

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Critical Thinking in Other Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the assumption that critical thinking is uniquely a Western educational construct. In particular, it will be argued that two non-Western traditions—namely, those of classical Chinese and Islamic thought—contain evidence of the championing of critical thinking as understood by contemporary SoTL scholars. This paper concludes with a set of pedagogical implications that will be relevant to university tutors interested in designing or teaching courses that aim at the fostering of critical thinking.

Keywords: Critical thinking in the scholarship of teaching and learning, classical Chinese and Islamic thought, module design, higher education

THE ‘CRITICAL WEST’ AND THE ‘UNCRITICAL EAST’?

It was John Dewey (1933) who can be credited with introducing the idea of ‘critical thinking’ (hereinafter, ‘CT’) into pedagogical discourse (Hitchcock 2018; Zhou 2022).¹ In a US study conducted in the 1930s which aims to explore and put into practice the teaching philosophies of Dewey, we see an explicit statement of the idea that critical thinking is important for the promotion of democracy (Commission on the Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association 1943, pp. 745–746, quoted in Hitchcock, 2018). Indeed, such a claim—that critical thinking prepares citizens for democratic participation—continues to be held by numerous contemporary writers (Behar-Horenstein & Niu, 2011; Facione, 2011; Ten Dam & Volman, 2004; Larsson, 2017). Arguably, the association of the critical thinking movement with Western-style democracy offers fertile ground for the propagation of a contrast between a ‘Western’ education system that promotes critical thinking and all others that discourage it (Deng, 2012, pp. 107–108).² Arguably, this characterisation of the Chinese education system may have inadvertently reinforced the assumption that critical thinking is a type of cognitive skill that is alien to institutions or cultures of education outside of the (democratic) West. However, as one commentator observes:

[C]ontemporary critical thinking textbooks completely ignore contributions from non-western sources, such as those found in the African, Arabic, Buddhist, Jain, Mohist and Nyāya philosophical traditions. The exclusion of these traditions leads to the conclusion that critical thinking educators, by using standard textbooks are implicitly sending the message to their students that there are no important contributions to the study of logic and argumentation that derive from non-western sources. (Vaidya, 2017, p. 132)

In addition, to assume that critical thinking is somehow *essentially* the product only of the (democratic) West is to ignore the powerful and, sometimes corrosive effects, that politico-legal choices, movements and entire institutions can have on rich cultural or religious inheritance. For instance, the Chinese Cultural Revolution—which saw a sustained, violent rejection of valuable parts of Chinese thought and traditions—is a paradigmatic example of how a socio-political movement can have highly destructive effects on what is culturally valuable (Lee, 1978; Andreas, 2009). Resistance, rebellions, secessions and revolutions that sometimes involve a partial or wholesale rejection of existing authority are not without destructive outcomes (Chirot, 1996): the Khmer Rouge regime saw a loss of cultural and intellectual heritage in Cambodia (Delano & Knottnerus, 2018); Japanese Imperialism of the early 20th Century saw a repression of Korean and Chinese cultural narratives (Mark, 2017), as did the Partition of India to a culturally diverse Punjabi community in the mid-20th Century (Majumdar, 2023), and so forth. It is therefore arguable that the subsequent derailment of and indeed, process of ‘othering’ engaged in by outsiders of these cultures were but a foregone conclusion (Jian, 1999; Li, 2008). In sum, the assumption that critical thinking is somehow essentially the product only of the (democratic) West is to ignore the influential effects of politico-legal events.

The so-called critical thinking movement has not only spurred a cottage industry of CT scholarship,³ institutions of higher education tend to have critical thinking as an educational goal (Davies, 2011; Zhou, 2022a) as with many undergraduate syllabi (Ennis, 1997); textbooks have been written about critical thinking (Salmon, 2012; Halpern, 2013); and tests have been formulated to determine the level of one’s critical thinking abilities (Oermann et al., 2000).

¹ Dewey used the term ‘reflective thinking’ to refer to what we now know as critical thinking.

² This simple binary between ‘uncritical’ Asian students and their ‘critical’ Western counterparts has come under scrutiny (see, for e.g., Lu, 2016).

³ We see, for instance, entire journals devoted to critical thinking (e.g. *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* or *Double-helix: The Journal of Critical Thinking and Writing*).

