

The case for a Chinese methodology in educational research

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Received 30 November 2018
Revised 21 December 2018
Accepted 26 April 2019

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to recover the identity of Chinese intellectual discourse, arguing for the necessity of a Chinese methodology in educational research to be constructed on the basis of the Chinese philosophical traditions and the Chinese social norms for the aim of solving Chinese educational issues within the Chinese cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is a theoretical paper, arguing for the ontological, epistemological and methodological basis for a Chinese methodology in educational research.

Findings – The major ontological issue of Chinese social and educational research, also the ultimate goal of the Chinese governance, is social harmony through harmonious personal relationships. The key to social harmony has been seen in the Chinese philosophical tradition as residing in people's personal morality and obligation, which constitutes the epistemology of Chinese research. And the golden mean of moderation by synthesizing and balancing the dualist extremes of views and actions should be adopted as the methodological paradigm to researching social and educational issues in China.

Practical implications – The elaboration of these three entities holds promises in the construction of the Chinese methodological system on Chinese social terms and merits.

Originality/value – The author has long sensed that the extensive methodological borrowing from the West by Chinese scholars in educational research might be problematic, given the vast structural differences in the two social worlds that the author and other scholars have observed. A paper in English to argue for the necessity of constructing a uniquely Chinese methodology for educational research in China is an absolute necessity.

Keywords Methodology, Educational research, Chinese society, Chinese philosophy

Paper type Research paper

I have long sensed that the extensive methodological borrowing from the West by Chinese scholars in educational research might be problematic, given the vast structural differences in the two social worlds that I and other scholars have observed. And I have long hoped to write a paper in English to argue for the necessity of constructing a uniquely Chinese methodology for educational research in China. However, at the same time, I have feared that it might be too massive and controversial task to take on as a young scholar. Eventually, I have decided to take the safe approach of focusing on my own methodological journey and my reflections on this journey in the style of an autobiography. It is my hope that my personal methodological struggle as a young educational researcher from China would serve as a “brick tossed to invite the jade” (a Chinese idiom) in discussions on the necessity for a Chinese methodology for educational research and what such a methodology might possibly look like.

Training in Western methodologies

I was born onto a small farm in Northeastern China, one year before Chairman Mao passed, thus ending the 10-year Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). I was raised and educated in Mainland China, and I received my research training at one of the best institutions of educational research in Beijing, graduating with a PhD in Education in 2011. My area of research was originally in Foreign Language Education and Teacher Education, and in particular, teachers' lived experiences in China's curriculum change in the new century



(see Liu and Wang, 2019). Before my research training in graduate school, I perceived research (educational research included) exclusively as experimental research that involves large samples and complex statistical analysis. In my PhD program, I was exposed, in a rather systematic manner, to qualitative research as an alternative approach to the traditional quantitative approach. This to me was a liberating experience, as I had long felt that research was only for people with strong math and statistical training.

I (and other fellow PhD students in Beijing) read Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* in a religious way to guide our understanding of qualitative research as a new paradigm in social and educational research. I also read works of other methodologists in my field of Foreign Language Education, such as Nunan's (1992) *Research Methods in Language Teaching* and Holliday's (2002) *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research*. I learned from these works that underpinning quantitative research is the positivistic notion that there are hard universal truths in teaching and learning effectiveness and efficiency out there, and educational researchers' job is to uncover such universal solutions to classroom problems and prescribe them to classroom practitioners. Underlying qualitative research, however, is a fundamentally different philosophical belief that knowledge is tentative and contingent upon context, rather than absolute. Educational research is a constructive process, and research outcomes derived in one context may not be applicable to other contexts removed in time and space.

I took much interest in reading Creswell's (2007) five traditions/approaches to qualitative research: narrative studies, phenomenology, ethnography, grounding theory and case studies, and I decided on using ethnography as the methodology for my research project to explore the lived experiences of a group of English teachers in a Beijing senior high school (as a culture sharing group) with regard to the communicative pedagogy in language teaching suggested in the new national English curriculum (see Liu and Wang, 2019). I was convinced that ethnography, given its emic and inductive nature, is the best methodology to collect naturalistic data, emerging from ground up. I was also interested in van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach to ongoing meaning making in the process of data analysis. According to van Manen (1990), human science research is a form of writing, as we come to know what we know in this dialectical process of constructing text (a body of knowledge). In addition, I was intrigued by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry, particularly as a holistic way of collecting and presenting research data as stories. I incorporated all these methodological ideas in my research and everything seemed to work well.

