

Analysis on the Documentary “Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School”

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ABSTRACT

The documentary "Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School" released in 2015, contributes numerous classic cases that have been discussed by scholars in the fields of the sociology of teaching and educational psychology, and is often used as teaching materials for related courses in Chinese universities. Through careful observation and study, this paper analyses the phenomena shown in the documentary and studies the underlying reasons for them from several aspects: the choice of school, the infusion of cultural identity, the psychological gaming between teachers and students, the concern for individuals in education under different institutional conditions and Krashen's emotional filtering hypothesis, concluding that this documentary is more of an educational experiment recorded by the camera. The audience should have the ability to discriminate. The road to reform in Chinese education should be based on profound and practical reflection, promoting the emergence of educational policies and approaches that are in line with the laws of education and are corresponding to the economic and social development in the new era.

Keywords: Documentary, “Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School”, Macro comparison, Case study

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a BBC television documentary “Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School” was released. As a cross-border collaboration, it was both an educational experiment and a creative exercise. The BBC invited five Chinese teachers to Bohunt School in Hampshire UK, to teach a group of 50 9th grade students one month the worth of “Chinese education lessons”, from morning exercises, the flag-raising ceremony and wearing oversized school uniform to eye exercises, afternoon extra meals and evening study, all according to the schedule of Chinese students. In this month-long crossover, a series of conflicts between the Chinese and British cultures, educational systems, educational philosophy, and the social climate becomes the main theme throughout the film. It also contributes to several classic cases that have been well-received by scholars in the sociology and psychology of education. This is why the film has been widely and deeply discussed in Chinese and British societies and has been used as teaching material for the relevant courses in Chinese universities.

The current discussion has focused on the analysis of teacher-student behavior, learning styles [1], Chinese secondary school examination system, the comparison of

Chinese and British basic education, and the perspective in the field of cross-cultural communication [2], while the comprehensive case study of the documentary is still in a blank area. This paper examines the students' cases and places them in several macro perspectives to explore the deeper reasons, hoping to provide more reasonable explanations of the teacher-student behaviors and some useful suggestions for the path of reform in Chinese education.

2. REASONS FOR CHOOSING BOHUNT SCHOOL

Bohunt School is the first public secondary school in the UK to offer a Chinese immersion program. The school and the parents are very supportive of Chinese language teaching. The pioneering Chinese immersion program has received a lot of attention from the Chinese and British media. In late November 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron invited six students from BHS and their Chinese teacher, Ms. Qingwei Li to visit 10 Downing Street to discuss their experiences of learning Chinese before his trip to China [3]. In April 2016, China Publishing Group presented books to BHS for the first time and set up a special shelf. On 14th March 2017, members of the China Publishing Group delegation, led

by Vice President Jun Jiang, visited BHS in Hampshire on the eve of the opening of the 46th London Book Fair. The China Publishing Group Company presented books to Bohunt School again, bringing a total of more than 100 volumes of Chinese textbooks, reference books, children's books, Chinese historical and cultural books. They also specially invited Swedish sinologist, Ms. Xili Lin, to give a lecture entitled "The Beauty of Chinese Characters" [4].

3. CASE STUDY IN MACRO PERSPECTIVES

3.1. Analytical Perspective I: The Infusion of Cultural Identity

In the film, the Chinese teachers' style of education is accompanied by a series of Chinese management styles, represented by the "three old routines" that have almost become the norm in Chinese primary and secondary schools: the flag-raising ceremony, the morning exercise/eye exercise, and the uniform. On the surface, these are part of the daily routine experienced by every Chinese school and Chinese student, but when analyzed from the perspective of cultural differences and political identity, there is an unnoticed conceptual gap between East and West and the huge differences that come with it.

On the most straightforward issue of school uniforms, students represented by Luca, see the uniform as a restriction on their individuality, the first challenge from the Chinese education, while the teachers see the uniform as a tool to erase students' learning ability, personality, family background in external. It is a seemingly useless but highly pervasive tool. From the British students' point of view, this first "non-cooperation" is particularly important, but it is also perfectly acceptable to compromise after resistance, as they want to wait and see what else is in the Chinese teachers' arsenal. From the Chinese teachers' point of view, this first external deterrence is particularly important and uncompromising, because, in Chinese culture, we focus not only on the outcome of the act itself but also on the potential psychological impact of the act on both parties. There is no doubt that in the case of the uniform, it is not just the uniform itself that is important, nor even the erasure of individual colors of students, but the psychological game that lies beneath the victory and the defeat.

