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Educating Chinese Seminarians in North America: A Cross Cultural Understanding of Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand the characteristics of Chinese adults and Chinese cultural influences on learning, and to make recommendations on how to best teach them in North American seminaries. The questions being considered are: How are the Chinese different from westerners when they are learning? What makes them that way? What adjustments are needed in order to teach them effectively in the North American context? What are the characteristics of Chinese Christians and what difference do those characteristics make for the North American seminaries which equip them for ministry? As the number of Asian students with Chinese cultural heritage who are studying in North American theological seminaries increases, the immediate concern is to understand the cultural differences between Chinese and North American conceptions of education. This understanding is essential to providing relevant theological training for them.

I would like to clarify that I use the terms "Chinese" or "Chinese in North America" in an inclusive sense to refer to all overseas born Chinese who have come from Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore. However, this is not to suggest that Chinese are a homogeneous cultural group, or that Chinese Christian experiences

in North America are the same for everyone. Rather, my goal is to trace a general cultural heritage and ethnic behaviors which have transcended geographical, political, linguistic, and theological boundaries, and yet are still genuinely and distinctively Chinese. Also, because this Chinese heritage is my background, and I am a pastor ministering in a Caucasian mainline Protestant church in suburban Vancouver, Canada, I do not presume to speak on behalf of all Chinese Christians in all of Canada and of United States. There are numerous Christian traditions and various geographical adaptations within the so called "North American context". Again, the purpose of this paper is not to focus on a specific location or Christian group, but to trace the general connection between theological education and the Chinese cultural heritage. I am keenly aware that I am a first generation male Chinese Canadian writing from a mainline Christian tradition (Lutheran). I am committed to bringing understanding and respect to various cultural practices and theological convictions in this culturally and religiously pluralistic society. My biases will be obvious.

Research on the Chinese conception of education and psychology is a fairly recent interest. In this paper, I draw heavily on research findings from the disciplines of communication, education, and psychology, and from social scientists such as Michael Bond, Ge Gao, Stella Ting-Toomey and Daniel Pratt. After explaining the cultural heritage, Chinese conceptions of teaching and learning, and the characteristics of Chinese seminarians, I will briefly highlight some of the issues in contemporary North American discussions of theological education. At the end of the paper, I will discuss some implications for the education of Chinese students in North American seminaries.

Chinese Cultural Heritage

What makes Chinese societies 'Chinese' (whether from China, Taiwan, and Singapore) is the Confucian heritage which they all share. Even though these countries have gone through or are in the process of modernization and of westernization, Confucian values and ethics continue to be the chief driving force in the family, human relationships, and education. One might argue whether any con-

temporary Chinese societies can be characterized as 'Confucian'; and yet, it would be troublesome to imagine any Chinese society without its Confucian heritage. The Confucian legacy is not a rigid belief system, but a set of guiding social directives for the conduct of familial and extra-familial relationships. It forms the very core of how Chinese approach the issue of education.¹

Most Chinese values and ethics can be traced back to Confucius. He is one of the most influential ancient Chinese thinkers and the impact of his thinking is far beyond his time. Born in 551 B.C. in Shantung, China, a son of an aristocratic family, his aspiration was to be a politician. However, after realizing that his striving for social reform would be unproductive if not a failure, at approximately fifty years of age he decided to change his life direction and spent the next twenty-three years in teaching and in editing books.²

Under Confucian influence, the Chinese maintain a profound respect for education. Confucius' view of education focused on the practical concerns of society. Education was not intended merely for personal advancement. Although Confucius' teaching emphasized personal character development, his aim was to establish a just society through preparing moral government officials.³ In order to have a good government, it is necessary to produce a group of people who have a good education, high moral standards, and the ability to lead the masses with personal integrity. This is well illustrated in the Confucian dictum that "those who labor with their brains should govern those who labor with their brawn." The fact that the Chinese view academic success as the main vehicle toward true prosperity in life explains why North American universities are filled with the offspring of Chinese immigrants.

Traditionally, Chinese view teachers as among the five categories of being which should be adored by society. These categories are: the God of Heaven, the God of the Earth, the emperor, parents and the teacher.⁴ Such understanding could be translated into five principal relationships, which are: ruler and subject; father and son or daughter; husband and wife; older brother or sister and younger brother or sister; and friend and friend. Depending on where one stands, one has a certain role and responsibility to practice. Being a teacher in the Chinese context means having authority and respect. There is no need to earn the students' respect as in the western

understanding of honor. Rather, respect is given to anyone for the simple reason that that person is standing on a "higher ground". This hierarchical understanding of relationships positively forces people to gain the sense of their role and assume responsibility. For example, the Chinese will punish an older child for the misbehavior of a younger, and that is not seen as an injustice because the older sibling has responsibility for guiding the behavior of the younger. In turn, the younger child has the responsibility of following the guidance of the older child. When the younger sibling misbehaves, the older child is charged with setting a moral standard and demonstrating benevolence toward his or her younger siblings. If both participants in the relationship respect their responsibilities, peace and harmony are assured.