Awakening for Chinese methodology

Upon the completion of my PhD program in Beijing, a postdoc opportunity brought me to Canada in 2011. The removal from my home soil and culture has given me the much needed perspective to reflect on China, Chinese society and Chinese educational issues, things that I would have taken for granted if I had not left. The cross-cultural experience has increased my sense of the Chinese identity and my desire to understand my home culture, and I began to read Chinese scholars who wrote about Chinese culture in comparison with the West, including Gu Hongming (1915), Lin Yutang (1935), Fei Xiaotong (1947), Fung Yulan (1948) and Laurence C. Wu (1986). All these works pointed to some key differences in Chinese philosophy and culture from Western philosophical traditions that gave rise to the Western methodologies. Upon reflection, I came to the alarming realization that during my PhD work in Beijing, I did not refer to a single Chinese methodologist. What is more alarming is that all PhD students around me seem to have done the same as I did. The only methodological book in Chinese, read and referenced by most Chinese PhD students around me, is Chen Xiangming (2006), who is a Harvard returnee with a PhD in Education and whose book introduced all major traditions and approaches of qualitative research to the Chinese audience.

I began to wonder: does not the unique Chinese philosophical tradition and thought system justify and even require a unique Chinese methodology to be used in the Chinese cultural context and to solve Chinese educational problems? Some Canadian scholars referred me to Linda Smith's (2012) "Decolonizing Methodologies," which has been considered a trailblazing work that aimed to break away from the Western methodological hegemony. While reading Smith (2012), I could not help but wonder: if there was to be a unique Chinese methodology, what would be its ontological and epistemological foundations based purely out of the Chinese philosophical tradition? Fung Yulan, one of the best known Chinese philosophers, finished his PhD in Columbia University under John Dewey's supervision in the 1930s, and he was the first Chinese philosopher who systematically introduced Chinese philosophy to the West in English (Fung, 1948). He used the same Western terminologies, such as "ontology," "epistemology" and "methodology" in discussing Chinese philosophical issues. Though these philosophical terminologies may not fit into the Chinese philosophical traditions perfectly, they might be the only starting point to engage with Western thoughts and then to differentiate from them.

In 2012, I came across Wu's (2011) article on the issue of pedagogical discourse in China published on *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. According to Wu (2011), there have been several historical transformations of Chinese educational discourse that resulted in a gradual epistemological break with China's Confucian past. China's defeat in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860) created a concern over the superiority of Western culture. China's defeat in Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) further symbolized the backwardness of the Chinese traditional culture. The May 4th Movement of 1919 marked a more radical break when top scholars of China condemned Confucian culture as the major obstacle to modernity and called for a new culture in China based on the Western standards of science and democracy. The founding of the P.R. China in 1949 became the third wave of discontinuity with the traditional discourse when the Chinese knowledge system was rewritten into the single perspective of Marxism. As a result, the modern Chinese intellectual discourse is largely articulated in Westernized terms that have been normalized as the only legitimate discourse, so much so that, when people wish to affirm the traditional Chinese discourse, they must do so by showing how the Chinese world-views contained the seeds of Western style modernity (Wu, 2011).

But is this discursive Westernization problematic? Is not this a sign of the Chinese modernity that should be welcomed? According to Lin (1935) that I read in the same year, the Chinese culture has demonstrated resilience and stability throughout Chinese history due to the tight family network. According to Jaques (2012) (who came to speak at the Canadian university I was working at in 2013), much of what characterized the Chinese society in history remains strikingly true and evident today despite Mao's effort to sweep away Confucian traditions during the Cultural Revolution, and thus one key issue in China research in the Western world is the failure to understand the continuity between the current Chinese society and the long thread of Chinese history. The disconnection between the continuity of Chinese way of thinking/behavior and the alien methodological discourse borrowed from the West to describe it has resulted in the failure of the Chinese research community to "look at China on its own terms and merits" (Naisbitt and Naisbitt, 2010, p. 1).

