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The "Uncritical" Chinese Student: A Western Colonial Narrative?

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century there has been a marked increase in the number of mainland Chinese students in Anglophone higher education institutions. However, Chinese students in these institutions are seen from a deficit perspective, sustaining stereotypes of Chinese students which feed into a hierarchical distinction between a Western (presumed critical) positioning in relation to knowledge, and an Eastern (presumed uncritical) one. This effectively places Chinese students on a developmental scale aiming toward the Western ideal. Both Eastern and Western are monolithic fictions in this narrative. This polemic traces the possible antecedents of the deficit perception to the Enlightenment period and the racialized views of some of its greatest minds such as Linnaeus, Hume, Kant, and Mill, and the colonization driven by the Europeans' military, scientific, and economic dominance. The perceived superiority of the white race has been encultured in the European mind over the centuries and colors the reception of the Chinese student from the deficit lens in British higher education. Such thinking perceives criticality as an inherently Western concept which Chinese students are incapable of mastering. I present studies which demonstrate that poor performance of some Chinese students is attributable to insufficient cultural, linguistic, and subject mastery rather than a lack of critical thinking ability. I then illustrate how, contrary to perceptions, criticality is at the heart of Confucianism, and that Chinese students' pedagogical preferences can be explained by the Confucian concept of personhood as metaphysically tied to others, rather than any lack in critical thinking.

Keywords Criticality · Confucianism · Chinese students · Higher education · Enlightenment · Colonialism

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions in English-speaking countries have benefited greatly from the rise in Chinese students.[1] However, there is a widespread perception in Western institutions that East Asian and—my particular focus— Chinese students, are passive and dependent: accustomed to rote learning, content with single correct answers, and have difficulty in being critical. Consequently, it has been argued that thinking critically is particularly problematic for East Asian students because of their Confucian educational heritage. Some scholars go further and think that critical thinking is an inherently Western pedagogical approach and therefore incompatible with Asian cultures. In contrast, other studies have found few or no differences between Asian and Western students in their learning dispositions. Instead, the perceived comparative lack of criticality in Asian students can be accounted for by factors such as a lack of cultural and linguistic proficiency in a second language, and a lack of familiarity with the academic discourse of the discipline which in turn leads to low confidence. I further claim that the pedagogical preferences of Chinese students are also explained by the Confucian concept of personhood as metaphysically tied to others, rather than any lack in critical thinking.

The aim of this essay is not to refute that elements of passive learning exist, or that Chinese teachers do direct their students' learning, nor that rote learning plays a part in the current Chinese education system. Rather I wish to dispute the belief that these practices are consistent with early Confucian pedagogy as well as the negative interpretations of these pedagogies. As Kurtis Hagen reminds us: "It is one thing for a culture, in general, to be influenced by Confucianism; it is another for any particular aspect of a culture to cohere with the philosophies of Confucius and the other significant early Confucians" (Hagen 2022: 218). Confucianism is not a monolith; there are many interpretations of it among the manifold Confucian thinkers. Moreover, it is not ossified and has evolved over the two and a half succeeding millennia. Some of what is now held to be Confucian would not align with classical Confucian thinking. I also examine why negative perceptions persist by delving into the antecedents of the deficit model, which continues to view all non-Western traditions as being hierarchically lower in terms of cognitive development and manifests itself in the belief that Chinese students lack critical thinking skills. Such thinking, I contend, can possibly be traced to the colonial attitudes of racial superiority of the white race and which continue at a *subconscious* level to the present day. In this polemic, I make a simple "argument" that if the greatest and most progressive minds of the Enlightenment period such as Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Mill could hold racialized views on the supposed cognitive immaturity of non-European races, then what could one expect from government and business leaders of the Occidental world? I will not delve into the intricacies of the debate, nor hold reason or discursive argument as a method for arriving at or being the final arbiter of "truth"; as the Daoist master

[1] For the United Kingdom see HESA 2020; Canada, J. Chan and Esaki-Smith 2019; Australia, Maslen 2019; for the United States, IIE 2019, and Sun, Kang, Chang, and Lausch 2019.

Zhuang Zhou 莊周 warned in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, winning an argument through skillfulness is not equivalent to arriving at the truth.

> Suppose you and I have an argument (*bian* 辨). If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? (quoted in Littlejohn and Li 2022: 1525)

Zhuang Zhou was aiming his critique at Mozi's 墨子 disciples, the Mingjia 名家 (School of Names), also called *bianshi* 辯士 (translated as "disputers" or "rhetoricians"). These thinkers were adept "in argumentation, making finely grained distinctions between concepts" (Littlejohn and Li 2022: 1524) but for Xunzi 荀子 "without any beneficent intent [or] … useful results" (*Xunzi*, Chapter 6; Hutton 2016: 41). Consequently, I offer a global perspective on the debate by laying plain the *essentializing* racialized language of thinkers such as Linnaeus, Hume, Kant, and so on, because knowing who said what will allow the reader to reflect on the significance and influence of their views on the Western mind over the past three hundred years. After all, we all are partly products of our enculturation: its effect can remain deep-rooted at the subconscious level. For me, the deficit categorization of non-Western students is unsurprising, given the military and scientific dominance of Britain and America (and the Europeans in general) over the last three hundred years or so. The United States remains the number one economic (Kupelian and Clarry 2021) and military (Statista 2023) superpower. This has resulted in English becoming the undisputed *lingua franca* of science (and academia in general) (Gordin 2015, Plo Alastrué and Pérez-Llantada 2015),[2] commerce (Borzykowski 2017), and general communication with around 1.528 billion speaking English (Statista 2025). Given this overwhelming dominance over the last three centuries, it would be surprising for native Anglophone teachers *not* to have been enculturated into assuming the superiority of the European race and its culture and internalized this, retaining a residual "air" of superiority at a subconscious level; I say subconscious because I do not believe this belief, in most instances now, to be predicated on malicious intent.

I begin by addressing the antecedents of the reason why Chinese and East Asian students are viewed from a deficit perspective by tracing the roots of such beliefs to the Enlightenment and colonization. Some of the greatest minds normalized the European race's belief of superiority over others, a belief supported by the scientific, industrial, military, and cultural dominance which justified colonial rule. Such thinking, I argue, cannot but have been internalized, and in contemporary society

[2] According to Gordin, 98% of publications in science are written in English (Gordin 2015: 158).

sustains stereotypes of Chinese students as being passive, deferential, and lacking critical skills. This feeds into a fundamentally hierarchical distinction between a Western presumed critical positioning in relation to knowledge, and an Oriental, presumed, uncritical one, thus placing Chinese students on a developmental scale toward the Western ideal. This perception will be investigated by examining—and refuting—evidence put forward by two authors in the English language field who are representative of the claim that criticality is an *inherently* Western concept difficult for non-Europeans to master. I then offer an in-depth discussion of Confucian pedagogy to illustrate that criticality is in fact at its heart. I further claim that the current pedagogical preferences of Chinese students, some of which are misinterpreted by British teachers as passivity, deference, and lack of criticality, are explained by the Confucian concept of the person and the purpose of education.