Confucius expected his students to exhibit complete obedience and to foster a father and son kind of relationship (no women were allowed to participate in traditional Chinese education). The goal is to generate societal righteousness, not individual freedom.⁵ Chinese societies traditionally emphasize the right of the community more than individual rights. In terms of Chinese education, the focus is to develop the "public" self. As Chu points out, a male Chinese would view himself as a son, a brother, a husband, a father, but hardly as himself.⁶

For centuries, the Four Books and Five Classics formed the basic curriculum in schools and heavy stress was placed on memorization of these texts as a means of attaining success.⁷ It is not an exaggeration to argue that the most significant characteristics of traditional Chinese education were absolute obedience to the teacher and strict memorization. A tremendous expectation was put on conforming to the status quo as the social norm for all aspects of life. For example, in *The Analects of Confucius*, we read: "The Master said: 'At home, a young man must respect his parents, abroad, he must respect his elders. He should talk little, but with good faith; love all people, but associate with the virtuous.'"⁸

Chinese learners are not encouraged to exhibit verbal expressions in class since not just anyone is entitled to speak. Only with the invitation or approval of teachers are learners allowed to speak. This is based on their respect for the teacher: they may feel that asking questions suggests that the teacher did not teach the subject well

enough. By speaking out, they may be perceived as assuming authority comparable to that of the teacher. As a result, 'conversation' or dialogue is never a tool of teaching and learning in the Chinese context and students are not educated to participate verbally. Harsh punishment, probably by shaming or physical punishment, will be used if students violate this rule. Furthermore, a Chinese teacher would devote much time to academic activities and imparting information, and much less time to small group or individual activities.⁹

The Chinese respect scholars and teachers: they pay special courtesies to scholars and specialists and look to them for guidance in personal and in public affairs.¹⁰ In terms of education, students are constantly looking to their teachers for challenging lectures and ideas. A Chinese student evaluates a teacher or a course not at the end of the term by filling out a form; rather, the teacher is evaluated at the time he or she delivers the material.¹¹ A good teacher is one who can deliver the material in an organized lecture and has the ability to stimulate insights. On the other hand, a good student is one who patiently and quietly listens to the teacher's material. Traditional Chinese State examinations were highly competitive. For the Chinese believe that "on one mountain, there cannot be two tigers." The pressure to succeed was intense. No student would jeopardize their chances by disrupting this hierarchical understanding since "haughtiness brings ruin, humility brings benefits". That might be the reason why Chinese immigrant students never feel completely at ease when they are invited to engage in a verbal conversation with the class. It confuses their understanding of who is in charge.

It is commonly known that Chinese cultural and ethical values have a lot to do with filial piety, family loyalty, and duty. Since parents are also one of the five categories of being who should be adored by society, obedience to parents is also observed. Home and school are closely related. School is considered the extension of parental rule.¹² Unlike the West, where there is often a mismatch between what is expected of children at home and what is expected of them in school, there is great consistency between home and school in the expectations and relationships that govern children's behavior in China.

There are similar disciplinary methods used by parents and teachers. Common disciplinary methods are scolding, spanking, and

shaming. Chinese children acquire the 'respect the superior' rule at a very early age. Every child will know: If a superior is present, one should respect and obey. Since the teacher is considered the surrogate father, or emperor, obedience to the teacher is the same as obedience to father or emperor in terms of attitude.¹³ The result is that Chinese children develop a keen understanding of what are acceptable behaviors. Yang's research finds that Chinese mothers seem to teach the children what not to do more than American mothers. That is to say that Chinese children need to observe more rules than the Americans.¹⁴ Observing rules is the key aspect of the moral responsibility of all Chinese and it is rooted in the Chinese understanding of heaven and human relationships.¹⁵

Such findings further reinforce the common understanding that there are fundamental differences in the goal of child rearing. For westerners, the goal of bringing up a child is to train the child to be independent. However, for the Chinese it is just the opposite. For many Chinese the goal of child rearing is to build up an intense emotional closeness within the family.¹⁶ Within Confucian thought, the individual is a developing part of a continuing family lineage. It is a progressive continuity of the specific ancestry of one's family; each individual is part of an ethnic continuity and is defined within those relationships. As mentioned above, the relationship between teacher and learner is more or less similar to that of father and son (or daughter); the reciprocal roles and responsibilities of teacher and learner are a reflection of the respect for hierarchy and authority in Chinese society.

The Chinese conduct their lives by distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, and also between the public and the private realm. Martin Schoenhals, a western teacher who conducted research in China, recorded a common scenario in which his Chinese friends often sit around in a small group to complain and criticize their superiors in private, but less often in public.¹⁷ Publicly criticizing the superior would disrupt the hierarchical understanding of relationships. And an inability to make the distinction between insider or outsider in conversation would lead to the loss of face. No matter who loses face, it is not a socially favorable scenario.