The Chinese ontology

Chinese philosophy was developed on the basis of ontological, epistemological and metaphysical paradigms that differ from those of Western theoretical discourses (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018). What then is the major ontological concern for social and educational research in China in the first place? According to Gu (1915), the Chinese mind rebels against the idea of investigating matters beyond their experiences. They live in the present, not the past, not the future. The Chinese philosophical thinking, regardless of its

different schools, seems to be concerned “chiefly with society, and not with the universe; with the daily functions of human relations, not hell and heaven; with man’s present life, but not his life in a world to come” (Fung, 1948, p. 7). There are no stories of creation, and there is no mention of heaven or hell in Chinese philosophies (Fung, 1948). Fei (1947) also believes that the existence and non-existence of religion is a key difference in the social organizations in the West and China, a point we will focus on later.

After I came to Canada, I started going to Church on a regular basis for the first few years with the goal of exploring the role of Christianity in the Canadian society. There are a few messages I found recurring in the sermons: God was the creator; he died for us but resurrected; we need to follow him and his teachings so as to join him in heaven when we die. Away from church, I have not found “In God we trust” printed on Canadian currency, but I did find God in the lyrics in the Canadian national anthem: “God keep our land glorious and free.” More importantly, I found that the Constitution of Canada starts with “Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law.” From findings of the Canadian census, I learned that close to two-third of all Canadians declare Christianity as their religion (Statistics Canada, 2018). My conclusion was: “In Canada, people do not seem to trust the government very much and are often cynical about government policies. But consciously or subconsciously, Canadians tend to subscribe to a set of higher moral principles informed by Christianity” (Liu, 2016a, p. 53).

Without a God in the Chinese thinking, what would guide the behavior of the Chinese people in society? “Confucianism is the philosophy of social organization, and so is also the philosophy of daily life” (Fung, 1948, p. 22). Though without a formal religion, the place which philosophy has occupied in Chinese civilization has been comparable to that of religion in other civilizations (Fung, 1948). There are five traditional social relationships in Confucianism: sovereign–subject, father–son, elder–younger brother, husband–wife and friend–friend. Though not technically family relationships, sovereign–subject and friend–friend relationships have been perceived in terms of father–son and elder–younger brother relationship, respectively. In this sense, the state is conceived in terms of a family, distilled in the concept of “family state (家国).” The personal and the social are intertwined, as the family system was the social system of China (Fung, 1948). If every person knows her or his role in the family and society, and fulfills the responsibilities expected out of that role, the society will be a good society with peace and harmony. In the family culture, one’s value is measured not on individual basis but by how he or she contributes to the prosperity of the family network.

According to Wu (1986), in all philosophical schools of China, the central concern is human relations, and thus the Chinese philosophy is humanistic in nature. However, the Chinese humanism is different from the European Renaissance humanism. Renaissance humanism emphasized a human being as a free, independent individual; but Chinese humanism emphasizes a human being’s relationship with other human beings. In Renaissance humanism, the greatness of human potentialities belongs to the individuals, whereas in Chinese humanism, human potentialities can be realized only through society. In other words, a person’s relationship to other persons is more important than the person as an individual. Thus I would argue that the major ontological issue of Chinese social and educational research, also the ultimate goal of the Chinese governance, is social harmony enabled by proper personal relationships, the achievement of which is the precondition of economic prosperity and people’s well-being. Chinese people seem to have not been too concerned with same “truth” related questions, such as truth as being external to us or truth as residing in our perception. Instead of asking: “Who am I? Where I was from? Where I am going?”; fundamental questions that have been debated by Western philosophers, the Chinese people seem to be more concerned with: “Which social group do I belong to? What is my position in the group? What are my duties and responsibilities to the group?”

The Chinese epistemology

If harmonious personal relationship is the major ontological concern in Chinese social and educational research, what would be the epistemological approach to achieve its realization? Similar to ontology, epistemology in the Western sense has not developed in Chinese philosophy. According to Fung (1948), epistemological problems arise only when a demarcation between the subject and the object is emphasized. But in Chinese philosophy, there is no such demarcation. The knower and the known is one whole. “Whether the table that I see before me is real or illusory, and whether it is only an idea in my mind or is occupying objective space, was never seriously considered by Chinese philosophers” (Fung, 1948, p. 25).