Here it is important to note that the literature in this field often uses the terms Western and East Asian cultures as if each group was homogenous, and by using these terms, I too am complicit in perpetuating generalities and assumptions that underpin these by using the term "Western." However, lest anyone

> [W]ince at the use of the blanket "Western" to encompass all Greek and later thought derived therefrom should bear in mind that few people have shrunk from using "non-Western" philosophy to bring together the intellectual heritages of three quarters of the human race. (Rosemont 2015: 9)

2 The Antecedents of the Deficit Model

Edward Said remarked that since the end of the 18th century, when Europe *re*-discovered the Orient,

> [I]ts history had been a paradigm of antiquity and originality, functions that drew Europe's interests in acts of recognition or acknowledgement but from which Europe moved as its own industrial, economic, and cultural development seemed to leave the Orient far behind. (Said 1985: 93–94)

The Orient, as a region and its peoples, has been presented "by the gaze of the Western percipients" (Said 1985: 92) as "ossified," frozen in time; this image has arguably become internalized. Thomas Macaulay in his infamous "Minute on Education"[3] asserted that: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay 1835/1965); this claim exhibits an "arrogance" of thought which I contend remains embedded in the Western subconscious. Macaulay's claim would no doubt have extended to Chinese civilization and resonated with Hegel who, commenting on Joshua Marshman's English translation of the *Analects* in 1811, very dismissively says that "it would have been better if Confucius were not translated," and that although "we do find in his work correct

[3] This assertion, at the expense of native languages, led to the promotion of English language education, and European learning, in India.

moral ideas, his reflections never rise above the conventional" (quoted in Kim 1978: 174).[4] Confucius should therefore not be compared to Socrates or a lawgiver like Solon (quoted in Kim 1978: 174). It is true the *Analects* does not appear to have a clear design or structure, it being a collection of Confucius' utterances concerned primarily with human conduct and character rather than metaphysics. Nonetheless, a careful reading of the *Analects* reveals the deep structure of the book. Confucius' sayings revolve around virtues such as *ren* 仁 (humanity), *li* 禮 (propriety or rites), *yi* 義 (appropriateness), and *zhi* 智 (wisdom).

Hegel's dismissive attitude toward the Chinese and Confucianism has its antecedents in Kant's thought, the latter, while admitting of the Chinese civilization as undoubtedly being "the most populous and civilized" (quoted in Xie 2012: 495), dismisses Chinese morality for its "simplicity" of thought and regarded it as basic common sense. According to Reihman, for Kant, though:

> The Chinese may have passed what we might call the "inclination test"—their actions are not guided by their baser inclinations—but they have failed the "autonomy test," for they act as they do not because they are guided by rational reflection or respect for the moral law, but only out of obedience to the command of experience and custom. While Kant ranks the Chinese set of customs higher than others, he presents this as an accidental state of affairs: It just so happens that their customs are particularly strict and modest. (Reihman 2006: 57)

This might also explain Kant's portrayal of the Chinese in the *Physical Geography* as being deceitful and unethical (Reihman 2006: 63 n18). Nevertheless, one is at a loss to understand how a man of great intellect, a person of morality, one who synthesized early modern rationalism and empiricism, could make such sweeping negative generalizations about non-white races, and dismiss a whole people's customs and morality as having arrived by accident and force of command. Had Kant paid attention to the *Analects*, he would have come across those sayings of Confucius that speak of leading by moral example rather than brute force or by compulsion of law (*Analects* 12.19),[5] and of the importance of remonstrating with one's parents or ruler when they engage in reprehensible behavior. For instance, in the *Classic of Family Reverence*, loyalty and reverence are stated to be conditional (ch. 15; Rosemont and Ames 2009: 114). Confucius also impressed upon his disciples the importance of learning and reflecting to avoid being confused or being led unto danger (*Analects* 2.15). Confucianism is not an ethics of blind loyalty and passivity.

However, Kant was not alone, as we will see below. He was following in the footsteps of Hume, whom he admired greatly, and the Swedish naturalist, Carl Linnaeus.

[4] Others such as Max Weber and Joseph Levenson have rejected the adaptability of Confucianism to modernization (Weber 1968, Levenson 1965). However, see Tu Weiming who argues that, "The thesis that the Confucian ethic is incompatible with the spirit of capitalism is untenable" (Tu 1996: 10) as evinced by the rise of East Asian economies, which demonstrate that industrial capitalism and Confucian values can coexist.

[5] All reference to the *Analects* is to D. C. Lau's translation (Lau 1979), unless stated otherwise.

Undoubtedly, his provincialism—he never ventured outside his city Königsberg—could be offered as an excuse. Yet there were the likes of Leibniz (1646–1716), Voltaire (1694–1778), and Christian Wolff (1679–1754), who were very enthusiastic of Chinese civilization and its ethics. Those Enlightenment thinkers saw in the Chinese an ideal example of how ethics could thrive independently of knowledge or belief in God (or the Christian God in Leibniz's case).[6]

In the preface to his *Novissima Sinica* (*News from China*, 1697), Leibniz writes that the Chinese "surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals. [And therefore] we [Europeans] need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion" (quoted in Cook 2020: 253). From a secular perspective, Voltaire and Wolff held China as an exemplary model that Europeans could follow because its morality prioritized social and ethical concerns over those of the religious. Voltaire in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (*Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, 1756) claimed that he could not imagine a better government than the Chinese, as all power lay in the hands of a bureaucracy "whose members were admitted only after several severe examinations" (quoted in Song 2014: 20). For Voltaire, Confucius was a sage who "deemed too highly of his character as a legislator for mankind to stoop to deceive them" (Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* [*Dictionary of Philosophy*]; quoted in Song 2014: 20). Wolff also idealized Chinese natural religion: in his 1721 discourse on the practical philosophy of the Chinese,[7] he argued that as the Chinese had achieved virtues by way of *natural* revelation rather than by *Christian* revelation, their achievement was all the more impressive and would last longer than those founded on a revealed religion. Moreover, their concept of virtue is not a rigid one, as the Chinese engage in a continual effort of self-improvement which a belief in natural revelation implies (Fuchs 2006: 43).

Nonetheless, the view of the superiority of the European rational autonomous man prevailed, I would argue inevitably, given the ever-increasing might of the European militaries and their colonial expansions throughout the world. China itself was challenged and defeated. Kant's "racist" perceptions were further cemented and legitimated by the likes of the "progressive" liberal John Stuart Mill. Mill was a spokesperson for British imperialism and a loyal employee of the East India Company for nearly half his life. According to him, the Company and England were a source of good, of progress which spread liberal values and improved people's capacity for *individuality* and the enjoyment of *higher* pleasures. The maximum liberty for which he argued was "meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties," which excluded children, who were too young to make informed

[6] In *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese*—an unfinished letter written to Nicholas Remand, a friend of Malebranche—Leibniz, unlike Voltaire and Wolff, saw and sought to demonstrate a monotheistic (religious) underpinning to the intellectual and spiritual foundations of ancient Confucianism, which he argued formed the basis of their well-ordered society (Leibniz 1977).

[7] On Wolff's enthusiastic reception for Chinese philosophy, see also Larrimore 2000, Lach 1953, and Fuchs 2006.

decisions, and unsurprisingly "backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage" (Mill 2011: 23).

