a classic Chinese text on education. The first part of the article gives a quick overview of education policy borrowing in China. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of ‘cultural scripts’ and the dominant cultural scripts for teaching in China. The second part of this article further explores the nature of these scripts by examining the epistemological justification for these scripts through an ancient Chinese text, Xueji. The concluding section discusses the implications of cultural scripts on cross-cultural education policy transfer.

### Education Policy Borrowing in China

The education reforms in China in the past few decades have been aimed at changing the traditional ‘difficult, complex, unbalanced and outdated’ curriculum content and the over-emphasis on textbook knowledge, passive learning, rote-memorisation and drilling (Ministry of Education 2001). Through a series of curriculum reforms, the Chinese government hopes to strengthen the connection between the curriculum content and the students’ lives, focus on the students’ learning interests and experiences, judiciously select the basic knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning, promote the students’ active participation, willingness to carry out research and diligence in action, nurture the students’ abilities in collecting and
processing information, gaining new knowledge, analysing and solving problem, interacting and cooperating with others (Ministry of Education 2001).

At first glance, the education reforms in China appear to be policies and practices borrowed from ‘the West’. Examples of policy initiatives are decentralisation through greater school autonomy and school-based curriculum, introduction of extra-curricular programmes and activities such as robotics, dance and field-trips, and promotion of ‘student-centred learning’ strategies and assessment such as group work, student presentations and project work. UNESCO (2007) reports that the process of curriculum reform in China “is mainly inspired by Western experiences, with inputs coming from a series of study-tours to developed countries that took place prior to the reform” (6-7, cited in Seah 2011, 168; also see Gu 2004; Schulte 2012). Ryan (2011a) observes that “the movement between Western and Chinese knowledge systems has mostly been unidirectional, from the West to China, with large numbers of Chinese students and scholars travelling abroad to learn from other countries, especially in the West” (4). Ha, McPherrson and Van Que (2011), in their study of English language reform, also observe that the stress is on incorporating ‘Western-based teaching methodologies’ such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) methods in the curriculum and teacher education projects. Other scholars have highlighted the tensions, challenges and difficulties that arise from such cross-cultural policy borrowing (e.g. see Shen 2006; Jin 2007; Wu 2007; Zhong 2007; Liu and Dunne 2009; Cai and Yin 2010; collection of essays in Hannum and Park 2007; Ryan 2011b).

However, we should not conclude that the Chinese leaders and educators have thereby adopted foreign (especially ‘Western’) policies and practices wholesale. On the contrary, the Chinese government states that its desire is to establish “a socialist education system with Chinese characteristics” (Ministry of Education 1999). Although the term ‘Chinese characteristics’ is not elaborated upon, what is clear is the awareness of the Chinese government to endeavour to strike a balance between borrowing Western ideas and preserving the local traditions. This sentiment is echoed by the Chinese educators, as illustrated in the statement issued by a group of Chinese Mathematics educators at an international conference:

The East and West civilisations have their own unique charm. We hope to improve our mutual understanding and learn from each other through extensive communication, and eventually achieving a balance between the two civilisations (ICME11 Chinese delegation 2008, 46, as cited in Seah 2011, 180).

It is therefore more accurate to describe China’s modern education policy not as the outcome of simplistic policy borrowing from ‘the West’, but as the result of a combination of adoption, adaptation and assimilation of ‘Western’ ideas into the local cultures. Indeed, history informs us that China has never borrowed education policy lock, stock and barrel, but had carefully selected theories and practices that were perceived to be compatible with the Chinese traditions. Orleans (1987), in his analysis of the Chinese’s acceptance and adoption of the ideologies and educational practices of the Soviet Union, maintains that the positive reception by the Chinese was due primarily to the “many basic similarities between the Soviet and the traditional Chinese systems which made such a shift palatable” (Orleans, 1987, p. 194; also see Price 1987; Gu 2004). Giving an example of the Chinese’s reinterpretation of neo-liberalism, Schulte observes that “techniques like output control, which Western observers tend to associate with neo-liberal techniques, are seen as part of a socialist audit culture, which is to ensure that local units prove themselves responsive to central targets (p. 482). Summing up the Chinese’s response to policy borrowing, Bastid (1987) posits that the Chinese “had a vivid consciousness of the risk of dependence implied in the adoption of
foreign cultural practices” that was “rooted in a sense of the originality and value of their civilisation” (20). It therefore should not surprise us that despite the ostensible transfer of education policy from ‘the West’, “many traditional and deep seated cultural practices and attitudes endure” (Ryan 2011, 4). The current education policy borrowing from ‘the West’ should be interpreted as judicious adaptation of policies to meet China’s specific needs and assimilation of these policies into the Chinese culture (Hayhoe 1987; Zheng 2002; Huang and Leung 2004). Given the pivotal role of culture in education policy borrowing in China, it is instructive to examine further the cultural factors for teaching and learning in the Chinese classrooms.