Michel Foucault developed the concept of the "politics of the body" [5], and in the closed "field" of schooling in Bourdieu's sense [6], this series of acts,

while declaring discipline, emphasizing commonalities, and erasing differences, also accomplishes a real sense of discipline in a relatively closed space through the total control of dress, behavior and image.

This is one of the historical traditions of the Chinese education and talent selection system that has lasted for thousands of years - in the imperial examinations, candidates were required to complete three protracted examinations in small, enclosed halls, under the guard of imposing soldiers. In this process, it is the environment that is closed off, while the discipline and punishment for the inner workings of the candidates are quietly established in a conceptual sense. In the film, Ms. Yang and Ms. Zou point out that the flag-raising ceremony is "a manifestation of a sense of belonging" and that through it, a "sense of national pride" is "born". In this process, the nationalist discourse constitutes a kind of power wrap, providing a source of legitimacy for the teachers' orders, while the simple sense of nationhood and patriotism also serves as an endorsement for the act. However, it is unlikely that British students who are brought up in a different political system, cultural environment, and customs, would have been comfortable with such discipline in any way.

In the western context, this kind of forcible tying of personal values to the national level is dangerous and inflammatory, as if it were a taboo or a red line that makes people uncomfortable and embarrassing, so their casual attitude is firstly an instinctive ideological rebellion, and secondly a tacit agreement between friends in the same context to relieve each other's embarrassment and show "How could I possibly care about such things". From the point of view of the Chinese teachers, the alignment of personal values with national values is a satisfying cultural achievement, and these students, who deliberately walk around the issue with their eyes closed, are merely a bunch of capricious and unreasonable children whose minds are not considered untouchable by the teachers themselves.

3.2. Analytical Perspective II: The magnified psychological game between teachers and students in an experimental scenario

The students, represented by Sophie, believe that doing their own thing in the classroom is a matter of personal freedom, while the teachers believe that personal behavior in the classroom is strictly regulated and that the final interpretation of such regulation rests with the teacher rather than the students. The reaction of the British students to this issue was predictable, firstly

because they were aware that this was a teaching experiment and that it was their job to behave as British students or what they thought British students should behave, and secondly because the Chinese teachers' aggressive and incontrovertible attitude was comical. Defiance is both an expression of their position and an instinctive rejection of the unfamiliar. From the Chinese teacher's point of view, their role is to be what the Chinese teacher is or what they think the Chinese teacher is, so some kind of gradual transition or ingratiation does not seem necessary. It can be seen that both sides have confined themselves to a role or a concept that they are supposed to play or to be as close as possible to the ideal concept they have in mind. The author personally believes that the British students are not unaware that their behavior may be interpreted as disrespectful by their teachers, and the Chinese teachers are not unaware of the skills of being patient with students but the key lies in the psychological game between the two sides.

3.3. Analytical Perspective III: The focus of education on the individual in different systems and national contexts

The students, represented by Luca, believe that they are not capable enough to adapt to the Chinese teachers' lessons, while the Chinese teachers believe that the lessons should not change its pace and difficulty because of the inconsistent pace of a few people, which is the so-called "survival of the fittest". It cannot be avoided in any way. From the perspective of the British students, since it is impossible to keep up with everyone in the classroom, the teacher should be more accommodating to the less competent students and use the pace of these students as a reference point for teaching. From the Chinese teachers' point of view, since it is not possible to keep everyone in the classroom up to speed, the teacher should be more accommodating to the more competent students and use the pace of these students as a benchmark for teaching. In the UK, people focus on the universal function of education. According to them, education is to provide the necessary basic knowledge for all students. Students are divided into individuals. Like a production line of products, not all of the products need to be perfect, but there must be a minimum standard of production; in China, the teacher "rushes to the top". This is like a bundle of lottery tickets, if a few big prizes can be won, it does not matter much if the other lottery tickets in the bundle have nothing to offer. In China, the syllabus for basic education is set by the state. Teachers are required to follow it and all students are expected to do their best to achieve this standard. The breadth and depth of