The Chinese society prioritizes harmonious relationships between people of different social hierarchical orders, and that the existence of the individual is for the purpose of living harmoniously with “others” in a family or in society (Hui, 2005). According to Wu (1986), all the traditional schools of philosophy in China maintain that truth is a moral and spiritual notion. “For them, truth resides within a person and has the power of transforming him into a morally and spiritually more worthy human being” (Wu, 1986, p. 8). The Chinese conceive of a person as essentially a moral being, and all his activities should result in moral good. The Chinese aim of studying philosophy is thus to enable one to become a better and happier person, and “the test of a philosophy in China is its ability to transform its advocates into morally worthy person” (Wu, 1986, p. 8). Thus, I would argue that personal morality in all levels of society should be most fruitfully seen as the epistemology of Chinese social and educational studies.

According to Gu (1915), Christianity is a personal religion of the Church, and it teaches a man to be a good man in the image of God. Confucianism is a social religion of the state, and it teaches a man to be a good citizen by being a dutiful son. In the five fundamental social relations in Confucianism we mentioned above, each pair of roles have different responsibilities, often hierarchical and unequivocal, as shown by this Confucian proverb taken from *Analects*: “Let the king be a king, the minister a minister, the father a father and the son a son.” When a father demonstrates most care to his children, and a son is dutiful to his father, there will be family harmony; “When each ruler practices benevolent government and every man understands proper human relationship and cultivates his personal virtues, then peace and goodwill shall triumph over violence and injustice” (Wu, 1986, p. 41). In a family, if the father is a loving father and works to provide for the family, and a son is a good son and respects the father, then there will be peace and harmony in the family. In a state, if the emperor is a loving emperor and works for the well-being of his people, and the people are good citizens and respect the leadership of the emperor, then there will be peace and harmony in the country.

From here we can see, at the national level, social harmony is not to be achieved through the introduction of the Western style equalitarian democracy, but the improved morality and accountability of individuals in leadership positions in line with Confucian moral standards. According to Jaques (2012), “the state (in China) remains as pivotal in society and as sacrosanct as it was in imperial time” (p. 565). The Confucian ethos “did not require the state to be accountable to the people, but instead insisted on its loyalty to the moral precepts of Confucianism” (Jaques, 2012, p. 573).

Lin (1935) observed that the five sets of Confucian social relations (sovereign–subject, father–son, elder–younger brother, husband–wife and friend–friend) do not cover the relationship between neighbors, or rather two strangers on the street. What is the moral principle to guide their relationship? This question has led me to read Fei (1947). According to Fei, the Chinese society and Western societies have different principles of organization. Based on the Western individualistic tradition in which each person is identified as a soul-bearing self, directly related to and accountable to the creator God, the way the Western

society is organized can be compared to a haystack, with each straw being a free individual joining the group as an equal member. The operation of such a haystack society requires a common set of moral terms and principles subscribed to by each member. The Chinese society, according to Fei (1947), can be compared to ripples in the lake, each ripple being an extended family network. The rings in the middle of each ripple are higher and closer, signaling that the relationship between members in the center of the nuclear family is more important and closer.

What this differential relationship means is that the moral standards in the Chinese society are situational, not universal (Fei, 1947). People's obligation toward others close to them in a family network overrides the obligations toward those more distant. The Chinese society is often considered to be a collective society. This is certainly true within each extended family ripple in the sense that one is obligated to help each other compassionately within the familial circle. The strong family ties have been seen as an important contribution to the resilience of the Chinese culture and society (Lin, 1935). But at the same time, people often observe the image of the selfish Chinese, often in public settings, as shown in Bo Yang's (1992) "The Ugly Chinaman." This observation is also true in the sense that those further from the center of each person's circle receive less consideration than those positioned closer in. If one finds him or herself in middle of a ripple, particularly a big one, this person is much better off than another who is on a peripheral ring or caught between ripples and not belonging to each. The selfishness of the Chinese behavior, observed by Westerners as well as the Chinese, refers to the colder attitude shown toward strangers outside one's familial circle and the disrespect for public order and hygiene. During my recent trip back to China in 2018, I could still see people spitting and queue jumping in public in a third-tier city.

