

# *Ancient philosophy factors affecting the formation of Chinese students' learning community*

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**Abstract**—In order to know why Chinese students learning community is hard to form, Chinese ancient philosophy is utilized to figure out factors affecting the formation. Sato's model has been chosen: the three stands to form a learning community philosophy are democracy, public philosophy and excellence. While ancient Chinese mainstream philosophy—Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy and the authority of teaching materials; its emphasis on being modest and Taoism's being taciturn as well as their belief in "Ming" act as hindrance to Chinese students' forming of a learning community. Some implications for education has been proposed.

**Keywords**—ancient Chinese philosophy; Chinese teaching; learning community

## I. INTRODUCTION

When cooperative or team-based learning and their advanced form—learning community have become the norm in American schools these days, Chinese practice meets with great obstruction. Judged from the performance of the past Chinese education reform, it is not as fruitful as it is expected [1]. Lu Jian-jun even thinks it is going through a profound crisis [2]. Scholars try to diagnose the cause of the hindrance to general educational reforms. It can be cataloged into three reasons: teachers' factors [3-4], students' maladjustments [5-6], organization' stubbornness and institutional conflicts [7-8], evaluation systems [9].

Learning communities takes its origin from Dewey's emphasis on the dynamic interactions between teacher and students [10] and Sergiovanni's characterization of the school as a place of trust, collaboration and commitment by its members instead of a bureaucratic organization aiming for efficiency and uniformity [11]. Based on Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory and Vygotsky's social development theory, Gabelnick defined learning community as a purposeful restructuring of the curriculum by linking courses that enroll a cohort of students. This represent an international structuring of the students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community and foster among students, faculty and disciplines [12]. Ludwig points out seven prerequisites forming a learning community: lacking any of them it would be shattered. The prerequisites are: shared goals, safe and supportive conditions, collective identity, collaboration, respectful inclusion,

progressive discourse toward knowledge building and mutual appropriation [13]. Admittedly, Chinese education should not be measured by the Western systematics because the systems of the former are in stark contrast with that of the latter, and it should be taken its inner logic into account. However, evidence shows that the benefits of learning community are huge. The benefits includes educational outcomes [14-18], student engagement [19-20], higher-order thinking and critical thinking ability [21-22].

Because of its obvious positive effects, learning communities has spread to Japan and sweep through the island country. It is reported that from the year of 2014 on, about 1500 primary schools and 2500 middle schools have been taking part in this teaching reform. More than 20 cities' schools have adopted learning community. Sato believes it would be the leading educational philosophy in the 21st century [23].

In this context, Chinese classroom still seems to remain silent; most schools and classrooms still adopt the traditional way of teaching and learning. The essay aims at analyzing the philosophical factors affecting the formation of Chinese learning community. Philosophy is the fundamental way to explain the thinking mode hidden under people's behavior in a certain culture. Whitehead believes that the most profound way to solve a puzzle is to place it under the context of ontology and epistemology [24].

Therefore, Chinese ancient philosophy—Confucianism and Taoism is draw upon because their status in Chinese thought can be described as source and orthodox [25]. One cannot comment on Chinese culture and education without discussing them. Especially Confucius, he was the first teacher in Chinese history, thus his influence in education is enormous [26].

## II. CHINESE ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY FACTORS AFFECTING THE FORMATION OF LEARNING COMMUNITY

There are several models built for a learning community; here, we will examine a version by Sato. Sato's model for the philosophy of learning community is divided into three stands: democracy, public philosophy and excellence [27].

#### A. Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy and the authority of teaching materials.

The word "democracy" does not connote any political sense but it is "a way of associate living". Everyone inside the community is the "protagonist" of the community whose study rights and esteem should be fully respected, so as the varied thinking modes and lifestyles. This indicates that all the powers among students and teachers should be evenly distributed. However, in one way, Confucianism's theory on social organization emphasized on the hierarchy or line of authority; any disobeying would be regarded as immorality. The quintessence of this morality is being submissive to higher levels. This is explicated in the five traditional social relationships, which are those between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, etc. So it is highly difficult for the even distribution of powers among students. Confucius followers, Tzu-ssu said serve your father as you would require your son to serve you. Serve your ruler as you would require your subordinated to serve you [28]. The designated role for everyone is detrimental to creativity, because it obliterates individuality and the desire to innovate. Tu Weiming asserts the loss of personal dignity, autonomy and the independence of the individuality [29] in the relationships. In another way, Confucius primary mission as a teacher, he believed, was to pass the ancient cultural heritage to his disciples. In this sense, the teaching materials are another authority writing off the individually original interpretation. This influence is great: from a long time in history, The Five Classics and The Four Books were the authority in the imperial examination of China. It can be concluded from here that the authority of teachers or higher levels and teaching materials is an important factor affecting students today.

