Track No: 14 (Teaching International business)

Competitive paper

Developing senior leaders and managers in the public sector: The case of the MPA for Chinese local government leaders

The paper explores how culture and education system affect leadership development for senior leaders from a local government via learning experiences in a different country. The research takes an interpretivist approach and adopts methods of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students on a Masters' of Public Administration (MPA), who are senior leaders at their local government. The findings show that culture and education have a great impact on the outcomes of students learning from two aspects. Firstly education systems influence the approach of surface learning in the Chinese context. Secondly Confucianism contributes to the education system which indirectly affects students learning due to an issue of face. The findings present a valuable insight for both academics and practitioners in order to understand the significance of the relationship between culture and education as well leadership development.

Keywords: China, Education, Culture, Public Servants, Leaders, Teaching and Learning Approaches

INTRODUCTION

China has been reforming the public sector for many years in order to improve government performance and provide good services to citizens. One important Chinese government initiative has been the education of civil servants through attendance at various training courses. The MPA programme is one such programme, which has been developed and available for a few years in Chinese universities. We believe that attending training programmes is an appropriate way to develop leadership and management skills. Importantly the methods underpinning the teaching and learning during programme delivery, and cultural elements are essential to overall success. For example British education highlights deep learning and encourages students to develop critical ways of thinking. However, the Chinese education system takes a surface learning approach and teaching is content-oriented whereby students are then heavily involved in direct classroom teaching. In such a system students believe that everything a teacher says is correct, and many do not challenge the teacher's knowledge base, thereby failing to develop their creativity. Culture, for example, the traditional Chinese culture (i.e. Confucianism) had a great impact on the establishment of the Chinese education system. This paper explores how culture influences the education system, in particular one MPA programme delivered to senior leaders and managers from China at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, in the UK.

The paper will firstly, theoretically review learning approaches and then move on to introduce the Chinese education system. Culture, especially traditional Chinese culture (i.e.

Confucianism) and its impact on the establishment of the education system will be discussed. Most literature concerning the cultural impact on learning is analysed from a language perspective, and there is little examination of how education systems are embedded in certain cultural contexts. This paper will use the Nottingham Business School's MPA programme as a vehicle to explore the ways in which culture impacts on programme design and delivery. It will then explain the process of the MPA programme development and teaching. In this section we will stress the importance of considering the background of Chinese public service reform, as well as highlighting the strengths of the British educational teaching and learning methods. Research findings will be presented, discussed and then conclusions will be drawn.

Learning Approaches

'Learning is about how we perceive and understand the world, about making meaning' (Marton and Booth 1997: 9). "Learning may involve mastering abstract principles, understanding proofs, remembering factual information, acquiring methods, techniques, recognition, debating ideas, or developing behaviour appropriate to specific situations "(*ibid)*. Many researchers are interested in studying learning styles, such as dependent learning and independent learning (Marshall and Rowland 1998). However, from our experience of different systems, it is possible to suggest that the education system is another influential factor on students' learning, and education systems are not separate from culture. What is the relationship between learning and the learning context and how does culture affects students' learning experience? These questions are the focus of this paper.

A related issue to learning styles is that understanding may be affected by context. It is argued that understanding can enhance students' learning outcomes and improve their performance (Marton and Salvo 1997, cited in Fry et al 1998). Two types of understanding are stressed by researchers (e.g. Entwistle and Smith 2002), target understanding and personal understanding. However, understanding may not be divorced from learning styles.

To understand different learning approaches, it is necessary first to appreciate the meaning of learning. There are various definitions of learning given by different authors. For example, learning is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'to get knowledge of (a subject) or skill in (an art, etc.) by study, experience or teaching'… (Brockbank and McGill 1998: 19). According to Marton learning is … 'the grasping of what is signified (what the discourse itself is), i.e. understanding what a written or spoken discourse is about' (1975:13 cited by Brockbank and McGill 1998: 19). Barnett (1992b: 4) states that 'learning is a human process which has an effect on those understanding it' (cited in Brockbank and McGill 1998:19). These authors believe that understanding is critical to learning. This is because understanding would enable students to not only 'know' but also to perform well via articulating what they were taught. Learning is thus seen as a process of understanding and deep learning is essential to knowing.