The lack of a universal moral standard to guide stranger-to-stranger relationship has resulted in some difficulties in building a legal society in China where everyone is supposed to be equal before the law. Each relationship is overwhelmingly personal, and the maintenance is based on reciprocity of favors and obligation. People have the propensity of seeking personal relations in the government to solve problems, and not rely on the formal channel by going directly to government offices. The Westerners may think a good opportunity is a God-sent; to the Chinese, all good things happen as a result of "a good time, a good place and harmonious people around" (another Chinese saying). Relations are social capitals in the Chinese society, and the different levels of possessions of relational capital create inequality and thus threaten social harmony. This tension can be seen as the key challenge of Chinese governance. Many detailed government policies are developed to avert the negative influences of nepotism.

The Chinese methodology

If the Chinese ontology is harmonious relationship, and the personal morality (often differential and situational and not universal in nature) is the epistemology, what then should be the methodology to be used in social and educational research in the Chinese social context? According to Gu (1915), the European civilization has been a battlefield for the divided interests between science and art, philosophy and religion, the head and the heart, and the intellect and the soul. People have a religion to satisfy their heart but not their head, and a philosophy to satisfy their head but not their heart. While the Chinese civilization, and the Chinese type of humanity, is characterized by the more happy union of soul with intellect. "Chinese philosophers rarely think in terms of 'either-or' but rather in terms of the complementarity of different views and practices. [...] This synthetic method naturally leads to tolerance and appreciation for theories and views of others that are different from one's own" (Wu, 1986, pp. 8-9).

"Chinese philosophers are inclined to look for truth in the synthesis of partially true views" (Wu, 1986, pp. 8-9). Confucianism encourages people to engage in public affairs,

and the Confucian scholars are supposed to aim to serve government positions. Taoism instead encourages people to seek truth and wisdom from nature, and the true Taoists are supposed to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of human society and cultivate their spirit in high mountains. Yet, according to Lin (1935), Chinese people are Confucianists when successful, and Taoists when in failure. The this-worldliness of Confucianism within the bounds of society and the other-worldliness of Taoism beyond the bounds of society rival each other and complement each other to give the Chinese people a good sense of balance (Fung, 1948).

The highest form of achievement for a Chinese man, according to Fung (1948), is to be a sage, and the sage is a morally perfect man in society, one of “sageliness within and kindness without.” In his sageliness within, he accomplishes spiritual cultivation; in his kingliness without, he functions in society. Thus, the synthetic method is an important characteristic of the Chinese philosophy (Wu, 1986), and this method that aims to achieve a fundamental Yin-Yang dialectic of a bipolar and non-homogeneous synergy of being (Čarnogurská, 1998) should be considered as a key methodological approach to research Chinese social and educational issues.

According to Wu (1986), Lao Zi’s proposition that “reversal” is the movement of Dao has been accepted by all the schools of Chinese philosophy. One major theme espoused by both the Taoists and Confucianists is the idea of reversal to the opposite extreme: when the development of anything brings it to one extreme, a reversal to the other extreme takes place. This has given the Chinese people epistemological fluidity, helping them remain cautious in time of prosperity and hopeful in time of extreme difficulty. The idea has also given the Chinese people the methodology in social action, namely, the Golden mean of moderation. “(I)t is better for one to be wrong by having too little, than to be wrong by having too much, and to be wrong by leaving things undone, than to be wrong by overdoing them. For by having too much or overdoing, one runs the risk of getting the opposite of what one wants” (Fung, 1948, p. 20). “To go too far is just as bad as to fall short” is a Chinese idiom known by every household.