#### B. Confucianism's emphasis on being modest and Taoism's being taciturn

Public philosophy, according to Sato, means schools should be a place for communication. However, evidence shows that Chinese classrooms lack the atmosphere of communicating among students and their peers as well as students and teachers. This behavioral mode can be traced back to two philosophical thinking of being modest and being taciturn. In the Book of Changes interpreted by the Confucianists, it is said: when the sun has reached its meridian, it declines; and when the moon has become full, it wanes. And again, when the cold goes, the warmth comes, and when the warmth comes, the cold goes [30]. Fung reinforce the way, believing that too much demonstration of oneself would trigger others' envy, resulting in scourge [31]. The philosophy of being taciturn is hold by Taoism. It is told that the Tao/Way that can be told is not the genuine Tao/Way. This sentence could be interpreted in this way: profound meaning is hidden in things, but the moment we explain it, words would definitely fail us. The philosophy has widely impact on the aesthetics of Chinese arts. The Chinese painting and poetry indicates that overall Chinese philosophy is suggestive but not direct [32]. Chinese people believe that all the sense of beauty lose the moment we express it directly. That's why Chinese students are reluctant to speak out their ideas and communicate with their peers and teachers. It can also be

supported by the decline of Mohism. As another branch of Chinese philosophy, it only existed for about 150 years. Hu Shi deduced one of the reasons for its decline is due to the sophistries of them. The representatives of Mohism was great debaters, finding fun in argue by words of nuisance. In a time full of wars and crisis, this type of talents are strongly sidelined [33].

#### C. The belief of Ming or Predetermined Fate

Excellence means schools should become a place for the pursuit of excellence. Everyone should pursuit relentlessly the supremacy regardless any adversities. It encourages competition. While both Confucianism and Taoism, to some extent, herald doing nothing (*Wuwei*). For example, the philosophy of gentleman accepts poverty; superior man knows his Ming. These philosophical thoughts pervades Chinese mode of thinking. Ming can be described as predetermined fate, which is prearranged by the heaven; No matter how hard one tries, it is Ming decides whether one succeed or not. As a result, we should not let the external success to judge our worth, and affect our happiness. Fung asserts this by giving the examples of painters and poets. What they can achieve are determined by their talents decided by Ming, If a poet's talent confines him or her to be a master, no matter how diligent and persistent of him or her, what can be achieved in the end is just a famous craftsman instead of a master [34].

### III. CONCLUSIONS

From Sato's model, it is evident that the ancient Chinese mainstream philosophy-Confucianism and Taoism does not support to construct the three stands of the philosophical learning community concepts: Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy and the authority of teaching materials are in conflict with democracy, which connotes the sense of varied lifestyles and thinking modes; the shared powets among teachers and students; the critical challenging mind against authorities. Confucianism's being modest and Taoism's being taciturn are at odds with the public philosophy, which deem the schools as the place for communication; the belief in Ming or predetermined fate and the pursuit of excellence is paradoxical too, because the former ease people's ambition for surpassing while the latter urge relentless fight for supremacy.

This explains why for so many years, students' learning community is hard to establish in practice. Interactions among teachers and students are hard to maximize: how to elicit group work in a friendly classroom atmosphere while motivate them to compete each other to pursuit supremacy is an issue often raised in the teaching methods seminar.

### IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

#### A. Try to create a safe and supportive environment for students

In modeling the learning community, Chinese teachers should try to create a safe and supportive environment for students, for example, encouraging more, smiling more, more eye contact, using and remembering students names and even softer voice or background music to achieve a better effect.

Chinese teachers often cannot resist the temptation of talking too much without knowing that students need time to internalize the knowledge and practice. Along with this habit is that teachers are always tend to expect what students answers. However, in a language teaching classroom, the most important thing is not a precisely scientific answer but students' everlasting enthusiasm and interest for the language. And at the same time, we should give them confidence in the materials they find. In doing this, you are letting them know you care about their feelings, so as to cultivate their sense of belonging to the learning community, then they are more willing to take risks.

*B. Be fully aware the cultural differences in implementing the strategies and tactics of learning community and make it more adaptable to Chinese soil*

We can adjust our teaching methods in order to make our classroom more acceptable to Chinese students. For example, we can make sure that they understand the meaning of learning communities and its backgrounds; provide them some information about the tactics of group work; slow down the pace of teaching compared with that of native speakers to give them more time to express; give clear and thoughtful instructions without pressures; get response from most students instead of the top ones to know their overall performance level; make them feel that they are making progress.

In understanding what philosophical factors impeding the formation of Chinese students learning community is of highly significance to cross the philosophical gap between China and West and then achieve a better education outcome.

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