Deep Learning and Surface Learning

The two approaches of deep and surface learning have been well researched (Marton 1975; Fry et al. 1999). 'Deep learning has been one of the most influential constructs to emerge in

the literature on effective learning in the higher education' (Boyle et al. 2003:268). The deep learning approach is typified as an intention to understand and seek meanings, and leads students to attempt to relate concepts to existing experience, distinguish between new ideas and existing knowledge, and critically evaluate and determine key themes and concepts. Deep learners actively try to understand meaning by working out relationships between concepts, relating new material to previously known information and adopting a critical attitude to information. In short, the deep learning approach results from the students' intention to gain better understanding from their studying (Fry et al 1999). The deep learning approach appears to be more broadly accepted as effective learning in the literature (Entwistle and Smith 2002). Deep learning has a different focuses from the surface learning approach.

The surface learning approach is typified as an intention to complete the task, memorise information, and make no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge (Fry et al. 1999). The surface approach highlights the routine use of rote memorisation. The link between memorisation and the surface approach has, however, proved to be an oversimplification (Kember 1996). Memories can also be used, for example, to master unfamiliar terminology by initial rote learning, as a first step towards developing understanding, or when committing an understanding to memory. Where memorisation involves meaningful learning, it has been described as deep memories (Tang 1991). Nevertheless, students who take the surface approach believe that their achievement is through superficial levels of cognitive processing (Brown et al. 1997). However, the deep

approach is not entirely separate from surface learning approach. For example, deep learners need to memorise what they were taught so that they could make sense of it. While two learning approaches are studied, understanding inevitably needs to be addressed because learning is about deeper understanding (Brown et al. 1997), as we shall now examine.

Understanding and Learning

The meaning of understanding implies something particular to an individual. It is an individual's interpretation of a context or particular aspect of that context. In this sense, a person always understands within a context … (Entwistle and Smith 2002). Entwistle and Smith (2002) believe that there are two types of understanding related to learning, target understanding and personal understanding. Each type of understanding is connected to one of the two learning approaches. That is target understanding emphasizes surface learning and the personal understanding stresses deep learning.

Target understanding is about 'the selection of topics and ideas from a universe of knowledge within each subject area' (Smith 1998, cited by Entwistle and Smith, 2002:332). In Smith's research, the target understanding derives in part from a formal requirement of the curriculum but is interpreted or developed from the teacher's own perspective. What the teachers teach and how students are assessed depend upon teachers' interpretation and are precisely fixed. The perceived target is an 'object of study', built up from teachers' comments and explanations (Entwistle and Smith 2002: 333). This inevitably limits students' understanding because students may be only interested in what teachers say and what will be assessed.

Students therefore could get good marks that may contribute to some kind of award. However, personal understanding highlights not only the subject of study but also draws the students' previous experience into account.

Personal understanding reflects how the student comes to see the topic presented by the teacher, influenced by the teacher's view, but also the student's prior educational and personal history. This relates to Smith's view of contextualization. The learner's contextualization involves, not only understanding about the conceptual requirements of a given task, but also … perceptions about the social (communicative) setting in which this task has been presented. Smith (1998) also suggests that personal understanding is not just the contextualization of the task but also the other effects of the wide range of contexts that students' experience. Smith's (1998) research also shows that 'people's behaviour and thinking … are substantially influenced by their experiences at home, by 'significant others', and by their peer group.' 'Personal understanding thus becomes the product of all these experiences…' Moreover, students bring different backgrounds and expectations to learning (Fry et al. 1999:9). All of these affect their intentions and their readiness to engage with the tasks set by the teacher, and also their understanding of what is required in the classroom. The decision to seek meaning (deep) or to reproduce the information provided (surface) is seen as a consequence of how students had interpreted the task and the setting (context) (*ibid*). Chinese public sector reform has taken place in a very specific context, as the following examination reveals.