Cultural Scripts for Teaching in China

Culture is essentially a set of attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours shared by a group of people down the generations via language and other means of communication (Barnouw 1985). Culture, as Anderson-Levitt (2012) reminds us, involves dynamic meaning making and is locally produced by particular people who interact in particular places; “Even when they are alone, people doing interpretive work draw on and respond to resources generated by other people, and in doing so they are interacting with other people” (446). The concept of ‘cultural scripts’ is helpful for us to understand the socio-cultural factors and influences endemic in any society. A cultural script, according to Stigler and Hiebert (1999) is a mental picture, a generalised piece of knowledge that is widely shared among people of a culture. It informs one about things, guides one’s behaviour and tells participants what to expect. It is learnt implicitly, through observation and participation, and not by deliberate study. This knowledge includes cultural beliefs and assumptions that underpin the way of life of a people, the ways that individuals treat one another and the vision and purposes of an organisation or society (Hargreaves, Halasz and Pont 2007, 11).

The ‘cultural beliefs and assumptions that underpin the way of life’ are the ‘control beliefs’ – beliefs that decide what goes into our belief system and determine how we look at everything – ourselves, others, and the world. They inform and are informed by a person’s thought processes, logic, observations and experiences, thereby forming the basis of that person ‘meta-view’ through which he or she perceives, interprets and constructs the world and its meanings. Control beliefs perform two main functions: the first is the conditioning function by providing the precondition for one to accept other beliefs; for example, a teacher’s belief in encouraging small group discussion for her students is dependent on a prior and more basic belief (control belief) in the merits of collaborative learning. Secondly, control beliefs perform the adjudicative function by determining the acceptability of other beliefs; for example, a teacher’s answer to this question, “Should I promote student-centred learning” would depend on her control belief regarding the best ways for students to learn.

Stigler and Hiebert highlight the existence and role of beliefs and assumptions that surround the cultural activity of teaching:

The scripts for teaching in each country appear to rest on a relatively small and tacit set of core beliefs about the nature of the subject, about how students learn, and about the role that a teacher should play in the classroom. These beliefs, often implicit, serve to maintain the stability of cultural systems over time. Just as we have pointed out that features of teaching need to be understood in terms of the underlying systems in which they are embedded, so, too, these systems of teaching, because they are cultural, must be understood in relation to the cultural beliefs and assumptions that surround them (87–88).
Stigler and Hiebert’s concept of cultural script is similar to what Jin and Cortazzi (2006) term as a ‘culture of learning’. The latter use that term to refer to “taken-for-granted frameworks of expectations, attitudes, values and beliefs about how to teach or learn successfully and about how to use talk in interaction, among other aspects of learning” (p. 9). The cultural scripts are contained in ‘cultural models’ that refer to shared domains of knowledge that serve to structure and constrain people’s experiences, enabling them to make sense of their those experiences, motivate them to action and to guide their behaviours towards obtaining their goals (Li 2004). The notion of cultural script also parallels Seah (2011)’s idea of ‘soft’ learning: “cultural knowing which ‘sits behind’ what the mind and heart are learning”, as opposed to ‘hard’ learning which are comparatively more tangible and observable (165).