The issue of face saving is particularly important to the Chinese, even though all cultures have some concern with this. Chinese often

speak of "losing face", which means to humiliate by exposing someone as incompetent. Public humiliation is the most common means of losing face. Face, or *Mian Zi*, in the Chinese context is both an internal and an external matter. It is internal because it is considered the innermost core of the human being, and to lose face is close to losing one's self. The consequence is that it deeply hurts the inner core of the self. There is no other more damaging condemnation to a Chinese person's personal integrity and moral character than to say "you have no face" and for this to be revealed in public. Such an accusation or comment is also an external matter since it pushes a person outside the society and that person will lose status and respect from the larger society.¹⁸ Therefore, there is a strong desire to protect one's face. Often, it leads to a style of communication which is strategically unassertive and proceeds in an indirect manner, leaving room for negotiation in the future or in private.¹⁹ It unmistakably leads the Chinese to become more passive in terms of education, human relationships and social justice. Furthermore, such fear of being rejected and hurt becomes the crucial medium for social control. That means, being guided by the desire for more *Mian Zi*, Chinese are more prompted to say "yes" to a request where "no" should be the true response, and vice versa. It is commonly known that Chinese persons are more sensitive to shame than to guilt.²⁰

As mentioned above, educational evaluation in the Chinese context is not impersonal, as in filling out a form at the end of the term; rather, it takes place immediately in the daily classroom activities. It is common among the Chinese that if someone does or says something considered wrong, some form of public humiliation, mostly by laughing, will occur. The person being laughed at is losing face and the person's ego is degraded. Therefore, it is no surprise to learn that a Chinese person's self-esteem is greatly influenced by the remarks of others.²¹

In terms of education, a Chinese student will not easily offer his or her opinion before the issue has been seriously thought through. Even if the learners have some questions in mind or got confused by the lecture, the learners would easily keep the question to themselves or approach the teacher in private after the class is dismissed. In order to avoid possible public humiliation, a Chinese student usually feels comfortable as a passive learner. That might also be the reason

why Chinese are very reluctant to speak with strangers.²²

Chinese Conceptions Of Learning And Teaching

The following is based on Pratt's article "Chinese Conceptions of Learning and Teaching: A Westerner's Attempt at Understanding".²³ This article gives us scholarly research data on the Chinese understanding of teaching and learning. Daniel Pratt, a professor of Adult Education at the University of British Columbia, has done extensive research on the Chinese conception of education both in Asia and in North America. In 1988, he interviewed 38 Chinese adult educators in 12 cities within China. The average age of all participants was 34 (range 22-55) with women, on average, nine years younger than the men. There were slightly more women than men.

In his research, Pratt summarizes four conceptions of learning, and three conceptions of teaching, among the Chinese.

Learning as the acquisition of knowledge of skill from others (L1). This concept treats knowledge as a commodity that exists 'out there', and that can be acquired through a transfer of knowledge by knowledgeable persons. A learner is portrayed as a relatively unquestioning consumer of knowledge.

Learning as the fulfillment of responsibility to society (L2). This conception expresses the expected quality of commitment and belief. Learning is seen not just as acquiring information, but with a purpose—moral development and social contribution. It is a way of contributing to social advancement or responsibility.

Learning as a change in understanding of something external to self (L3). This conception emphasizes understanding. Learners are not just consumers of information, but processors who work towards a change in understanding.

Learning as a change in understanding of self (L4). This conception has an individualistic flavor which focuses on the self and moves the learner from the background to the foreground.

Teaching as the delivery of content (T1). This represents the traditional understanding of Chinese teachers as content experts. Teachers are expected to be knowledgeable in their field of expertise.

Very little concern is given to the differences between students or their motivation.

Teaching as the development of character (T2). There are two elements in this concept. First, there is a responsibility to deliver content, and secondly, an aspect of morality is attached to it. The teacher is seen as a 'model' in terms of content and morality.

Teaching as a particular type of relationship (T3). This conception focuses on the relationship between learner and teacher. It stresses the importance of friendship as the key to defining their role and function. It shifts from content delivery to character formation.²⁴

In Pratt's analysis, L1 and T1 are complementary roles for teachers and learners. This reflects the traditional understanding of teachers being content experts and students being passive listeners. The former is a provider and the latter is a consumer, and the commodity being targeted is knowledge. There is little interest in knowing individual learning styles or personal uniqueness regarding education. The teachers and their materials should not be challenged by the students and any hints of such behavior would be seen as both a violation of the social norm regarding roles and a disruption to the educational process.

L2 and T2 are also complementary roles. Participants in this conception raise their responsibility to society, and education is a means to contribute and to shape a better society. Moral character is important to both the teachers and the learners. Teachers are responsible for the delivery of content and also the development of character or morality in their students. Pratt argues that L1/T1 and L2/T2 are different only in terms of purpose. Teachers in the T2 conception are not only experts in content but are also exemplars, role models of moral character. It is consistent with long standing tradition that the Chinese view teachers as having the responsibility to develop moral character as well as intellectual competency in their students.