Reform of the Chinese Public Sector and Training Needs

China has been reforming the public service sector for about 20 years in line with economic development and reform. Before 1988, China did not have a public service management system. All people who worked for the government including those at the central and local levels and for public institutions including soldiers, doctors, teacher, managers/leaders and workers in state owned enterprises were called “Cadres”. The cadre system was embedded in the society broadly under the context of a “planned economy” in China. Since 1988 China has established the public service system, restructured government departments, and set up various training programs for public servants in order to provide efficient and effective services for a flourishing economy.

There were two steps to achieve these targets of public service reforms. The first stage was establishing the public service system in China from October 1988 to 1992. With the implementation of national strategic policy on opening up and market-oriented reform, the national economy has achieved a great deal in terms of GDP growth and investment on infrastructure. Under such a context, it was necessary for central and local governments to think about how their services could match the requirements of continuous economic development in the near future. The Chinese central government under the support of the United Nation’s Development Programme (UNDP) thus began to do some preliminary work on establishing a Chinese public service system. Through research, investigation and planning UNDP has helped the Chinese government to launch a series of training programmes targeted on key senior officials both at central and local levels who were responsible for governmental management. Those training programs were called “Cadreman Training”.

Cardreman Training

The “Cadreman Training” was accomplished through three major steps: firstly, inviting foreign experts in the field of human resource management to give Chinese officials lectures as well as seminars on the theory of public service management from an academic perspective; second; secondly by sending most of those people who were involved in the first step of training to foreign countries for field visits, understanding best practice and real case from a practical perspective; third, by brainstorming a development strategy and implementation process of building up of the public service system with Chinese characteristics on the basis of results achieved from the first two steps of the programme.

From 1996 to present day the Chinese public administrative system was based on a systematic and scientific track of standardization and legalization. As a result, the Chinese government initially categorised civil servant training structure in terms of objectives, functions and responsibilities. In the meantime, the governments started to invest gradually in training infrastructure in terms of facilities and learning resources.

Overall Chinese public servants have accumulated invaluable experience on civil servant training through continuous practice and research. However, the paradigm changed according to the dynamic external environment. For example, with the requirements of economic reform, World Trade Organisation (WTO) entry and so on, central and local governments were restructured and changed their functions. The workforce had been downsized several times in order to provide more effective and efficient services for the well-being and

sustainable growth of Chinese society. As a result, it was the responsibility of central and local governments to provide appropriate training services, not only for redundant workers to find a new job via training in the society, but also to enhance their core competences to cope with changes. In addition, one of the major characteristics of China's political reform was the "Top-down" approach in terms of reform (i.e. government restructuring), conducted and implemented from central government to the local authorities. The public civil servant training system was also structured in the same way. That is to say, the civil servants' training of the local government officials at all levels followed central government direction. With more and more reforms and restructuring being implemented, the Chinese public administrative system continuously developed and required newly trained servants. In the mean time, the public training became regarded as a vehicle to improve and manage public service and facilitate the public servants' competence to work in a dynamic environment. In other words, there was a potential demand for training programmes at both central and local levels.

In the last 10 years the programmes being delivered have included training for taking up a post, training for holding a post, training for updating knowledge, training for specific operations, home-based training combined with overseas study, in-house training, and talent development training. Between 2002- 2003 twenty four Chinese universities piloted an MPA programme for the first time with approximately 8,000 MPA graduates from the courses. The MPA programme is now developed in a number of universities across China. However, most of the MPA programmes delivered by the Chinese universities are content oriented, which

could be seen as strongly influenced by the traditional Chinese education system, regarded by many as a system lacking the development of students' creativity. One of the present authors' had research and previous work experience in Chinese central government, and therefore was aware of the demand for good training programmes for public servants. She accordingly developed an MPA at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the UK, after consultation with a department of Chinese central government, one with the responsibility for training senior public sector's leaders/managers. The MPA programme at NTU takes a different approach with a focus on management competence and analytical skills development in contrast to the Chinese University MPA programmes with their emphasis on remembering and knowing information.