Although Stigler and Hiebert refer to the ‘scripts for teaching’, it is evident that they include, within the scope of teaching, associated activities such as learning, teacher professional development, school management and other educational activities. This follows from the earlier point that the cultural scripts underpin the total way of life of a group of people by informing one about things, guiding one’s behaviour and telling participants what to expect. To act out the cultural scripts in the classroom, teachers often establish acceptable classroom behaviour patterns that build on and reinforce the scripts so as to ensure effective teaching (Wang and Murphy 2004, 117).

Among the cultural scripts for teaching in China, three dominant cultural scripts have been identified by researchers. The first cultural script is the students’ respect for the teacher (Wang and Murphy 2004). This script stems from the Chinese’s belief in the moral dimension of learning; as Li (2004) puts it, “Because learning in the Confucian persuasion is not limited to academic learning but more importantly social and moral learning, respect toward knowledge and teachers, who ideally embody the self-perfecting process (Gao and Watkins 2001; Jin and Cortazzi 1998), is sensible and expected” (145). It follows from the Chinese’s notion of learning that the role of a teacher is not just a content expert; he or she is also and should be respected as, a role model and moral guide. The cultural script of the students’ respect for the authority of the teacher is manifested through daily classroom rituals (a reflection of Confucian propriety or ‘li’) such as standing up to greet the teacher, waiting to be called by the teacher before speaking in class, and sitting down only when instructed by the teacher.

Closely related to the cultural script of respecting the teacher is the second cultural script – student attention and discipline in class. The accent on respecting the teacher explains why there are fewer discipline problems and disruptions in Chinese classrooms compared to classrooms in ‘the West’ (Stevenson and Stigler 1992; Huang and Leung 2004). Wong (2004) explains how attention and discipline in class are reinforced in the Chinese classrooms through ‘various routines’ and ‘trainings’:

By “discipline”, it is much more than obedience. Besides as an ends in itself, students should be acquired and accustomed to the various routines in flow of classroom teaching: when to talk, when to do seat work, when to open one’s book, when to look at the chalk-board (or computer projection), and so on. ... These “trainings” are developed through reinforcement, social contracts, conformities, and social negotiations which are so common in the CHC [Confucian Heritage Culture] classroom and CHC teacher education programmes (e.g. students at a very young age have already known that one should put up one’s hand and being called by the name before one can stand up and speak) (526).

The third and final cultural script is the importance of practice for the students. An (2004) notes that Chinese students are expected to review regularly and constantly by doing
extensive and layered practices so as to achieve proficiency in conceptual understanding and procedural development in a subject. The Chinese belief in content mastery through repetitive learning is a key characteristic of the philosophy of learning in China; this belief can be traced back to the words of Confucius that “Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals?” (Analects, 1.1) and the Chinese proverb that “practice makes perfect” (cited in Huang and Leung 2004, 371). Interestingly, the emphasis on repeated practice is found not only in academic studies, but also in learning Chinese martial arts and Chinese calligraphy, thereby alluding to the extensive influence of cultural scripts in a community (for more information on the importance of practice in learning Chinese martial arts and Chinese calligraphy, see Wong 2004).

Given that the prevailing cultural scripts for teaching originate from local history, traditions and conditions, it is instructive to examine an ancient Chinese text on education so as to further understand the philosophical justification for teaching in China. At this juncture, it is important to make explicit an assumed relationship between cultural scripts and classic texts, i.e., cultural scripts (present) are derived from classic texts (past), among other sources. This assumption is premised upon Asad (1986)’s definition of a ‘tradition’ as consisting of discourses, (re)constructed through the interaction between the text (canon) and context (formal, informal and non-formal education), that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice. He adds that the discourses of a group of people relate conceptually to a past when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted to the present. It follows that classic texts and cultural scripts are linked through schooling and socialisation. In the specific context of education in China, the ‘text’ refers to the Confucian canon; since the Early Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE), a select score of texts had been designated as ‘jing’ or ‘classic’, culminating in the ‘sishu wujing’ (Four Books and Five Classics). The ‘context’ in which the ‘text’ depends on and interacts with comprises primarily of the high-stakes exam system (the imperial exam in ancient China and the national college entrance exam or gaokao in modern China), the schooling system that reinforces Confucian values (recall our discussion of the cultural scripts for teaching), the ‘Chinese way’ of upbringing and various forms of enculturation.