Mill conveniently considers the subjects of the British Empire as being in their juvenile stage and, like children, needing a firm —even despotic— rule, to be brought to civilization: despotic rule which, unironically, in India could be provided by the *East India Company*. Despotism was "a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement" (Mill 2011: 23). Mill's theory highlights the uncomfortable relationship between liberalism and imperialism. For Mill, and the British, there was no contradiction between enjoying the liberties of freeborn Englishmen and denying the same to the subjugated peoples of the empire, because all non-European peoples were developmentally childlike and barbaric. This is explicit in Mill's statement above, and implicit from his statement that "if a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best" (Mill 2011: 79). The peoples conquered by Britain evidently did not possess even a "tolerable" amount of common sense. Did Mill really think, for instance, that Indian and Chinese peoples did not engage in higher pleasure given the richness of their civilizations? Could brutes really value education, appreciate literature, produce the finest silk and porcelain, or construct the Taj Mahal? If not, then on what grounds were they cognitively inferior?

In the 20th century, even a philosopher such as Emmanuel Lévinas, whose philosophy centers on an ethics of responsibility for others—one is called by the *Other* and has to respond—cannot escape his Western enculturation (Lévinas 1979). His views accord with Thomas Macaulay's. In Lévinas's 1986 interview "Emmanuel Lévinas," originally published in *Conversations with French Philosophers*, he says:

> Europe, that's the Bible and the Greeks. It has come closer to the Bible and to its true fate. Everything else in the world must be included in this. I don't have any nostalgia for the exotic. For me Europe is central. (quoted in McGettigan 2006: 15)

In Lévinas's 1986 interview, he identifies humanity with the Bible and the Greeks: all the rest is superficial and frivolous—with nothing of spiritual seriousness to offer: "All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance" (quoted in Ma 2008: 605). In Lévinas's 1961 essay "Jewish Thought Today," later collected in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, he argues that what is lacking in non-Western traditions is the "Sacred History" that underpins the "Judaic-Christian world,"[8] a lack of transcendence that makes them *strangers* to the European tradition (quoted in Ma 2008: 605). Specifically on the Chinese, in Lévinas's 1960 article "Le débat russo-chinois et la dialectique" (The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic), published in *Esprit* and later collected in *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (1963), he disparagingly states:

[8] It is noteworthy that the Judaic-Christian coupling in Western parlance conveniently excludes the third Abrahamic religion Islam, thus occluding the latter's contribution to the origins of the Renaissance. For more on this see Watt 1972, Makdisi 1990.

> The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past. (quoted in Ma 2008: 605)

It is difficult, as Howard Caygill questions, to establish in what context the expression "yellow peril" cannot be viewed as racist, notwithstanding the disclaimer (Caygill 2002: 1). Furthermore, by consigning Asians to alien landscapes, he strips them of their humanity. Lévinas goes out of his way to dismiss non-European civilizations. In a 1986 interview included in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, he states:

> When I speak of Europe, I think about the gathering of humanity. Only in the European sense can the world be gathered together … in this sense Buddhism can be said just as well in Greek. (quoted in Dabashi 2015: 256)

This is said despite Levinas admitting to knowing little about Buddhism. Furthermore, as Hamid Dabashi reminds us, Levinas conveniently forgets that the Bible originated in Asia, and the Greeks were well acquainted in Asia centuries before "Europe" as a civilizational category came into existence. His prejudicial thinking was further highlighted in 1982. Between 2,000–3,500 mostly Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon had been massacred by a right-wing Lebanese militia called the Phalange in coordination with the Israeli army. In a 1999 essay titled "Beyond the State in the State," later included in *New Talmudic Readings*, Lévinas refused to acknowledge Palestinians as human enough to be his "Other." He argued that his definition of the Other was completely different, stating: "In alterity we can find an enemy.… There are people who are wrong" (quoted in Caygill 2002: 2). To understand such thinking and that of the abovementioned Enlightenment thinkers, one needs to investigate how the roots of racial prejudice arose in the 18th and 19th centuries.

3 Racial Prejudice due to Colonialism and Orientalism

The notion of the superiority of the European race was abetted by the form of rationality predominant during the Enlightenment era, one that sought to quantify and classify the great variety found in nature. With race introduced to the debate, the question arose whether all human beings were of one species. The Belgian polymath Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quételet (1796–1874), who was influential in introducing statistical methods to the social sciences, sought to measure human characteristics to determine the ideal *l'homme moyen* (the average man). He played a key role in the origins of eugenics. So too did the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus: in his *Systema Naturae*, published from 1735 onward, he proposed a fourfold classification of *Homo sapiens* which sought to make connections between appearance and temperament: *americanus* (red, choleric, and erect), *europaeus* (white and muscular), *asiaticus* (yellow, melancholic, and inflexible), and *afer* (black, phlegmatic, and

indulgent).[9] Further elaboration of the superiority of the European race can be found in the following entry from the 1792 English edition:

> *H. Europaei*. Of fair complexion, sanguine temperament, and brawny form … Of gentle manners, acute in judgement, of quick invention, and governed by fixed laws … *H. Afri*. Of black complexion, phlegmatic temperament, and relaxed fibre … Of crafty, indolent, and careless disposition, and are governed in their actions by caprice. (quoted in Rattansi 2020: 13)

In a similar vein, through the classification of color, Hume, in his *On National Characters* (1754), with little first-hand knowledge of black people, and probably with Linnaeus's classifications in mind, declares that different races possess different gifts and characters:

> I am apt to suspect the negroes in general and all species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white.… No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient Germans, the present Tartars have still something eminent about them. (quoted in Fuchs 2006: 46)

How Hume, a champion of the antislavery movement, could be so "ignorant" and arrogant as to dismiss all non-white nations as uncivilized is difficult to comprehend. Could he have been ignorant of Leibniz and Voltaire's writings on the Chinese, or of the achievements of Indian and Islamic civilizations? Kant's racist views, consequently, had their precedence in Hume and Linnaeus. Kant supported Hume's views and extended them by arguing that races are immutable—based on the belief that the original human genus carried the seeds of all four races, which became actualized under specific environmental conditions—such that there could be no reversion to the original stem or transformation into another race (as discussed in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Bernasconi & Lott, 2000; quoted in Jablonski 2021: 440).

Here we have three of the most prominent and influential Enlightenment thinkers who, with little direct knowledge of non-European peoples, evaluate their moral and intellectual worth according to their skin color. It never occurs to them that perhaps they might be making huge generalizations and assumptions. How could they? The trick here is that the classification of non-Europeans as inferior, and Europeans as superior is done from the vantage of the Europeans' privileged position as the classifier, given their military and scientific dominance. And because the European race is also included in the classification, one comes to view the classification as natural. Anything which "deviates" from the "norm" is seen as abnormal and deficient. (The European, like Adam, in his privileged position as superior to all other beings, goes round naming them.) Frantz Fanon was conscious of this trick:

[9] Linnaeus's hierarchical arrangement of temperaments with associated skin colors was his interpretation of the humoral theory of Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen, in which the four elements air, water, fire, and earth were associated with specific climates, geographies, and humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (Svensson 2015, quoted in Jablonski 2021: 438).

> Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. (Fanon 2001: 5)

The Kantian and Hegelian appraisals of the inferiority of Chinese philosophical thought are rooted in ideas of innate racial characteristics. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, beginning from Kant's minor works, sees in them racial prejudices which are embedded in his monumental works (Eze 1996). There is the pursuit of philosophy or wisdom for its intrinsic worth but also as a tool to *disqualify* all that which does not conform to European philosophy and its rational expectations.[10] The 19th century perpetuated these notions of the inferiority of non-Europeans and spawned the science of race, with the works of theorists such as Robert Knox and his *The Races of Men* (1850), and the Frenchman Count Arthur de Gobineau and his *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1854). These scholars normalized perceptions of the difference in human beings premised upon *distinct* and *permanent* races that were physically distinguishable by their

> [S]kin colour, facial features, texture of hair, and, with the growing influence of phrenology, size and shape of skull… [T]hat each race was innately associated with distinct social, cultural, and moral traits… [and] could be graded in a coherent hierarchy of talent and beauty, with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. (Rattansi 2020: 17)

Such notions of race align with Edward Said's observation that since the end of the 18th century, when Europe *re*-discovered the Orient, Europe viewed Oriental civilizations as frozen in time and superseded by the European with its industrial, economic, and cultural development (Said 1985: 93–94). Thus it was that after the initial euphoria of all things Chinese at the beginning of the Enlightenment, when China was still a great economic and military power, as this power waned and the European gained ascendance, we begin to see statements on the racial inferiority of the Chinese in terms of their intellectual torpor.[11]

My intention is not to present a litany of embarrassing quotes, nor a detailed exposition of the likes of Kant, Hume, and Mill's thought, nor a critique of the various assumptions that underlie their racialized and Eurocentric perceptions. Rather, it is to demonstrate how their thinking has had a profound effect on the European mind. For instance, their thinking served to justify "the continuation of the transatlantic slave trade when the trade was being attacked as immoral and inhumane" (Jablonski 2021: 441); by the end of the 18th century, it had led to a hardening of

[10] Compare with Reihman 2006, which argues that Kant's interpretation of Chinese philosophy is guided by his specific views on religion and metaphysics, and thus less prejudicial than they appear at first glance.

[11] "By 1914, the European powers held 85 per cent of the globe as possessions of one kind or another.… This success 'gave widespread legitimacy to the obviousness of white racial superiority'" (Rattansi 2020: 27). For more on their intellectual "inferiority" see Lee 2017.

attitudes with respect to a hierarchical arrangement of races based on color (Jablonski 2021: 442). It is important to highlight how such thinking was enabled by colonial power and led to the universalizing of European thought as the apogee for all humanity to aim for. Such a mindset, I argue, would act as a barrier to seeing non-European ways of thinking and being through anything but the deficit lens. One cannot help but think that the arbitrary "demarcation" of human races in developmentally hierarchical categories, backed by European military, science, and industrial dominance, must have played a major role in embedding the myth of the superiority of the European race, its culture and thought. It seems inconceivable that this could not have been so. After all, it was used to justify European colonization and its extreme violence, brutality, genocides, and enslavement of millions. As Fanon argues, Europeans keep talking about

> Man, yet [they] murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. … [Yet, it is] in the name of the spirit of Europe that Europe has made her encroachments, that she has justified her crimes and legitimized the slavery in which she holds four-fifths of humanity. (Fanon 2001: 251–252)

As Sartre wrote in the preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de La Terre* (1961; *Wretched of the Earth*), although European humanism casts itself as universal, yet its racist practices differentiate others by making them monsters. In fact, the European could only "make himself man … by fabricating slaves and monsters" (Fanon 2001: 22). The European professed equality of all humanity, yet has been peculiarly remiss in extending such right to non-Europeans; *au contraire*, the free, rational, autonomous European has been more adept at using his liberty and powers of reason to curb that of others by conveniently deeming them inferior and childlike.

The racial categorization of humans into hierarchical categories and with the resultant prejudice due to colonialism and orientalism, in my view, illustrates how "by the gaze of the Western percipients" (Said 1985: 92) the Orient, both as a region and its people, has been presented as backward, and ossified in time with racial profiling justifying the superiority of the European race. Given the dominance of the West for the last three hundred years, this image cannot but have become internalized through its ubiquitousness; "piggybacked," as Walter Mignolo says, "on the back of European imperial expansion" (Dabashi 2015: xi). "Peoples who are classified as ontologically inferior are also easier to categorize as being epistemically deficient and thus one can justify their and their cultures" dehumanization (Dabashi 2015: xxvi). Kipling's infamous "the White Man's Burden" justifies imperial conquest as a mission of civilization: the manifest destiny of Europeans to *deliver* "wild" "/sullen peoples/Half devil and half child" from savagery to "civilization" (Kipling 1899).

One may protest that to extend the Orientalism and its arguments of the late 18th and 19th century and impute them to the realities of the 21 st is unreasonable, especially given the economic strides made first by Japan and now China. This may be so, but I contend that the perception of the Occidental world's intellectual, cultural,

and social superiority remains in many Western minds, at least at the subconscious level.[12] This perception continues, as Said observed**,** given that

> [T]he production of knowledge, or information, of media images, is unevenly distributed: its locus and the centers of its greatest force are located in what […] has been polemically called the metropolitan West. (Said 1985: 100)

This supremacy is now maintained by the internet, with the use of search engines such as Google, and social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and so forth notwithstanding Tik Tok's popularity. Furthermore, the popularized version of Europeans as rational autonomous persons and their superiority has transformed into the language of democracy and "criticality." I will confine myself to criticality given its pertinence to our discussion and limitation of space.

4 Is Criticality an Anglophone-Western Concept?

Taking the English language field as a case in point—although I would contend my argument holds for all the social sciences given the focus on criticality in higher education—the "superiority" of Anglophone (and Western) civilization is claimed partly through the concept of *criticality*, which has been seen as *inherently* European (Ballard and Clanchy 1991, Atkinson 1997, Tan 2017) and even absent in some cultures (Atkinson 1997). Therefore, criticality may not be teachable to students of non-Western cultures, thereby implicitly demoting other cultures to a hierarchically lower stage of development. To underscore the continued construction of superiority, I highlight the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes, and how they arise with reference to Chinese/East Asian students by way of two texts which are emblematic of the notion that non-Western students lack critical thinking skills. These are Dwight Atkinson's article: "A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL" (Atkinson 1997), cited 1,101 times; and Andrew D. Schenck's "Improving Education in Confucian Countries through Analysis of Organizational Challenges, Leadership, and Responsibilities" (Schenck 2015), cited 11 times. These texts are symbolic of the continuing dichotomizing and radical alterity of the Occident versus Orient narrative—from Rudyard Kipling's "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," to Samuel Huntington's polarizing clash of civilizations thesis with its crude singular categorizations (Huntington 1993). As Amartya Sen remarks, Huntington presupposes a clash and conveniently glosses over the "*internal diversities* within these civilizational categories … and the reach and influence of *interactions*—intellectual and material—that go right across regional borders of so-called civilizations" (Sen 2007: 10–11). Such dichotomizing narrative, in the field of English language teaching, claims "superiority" of contemporary Anglophone (and Western) civilization through the concept of *criticality*, which is seen as *inherently* European

[12] This can be seen manifested in the rise of the radical right in the West and their unabashedly Western-centric and racist rhetoric.