A synthetic, balanced and moderate approach has been a key dimension to the success of Chinese social and economic development in the past 50 years. Upon the recognition of the failure of adopting extreme socialist means during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese leadership began to use both socialist and capitalist means to develop the economy and to improve people’s lives, in the spirit of “It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice” (see Naisbitt and Naisbitt, 2010). In recognizing the drawback of the “rule by people (人治)” where the interests of people we know override those of strangers and the public, China has been trying to introduce “rule by law (法治)” where stronger public policies of the government are used to regulate the stranger-to-stranger relations. In education, one can also observe a convergence of pedagogical discourses that embrace both the advantage of the traditional Chinese pedagogy of prioritizing education and strong work ethic and the Western tradition of explorative learning and student centered learning (see Liu, 2016b). To reduce the academic pressure extended by parental and social emphasis on academic achievement, educators and policy makers in China are seeking ways to reduce the weight of children’s school backpack. Chinese parents around me immigrated to Canada so that their children could enjoy the more relaxed education in the West, but while in Canada, they turned into “tiger” parents and give additional work to their children to supplement the “lighter” Canadian curriculum.

Application

Methodological hegemony (Smith, 2012), featured by the dominance of the Western methodological discourse and the aphasia of other cultures’, speaks to the post-colonial condition we live in today. As a critical pedagogy for the oppressed (see Freire, 2007), efforts

should be made to elevate the indigenous methodological approaches informed by non-Western philosophical and social traditions in different parts of the world. In this paper, I have argued for the necessity of constructing a Chinese methodology in educational research based on the unique Chinese philosophical traditions and the unique Chinese social norms. I have also tried to lay out what a truly Chinese methodology might look like with regard to its ontology, epistemology and methodology in comparison to the Western philosophical traditions. But what would it be like to apply the Chinese methodology outlined above to the study of an education issue?

After my postdoc program, I have been employed as an administrator in the international office of the Canadian university, with many opportunities to work with students and scholars from China. Previously I have argued that it is important to look into the Chinese educational culture as the major push-out factor behind Chinese students' international mobility (see Liu, 2016a). I have also argued elsewhere that we need to learn from their home educational system and culture when we try to meet the needs of Chinese students in international student services (see Liu and Lin, 2016). In this section, I will use the experiences of Chinese international students in Canadian higher education as an example to illustrate the appropriateness and necessity for the use of the Chinese methodology when researching Chinese educational issues.

On the ontological level, all social and educational issues are concerned, one way or another, with personal relations and social harmony in the Chinese society. So it is necessary and advisable to examine Chinese international students' family relations and other social networks to understand their transcultural learning experiences. In the North American higher education context, students are taken primarily as independent adults whose autonomy is to be respected and whose privacy is to be protected. In the case of Chinese students, parents, grandparents and extended family network tend to be more involved in the funding and decision making for the students' overseas study. Thus it is more helpful to take a Chinese student as a member of their family collective, not only as an independent individual, though legally they are. The Canadian university I am at has been trying to implement a family approach to international student advising, with an orientation day for Chinese parents at the beginning of the new school year. It has been found to be important to advise parents about teaching and learning cultures and practices in North American universities, given their big influence in students' decision making.

On the epistemological level, educators in North America are advised to use personal morality and obligation to their family as an external motivator for Chinese students. They are also advised to pay more attention to the pressures faced by Chinese students, particularly when they are experiencing academic challenges. Academic success is a moral and ethical obligation as a result of the high expectations of parents and extended family, though unrealistic they can be sometimes. The pressures are so high that Chinese students often share only good news with their family. One particular policy at the Canadian university is that students are required to take one year off if their GPA is below a certain mark. The goal is for students to rest at home and reflect on their learning strategies. However, it has been hard for Chinese students to go home for a year. They do not want to let their parents down and bring shame to the family. Personal morality and ethical obligation toward their family in the Confucian concept of a "dutiful" child is the key to understanding the experiences of Chinese students overseas.

On the methodological level, a synthetic and balanced view needs to be adopted to replace the traditional either/or approach when examining Chinese students' cross-cultural journey. The traditional either/or approach has been featured by phrases, such as "adaptation," "acculturation" and "integration," in which international students are supposed to leave behind their home culture and behavior in the process of acquiring those of the host country. But this one-directional, reductive approach is too simplistic and not in

sync with the Chinese bipolar, Yin-Yang dialectical way of thinking (see Lin and Liu, 2019). Most educators in North America often point out that Chinese students tend to spend too much time with other Chinese students and thus fail to integrate. But most Chinese students will continue to hang out with other Chinese students, and this reflects that continuity of their Chinese identity and should not be seen problematic. But the key is to help them achieve a Golden mean of moderation through a balanced interaction with both students from home and from the host country. Overdoing each would break the Yin-Yang balance and thus stray from the Dao (the correct way) of international education. Such language would be familiar to Chinese students when educating and researching with them.