It should be clarified that the above claim that cultural scripts are derived from classic texts does not imply that the classic texts are ‘objective’ truths that accurately reflect reality or that these texts have been correctly interpreted by the Chinese readers. Certainly, the classic texts, as well as Confucian teachings in general, have been (re)interpreted and manipulated by the literati, political elite and policymakers, from past to present, for specific agendas and interests (Louie 1984). However, it is also arguably true that a dominant (not necessarily ‘objective’) interpretation of the classic texts has been transmitted from one generation to another, resulting in the cultural scripts for teaching among the Chinese today. Underscoring the preservation of ancient Confucian traditions (cultural scripts) through the classic texts in China, Gardner (2007) avers that “passages, paragraphs, lines, and terms from those books became part of the lingua franca in China, used referentially in speech and writing by literati who could be confident that these existed a shared cultural inheritance” (p. xv). The ‘shared cultural inheritance’ includes the cultural scripts (‘control beliefs’) for teaching as discussed earlier, namely, students’ respect for the teacher, student attention and discipline in class, and the importance of practice. That the cultural scripts derived from the Confucian classics reflect the worldviews and lived experiences of the Chinese, both in China and overseas, is attested to in various studies that show the Chinese manifesting a shared ‘Chinese culture of learning’ that can be traced to Confucian teachings (e.g. see Hu 2002; Nguyen et al 2009; Han and Scull 2010; Xu 2011). For example, a recent empirical study on the reasons for Asian-American students to outperform their white counterparts in school
conclude that the former tend to be motivated by Confucian teachings such as the value of education, hard work and family support (The Straits Times, May 7th, 2014, p. A18).

The Cultural Scripts for Teaching from the Xueji

This section further elucidates the nature of cultural scripts for teaching in China by discussing the epistemological basis for these scripts from a short textual analysis of the Xueji. The Xueji (Record of Learning) is part of a longer Chinese text known as Liji (Book of Rites) which was one of the Five Classics (wujing) in ancient China. It is one of the earliest educational texts in the world, with scholars believing that it was written either during the Warring States period (475-221 BCE) or the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) (Yang, McEwan, Xu and Ames 2012). The authorship of the text is unknown, with possible authors being a disciple of Mencius and Han dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu (Gao 2005). Although the title only mentions learning and not teaching, it should be noted that the ancient Chinese character for learning (xue) originally referred to both ‘learning’ (xue) and ‘teaching’ (jiao) (Yang 2010). A very short treatise that comprises only 1229 Chinese characters, it is composed of 22 chapters or sections. All the English translations of the verses in the Xueji cited in this paper are done by me, unless otherwise stated. In my translation, I have tried to preserve the original meaning and word pattern as much as possible. Any additions to the translation for the purpose of clarification are marked by square brackets. As space does not permit me to expound the text in full, I shall only discuss passages that are directly relevant to two key questions in epistemology: What is knowledge? How is knowledge?

What is knowledge?

The ancient Chinese believe that knowledge is found in the ‘way’ (dao). The Xueji states in section II:

A jade that is uncut will not become a vessel [for use]; [likewise] people who do not learn will not know the way.

Another verse (section XVII) stresses the need for the people to “respect the way”. The ‘way’ refers to the way of heaven that was modeled by sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, and Yu of the first three dynasties of China. Specifically, the ‘way’ covers all the manifestations of Zhou culture, including its knowledge base, values, beliefs, forms and practices that have been passed down through the generations and expressed in various forms such as traditional texts and the exemplary conduct of virtuous rulers. The curriculum of the ‘way’ in ancient China comprises the six arts, namely rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy or writing and mathematics. The ‘way’ embodies “the normative tradition” that “contributed significantly to the formation of Confucian ideals” (Chan 2000, 246). Confucius exhorted all to “be firmly committed to love learning, hold fast to the good Way till death” (Analects, 8.13). He also emphasises the need for human beings to become official-scholars who “broaden the way” (Analects, 15.29), meaning to realise, perpetuate, and promote the Way on earth to future generations. Ames and Rosemont (1998) point out that to ‘broaden the way’ is “to experience, to interpret, and to influence the world in such a way as to reinforce and extend the way of life inherited from one’s cultural predecessors” (45). So ingrained is the ‘way’ in the Chinese way of life that the word for the verb ‘know’ in Chinese (Putonghua) literally means ‘know the way’ (zhidao).
How is knowledge obtained?

