

Taking Chinese to the world: Language, culture and identity in Confucius Institute teachers (a review)

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This is a very useful piece of research conducted by Wei Ye, which will be very helpful to teachers and students of international culture and to those interested in the use of education as a tool of soft power, particularly in the context of the Chinese Confucius Institutes and the Confucius classrooms movement. Above all, however, it will be of value to teachers and administrators in schools and colleges and HR and development managers in companies and corporations, concerned to help overseas students and workers acclimatise to conditions in a new country.

Wei Ye was a Confucius Institute teacher in the US and also in the UK and this book is a study of Confucius institutes and Confucius classroom teachers in the UK. The book divides into 8 chapters, beginning with an explanation of the Confucius Institute and Confucius classrooms

initiative, going on to examining the theory and practice of 'cultural sojourning', using particularly the three-fold principle of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Habitus, capital and field, and continuing with a number of group and personal case studies before drawing detailed conclusions and recommendations for host country organisations to ease acclimatisation.

First, for those who aren't familiar with it, what is the Confucius Institute?

Inspired by the language and culture teaching institutions of Britain, Europe and the United States, such as Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institute, Cervantes Institute, USIA and, above all, the British Council, the Confucius Institutes were instituted by Hanban, a not-for-profit agency of the Chinese Ministry of Education. They are named after the

famed Chinese philosopher and teacher, Confucius (551-479 BCE) and the first one was established in Seoul in 2004. Between 2004 and 2015, China established over 500 Confucius Institutes, mainly in universities and colleges and over 1000 Confucius classrooms in primary and secondary schools. To do the teaching they employed 44,000 teachers in 134 countries. The aim by 2020 is to expand to over 1000 Confucius Institutes in 500 cities around the world.

Wei goes into detail about how institutes are organised and what they teach; language, landmarks, folklore, music, dance, festivals and food but no politics, and also discusses some of the earliest challenges. These included lack of knowledge required for teaching overseas, inadequate materials and lack of adaptation to local needs.

In addition, she points out, Chinese education is very exam-oriented and values memorisation and rote learning rather than reasoning, imagination and group work, which tend to be encouraged in the west. This point was brilliantly made by Patricia Williams-Boyd in *Training Language and Culture* Vol. 1 Issue 2 in her article entitled, *Teaching English in China: Changing self-perceptions*.

Wei discusses different approaches to cultural identity and assimilation to new environments but

focuses principally on the ideas of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu in his 1977 chapter *Structures and the habitus* in *Outline of a theory of practice*, identified 3 key areas of cultural identity: habitus, capital and field.

Habitus is our habitual unthinking selves formed by our background, personality and our culture. It incorporates both ways of behaving and ways of thinking and can change over time and in different circumstances. Capital also covers a range of personal assets and characteristics including physical resources, symbolic capital (personal status and position), cultural capital, which covers tastes, consumption patterns, personal attributes, skills and awards (qualifications). It also includes social capital, our social network and linguistic capital and mastery of languages, our own and others. Social capital describes the contexts in which we live and work. All these go to build up our sense of identity, which may be enhanced or restrained by the field we are in. Wei identifies two ways of adapting to new conditions and environments. One is the 'cultural mediator', based on Michael Byram's INCA project, which identifies the positive characteristics of good adaptors to new cultural influences and how to adapt to new cultures and environments. The other is Claire Krampsch's 'symbolic competence', which addresses the 'third space' between our own culture and the culture that we are adapting to and what we learn and how we change in the

process. Bourdieu, Byram and Kramsch are the lynchpins of Wei's analysis of the process of acculturation (adapting to a new cultural environment) and identity and agency (the changes we undergo in our view of ourselves).

So, what conclusions does Wei come to? The study identifies a number of constraints in professional acculturation. The first is linguistic. Many teachers experienced difficulties understanding and adapting to slang, youth culture and accent. Interestingly, observes Wei, the teachers interviewed made no reference to nuances of meaning caused by cultural appropriateness or indirect ways of expression, which many foreigners report as a major challenge in adapting to British English communication. (See Peter McGee's article on Vague Language in this issue.)