(Atkinson 1997; Ballard and Clanchy 1991; Schenck 2015). The applied linguist Dwight Atkinson believes criticality to be lacking in some cultures as

> [C]ritical thinking is cultural thinking. Thus, I have suggested that critical thinking may well be in the nature of a social practice—discoverable if not clearly self-evident only to those brought up in a cultural milieu in which it operates, however tacitly, as a socially valued norm. (Atkinson 1997: 89)

Atkinson offers little evidence for the above apart from the fact that though there may be no consensus of the definition of criticality, it is a "commonsense social practice," because people "'can still (a) talk about it, (b) apparently understand one another when they do so, and (c) even 'recognize [it]... when it occurs (Resnick, 1987: 3)"' (Atkinson 1997: 75). Atkinson relies on Helen Fox's "commanding vantage point … as teacher and writing consultant to a very large number of international students, combined with her experience living in several non-Western societies and her use of formal research techniques" (Fox 1994: 75), that criticality is a Western concept which is difficult for nonnative students to grasp due to cultural and educational differences, and may not even be teachable to non-Western students.

In *Critical Thinking and Language* (2011), Tim John Moore argues that "this simple binary of critical and non-critical educational cultures persists as a powerful image in our universities"(quoted in Rear 2017b: 1). However, this worldview has been refuted by other studies that show few or no differences between Asian and Western students in their learning dispositions (Paton 2004, 2011; Manalo, Kusumi, Koyasu, Michita, and Tanaka 2013; Rear 2017a). Instead, the perceived comparative lack of criticality of Asian students can be accounted for by the impact of studying in a second language (Kumaravadivelu 2003; Paton 2004, 2011; Lun, Fischer, and Ward 2010; Rear 2017a). There is no shortage of evidence linking critical thinking with language proficiency. Vivian Lun, Ronald Fischer, and Colleen Ward attribute

> Asian [Chinese] students' apparent lack of critical thinking … [to] … the need to use English as a second language in academic discourse. Without sufficient English proficiency and/or enough confidence in using the language, Asian students are discouraged from overtly expressing their critical thinking in classrooms even if they want to do so. (Lun et al. 2010: 614)

When writing essays, second language writers are significantly impaired due to the strain that the need to use a second language places on lexical expression, syntax, cohesion, strategy use, and ease of writing. For instance, David Rear compared Japanese students' critical thinking skills in their first language and in their second language, and claims that the stark difference in results between the two can be attributed to students' ability to: construct and deconstruct arguments, find logical inconsistencies, and express themselves clearly and persuasively (Rear 2017b). He further claims that these differences can be explained by Cognitive Overload Theory rather than any inherent cultural inability, because

> [T]he amount of information that can be stored and processed in the working memory is limited. Language processing requires the use of cognitive

> resources in working memory, as does the application of critical thinking skills. If a considerable amount of those resources are expended on utilising a foreign language, there may not be adequate resources remaining for the satisfactory execution of critical thinking. (Rear 2017b: 13)

Rear's observations lend credence to Carol Floyd's study of Chinese students attending the English language center at Macquarie University. Her findings indicate that critical thinking skills are more difficult in a second language. The participants' scores were significantly higher when they took the test in their native language compared to when taken in English. Interviewees stated that they had difficulties with the reading and vocabulary (Floyd 2011). This is unsurprising, as Keiko Koda illustrated in her study on word - recognition that without solid mastery of language "meaning construction is seriously impaired" (Koda 1996: 446).

However, Andrew Schenck argues, in a similar vein to Atkinson looking specifically at students from a Confucian background, that the lack of criticality displayed by East Asian students can be explained by Confucian educational traditions that place an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge "through direct guidance" and "passive memorization." These practices are in direct contrast to the Western "andragogical theories which rely on diverse opinions and self-direction" (Schenck 2015: 2). The reason for this he associates with Confucian ideals that place emphasis on "strict hierarchical relationships" in society. These relationships, Schenk believes, result in subordinates being forced to obey superiors' orders. In education, this means learners receive knowledge from teachers as subject-specialists while the teachers in turn must obey their superiors (Schenck 2015: 2).[13] The hierarchical nature of the relationships Schenck attributes to the Confucian cultures' preference "for high-stakes testing of basic skills, such as math, literacy, and science [because] they require direct transmission of knowledge and passive memorization for achievement" (Schenck 2015: 2).

Schenck views the Confucian tradition from a deficit perspective, because Confucianism for him prevents Western educational strategies, reforms, and style of leadership from taking hold. For him, it is a given that these are the ideals to aspire to. Even the fact that East Asian students do well in PISA results is dismissed because these require skills which are hierarchically "lower" on the critical thinking skills spectrum, as they "simply" require passive learning and rote memorization. However, in a 2014 *Financial Times* article titled "Countries that Excel at Problem-Solving Encourage Critical Thinking" by Jeevan Vasagar, the OECD's assessment suggests that schools in East Asia are developing thinking skills as well as providing a solid grounding in core subjects (quoted in Rear 2017a: 25). This is corroborated by evidence from Stigler, Gonzales, Kwanaka, Knoll, and Serrano 1999, whose observation of math lessons in China and Japan show teachers encouraging their pupils to analyse math problems in an inductive and intuitive manner, and as a result nurture deeper understanding.

[13] This neatly resonates with Kant's dismissal of Chinese morality as resulting from chance and the result of obedience to authority rather than rational reflection (his autonomy test).

There is growing evidence that Chinese students adopt a distinctive approach to studying which includes rote-memorization that leads to deep rather than surface understanding (Kember 1996, 2016; Richardson and Sun 2016; Watkins and Biggs 1996). In studies examining high-achieving Chinese students, it seems that memorization leads to a deep understanding of material, an outcome normally associated with deep, rather than superficial, learning (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Tse 1996). This was termed "The Chinese Paradox" by John B. Biggs: "the paradox was that westerners saw Chinese students as rote learning massive amounts of information in fierce exam-dominated classrooms—yet in international comparisons, students in the Confucian heritage classrooms greatly outperformed western students learning in 'progressive' western classrooms" (quoted in C. Chan and Rao 2010: xiii). The findings contrasted with Ference Marton and Roger Säljö's "Deep and Surface" learning model, which assumes rote-memorization leads to a surface understanding of content (Marton and Säljö 1976).[14] Kevin Nield's research on Hong Kong students finds that Chinese students go beyond rote memorization, and are *strategic* learners, thus confirming John Biggs theory (Nield 2007; Biggs 1987). Similar findings of good understanding via memorization have also been found in Nepalese students (Dahlin and Regmi 1997), thus questioning the underlying principles of the Deep and Surface model. It has been suggested that there may be different definitions of memorization: mechanical memorization and memorization with understanding (Marton et al. 1996), which could explain the inconsistency (Marton et al. 1996). It would then appear that Marton and Säljö's model (Marton and Säljö 1976) may be culture-specific, and not applicable to all students in higher education.

Confucian rote-memorization offers us hints as to possible reasons why some Chinese students' rote-memorization is associated with deep rather than surface understanding. Tu Weiming argues that Confucian rote-memorization is important in laying the foundations of deeper understanding:

> The traditional Confucian student was likely to begin his study on the *Chung-yung* [中庸][15] as early as the age of eight. After thoroughly memorizing the text, he had time to grasp its meaning by being gradually steeped in it. Without imposing a preconceived interpretive scheme upon it, he could try to realize its inner logic through personal knowledge. For him, systematic recitation which is misconstrued as unreasoning, rote-learning was a long and strenuous process designed to foster a holistic vision by integrating the cognitive and experiential dimensions of his understanding of the text. (Tu 1989: 11)

Confucian recitation is more than mere rote-memorization: in ancient China, as William Sin asserts, it was seen as "emotive immersion, and of certain bodily engagements, such as the use of the voice in recital," and as such goes beyond

[14] Denise Chalmers and Simone Volet, differentiating such learning approach from surface learning, have termed it "deep memorization" (Chalmers and Volet 1997).