The NTU's MPA programme was designed specifically for senior leaders/managers and aimed to develop students' competency in managing change innovatively, improving performance management, developing strategic leadership and independently making decision. Importantly the programme develops an ability to improve critical thinking, which is largely absent in existing Chinese MPAs. It is the current authors' contention, based on long experience in both Chinese and UK educational systems that developing critical thinking is the most difficult task for many international students who study at universities in the UK. The NTU MPA programme emphasized the need to research comparative public management, innovation, skills for policy analysis, and operational and performance management, as well as studies in leadership and ethics to meet the emerging needs of Chinese public administration. The programme provide the students with the latest

developments in knowledge of the public sector in order to allow them to have a better understanding and ability to apply theories into practice. The programme is aimed at enhancing students' skills in various aspects including presentation, communication, and research skills and techniques. The main principle of designing the programme was to facilitate students' competence as creative managers. The programme consisted of nine modules including a research project, and uses a wide range of teaching methods, such as lecturing, workshops, seminar, case studies, role play and self-study as well as visits to local government and other organisations. The assessment aimed to evaluate their application capability of theories covered in the module, in particular the skills of oral and written communication, as well as research capabilities.

We believe that participants' learning experience and outcomes should not be separated from their personal education experience in a context within a culture different to the one in which the programme was developed and is delivered. The following section will introduce Chinese culture and explore its impact on the education system and how it consequently influences teaching and learning.

Chinese Culture and Education System

Culture and Chinese culture

Culture has a number of meanings, as derived from literature. Trompenaars and Hampen-Turner (1997:3) argued that 'the essence of culture is not what is visible on the surface'. 'It is the shared ways groups of people understand and interpret the world' (*ibid*). In the literature,

culture, theoretically speaking, is a set of values and beliefs shared by people in a social community (Schein, 1985). Trompenaars and Hampen-Turner (1998:6) emphasise ‘culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas'. Hofstede (1980) views culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another (1984:21). The function of culture is to establish modes of conduct, standards of performance and ways of dealing with interpersonal and environmental relations that reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and thereby promote survival and growth among the members of any society (Ahmed and Li, 1996). For example, Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, advocates the importance of commitment and patience, orders relationships by status, requires respect for tradition, frugality in consumption, reciprocation of greeting, favours and gifts, and imbues a sense of shame through its construction of the concept of ‘face’ (*mianzi* 面子). Within this cultural setting, the function of culture is to establish modes of conduct, standards of performance and ways of dealing with interpersonal and environmental relations that reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and thereby promote survival and growth among the members of any society. ‘Correct’ interpersonal behaviour is determined by gender, age and position in society. Chinese culture also stresses group harmony, trust, sensitivity and social cohesion. It encourages complex hierarchically based interrelationships and interdependencies (Redding, 1980). Members within a group are required to co-operate and trust each other. At times, this requirement makes it necessary for the individual to subordinate self-interest, or even the truth, in order to maintain group harmony. Wang et al (2005) shares some of Redding’s view

and stresses five major aspects of Confucianism, which are (a) hierarchy and harmony, (b) group orientation, (c) guanxi networks (relationships), (d) mianzi (face) and (e) time orientation. These five characteristics are seen as core in Confucianism-based culture. All these characteristics, to some degree, may be reflected in the Chinese education system. The paper explores how these cultural aspects affect students' learning from their studying on MPA programmes, but in the next section we will examine the education system in China, more broadly.