However, one cannot construct the ‘way’ subjectively or learn the ‘way’ on his or her own, at least not at the initial state of learning. Instead, one needs to learn it from a teacher who has mastered, accumulated, internalised and demonstrated the knowledge, values and skills. The paradigmatic examples of such teachers are the sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, and Yu in ancient China, and distinguished educators such as Confucius. This Chinese belief explains, to a large extent, why teachers are historically highly regarded and respected in China. The high status of teachers is highlighted in this verse from section XVII:

In the way of learning, reverence towards [one’s] teacher is highly commendable. When [one] reveres [one’s] teacher, then [one] respects the way [imparted by the teacher].

This verse informs us that the means to learn the ‘way’ is through a teacher. Another verse (VI) echoes this link between the teachers and the ‘way’:

At the commencement of the teaching in the college, [the officials, donning their] skin caps, offer vegetables [to the ancient teachers and sages], to demonstrate [their] respect for the way.

The commencement ceremony of the school term affirms the importance of the students showing their respect to the ancient teachers and sages who are role models of the ‘way’. Since the teacher is the source of knowledge, respecting the ‘way’ is to respect the anointed transmitter and standard-bearer of the ‘way’. So important is respect for one’s teacher that another passage points out that even the ruler – traditionally regarded as the son of heaven – is expected to dispense with state protocols when he is being instructed by his teacher (section XVII):

When [a person] takes on the role of a teacher, [the ruler] does not treat [him] as a subject. According to the propriety of the college, [the teacher] does not [need to face] north even when addressing the son of heaven. That is how respect to the teacher is shown.

The assumption held by the Chinese since antiquity is that knowledge is generally not fluid, constructive and subjective, but relatively fixed, essentialised and objective. Although all human beings are called to ‘broaden the way’, as taught by Confucius, only those who have invested time and energy to successfully acquire the wherewithal of the ‘way’ and achieved the status of ‘scholars’ are qualified to do so. It follows that knowledge, for the Chinese, is primarily obtained not thorough self-construction but through receiving instruction on the teachings of the classic texts by an expert. The primary role of a teacher, therefore, is that of a content expert, knowledge transmitter and moral guide.

A pre-condition for students to learn the ‘way’ is for them to show their respect to their teachers by being attentive and disciplined. This point is underscored in the following passage:

VI: [The students] recite the three [songs] from the Xiao Ya [of the Book of Odes], so that [they would learn about the duties of] officials from the start. [When the students] enter the college, [they open their] [book] containers [to the beat of] drums, so that [they would] reverentially value [their] study. The two items of cane and thorns [for disciplining students] are there to maintain a sense of awe [in the students].
The value of conformity and discipline is reinforced in the classroom when the students are constantly reminded to take their learning seriously through collective actions such as mass recitation and opening their book containers to the beating of the drums. The idea of maintaining order and proper behaviour is further conveyed by the display of the cane and thorns. There is therefore a consistent message received by the students, through various routines and training, on the sacredness of learning, and the premium placed on demonstrating normative behaviours, values and attitudes throughout the learning process.

Besides being attentive and disciplined, Chinese students are expected to gain content mastery by repeated practice, as noted in the following passage (section VIII):

[If a student] does not learn to play in tune, [he] cannot be accomplished in the stringed instruments; [if a student] does not learn the rhyme and rhythm of poetry, [he] cannot be accomplished in the Book of Odes; [if a student] does not learn the varieties of [ceremonial] clothes, [he] cannot be accomplished in the rituals; [if a student] is not interested [to learn] these arts, [he] cannot find joy in learning.