[15] One of the Four Books of classical Chinese philosophy.

mere "process of rational inquiry" (Sin 2020: 219). This complete immersion of oneself, mind, and body in study enables rigorous thinking. Thus it is in this positive light that we should consider Chinese rote-memorization and recitation, rather than the contemporary negative Western association with superficial understanding. We should also be careful in associating cultural specificity to rote-memorization. Eastern culture does not monopolize rote-memorization as a learning strategy; in the West, rote-memorization of facts is neither unfamiliar nor seen as a negative. For instance, rote-memorization is very much alive in the learning of multiplication tables and formulae in mathematics. Similarly, when learning languages, memorization of grammar rules and chunks of vocabulary are essential; the same is true of case law in legal studies and so on and so forth. Memorization is an important and efficacious strategy in these subjects, it assists in acquiring foundational knowledge upon which to build deeper understanding.

Admittedly, the current Chinese education system, being exam-oriented, can lead to rote-memorization of facts for examination without reflection: this ought to be avoided. Therefore, one should not dismiss the many findings, including those of Atkinson and Schenck, conducted on Chinese students, which highlight the difficulties and challenges that these students encounter while studying in Western countries. However, to refute binarisms, it is important to note that concerns about rote-memorization are not exclusively Western, or new. Indeed, the ancient Confucian text *Xueji* 學記 (*On Teaching and Learning*)[16] was criticizing the use of rote-memorization techniques two and a half millennia ago. Similarly, silence and perceived passivity should not be conflated with absence and inactivity: research consistently reports the efficacy of such strategies in Chinese students (Cortazzi 1998; J. Liu 2002; Y. Shi, Shen, Wang, Cheng, and Wang 2021). For instance, Yan Hui 顏回, the most gifted and dearest of Confucius' students, rarely responded to Confucius' instruction and appeared stupid even to him. Eventually Confucius realized this was quite the opposite: Hui could in fact elaborate and shed light on what he had been taught (*Analects* 2.9). Silence is also not culturally specific:

> Some students have the ability to participate in discussions but prefer to learn in silent ways (Meyer and Hunt 2004). Other students may find that they benefit more from listening to different opinions in classroom discussions (Meyer 2007) instead of concentrating on speaking or trying to answer questions (Meyer 2009). Indeed, as Wood (1996) has argued, when students are listening attentively during classroom discussions, they are likely to be learning as much as peers who are talking. (M. Shi and Tan 2020: 253)

Silence during class can also be necessitated by large class size: in a high stakes exam-oriented environment, teachers prefer questions after class in order to maximize content teaching during class time (J. Liu 2002). David Watkins and John Biggs argue that Confucian pedagogies and learning preferences are often misunderstood because they are examined under the Western percipient's gaze, an ideal which rarely considers the educational contexts of Confucian pedagogies (Watkins

[16] The Di and McEwan 2017 translation is used in this essay.

and Biggs 1996, 2001). Consequently, distortion and simplification become the reasons for any reticence in their classrooms (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005: 289).

Now that I have put forward possible alternative reasons for Chinese students' perceived lack of criticality, in the next section I delve deeper into classical Confucian pedagogy to illustrate that (1) criticality is at the heart of Confucianism and (2) the pedagogical preferences of Chinese students, aspects of which are misinterpreted by British teachers as passivity and lack of criticality, can be explained by the Confucian concept of personhood and the purpose of education.

5 Confucian Pedagogy

5.1 Confucian Criticality

Criticality was at the heart of Confucius' education and pedagogy; he was at a loss with students who learned without reflection (*Analects* 15.16). He impressed upon his students that: "If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril" (*Analects* 2.15). Thus, Confucius encouraged and gave time to his students to reflect on their learning (*Analects* 7.8). Nevertheless, Confucianism is often misleadingly held as the overarching reason for East-Asian students' passivity and obedience to teacher authority (Cheng 2000). Such explanations have been criticized by the likes of N. Liu and Littlewood as "the biggest cliché" about East-Asian students (N. Liu and Littlewood 1997: 374). This kind of thinking imagines an Asia that is not only homogenous but also frozen in time. This is problematic for understanding the diversity of Confucian cultures and East-Asian international students' diverse experiences in Western/English classrooms (Cheng 2000, Wong 2004). Rarely mentioned are those Confucian sayings which state that respect and obedience are *conditional*: it is the duty of a filial son to remonstrate against his parents, and a loyal minister against his ruler, when faced with reprehensible behavior (*Analects* 15; Rosemont and Ames 2009: 114). Or that: "When faced with the opportunity to practise benevolence do not give precedence even to your teacher" (*Analects* 15.36).

One hardly ever hears that the relationship Confucius had with his students was more that of a father, older brother, or friend (Creel 1960: 80), and unlike the master-figure, he did not fill the student with awe, which would make the relationship overly deferential, limiting the scope of criticality. Indeed, the *Xueji* advocates that teachers enlighten students through persuasion rather than force. Teachers are encouraged to:

> Lead students forward through reasoning and inspiration rather than to drag them, to offer them encouragement rather than hold them back, to open their minds rather than to provide them with fixed answers. If teachers serve as guides, they promote harmony; if teachers encourage students, they facilitate growth of students; if teachers open the minds of their students, they promote thoughtful inquiry. (*Xueji* 12; Di and McEwan 2017: 13–14)

Confucius was an authority figure in the Gadamer sense of being *authoritative* rather than *authoritarian* (Gadamer 1996). Never claiming to be infallible, he was open minded and flexible (*Analects* 9.4); he suspended judgment, being neither for nor against anything but that which was appropriate (*Analects* 4.10). As such Confucius encouraged his disciples to engage in discussion, to openly question his conduct (*Analects* 6.28), and to correct his actions (*Analects* 7.31, 17.3) without him showing anger or resentment. Such behavior was expected and encouraged, and its omission was akin to stupidity (*Analects* 2.9). In fact, Confucian education *even* admits of the teacher not being as good as the student. For instance, Confucius spoke of his protégé Yan Hui as having a capacity that exceeded his own abilities (*Analects* 5.9). Confucius would have understood that a person could not develop a flexible approach, essential when considering the particularities of the context to arrive at a morally appropriate decision, if they could not also question their teacher.