Pratt argues that L3, L4 and T3 appear to be less obviously connected with the cultural, social, political and economic situation in China. He provides three possible explanations. First, he might have mislabeled the respondents' data. Second, they are exceptions which are not commonly known to 'outsiders'. Third, after several decades

of having an open door to the world, China has been greatly influenced by outside forces and has begun importing 'western' ways. These changes are brought about by exchange students, returned visa students, and the increasing accessibility of western literatures.²⁵

Pratt's research conveys the idea that China is changing and Chinese students have gained more perspectives regarding education. However, the fundamental conceptions of Chinese education such as respecting teachers, passive listening to lecture, and building personal character are still strong among the Chinese.

Chinese Seminarians - Who Are They?

Chinese Christians in Canada are dominated by immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, with a growing number of Chinese coming from mainland China.²⁶ They represent the Third Phase of Chinese immigrants from Asia which bring along with them the professional skills and financial ability to establish themselves in Canada.²⁷ Depending on what denomination they come from, they might or might not be able to find the same denomination in Canada. However, no matter what denomination they belong to, Canadian Chinese churches are predominantly Evangelical in theology and in practice.

For example, in western Canada, the number of Chinese Evangelicals has outnumbered the Chinese mainline churches. In Greater Vancouver, British Columbia, there are about 99 Chinese churches; however, only 13 are considered mainline.²⁸ In the province of Alberta, of the 35 Chinese churches, only 7 are considered mainline. In the whole province of Saskatchewan, out of 7 Chinese churches, only the Chinese United Church in Moose Jaw is considered mainline. The Chinese Mennonite Churches in Saskatoon and in Regina are historical denominations in name; however, the pastors who are leading them are actually Evangelicals. Due to the conservative nature of Chinese culture mentioned in the beginning of this paper [e.g, hierarchical, conservative, and focusing on the inner self], the majority of Chinese churches find Evangelicalism a more favorable theological expression of Christianity. When they see the Christian faith through the predisposed Chinese cultural lenses (which they might not be aware of), Chinese Christians express a strong

affinity for pietistic spirituality, are deeply interested in a Billy Graham version of evangelism and mission, and demand strict moral personal conduct. As a result, the differences between mainline and Evangelicals are less obvious and less divisive among the Chinese churches than among Caucasian churches.

Some of the Chinese seminarians attending North American seminaries come directly from the Chinese homelands, and some of them are landed immigrants who later become citizens. There is also a steady enrolment of second generation Chinese Christians. Most of them will stay to pastor the Chinese parishes and some of them will return to their home countries to teach or to pastor.

Furthermore, as Greer Ng points out, Chinese religious leaders (of any religion) are often regarded as deeply spiritual people of high moral integrity.²⁹ This, combined with the conservative pulse of Evangelicalism, means that Chinese seminarians are often looking for a seminary which can improve their theological thinking academically and at the same time heighten their religious experiences spiritually.³⁰ They often desire more practical linkage between theological thinking and practice. When they graduate and begin serving in the Chinese churches, the congregations look upon them as models and leaders in controversial issues as well as in spiritual life. Such expectation fits the conception of teaching and learning type L2/T2 as described by Pratt.

The focus on spiritual piety has been the emphasis of traditional Chinese theological education. However, for the past twenty years, significant numbers of Chinese theologians who graduated with doctoral degrees from North American and British theological institutions have raised the academic standards among Asian seminaries tremendously.³¹ There is evidence that the Asian seminaries have focused more on the scholastic side of theological training, and yet, regarding the Confucius cultural heritage, there is no hint that the pietistic focus as a basic theological training component is diminishing.

Contemporary North American Discussion Of Theological Education

Western education has been influenced by ancient Greek phi-

losophers such as Plato and Aristotle. In terms of theological education, many modern Protestant seminaries inherited the German model of education. However, when coming to North America, the conception of theological education was less influenced by the German scholarly model than by the American quest for freedom of inquiry as demonstrated by the Puritans.³² With the Revival movements of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Christian faith as influenced by religious revivalism and theological fundamentalism has swung toward the experiential. As a result, theological education began to depart from the emphasis on the study of theology to practical aspects like preaching, evangelism and individualistic spirituality. On the other hand, the mainline theological seminaries and the university related seminaries, influenced by the historical-grammatical-critical method of biblical interpretation, tend to be more liberal in terms of theology and biblical studies, and focus more on scholastic excellency.³³

Most Evangelical seminaries carry a revised version of Fundamentalism and continue to stress the importance of personal piety as part of theological training. Gordon Smith argues that theological training will be best supported by worship and prayer. Smith's idea of spirituality resembles the Roman Catholic model which focuses on prayer, fasting, meditation, retreat, and devotional reading of the Bible.³⁴ However, on the issue of spiritual formation, there is no consensus among theological educators about what that really means. As far as the practice of 'spirituality' is concerned, not all theologians agree whether it refers to psychological and moral development, theological praxis, or pietistic practices such as prayer and personal devotion.³⁵