Discussion

The methodological borrowing of the Chinese research community is a reflection and a result of methodological imperialism under the post-colonial world structure (Smith, 2012). Cognitive injustice is still the prevalent state of the reality, where knowledge of the Western world is considered as the only legitimate knowledge; while knowledge elsewhere is not recognized as being valid and worthwhile (see Visvanathan, 1997). To gain the acceptance of the dominant discourse, research done in non-Western contexts must be done through the epistemological lens that reflects the Western world-views. Both quantitative and qualitative paradigms that dominate the methodological discussions in mainstream forums are alien to the philosophical tradition and social organization of China and larger Confucian culture circles. Through this paper, I would hope to call on the Chinese community to be more mindful of the danger of blind methodological borrowing, and more importantly, to purposefully resist the imposition of the Western methodological discourse as the only legitimate way of knowing, and to exert agency in constructing a Chinese methodology for education to be used to research educational issues in the Chinese social and cultural context.

A humble learning attitude is needed after the heavy lesson learned by the complacent government of Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) when China closed its door to the industrialization process that took place in Europe. With the door closed, China refused to change and was thus left behind by the West in technical, economic and social developments. This also resulted in the maltreatment of China at the hands of Western imperialist powers for over a century, from the first Opium War in 1839 to the end of the Second World War in 1945. And the social and economic reform through opening up to the West and learning from the West has been the driving force since the 1980s behind the fast progression in society and economy in China. However, Western referencing, when taken to its extreme of not doing careful examination of the local context, will not do any good service to the local cause. The extensive methodological borrowing by the Chinese research community, while sitting on but ignoring the wealth of the Chinese philosophical thinking and the uniquely Chinese social organizations is problematic.

The call to develop a Chinese methodology is not the result of the nationalist thinking; instead, it is a cultural necessity. The Chinese cultural thinking has demonstrated quality of strength, resilience and continuity. The rule of the Mongols and the rule of Manchus for lengthy periods in the Chinese history have both failed to change the Chinese culture, the Chinese language and the Chinese way of life; instead the incoming cultures were absorbed into the Chinese culture and became elements of the Chinese culture. Since 1949, China has been led by the Chinese Communist party, and to reconcile the traditional Chinese culture and the incoming socialist ideology, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” has been coined and used to describe the Chinese ideological landscape. However, if we can learn anything from the history, the correct phrase to use would be “Chinese Culture with Socialist Characteristics,” as I can venture to predict that the traditional Chinese culture and way of life would prevail as the dominant

paradigm with socialism absorbed as a nice addition. In this context, it is an imperative move to reassert the Chinese intellectual discourse through the construction of a uniquely Chinese methodology in social and educational research.

Conclusion

Living away from China has made me acutely aware of the existence of an inferiority syndrome in China. Such an inferiority syndrome, a form of self-imposed post-colonialism, has resulted in the tendency of Western referencing as rectification for everything that takes place in China. This is very problematic. In this paper, I have argued for the necessity of constructing a Chinese methodology in educational research on the basis of the Chinese philosophical traditions and the Chinese social norms. I have also explored the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of such a methodology through a review of literature on Chinese philosophy and society. I can predict that some scholars may take issues with my decision to use a Western philosophical framework to examine Chinese philosophy, while arguing for the necessity of constructing an indigenous Chinese methodology. Others may disagree with the arguments I made with regard to the Chinese ontology, Chinese epistemology and Chinese methodology. But I would be happy if the paper is able to trigger any debate on this issue at all. As I mentioned at the start of this paper, this paper hopes to serve as a “brick tossed to invite the jade” in discussions on this issue. It is also my hope that scholars in China would come across more papers like the current one, while searching the Western English literature for methodological inspirations, so that they would join the discussion.

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