To cultivate flexibility of thought in his students, Confucius the teacher listened carefully to his students and acted as a facilitator, awakening their love of learning and self-cultivation. The *Xueji* concurs with the role of the teacher as guide and facilitator, someone who opens minds through thoughtful inquiry rather than providing fixed answers (*Xueji* 12). Such a teacher listens to her students intently and responds to their specific questions, rather than offering rote answers memorized from textbooks (*Xueji* 18). In this regard, respect for the student was important and required encouraging them to ask questions (*Xueji* 18). Asking questions was essential for the learning process, as it developed curiosity and criticality, eventually leading to understanding. In this process, the *Xueji* urges the teacher not to be too hasty in providing answers to students' questions as this would curtail independent thinking. This aligns with Confucius' unwillingness to spoon-feed knowledge: "I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words. "When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time" (*Analects* 7.8; cf. 1.15). This pedagogical approach was adopted to nurture contemplation and inference. Confucius offered the initial point of learning and then expected his students to arrive at their judgments through deduction. This method was important to cultivate if students were to be more than simple reciters of facts, they had to learn to think for themselves (*Analects* 7.8). This is why, as Zongjie Wu states, Confucian education, per the *Analects*, involves many interactions where Confucius' disciples initiate conversation: "Confucius is unwilling to take the initiative to ask students questions. It is usually the student who should have something to say before the teacher can think of advising, or not advising, him or her" (Wu 2011: 542). Consequently, the *Xueji* advises that the teacher and student should "talk with each other for a long time" with the intention that the learner analyze the question appropriately and for the teacher to offer scaffolding (*Xueji* 19). This is why, according to the *Xueji*, the good learner is good at asking questions. They

> [A]pproach their task as if carving hardwood. First, they chip away at the soft parts and then set to work on the knots. If they keep at it, the difficulties are gradually resolved. Those who are poor at asking questions do just the opposite. (*Xueji* 17; Di and McEwan 2017: 15)

Refining one's questions is akin to chipping away at wood to create the desired object; one gains greater understanding. This accords with Confucius' desire to reflect deeply and intensively on a matter until one has exhausted all avenues (*Analects* 9.8). Such active participation has its resonance in "Self-Regulated Learning": those who take the initiative for their learning show a greater propensity to absorb and master new knowledge as they actively engage with instructional materials, ask appropriate questions—rather than passively receive information from the teacher—and seek to address gaps in their knowledge. These persons exhibit an inner desire for learning which pushes them to go beyond surface level comprehension, toward deeper understanding. Such persons understand that although the teacher imparts knowledge, they must actively participate.

Active participation in classical Confucian teaching and learning meant creating a collegial and collaborative learning environment in which peers and friends could exchange ideas and "improve each other" (*Xueji* 10). By engaging with peers in "discourses on their studies" learners can demonstrate their ability to reflect on, analyze, integrate and apply what they have learned (*Xueji* 5). In addition, they can learn from and correct each other's faults. The *Xueji* exhibits an understanding that studying without one's peers leads to students becoming "idiosyncratic in their manner and limited in their learning" (*Xueji* 11). These benefits of peer and collaborative learning were recognized some two and a half millennia prior to Vygotsky's oft-quoted work (Vygotsky 1962). Vygotsky argued that the range of skills that can be developed with peer collaboration is greater than anything that can be attained alone.

Having refuted the charge that criticality is *inherently* Western, and that the perceived lack of critical thinking in Chinese students can be explained by straightforward reasons such as insufficient cultural, linguistic, and subject mastery, let us now consider certain pedagogical differences or preferences. These for me can be explained by the different conceptions of personhood in the Western and Confucian traditions, rather than a lack of criticality.

5.2 The Confucian Concept of Personhood

Since the Enlightenment, the dominant British (Western) conception of personhood is that of the free, rational and autonomous individual. This contrasts with the Confucian conceptualization of a person as metaphysically tied to others in a network of roles and relations. The Confucian conception makes everyone responsible for everyone else because others are seen as an extension of the self, and others' families [are seen] as one's family whom one "should respect, care for, and care about" (Pang-White 2023: 127–128). One becomes "fully" a person by excelling in all one's roles and relationships. The role of Confucian education is to cultivate an ethical person,

junzi. This paradigmatic Confucian person being relational, to *fully* realize her personhood, must cultivate her myriad relationships. Such ethics has pedagogical implications. To "fully" realize her personhood, the *junzi* must nurture the cardinal Confucian virtues *ren* 仁 (humanity, benevolence) and *li* 禮 (ritual propriety).

To be *ren* one must *love* one's fellow human (*Analects* 2.22). This beneficent concern for the other actively requires one to "cultivate" and "establish" others in the process of doing this for oneself. Confucius says:

> Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves—this may be called the art of virtue. (*Analects* 6.30; Legge 2005: 33)

One does this by sublimating one's selfish impulses rather than denying them. Underlying the cultivation of relationships is *reciprocity*: relating "to others in a meaningful way […] in the spirit of filiality, brotherhood, or friendship [, which reflect] one's level of self-cultivation" (Tu 1972: 188) and sense of self.

Ren manifests itself through *li. Li* encompasses "all established ethical, social, and political norms of human behavior, including both formal rules and less serious patterns of everyday behavior" (Li 2007: 318). Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont conceive *li* as a form of social grammar "that provides each member with a defined place and status within the family, community, and polity, [encompassing] all formal conduct, … table manners to patterns of greeting and leaving … and so on and so forth" (Ames and Rosemont 1999: 51). To make *li* meaningful, each generation has to shape it to their particular time, context, and situation (Ames and Rosemont 1999: 51) through an *evolutionary* process. This and the fact that *li* must conform to *ren*, prevents *li* from becoming "empty formalism." Indeed, any established *li* can be revised or eliminated by stating its incompatibility to *ren* (*Analects* 3.3, 9.3). Being that *ren* and *li* underpin the nurturing of all one's relationships; to excel in these, the ethical cultivation of character needs aesthetic sensibility and artistic temperament. Confucians do not distinguish, for example, rude and boorish behavior from moral behavior. Thus one's conduct must exhibit grace and beauty, raising the most mundane of interactions such as greetings to a sacred plane (Ames 2002: 146).

Ren and *li* directly underpin the teacher-student relationship. There is certain respect and reverence afforded to those with greater knowledge, experience, and wisdom than oneself. This is particularly true of teachers, experts whose role is not only to impart knowledge and wisdom but also act as moral exemplars and parental figures. The terms for "teacher" in Mandarin are *laoshi* 老師 and *shifu* 師父. *Laoshi* literally means "old teacher," but "old" does not simply refer to age; rather, it is honorific, displaying respect toward one's teacher. Teachers even at university can be addressed as *shifu*, which literally means "teacher-father."[17] The Chinese terms retain an aura "of richness and respect that [the English term] 'teacher' has to some extent lost" (Standish 2019: 555). British teachers being unaware of the cultural connotations of "teacher" in the Chinese context misinterpret the behaviors arising from

[17] A term used in a neutral manner even by female teachers.

this. They fail to understand that any hesitancy on the part of the Chinese student to speak without being asked, or "failure" to challenge or question the teacher openly, might be a sign of cultivation—displaying appropriate respect and reverence toward one's teachers—rather than an inherent disposition to being passive and uncritical. Further, that lacking good knowledge of the subject, a student would naturally defer to her teacher.