The Education System in China

Education has been valued for thousands of years in China. The establishment of the education system can be traced back to the fundamental justification for the Chinese imperial exams, which appointed to civil service positions not through special or inherited privilege, but through an individual's own abilities. These included *Six Arts* (music, archery and horsemanship, arithmetic, writing and knowledge of the rituals and ceremonies of both public and private life) in the first generation exams and later the curriculum was extended to the *Five Studies* (military strategies, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography) in addition to the Confucian Classics. The exams took three levels (i.e. local, provincial and national). Those who passed the local level exam and then the provincial level exam became *juren* (举人) or a recommended man and were eligible for the national level exams. Those who passed national exams became *jinshi* (进士) or a so-called "presented scholar". These were highly prestigious special exams for scholars who were occasionally assessed by

Imperial Decree. All the exams lasted up to seventy-two hours and each individual was set and examined separately from others. For those who passed all the exams and were selected for administrative positions, it meant that their clans or families also rose in social prestige and wealth. Only a very small proportion of candidates who were selected, for example, there was just two percent in the Tang Dynasty.

'Although the imperial examination system set up in the seventh century was abolished in 1911, candidates continued to strive for exam success in order to better themselves' (Chan, 1999:297). 'This served to reinforce the fact that academic achievement and hard work were seen by many as the main way of moving up the social ladder for the Chinese...' (*ibid*). Therefore, pursuing higher education is still seen even now as a better way to achieve success. The annual national examination in China is the biggest event to those families who have children entered for the exam, especially to those families that only have one child. This is almost the case for all the families. Children start to prepare for the examination from primary school. Surface learning and target understanding are significant, because retention of knowledge learned from classes is highlighted. Students thus have to remember as much as they can in order to receive better marks. They believe what their teacher says is one hundred percent (100%) correct. What a teacher says will be seen as the right answer to exam questions. Therefore, students rarely challenge their teachers. Another potential factor in this is that of 'losing face', but this concept is outside the scope of this paper, but its importance cannot be ignored. The crucial point here is the Chinese education system encourages a "surface" approach to learning.

In the Chinese education system, during twelve years of study from primary to secondary school, children become skilled at memorising and taking exams. If successful, they have the opportunity to enter a University in China. Universities in China reflect a similar approach of rewarding performance in examinations based on memory and memorising. As a result of such teaching, learning and assessment methods Chinese students are mainly interested in limited areas, which are covered or recommended by teachers so that they will achieve good results.

From the primary school to secondary school students are located in a fixed classroom and study alongside the same group of students. The pupils also have to sit in the same seat for forty five minutes at a time even if they began their education at the age of six. They are not allowed to move during the forty five minutes and must refrain from chatting with others in classroom. They are made to put their hands behind their backs. A tutor will look after the whole class from year one to year six at the primary school, for example. The curriculum has changed little during the years at each level, including university. Teachers are not required to change their teaching structure and content often. They use the same methods – didactic, one way delivering at all levels of education. As an example at university level, a teacher may use teaching materials for more than 10 years without any change. Assessment is almost 100 % closed paper exams towards the end of the term or year, and exam questions are designed based upon one single textbook. The education system appears not to encourage change, and this applies to teachers and students. Teachers expect students to have the same knowledge as they do. Therefore students have to remember what the teacher has said in the lecture and

answer the question in the exam with the same answer. Otherwise students would receive no mark on that particular question, although some subjects require students to have their own thoughts, such as Chinese composition. This, however, is unusual and untypical of most subjects where rote leaning and regurgitation of facts is rewarded.

Having described the general basis of Chinese education, and the main ways in which students are expected to learn, the paper now moves on to illustrate the research methodology on which this paper was based. It also explains how data was gathered from Chinese students studding on an MPA programme in a non-Chinese context, at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham University, in the UK.