Edward Farley's idea of recovering "*theologia*" as the essence of theological education has been frequently quoted and criticized among theological educators. In Farley's idea, the starting point of theological education is not the nature of ministry nor the mission of the church, but theology. This is the reflective aspect of theological education. He sees that theological education has been fragmented, has lacked coordination, and has separated each theological discipline into its own self-defined territory. In order to restore the unity of theology, it is necessary to go beyond the functional aspect of church ministry. Without such a recovery of "*theologia*", theological educa-

tion will never escape the perpetual enslavement to specialties.³⁶

Rebecca Chopp offers another way of thinking about theological education, which is one feminist's approach to theological scholarship. She mentions there has been a change in the student body, however, this change is often ignored. Contemporary seminaries' student bodies have more women than men, more second career people, and increasing numbers of ethnic students, yet they have not changed much in the way they operate. Chopp argues that the proper subject is the students, not the theological disciplines themselves. In the past, so many of women's experiences in life and in the church have not been the loci of theological scholarship. As a result, many women's experiences were dismissed, ignored and belittled within the traditional classroom.³⁷ Theological scholarship was largely determined by male theologians. Chopp argues that theological seminaries should be places for allowing women to name their experiences, and from there, we can develop "*ekkklesia*" as a way of theological scholarship. To Chopp, theology is a practice, not just an abstract theory of analysis and explanation. It is not enough to show mastery of prescribed content; the ability to engage in a process of dialogue with the content must be demonstrated. In Chopp's word, *ekkklesia* is a "manifestation of God...[which] provides spaces and discourses for lamentations."³⁸ In terms of the future of theological education, she says, "Change and transformation will occur when we find new ways of envisioning the educational process through the network of actual and emergent practices within theological education."³⁹

Implications

As we might have been aware, the essential characteristic of western theological education is the ability to think. However, the most essential traditional Chinese educational objective is to be (a moral person). The question is not whether to be or to think. Rather, it is how to conduct theological education based on our awareness of a cultural gap and to maintain the integrity of theological scholarship while at the same time remaining relevant to students. I draw the following implications based on four main sources: the Chinese cultural heritage; Rebecca Chopp's book, *Saving Work: Feminist Prac-*

tices of Theological Education; Jung Lee's article "Multicultural and Global Theological Scholarship: An Asian American Perspective", and Liberman's article, "Asian Student Perspectives on American University".

Jung Lee, responding to Don Browning's idea of strategic theological inquiry, argues that North American professors will not be able to educate Asian students effectively because they are preoccupied with western culture and tradition. No matter how many books the Asian students read about Plato, Aristotle, and Moses, an Asian student who was born overseas will never become an authentic westerner. He argues that the cultural gap that exists between the East and West is large enough for misunderstanding in theological scholarship. Therefore, Jung Lee suggests that North American seminaries should hire Asian theologians and offer courses in Asian theology and religions.⁴⁰ I agree with his recommendation that North American seminaries should considering hiring Asian theologians. Such a move would promote learning among the Asian students and also increase the cross cultural awareness of the professors. Seminaries which have Asian professors will greatly improve their profile among the Asian communities and eventually attract more Asian students.

However, it might be argued that if we follow Jung Lee's argument, only westerners should teach westerners and Asians should teach Asians. Such a proposition could imply that there is no need for cross-cultural learning and teaching. Even if one tries, it is likely a waste of time. He may be right by saying "western scholars do not share the historical traditions that have shaped the Asian way of thinking",⁴¹ however, we should not limit their ability in attempting to understand the Asian way of life. In an increasingly pluralistic century, the East and West can no longer afford to live unaffected by others. Through time, the East will be somewhat westernized and the West will be somewhat easternized. Therefore, I would argue that those seminaries which are unable to hire Asian scholars should create an Asian friendly environment for Asians students to learn. There are enough Asian students who want to pick up western ways of thinking, but at the same time they want their western professors to understand that they are not westerners. The kind of inquiry Asian students are interested in might seem uninteresting to western pro-

fessors. To have passion for the subject is essential for western professors, although perhaps it is not so for Asian students always.

To treat Chinese seminarians differently is not a betrayal of theological scholarship. Lee argues that theological seminaries need a "mosaic of different standards of theological scholarship if we want our theological education to become truly multicultural and globally oriented."⁴² This is just another way to say that the school needs to focus on the diversity of students' abilities and backgrounds. Chopp's book affirms this also. In the past, she says, theological scholarship has been defined by male scholars regardless of the experiences of women. The assumption was that gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, and experiences in life have no effect on what should be learned and how it is learned. Also, there was no question about who should set the agenda for learning. The result was that theological scholarship was defined as meeting the standard set out by male theologians and their idea of excellency. However, recently much has been said about the diversity of learning styles and turning the focus from *content* to the *students*. To create an Asian friendly atmosphere is to recognize that academic excellency cannot be judged irrespective of students' backgrounds. Lee argues: "From an Asian perspective, what seems to be clear argumentation may not be clear, and what seems to be philosophical consistency may not be consistent, because Asian thought processes are different. It is wrong to presume that everyone thinks the same way."⁴³

In terms of curriculum, the design of courses should attempt to minimize the gap between the academic and the practical. However, it is inevitable that some courses will be more oriented toward critical thinking, and some more oriented toward practical ministry. It takes creativity to bring the two together in all classes. While North American educators debate the purpose of theological education, they have never abandoned the idea that in some way theological education is for the church. Chinese seminarians have a deep commitment to the service of the church and to the spiritual nourishment of faith. Paying attention to these needs will greatly benefit their training in North American seminaries.⁴⁴

There is a general understanding that a good theological school employs different styles of teaching.⁴⁵ While most theological professors use lectures as the dominant means of teaching, it is only

wise to use a variety of methods in teaching. One might easily assume that because of the cultural heritage of the Chinese students, they might prefer lectures and an authoritarian style of teaching. However, Liberman's research finds something worth looking at regarding the use of discussion among Asians.