The ‘arts’ in the passage refers to music (‘accomplished in the stringed instruments’), poetry (‘accomplished in the Book of Odes’) and rituals (‘accomplished in the rituals’). They are part of the six arts which comprises the curriculum of the ‘way’, as noted earlier. The message here is the need for one to spend time reviewing and practising what one has learnt in a domain of learning, be it music, poetry or ritual, so that one can achieve proficiency.

**Discussion: Cultural Scripts and ‘Teacher-Dominated’ Pedagogy**

The preceding shows that the prevailing cultural scripts for teaching in the country – students’ respect for the teacher, student attention and discipline in class, and the importance of practice – find their philosophical justification in Confucian worldview that is transmitted via Chinese classic texts. In particular, an analysis of the Xueji helps us to understand why the ‘teacher-dominated’ pedagogy is treasured by the Chinese educators and community as indispensable for ‘good’ teaching. The epistemological basis of the teacher as the transmitter and exemplar of the ‘way’, coupled with a view of knowledge as external and acquired through systematic tutelage, explains why teachers continue to be respected and play a prominent role in modern Chinese classrooms. Despite the professed aim of the Chinese authorities to borrow ‘Western’ style student-centred instruction, what is happening in China is not a total shift from teacher-centredness to student-centredness, but rather a persistent practice of didactic instruction that exists alongside some forms of student-centred teaching in many Chinese classrooms. In other words, the Chinese teachers have neither embraced ‘Western’ conceptions of student- or child-centred approaches nor ‘Western’ learning theories and presuppositions such as constructivist, cognitive and social constructivist views. Instead, the Chinese educators have re-interpreted and adapted these foreign ideas and assimilated them into the local contexts in accordance with their Chinese logics, values and ways of life.

The adaption and assimilation of ‘student-centred instruction’ can be illustrated in a dominant Chinese teaching method known as the ‘teacher-dominated’ pedagogy that is both teacher- and student-centred (Huang and Leung 2004; Gu, Huang and Marton 2004). On the one hand, it is teacher-centred as the entire education project, from the nature of knowledge, role of teachers and learning process, places the teacher in the driver’s seat. As noted earlier, Chinese teachers, as the repositories of knowledge, transmitters of the ‘way’ and moral guide, are expected to teach the students in a structured, incremental and progressive manner so that
the students could master the depth and breadth of the subjects. A ‘good’ Chinese teacher is one who possesses adult authority, has deep knowledge, is skilful in answering questions, promotes learning virtues especially adaptive attitudes towards learning in the students, and is an exemplary moral model (Jin and Cortazzi 1998; Gao and Watkins 2001; Li 2004; Wong 2004). Effective teaching in a Chinese classroom should accordingly be supported by a learning environment that is marked by orderliness, discipline, conformity and social interdependency (Huang and Leung 2004). A ‘good’ student, on the other hand, is one who has obtained a mastery of content knowledge, has put in hard work and dedication to learn systematically, and is imbued with the requisite moral values and learning virtues (Li 2004; Huang and Leung 2004; Wong 2004; An 2004). Rather than constructing knowledge on their own, students learn the ‘way’ through adult-child relations within a dialectic of autonomy and social dependency (Xie and Carspecken 2008).

But the Chinese culture of teaching does not mean that the students necessarily learn by rote or are expected to receive knowledge passively. As pointed out by a number of researchers, the students are actively engaged in making meanings and participating in class. Even when memorisation takes place, it is not rote-memorisation but memorisation with understanding. This is possible due to learning strategies such as active listening and prompt responding to teachers’ cues, whether they involve answering a question or writing down their individual answers (Cortazzi and Jin 2001). An (2004) adds that teachers in China generally adopt the ‘learning-questioning and learning-reviewing instructional model’ where the teachers ask questions to promote students’ active thinking and connect their prior knowledge to the new learning, followed by the students reviewing what they have learnt regularly by doing extensive and layered practices.