Unfortunately, the Chinese student's esteem toward her teachers, elders, and "superiors," in Western eyes, is often construed as *over*-deference, something that hinders the student's ability to argue and critique, (however much there may be grounds, in contemporary Chinese context, for this perception) (Huang 2008, Zhang 2017). The negative Western associations of silence and deference to the teacher and authority are, I believe, the result of the rational-individualistic conceptualization of personhood, particularly in the Anglophone countries, which advocates an aggressive adversarial style of criticality. Such criticality is premised upon the notion that you can disassociate the argument from the person—transcending social interactions. Harvey Siegel, for instance, argues that strong critical thinkers can distinguish "between having faulty beliefs and having a faulty character"; consequently, they are "emotionally secure" with respect to direct academic criticism (Siegel 1988: 41). The implication is that no offence will be taken for having one's views openly attacked.[18] However, Confucians being sensitive to causing offence to others, as this might impede cultivating interpersonal relations, pay appropriate respect and deference to their interlocutors. None of this means Confucians avoid questioning the views of others (such as teachers) when one remembers the importance of remonstrance in Confucianism, but this must be done in an indirect way that avoids directly "attacking" or "ridiculing" others. Confucians understand that humiliation and loss of face can make others defensive and/or offensive, as direct critique can affect our status claims, and are not easily recoverable.[19] Contemporary Chinese students under the Confucian pedagogical influence would regard a direct adversarial approach as crude and uncultivated, and one that would hinder the cultivation of *thick* relations and interpersonal harmony, without which one cannot cultivate oneself fully to realize one's personhood. Therefore, silence and perceived passivity ought not to be conflated with absence and inactivity or a lack of criticality. Rather, they are preferences that are born of a particular conception of the person as relational.

[18] Siegel's assertions are questionable given the influence of myriad biases and beliefs (especially identity-confirming ones) that tint our worldviews. Often "our explicit reasoning processes serve to rationalize behavior rather than to cause it"—a case of the cart before the horse (Taber and Lodge 2016: 62). Furthermore, we have a tendency to hold onto a belief despite evidence showing it to be false (Mercier and Sperber 2011: 67). This is without taking into consideration the effect of cognitive bias: we often take mental shortcuts (heuristics) that can lead to deviations from rational objectivity, including system errors in the thinking process (Haselton, Nettle, and Murray 2015). This is not to discount the importance of reason and evidence in conferring "warrant and justification"; and it may be, as Siegel believes, "the route to true as well as justified belief" (Siegel 1997: 23). But at the same time, we should not overlook reason's limited power of persuasion and the fact that what is rationally justified is not the same as what is true or even ethical.

[19] For example, in the scientific community reputation is considered the most highly coveted resources (Petersen et al. 2014). This would undoubtedly be the case in the humanities and social sciences.

6 Conclusion

Many British teachers and academics continue to conflate Chinese students' silence and academic difficulties associated in learning in a second language and general ability to something more fundamental, a deficit conceptualization of the Confucian education and pedagogy. I have refuted the notion that criticality is the sole preserve of the West; on the contrary, it has been shown to be central in Confucian philosophy. This is not to ignore the fact that some Chinese students may have difficulty adopting a direct and adversarial style of criticality due to being brought up in a system which eschews questioning of authority and authoritative figures such as teachers. This undoubtedly can result in over-deference toward teacher authority to the point of passivity in class. And with the Chinese education system being highly exam-oriented, with large number of students per class, teaching can lean toward the transmission of knowledge and rote-memorization of facts. However, such teaching and learning strategies can be considered the most efficacious given political and resource constraints. They ought not, at first blush, be conflated with critical thinking being an alien concept to Chinese students. Indeed, some of the dispositions of teachers and students exhibited in class, as have been illustrated, can be attributed to the different conceptions of personhood and the purpose of education: to nurture an ethical person, the *junzi*.

Taking into consideration the Confucian concept of personhood and purpose of education, one realizes the significance placed on the cultivation of interpersonal relations. This requires paying attention to norms of *li*: *what* one says or does and *what* one does *not* say or do, in addition to *how* one does or does not do or say something are important. A person of *ren* understands that there is "no sharp distinction between manners and morals" (Rosemont and Ames 2009: 24) and the centrality of cultivating relationships. Any rude or boorish behavior would undermine the development of thick relations; it would diminish "the meaning invested in relations, and in so doing, loosen and ultimately threaten the moral fabric of society" (Rosemont and Ames 2009: 24). With this in mind, one can see why the Chinese student might be reluctant to challenge their Western teacher, or even to ask questions without first being invited: such reticence by the student would be a sign of her cultivation rather than an over-deference toward teacher authority. The Chinese student is responding to her "*laoshi* "or "*shifu*" rather than "teacher," thus showing respect and reverence. However, although many British teachers find this endearing, they see it as over-deference given the value placed in the West on a criticality that emphasizes adversarial discourse through questioning. But this too is a false dichotomy: as we have seen, questioning is at the heart of Confucianism, but it is done in a way that avoids humiliation or loss of face.

By focusing away from of the present, I have historically contextualized the possible reasons for the deficit attitude toward Chinese students, namely Britain's (and Western) military, economic, scientific, and cultural dominance over the last three hundred years. The British have been enculturated to considering their nation and race as hierarchically superior; some of the greatest British and

European minds have told them so, as exemplified in dismissing Chinese morality as the result of chance rather than design. The estimation of Chinese (and other non-Western civilizations) as cognitively immature were highly influential and used as justification for colonization. The effects of centuries of enculturation cannot easily be wished away or educated out. The rise and success of the radical right in Britain and the West attests to the continuing undercurrent of racial prejudice and bias. Teachers represent a cross-section of society and are not immune to such enculturation. With the English language having become the preeminent *lingua franca* of the world due to American dominance from the 20th century onward, for Anglophones there is little need to speak another language; how then can they not feel "superior"? The aforementioned, I contend, contribute to the British (Western) sense of superiority at a subconscious level for many English language teachers (arguably also in the humanities and social sciences).

Perhaps it is unfair to "blame" the English language teacher for adopting a pragmatic approach, as she is tasked with enabling her students to understand the requirements of their disciplines in order to be successful in their studies. However, unless teachers highlight the ethnocentric nature of all discourse, non-Western cultures' epistemological traditions will continue to be viewed from a deficit perspective, as will their students. Failing to draw attention to the ethnocentric nature of discourse occludes the fact that different approaches to writing are affected by factors such as attitude toward knowledge, ways of communication, and values, which are inherent in one's cultural assumptions, and can be seen as ideological imposition and cultural hegemony. Therefore, English language teachers and those teaching disciplines should work in concert to address issues of linguistic and cultural "chauvinism" through embracing and celebrating difference, being open to a positive friction between different possibilities of expression that can lend a welcome critical edge to thought. This requires recognition of "the equal value of different cultures" (Taylor 1992: 64). Or at the least to acknowledge, as Merleau-Ponty does in his *Everywhere and Nowhere* (1960), that the Orient might serve as a "sounding-board" through which "we learn to estimate what we have shut ourselves off from by becoming Western" (quoted in McGettigan 2006: 16).

For several decades Chinese students have comprised a significant majority among overseas students in Anglophone countries; it is disappointing that even now there remains little interest in or familiarity with Chinese (non-Western) epistemological traditions, apart from an *exotic* fascination with difference. This remains the case notwithstanding calls for the decolonization of the curriculum in British and other Western educational institutions. I suspect that for many in the West, like Kant, Hegel, and Lévinas, the pinnacle of humanity resides in the accumulated wisdom of the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, "all the rest—all the exotic—is dance": superficial and frivolous, providing little that might enrich the Western way of knowing and thinking. Such attitudes, I contend, are in part the result of the stereotypes and biases formed during the period of colonization about other races' cognitive "immaturity," and the West's continuing dominance in the present day. It is these factors that inform—subconsciously—perceptions of the uncritical Chinese student.

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