Despite the importance of critical thinking in higher education, some writers have noticed that the English term ‘critical thinking’, for East-Asian students or those influenced by Confucian cultures⁴ (‘Asian students’ for short), calls forth notions of aggression and undesirable disagreement (see Chiu, 2009; Chiu & Cowan, 2012), connotations which are inconsistent with the so-called ‘Asian values’⁵ of self-restraint, communal harmony and social politeness. Indeed, some authors go so far as to argue that as a result of acculturation, the teaching of critical thinking to Asian students is comparatively challenging, and that such students tend to fare worse in their CT abilities compared to their ‘Western’ counterparts (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Davies, 2013; Shaheen, 2016; Aston, 2023). This, according to one commentator, has led some educators to see it as their *raison d’être* to awaken the less-than-critical Asian students from their intellectual slumbers (Singh, 2009; 2013).⁶

In this short reflective paper, I contribute to the movement that challenges the assumption that elements of critical thinking—with its associated notions of reason, evidence, and truth—are the products only of Western educational traditions. In the following sections (“Chinese Thought and Critical Thinking” and “Islamic Thought and Critical Thinking”), I offer a sketch of two non-Western traditions—namely those of classical Chinese and Islamic thought—that have championed critical thinking as we understand the term.⁷ In the section “Critical Thinking: Pedagogical Implications”, I lay out a set of pedagogical implications that will be of interest to university instructors designing or teaching courses that aim at the fostering of critical thinking in light of the thesis of this paper, namely that critical thinking is not a uniquely Western construct.

CHINESE THOUGHT AND CRITICAL THINKING

Scholars of Chinese thought and culture have contended that the practices and concepts associated with critical thinking are *not* completely absent in Chinese history (Paton, 2005; Tian & Low, 2011, p. 67). It has been found, for instance, that numerous sayings by Confucius suggest a commitment to the value of self-reflection⁸ and sceptical questioning of the views of others.⁹ More specifically, Confucius encouraged reflection of the evidential basis of one’s claims of knowledge, and self-reflection to ensure that one’s synthesis of information is conducted freely without coercion (Kim, 2003).¹⁰ Such proposals bear similarities with an influential taxonomy of educational objectives related to critical thinking offered by Bloom et al. (1956, pp. 201–207):

‘Analysis’: the ability to recognize unstated assumptions, ability to check the consistency of hypotheses with given information and assumptions, ability to recognize the general techniques used in advertising, propaganda and other persuasive materials;

‘Synthesis’: the organizing of ideas and statements in writing, ability to propose ways of testing a hypothesis, ability to formulate and modify hypotheses;

‘Evaluation’: the ability to indicate logical fallacies, comparison of major theories about particular cultures.

⁴ For instance, the Indonesian Chinese, Thai Chinese, Filipino Chinese, etc.

⁵ I put this term in quotation marks to show that it is problematic to assume that what is ‘Asian’ (or, indeed, ‘Western’) picks out a monolithic and socio-culturally homogeneous entity.

⁶ Needless to say, such claims have been resisted (Lloyd & Nahr, 2010; Rear, 2017).

⁷ For a discussion of critical thinking in classical Indian thought see Vaidya (2017).

⁸ ‘Learning without thinking is a vain effort. Thinking without learning is a dangerous effort’ (from the *Analects*, quoted in Tian & Low, 2011, p. 68).

⁹ ‘A good student should study hard and always be ready to ask questions’ (from the *Analects*, quoted in Tian & Low, 2011, p. 68).

¹⁰ Self-reflection is important because, according to Confucius, an awareness of one’s epistemic deficiencies allows one to avoid confusion in the quest for knowledge (Kim, 2003).

These three set of skills, collectively referred to as ‘higher-order thinking skills’, are such that what comes under ‘analysis’ bear more than a passing resemblance to the critical thinking processes advocated by Confucius. So, although Confucius did not explicitly offer a definition of critical thinking (as some scholars of critical thinking have done),¹¹ the value and practice of it is present in what we know of Confucian thought (Kim, 2003). It is also noteworthy that there exist passages in the Confucian text that advocate for a non-hierarchical form of relation between students and teachers (Kim, 2003).¹²

Indeed, elements of critical thinking also existed in Mohism, which was an influential school of thought that flourished in the period of the Warring States era (479–221 BCE) in ancient China (Fraser, 2023). Mohism (as with Confucianism) advocated for the search for unambiguous evidence for one’s claims of knowledge, of appreciating the implications of one’s thesis, of cultivating the skills of questioning, analysing and the detection of biases (Guan, 2001, pp. 32–36). Incidentally, these skills are also the key educational goals articulated by Departments of Education in the United States (see e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 30). Again, as with elements of Confucian thought, one notices similarities between contemporary descriptions of the skill-set associated with critical thinking and those advocated more than two millennia ago under the aegis of Mohist philosophy.

ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND CRITICAL THINKING

There are passages in the Quran that explicitly encourage the seeking of knowledge (Malik, 2017, pp. 1–2). Scholars of Islam have pointed out that Muslims can be said to have fulfilled their religious obligations only if they have engaged in deep reflection or contemplation (*ibÉdah*) both on religious *and non-religious* matters (Badi, 2011). When knowledge seekers realise that their evidence is insufficient or unverifiable, they are then advised to suspend judgment on the matter (Dahari et al., 2019). Interestingly, Islam has a term that repudiates the unquestioning acceptance of authority: *Taqlid*, according to one source, ‘consists of accepting the theories and judgments of another person or persons without demanding proof, without considering or thinking’ (*Taqlid* in Ideology, 2023). *Taqlid* is, therefore, ‘not conducive to science’ which emphasises rational justification or empirical investigation, and not blind acceptance on the basis of faith or authority. The notion of *Taqlid* echoes the critical thinking skill of ‘analysis’ as described by Bloom et al. that promoted the ‘ability to recognize the general techniques used in advertising, propaganda and other persuasive materials’ (Bloom et al., 1956, pp. 201–207).

Further, the Islamic term *Ta’aqul* picks out the process of reasoning with facts on the basis of logical deduction and observation (Badi, 2011). *Tadabbur*, on the other hand, refers to the making of inferences from an existing base of knowledge to generate new insights (Abdul-Rahman, 2017). All this echoes influential definitions of critical thinking offered by Western scholars where, for instance, critical thinking is construed as the ‘cognitive skills of analyzing, applying standards, discriminating, information seeking, logical reasoning, predicting, and transforming knowledge’ (Scheffer & Rubenfeld, 2000, p. 357). The Quran also places importance on the *practical application* of knowledge (*Yaqīn*); indeed, ‘wisdom’ is exhibited when knowledge is applied or extended to new or novel situations a process with which (*Íikmah*). Interestingly, the extension of existing knowledge is also another aspect of high-order critical thinking that

¹¹ Western scholars writing on CT are sometimes tempted to propose *definitions* the concept of critical thinking (see, for instance, Halpern, 2013, p. 6, and Robinson, 2011, p. 275).

¹² ‘The teacher does not always have to be more knowledgeable than the pupil; and the pupil is not necessarily always less learned than the teacher’; ‘Among any three persons, there must be one who can be my teacher’ (from the *Analects*. See Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*).

Bloom et al. emphasised (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 38, my emphasis). Finally, Marsden (2005) found that critical discussion, debate and intellectual curiosity are central to Muslim ‘personhood’ and are propagated through inter-generational pedagogical practices.

CRITICAL THINKING: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section, I turn to the practical task of explaining how it is that a designer of a course that features critical thinking as one of its key objectives can develop critical thinking in students without succumbing to the stereotype that CT is a uniquely ‘Western construct’.

Trans-lingualism. In universities or colleges where students are competent in more than one language, tutors may leverage on the multilingualism of students: since each language tends to be associated with its suite of meanings and cultural associations, tutors can design lessons that offer comparisons between different language repertoires. The appreciation of similarities and differences in the cultural inheritance of different languages requires the exercise of critical thinking abilities in a way that need *not* reinforce the assumption that CT is a uniquely Western edifice.¹³ In relation to this so-called ‘trans-linguistic’ pedagogy, tutors teaching modules in critical thinking may consider the designing of modules that allow for *team* teaching, where faculty with different expertise not only contribute to the teaching of different sections of a course, but do so by drawing from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. This is also consistent with criticisms raised by educational scholars of the teacher as the irreplaceable authoritative or ‘heroic’ figure professing at the lectern (Skelton, 2009); rather, excellence in teaching, it has been argued, can be found in *collaborative* approaches to teaching (see also Manathunga, 2011, and Haggis, 2009).

Contextualism. It is not uncommon for an undergraduate introductory textbook on critical thinking to contain the standard drill on inductive/deductive logic, accompanied by a thick list of logical and informal fallacies. Instructors who have taught syllabi that contain the standard drill even profess to finding it somewhat divorced from lived realities:

I took Critical Thinking as an undergraduate and it was one of the most dreadfully dull courses I ever took in my degree. The main thing I remember from it is that we spent most of the semester memorizing the forms of fallacies. (Arvan, 13 June 2023)

Students wish to know what to do, what to say when persuading others and how to make sense of their own lives as well as the times they live in. Instructors teaching CT courses should, therefore, *contextualise* their materials in at least three ways. First, examples or case studies should ideally be drawn from real life or at least bear close resemblance to real life. Second, instructors can attribute a lesson or learning point to examples or readings from outside of the ‘Western canon’:

[A] ‘speech’ is said to have an appropriate meaning, to be free of the eighteen faults that spoil words or thought, and to be endowed with eighteen virtues; and a ‘speech’ has sophistication, careful discrimination, clear order, the presentation of a conclusion, and motivation... (Sulubha to King Janaka, *The Mahabharata*)

In the passage above from the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, we see Sulubha, a single woman engaging in an intellectual debate with the philosopher King Janaka—a debate which she eventually wins. The passage quoted offers a succinct lesson on what constitutes a convincing argument: it should avoid ambiguity and