Liberman's research is an extended period of interviews with the Asian students at the University of Oregon. He found that those students who are influenced by the Confucian culture applaud the flexibility of the American system of education and the freedom to ask questions even to the point of challenging the professor's viewpoints. It is revealing that even though the American style of learning is somewhat foreign to these Asian students, it is such freedom that they enjoy the most when they come over to study in North America. In other words, the cultural adjustment that they need to struggle with, in a sense, does not hinder them to appreciate the value of verbal expression and freedom of inquiry. However, what these Asian students do not like is the extreme individualism exhibited by the classmates born in America when they talk. They find that those Americans are interested in nothing but "Me-ism", and the Chinese accuse them of talking too much, of sometimes losing the focus in verbalizing, occasionally being inconsistent, and lacking in respect for the professors. Those Americans might be eager to engage in a dialogue with the professors, but they have not even read the assigned readings. These Americans often speak without proper preparation and/or understanding of the issue.⁴⁶ Therefore, as these Asian students point out, there is no dialogue but meaningless talk! In another word, Asian students refrain from joining in because they perceive the verbal activity is wasting their time. Hence, if one finds an Asian student lacking in participation, no one should ever conclude such behavior means lack of interest in the educational process. Liberman challenges North American teachers to think creatively regarding freedom of speech and academic excellency when he asks, "whether there is an alternative to expressive individualism that is capable of preserving critical thinking in its most creative and democratic forms while avoiding the arrogance and caprice that some of the Asian students have suggested detract from the educational process."⁴⁷

Therefore, if discussion is to be used, it is good to put Chinese

students in a smaller group. In a smaller group setting, they are more likely to participate than in a larger group. However, whether it is in a small group or in a large group, Chinese students will be more likely to speak up when they are given a right to speak. It could be done by the invitation of the teacher, or when everybody is given a chance to express themselves and it is their turn to participate. They often need approval or a platform from the class to speak. Furthermore, none should expect Chinese students to enjoy active participation by speaking spontaneously (even though there might be exceptions). It is always wise to give assigned readings in the previous class so that they have some knowledge about the topic to be discussed.

Because of their cultural influences (L2/T2), Chinese students always look at the teacher as a model, an example, and a lot of respect is shown to them. North American professors might not be totally comfortable with this expectation and would like to operate more in a "friendship" mode.⁴⁸ It is acceptable for North American professors to continue their ways of teacher-student relationship because that is the way Chinese students love it. That is what the Chinese students believe they missed in their former years of education! The authoritarian style of teacher-student relationship is a product of the Chinese social structure, where the context is different, but Chinese students have little problem adjusting themselves in a new setting. However, no matter how much the Chinese students enjoy the "friendship" with the professors, in their minds the professors are always someone other than friends. They are always regarded as from a different class and the teachers' ways of life, habits, and opinions usually have significant impact on their personal being. In that respect, it is scary to be a teacher for the Chinese!

In terms of actual teaching, we need to keep in mind that Chinese people are a practical people and their ways of thinking are more pragmatic and oriented to the concrete. Linguistically, the Chinese lack vocabularies that express abstract thinking and emotions. Emotionally, Chinese do not speak of their feelings. If Gao and Ting-Toomey are right, to the Chinese, "feelings are not to be spoken but to be sensed and discerned".⁴⁹ For this reason, it is difficult for the Chinese to learn the westerner's style of pastoral care. For example, the question, "How do you feel?" is a western way of

expressing care, not the Chinese way. A literal translation of this question does not sound caring to the Chinese ears. Rather, the usual Chinese opening greeting is "Have you eaten yet?" Because the pastoral caregiver will be considered as an outsider according to Chinese culture, the patient is not going to disclose his or her feelings verbally. Let us further consider teaching Chinese students. In terms of learning abstract concepts, Chinese students are always looking for examples and illustrations. It is wise for the teacher to provide an example or story after presenting a complicated concept. Like the people of biblical times, the Chinese find abstract material easier to learn if it is communicated through a story. My Caucasian friend reminds me this is also true for westerners.

Some consideration should be given to the fact that English is their second language. Most Chinese seminarians try very hard to write as clearly as possible using correct grammar. However, it does not take long to distinguish the writing style of Caucasian and Chinese students. For example, the vocabulary and the phrases they use in most cases are very distinct. I recall that my theology professor in one class said that he did not want us to write down our names on the title page of our papers. He just wanted us to write our student numbers. That way, he had no idea who had written each paper and as a result, the grading would be fairer. Looking back, I would say this is another example of injustice. He was totally committed to content and to theological scholarship only, not to his students. Such an approach in teaching raises serious questions: Can he really be fair in grading by disregarding who wrote the assignment? Furthermore, by comparing the style of the writing, can he really ignore who wrote it? He is attempting to be fair, but to what and to whom?