The second constraint was physical. Teachers were faced with long hours, heavy timetables and often the need to deliver classes in different teaching sites weekly or even daily. Many were exhausted and weren't able to focus on more positive extra-curricular activities like improving their English.

The third area of constraint was the differences in professional cultures. Chinese teachers noticed a culture of 'positive encouragement' of students among their British colleagues reflected in more positive assessments than they themselves might give. They also felt a loss of social status in being

expected to 'muck in' and do jobs which in China they would expect their secretaries to do.

One incident, described in Chapter 4, explained how two teachers extended their holiday in China, meaning they would miss one week of the new school term. The host school reacted strongly, wanting to fine the teachers. For the Chinese project director, this posed a big problem. Left to herself she would have negotiated with the teachers, probably arranging for extra hours to make up the lost time. However, the host school felt the rules of the contract were being broken and were not prepared to be flexible. Wei describes the conflict of a Chinese 'people first' concern and what the Chinese director saw as a British 'rules over people' priority. It is true that Britain is very much a rule-based society but the spirit of compromise is very strong as well. But for Wei, such conflicts pose problems of identity. Are the Chinese teachers fully fledged members of the British education system or effectively visiting scholars? This affected teachers' confidence and levels of commitment.

Chinese teachers also felt under pressure from their classes, especially when teaching young children. Used to a homogeneous and obedient class, they found diversity and the inclusion of special needs children a challenge. Also, they keenly felt their change of status. In China, their authority was endorsed by the state. In Britain,

they had to earn the respect of their students.

The fourth constraint was lack of support from their own sending institutions. Some were still carrying out responsibilities from their home institutes and many reported problems with housing, banking and visas.

Many complained about the inadequacy or lack of appropriate teaching materials, as reported above but most important was the feeling that their work was not valued by the sending authorities when they returned home. This is a not uncommon complaint by repatriates on return from assignments overseas.

These are the negative issues raised by Wei's interviewees. What were the positives?

Observation of British teaching colleagues was very helpful, as was co-teaching and teaching assistantships. These helped them get used to classroom management organisation and teaching methods. Chinese teachers felt they had learned new skills in both areas.

Many appreciated the support from their host schools and local colleagues with encouragement, emotional advice and support and sharing ideas and teaching materials. Others, faced with indifference by the host school leaders, depended on the local Chinese community for support.

A key advantage for the Chinese teachers was the opportunity to learn about how British education and classrooms work. Many were impressed by the inclusive style of education and one teacher expressed her wish to contribute to its development in China. Although working with children with special needs was stressful and demanding at first, many grew to appreciate the philosophy of special education and developed more positive attitudes.

At the end of the study, Wei Ye lists some key outcomes and recommendations in the context of globalisation and internationalism.

First, she says, participants understood their own culture better and also were able to overcome stereotypes about British culture. In the process, they felt they had become calmer, more direct, optimistic, efficient, rational and independent. Above all, they had become more aware of their own cultural identity and not to judge other cultures. Wei writes, *'They realised that every country has its strengths and weaknesses and no one culture is better than another.'* The teachers also learned new ways of interacting and opened up new ways of working when they returned home.

As to organisational lessons learned, Wei advocates a stay of two years minimum rather than one and stresses the importance of pre-departure

training and repatriation training, a lesson corporations sending assignees abroad could also learn. She also emphasises the value of using the talents and experience of teachers in other areas of school life. For example, a geography major, employed to teach Chinese, was also able to work with Geography teachers to develop new online graphical imaging techniques based on his experience in China.

To conclude, Wei puts the language and cultural

experience of Chinese Confucius Institute and Confucius classroom teachers in the context of a globalising economy. *'Teaching abroad,'* she writes, *'provides real world experience and opens a door to discovery; it requires reconsideration of the culturally rooted beliefs concerning teaching and learning and offers a valuable opportunity for teacher education and professional development.'*

As someone who has spent much of his life teaching abroad, I couldn't agree more.