**Conclusion**

Following our exploration of the nature and enduring influences of cultural scripts for teaching in China, this concluding section highlights two main implications for research in cross-cultural education policy transfer. First, there is a need for comparativists to acknowledge and explore further the nature, role and enduring influences of traditional knowledge, values and attitudes on cross-cultural education policy transfer. This point is not new as writers such as Ball (1998), Bray and Qin (2001), Crossley (2002), Crossly and Watson (2003), Steiner-Khamsi (2004), Stenier and Stolpe (2006), Rappleye (2006), Takayama (2011) and Schriewer (2012), just to name a few, have consistently drawn our attention to the importance of cultural context. But what this article wishes to underline is the need to explore the epistemological justification for cultural factors that mediate cross-cultural policy transfer. Such an exploration is salutary in helping comparativists to uncover the different and competing belief systems that account for policy divergence across societies despite their similar adoption of global/‘Western’ education policy. As argued in this article, the cultural scripts for teaching in China – students’ respect for the teacher, student attention and discipline in class, and the importance of practice – are rooted in the Chinese’s worldview on the nature and transmission of knowledge. Exploring the epistemology of cultural context could offer new insights and perspectives on education policy attraction, learning and translation, echoing Crossley (2002)’s assertion that context matters “more than ever as we search – with justifiably renewed enthusiasm – for new directions in the field of comparative and international education” (84).

The second implication is that appreciating the cultural scripts of a locality helps us not only to understand the complex processes of education policy transfer as interpreted by the recipients (teachers, students, parents etc); it also challenges the advocates of the policy that is being transferred (policymakers, transnational organisations etc) as well as researchers
to re-examine their own definitions, assumptions, justification and application of take-for-granted concepts, theories and logics. One example is ‘teacher-centredness’ and ‘student-centredness’. As this article has argued, it is more accurate to describe the ‘teacher-dominated’ pedagogy privileged and practised in many Chinese classrooms as both teacher-centred and student-centred. Huang and Leung (2004) aver that the dichotomy between student-centredness and teacher-centredness in existing literature is “too artificial to capture the subtle characteristics in the classroom” for China as it is “based on superficial features such as the teacher’s expository teaching and students’ attentive listening”. Li (2004) maintains that there is a prevailing “uncritical importation of Western concepts and theories” and the “persistent reliance on Western concepts without attending to indigenous or emic cultural meanings and their psychological manifestation in learning” (128). Other theories and concepts that are potentially culturally biased and should be interrogated by comparativists include epistemological and ontological issues such as the definition and transmission of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’, and the various interpretations of a ‘good’ school, ‘good’ teacher, ‘good’ student, ‘good’ teacher-student relationships etc. More research could be directed to interrogate the interaction between ‘indigenous knowledges’ (Dei, Hall and Goldin-Rosengren 2000; Dei 2002) and ‘foreign’/‘Western’ knowledge, as well as the effects of such interactions on the ‘hybridity and eclectic creolisation’ of education in diverse contexts (Willis, Yamamura and Rappleye 2008; Takayama 2011). By connecting the ‘past’ (classic texts) to the ‘present’ (cultural scripts), and the ‘indigenous’ (cultural scripts) to the ‘imported’ (foreign ideas and practices), we are reminded once again of the central role of culture in education policy transfer through a dynamic, on-going and contentious process of meaning making.

References


Notes

1 Gardner was referring specifically to the Four Books, namely, Analects (Lunyu), Mencius (Mengzi), Great Learning (Daxue), Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong) in the quotation cited. But his comments about the enduring influences of Confucian teachings on the lives of the Chinese, in my view, equally apply to other Confucian classic texts.

2 I have translated Xueji as ‘Record of Learning’ as it is the most literal translation. However, other scholars have translated it variously as ‘Record on the Subject of Education’ (Legge, 1885), ‘Record of Learning’ (Wong, 1976) and ‘On Teaching and Learning’ (Yang, McEwan, Xu & Ames, 2012) etc. Whichever translation one chooses, the agreement among scholars is that the text focuses on both learning and teaching.

3 I follow Legge (1885) and Gao (2006) in dividing it into 22 sections. However, others such as Wong (1976), and Yang, McEwan, Xu and Ames (2012) divide it into 21 sections while Chen (2004) divides it into 20 sections.