The Chinese educational emphasis is on memorization first before critical thinking.⁵⁰ To Chinese students, all learning starts with memorization, then understanding and application, before questioning or criticizing. In seminary, most professors would say that the goal of the course is critical thinking, not memorization for tests. However, the way they teach often discourages such a noble idea. Even though memorization does not occupy a chief function in seminary courses, Chinese students see no rush to critical thinking or problem solving before the learners have demonstrated mastery of

basic knowledge. This mode of learning takes time. That means, teachers of Chinese students need to be patient. A semester course period often is too short a period of time for Chinese students to absorb everything which has been taught and to show mastery of the subject. Therefore, no mistaken judgment should be made by regarding them as lazy, slow, unintelligent, or unfit for higher education. To apply Chopp's thesis, to first understand your students and to appreciate the variations among them is the most fundamental step in teaching. Uniformity in terms of content, delivery style, scholarly expectation, and grading policy is probably not desirable for theological schools, now and in the future.

Conclusion

Awareness of cultural differences is a prerequisite for any kind of teaching and such understanding could lead to a favorable atmosphere for learning and for change. The attitude to learning of Chinese seminarians who are born overseas is influenced by the traditional Chinese cultural view of education, which is more passive and reserved in terms of learning and more authoritarian and hierarchical in terms of teacher-student relationships. North American theological seminaries have a tendency to lean toward the research-scholastic type of education but Chinese Christians lean more toward spiritual and personal development. A healthy balance of the two will be beneficial to the well being of Chinese seminarians as well as the churches they will be serving. The gap between East and West used to be dramatic. However, with the approach of the next millenium, such a gap will only become less and less so. There will be more and more Asian Christians studying in North American theological schools. To foster an Asian friendly learning environment is just as important as offering Asian theology and religious culture courses. For those seminaries which are interested in global theological education, Asian spirituality and culture has much to offer to/for articulating Christian faith in the post Constantinian era.

Finally, most seminary professors have doctoral level training in their respective fields, for example: theology, biblical studies, church history and so on. Often they have little training in the concept of teaching and learning in higher education. The basic idea is that if

one knows the content well enough, one is able to teach that subject. However, such an idea has been proven wrong. It is a myth. It is no secret that the ability to master content and the ability to teach such content are two different matters. Moreover, to teach the way we were taught undermines the necessity of innovative and creative teaching. Also, it shows indifference toward changes in the student body. Therefore, it is wise for a seminary to provide regular Professional Development Seminars for professors regarding adult education, teaching and learning concepts and awareness of cultural differences. How to dig out the best from the students in light of their variety of experiences and backgrounds is the heart of all teaching. And it is even more so when teaching students who have a different cultural heritage.

Notes

- ¹ Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Psychological Perspectives of Chinese Interpersonal Morality," in C.-A. Seyschab, A. Sievers, S. Synkiewicz, (eds.) *Society, Culture, and Patterns of Behaviour* (Bonn: Horlemann, 1990) 15.
- ² Gung-Hsing Wang, *The Chinese Mind* (New York: The John Day Company, 1946) 12-13.
- ³ Zhou Nanzhao, "Historical Contexts of Education Reforms in Present-Day China," *Interchange*, Vol. 19 (1988) 8-9. Also see H. G. Creel, *Confucian and the China Way* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1949) 76.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Zhu Weizheng, "Confucius and Traditional Chinese Education: An Assessment," in Ruth Hayhoe, ed., *Education and Modernization: The Chinese Experience* (Exeter: BPC Wheatons Ltd., 1992) 9.
- ⁶ G.C. Chu, "The Changing Concepts of Self in Contemporary China." In A. J. Marsella, G. Devos, & F. L. K. Hse, eds, *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (New York: Tavistock, 1985) 252-277, as quoted in Ge Gao, "Self and Other: A Chinese Perspective on Interpersonal Relationships," in William Gudykunst and Stella, Ting-Tommey, eds., *Communication in Personal Relationships Across Cultures* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996) 81-101.
- ⁷ Nanzhao, 9.