material included in the syllabus are generally the minimum standards that students must achieve [7]. Whereas in the UK the syllabus is tailored to the individual student's level of ability to fulfill the developmental needs of each student in maximization. The main reason for the difference in the syllabus is that China is more concerned with the absolute assessment of the whole group, trying to make every student achieve a uniform standard, whereas the UK is more concerned with intra-individual assessment, which is a comparative assessment of different aspects of the same individual or changes in an area and is more concerned with the development of the individual [8]. The differences in the results of this trial also reflect, to some extent, the imprint of the syllabus as the basis for teaching in the teachers' consciousness is far-reaching.

3.4. Analytical perspective IV: Krashen's affective filter hypothesis

The famous linguist Stephen Krashen proposed the "affective filter hypothesis" [9], which classifies the affective variables that influence the process of second language acquisition into motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. According to Krashen, motivation is an important emotional factor that influences learners' initiative to learn and is one of the main variables governing learners' performance in foreign language learning. Confident students tend to participate actively in the interactive sessions of the class, while those who are less confident may become intimidated and avoid classroom activities; language learners' anxiety refers to the sum of unpleasant emotional reflections and psychological discomfort caused by many factors, such as nervousness, worry, and fear during the process of second language acquisition [10]. The author believes that the "affective filter hypothesis" is not only applicable to second language acquisition but also students' learning and acquisition of other knowledge. If teachers do not take into account the students' level of accepting knowledge, whether they want to learn, or whether they are in a nervous and passive state of mind, it will not be conducive to the students' acquisition of knowledge; on the contrary, students can only absorb knowledge effectively in a happy and relaxed atmosphere.

Putting this theory into the context of the documentary reveals that the group of students represented by Rosie have doubts about their ability to adapt to Chinese education from the beginning of the project, and have been reacting with passive resistance to a series of teaching activities that were difficult to adapt

to, such as the Chinese teacher's fast-paced board teaching, frequent classroom tests, extended school hours and indiscriminate levels of difficulty. These students are not truly unable to adapt to Chinese teaching and achieve satisfactory results. It is because their excessive anxiety and lack of confidence create an emotional barrier that prevents the comprehensible input from reaching their brains, and in this vicious circle, "learned helplessness" [11] gradually develops, leading to their unsatisfactory performance in the experiment.

4. CONCLUSION

This experiment is, according to the author, more akin to a show. In the first example given above, it is difficult to conclude that the British students are completely unable to accept the dress code, as evidenced by Luca's statement "I don't like it, but might if I wasn't forced to wear it, I might have liked it". Please wonder whether the outcome would have been different if it had been suggested, not by compulsion but for appropriate reasons, that they should wear smart and decent clothes. In the second example, it is even more obvious that the British students clearly understand the respect implied in keeping things serious, judging by their behavior to meeting their headmaster. Chinese education has also been known to "teaching students by their aptitude" and "be good at giving systematic guidance", but the teachers choose a different, tougher way of cutting through. The reason for this is, to some extent, to reinforce the effect of the conflict. Such a show typifies and stereotypes both Chinese and British education, but there is not a spotless Chinese or British education. Overall, the author thinks this experiment is more about presenting "what people want to see" and the audience should be able to discern this by themselves. This paper hopes to provide more reasonable explanations of the teacher-student behaviors and some useful suggestions for the path of reform in Chinese education.

It is important to note that any analysis and interpretation from the perspectives of "ways", "purposes" or even "cultural differences" is more or less one-sided when it comes to such an important issue as education, which affects people's livelihood and the foundation of the country. Education is an academic issue, but it is also a social issue and a livelihood issue. Of course, it is necessary to "return the academic to the academic", but it is more important, in the context of "double reduction", through some more profound, sustained, and practical reflection, to promote the emergence of educational policies and approaches that

are appropriate to the social conditions and economic development of the new era and in line with the laws of education, to break out of the trap of the "Orientalist" gaze and discourse, to explore a new and valuable path for Chinese education.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Chenliang Zhao.

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