¹³ Here, I am inspired by Cummins’ (2019) work on ‘translanguage’ pedagogy.

irrelevant information; it should contain a claim or conclusion that is justified on the basis of the available evidence at hand; the steps of the argument should be presented in logical order, etc. The foregoing is but one example of how a familiar lesson on rhetoric or effective persuasion can be attributed to a piece of text from outside the Western canon or, indeed, outside of the age in which we live in. More generally, when a familiar lesson is so attributed, students are invited to appreciate how non-Western thinkers or ideas are just as deserving of study as those that originate from the West; in addition, intellectual humility—which is an important disposition of the critical thinker (Zhou, 2022)—is also fostered when students see that something written more than two millennia ago (in the case of *The Mahabharata*) expresses problems and solutions that are still pertinent in the present age.

A third way of contextualising the teaching of critical thinking is to adopt what has been called the ‘infusion model’ of course design as opposed to the ‘stand-alone model’ (Ennis, 1989). Hitchcock describes the distinction between the two approaches as follows: ‘One model is infusion, where the strategies, skills, dispositions and attitudes of a critical thinker are developed *in the context of subject-matter instruction*... The other pure model is stand-alone instruction, in the form of a separate course in critical thinking, using everyday examples that do not require advanced subject-matter knowledge’ (2011, section 3.2, my emphasis). The infusion model, a third way of contextualising the teaching of critical thinking, helps to reinforce the idea that CT skills and dispositions are *not* a-cultural constructs; rather, these are borne of the rich grounds of existing disciplines, pedagogical cultures, and domains of inquiry.

Cultural Matters. In the foregoing paragraphs I offered three ways that course designers can adopt when teaching critical thinking whilst eschewing the stereotype that CT is a uniquely ‘Western construct’. In this sub-section, I describe two further practices that tutors can adopt when teaching CT courses in Asian universities or colleges.

An influential paper written by by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) titled ‘Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy’ is a diamond in the rough because it locates teaching in real communities. In her essay, Ladson-Billings studies what it is that *successful* teachers of African-American students do in classrooms. Her conclusion is simple: tutors ought to feature more positive representations of minority groups in the course syllabus or lesson materials.¹⁴ In my own teaching, whenever it becomes possible to do so, I use examples or case studies that offer successful or edifying narratives of groups of individuals who may not receive as much representation in popular or academic discourse. This practice, which is also applicable to non-CT courses, fosters a sense of ‘related-ness’ between students from minority groups and the lesson material (without having to engage in the more radical move to ‘decolonise’ one’s syllabus).

The next practice that I adopt in my own teaching is to assiduously be mindful of how my students have been socialised. There is research that claims that Asian students are more prone to shyness or social anxiety (Paulhus et al., 2002). Indeed, there have been studies outside of Asia that suggest that the classroom silence maintained by native American Indian (Navajo) students is their way of expressing respect towards their teachers (by not questioning the latter) and peers (by not differentiating themselves from each other) (Plank, 1994). In contrast, the silence maintained by Western students may be perceived as an expression of defiance. A different author also noted that while undergraduate Australian students are allowed to interrupt more senior academics in seminars, Indonesian students are not as comfortable with such classroom practice (Kirkpatrick, 2011). The point here worth emphasising is this: the teaching of critical thinking need *not* be an uncomfortable experience for Asian students unused to the thrust and parry of confrontational debates, if the tutor is sensitive to prevalent cultural or behavioural norms (Zhou, 2023). Here, I offer one more practice I adopt in my classes:

¹⁴ The findings of Ladson-Billings are, at times, heartbreaking: for instance, it was reported by Ladson-Billings that a young student once asked her grade school teacher ‘How can a *princess* be Black?’

when I field questions from my students, I periodically emphasise that a student's mistaken belief does not automatically lower her epistemic standing (e.g. that she is gullible, hasty, unreflective). Rather, to be mistaken about a particular belief is to be in a position in which one can begin assessing and strengthen a whole web of beliefs.

CONCLUSION

In this reflective essay, I suggested how critical thinking is not the unique purview of the West. Ideas that originate from classical Chinese and Islamic thought ought not to be perceived of as mere historical or cultural pieces of curiosities; rather, both traditions have encouraged reasoned argumentation in particular, and epistemic vigilance in general. Students awakened to the fact that elements of critical thinking can be found outside of the Western canon may start to reflect on the limitations or assumptions that underlie *their own* educational culture—for, it is often that which is most familiar or closest to us that we turn an uncritical eye to. Familiarity breeds an unquestioning mindset; and, as this paper attempts to suggest, there are cultures outside of the West that have resisted such a lack of criticality.

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