- ⁸ Simon Leys, translator and notes, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) 4.
- ⁹ Wang, 115.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Schoenhals, *The Paradox of Power in a People's Republic of China Middle School* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993) 96.
- ¹² Ge, Gao, "Self and Other: A Chinese Perspective on Interpersonal Relationships," in William B. Gudykunst, Stella Ting-Tommey, Tsukasa Nishida, eds., *Communication in Personal Relationship Across Cultures* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996) 86.
- ¹³ Micheal H. Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 30.
- ¹⁴ Kuo-Shu Yang, "Chinese Personality and its Change," in Michael H. Bond, ed., *The Psychology of the Chinese People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 122.
- ¹⁵ The foundation of Chinese pietistic tradition is the concept of *li*. It finds its root in the ancient Chinese understanding of heaven or of the cosmos as an orderly system. Such a governing force keeps the universe in place and in harmony. Therefore, to observe *li*, the code of behaviour, will be the same in human relationships. *Li* intends to produce and conserve harmonious life. See Philip H. Towner, "The Shape and Motive of Piety in Chinese Religious Tradition and the Biblical Tradition, *Li* and *Eusebeia*," *Jian Dao* 5 (1996) 95-126.
- ¹⁶ Liberman, "Asian Student Perspectives on American University Instruction," in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 18 (1994) 186.
- ¹⁷ Schoenhals, 28.
- ¹⁸ Gao, 95.
- ¹⁹ Ge Gao and Stella Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Effectively with the Chinese*, William B. Gudykunst and Stella Ting-Toomey, eds., *Communicating Effectively in Multicultural Contexts Series*, no. 5 (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998) 63.
- ²⁰ See Young Gwen You, "Shame and Guilt Mechanisms in East Asian Culture," *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, Vol. 51 (1997) 57-64.
- ²¹ Gao, 95.
- ²² Michael H. Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights From Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 48-52.

- 23 Daniel Pratt, "Chinese Conceptions of Learning and Teaching: A Westerner's Attempt at Understanding," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (1992) 301-318.
- 24 Ibid., 308-314.
- 25 Ibid., 315-317.
- 26 After July 1, 1997, Hong Kong became part of mainland China. I named Hong Kong and China separately solely because the lifestyle, economic situation, and Christian culture are significantly different. The Chinese Christian culture in Canada is dominated by Chinese Christians from Hong Kong, not from mainland China.
- 27 Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, "Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education," in Barbara Wikerson, ed., *Multicultural Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1997) 192-197. Ng identifies three phases of Asian immigration: First, from mid-1880 to 1964. These Chinese were cheap laborers trying to make a fortune. Second, from 1965-85. They were the result of U.S. and Canadian governments passing of legislation concerning immigration policy. Third, the period since 1985. The economic status of these immigrants is the highest ever.
- 28 The statistic being quoted here is the list as printed in the Chinese religious newspaper, *Herald Monthly*, Vol. 11, no. 5, 1998.
- 29 Greer Ng, 215.
- 30 Spirituality in the Chinese context means prayer, devotional reading of the Bible, retreat, and personal closeness to God.
- 31 Tan Che Bin, "Chinese Protestant Theological Education in the Diaspora Since 1949," *Missiology: An International Review* 13 (1985) 297-307. Tan mentions that theological training of the earlier Chinese seminaries was quite anti-intellectual and the focus had been to train a person to do everything in ministry.
- 32 Richard W. Solberg, "What can the Lutheran Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?" in Richard T. Hughes, and William B. Adrian, eds., *Models for Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997) 72-73.
- 33 Philip S. Keane, and Melaure A. May, "What is the Character of Teaching, Learning, and the Scholarly Task in the Good Theological School?" *Theological Education*, Vol. 30, no.2 (1994) 36.
- 34 See Gordon T. Smith, "Spiritual Formation in the Academy: A Unifying Model," *Theological Education*, Vol. 33, no. 1 (1996) 83-91.

- ³⁵ See Donald Senior, and Timothy Weber, "What is the Character of Curriculum, Formation, and Cultivation of Ministerial Leadership in the Good Theological School?" *Theological Education*, Vol. 30, no. 2 (1994) 17-33.
- ³⁶ See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Thinking Theologically about Theological Education," in Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis, and Colin Crowders, eds., *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) 318-320.
- ³⁷ Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995) 19-36.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 75.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 111.
- ⁴⁰ Jung Young Lee, "Multicultural and Global Theological Scholarship: An Asian American Perspective," *Theological Education*, Vol. 32, no. 1 (1995) 44-48.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 49.
- ⁴² Ibid., 46.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 52.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.
- ⁴⁵ Philip S. Keane, and Melaure A. May, "What is the Character of Teaching, Learning, and the Scholarly Task in the Good Theological School?" *Theological Education*, Vol. 30, no.2 (1994) 35-44. It is very difficulty to define what is a good theological seminary. Depending on who defines and for whom it is being defined, it varies as much as the branches of theology.
- ⁴⁶ Kenneth Liberman, "Asian Student Perspectives on American University," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (1994) 181-186.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 191.
- ⁴⁸ Because of the sensitive issue of sexual harassment, what constitutes a proper teacher-student relationship has been greatly debated. In terms of power, teachers and students are not equal. For effective education to be carried out, such inequality is necessary. However, Chinese students are more likely to benefit from a more open style of education and an alternative approach to education.
- ⁴⁹ Gao and Ting-Toomey, 26.

- ⁵⁰ There is a general misconception regarding the Chinese emphasis on memorization as an example of rote learning, or as a superficial approach. However, the intention of memorization is to seek deeper understanding. Chinese education does not stop at memorization, but is a vehicle toward critical thinking. See Lyn Gow, John Balla, David Kember, and Kit Tai Hau, "The Learning Approaches of Chinese People: A Function of Socialization Processes and the Context of Learning?" in Michael H. Bond, ed., *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 109-123.