REASEAERCH METHODS

From an interpretivist approach (Saunders et al (2000), the research employed focus group discussions involving both two and four person semi-structured interviews with MPA students. The aim of the focus group discussions and the interviews were to explore the students' experience, meanings and perceptions of the MPA programme compared with their previous learning experience in China. This was aimed at finding out how culture impacts on their learning. It was also to add to our understanding of the impact of the education system on teaching and learning, as this is little researched in the literature. The students involved in the research were all senior government leaders/managers, except two who are Associate Professors in a public administration school at local government level in China. They all had more than eight years working experience and half of them have already had an MBA from a

Chinese University. The first focus group discussion lasted for two and half hours with nine students and the second focus group involved twenty two students for one and half hours. The face to face interviews were conducted in between two focus group discussions. This field work was conducted before their departure to China when they had almost finished their dissertation, to complete the MPA course of study, after one year in Nottingham. It was thought that at this stage in the programme that they would be able to provide valuable data based on their experiences of the whole process of teaching and learning on the programme.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research revealed a number of interesting results from the focus groups and the interviews. The following section will firstly present the findings on how the Chinese education system and Confucianism continued to impact on the students' learning experience.

Learning approaches

The UK education system is different from the Chinese, as the former takes a deep learning approach, which was evidenced in the interviews. Boyle (2003) highlights the deep learning approach leads students to attempt to relate concepts to existing experience, distinguish between new ideas and existing knowledge, and critically evaluate and determine key themes and concepts. One of the interviewees said:

> '*The MPA's strength here at NTU stresses critical thinking. The Chinese MPA seems to be more rigid than in the UK. What the MPA students benefit from the MPA here the most is the way of thinking in which it is far more important than the content.*

However the critical thinking needs an environment. Teachers can provide the platform for students and have the skills to encourage students to perform well on the platform in a critical way. …We respect the contribution of new theories but we can also ask questions like why, and how does it work in the context and can we change it or improve it or can we apply them into another context?

Critical thinking is seen as a useful approach to widen the students' view and it can make a good contribution to the application of a theory developed in the western world. However, it is not straightforward to students, particularly at the beginning of the course. For example, one of the students said in the interview that:

'When I wrote the first essay I used a lot of quotations from textbooks and journal articles as well as published government documents to explain how the NHS system here works. I was very pleased with my writing and expected a good result for the assignment. I was shocked when I received the essay back as it was a very low mark. After reading the comments I realised that I need to evaluate it critically not just simply present the information quoted from others. I thought the information written in the course work is useful to my job and I should remember them for my practice.'

This reflects the Chinese surface learning approach which highlights routine use of rote memorisation (Fry et al. 1999). As the student carried on and confrimed that:

'This was how l learned from MBA programme at one of top universities in China. I used to prefer learning new ideas and new information and try to remember the

details so that I could use it when I need. This is a habit and developed from my life. It is probably not just me but also my colleagues in the course feel the same.'

The surface learning approach taken in China is confirmed by another student who explained that in China they had to remember everything that the teacher taught in the classroom or what the textbook presented in order to get a good mark in the exam. A closed exam paper was the only assessment and still dominates the end of the term or year. He said：

'We only had one text book for one module and it was like a Bible. We had to learn everything written in the book. Otherwise I would not get a good result. In addition the tutor gave us a revision session and covered most exam questions. Therefore, everybody could pass and it was difficult for anyone to fail. … (teaching) was content driven and there was no space to think. Teachers hope to tell everything s/he knows and did not consider the other way.'

Another student added:

'Teachers in Chinese universities normally introduce big theories and we felt that we have learned a lot of knowledge from the teaching/delivering (in Nottingham). Now I recall what I had learned and feel that the knowledge stored in my brain has gradually disappeared and the knowledge I had learned appears to be very superficial or background information. Chinese teachers generally prepare and teach carefully and seriously about the theories themselves. We used to believe what they taught was 100% correct. Thus we firstly accepted it without questioning. For example two Chinese universities of A and B are very famous in China and the programme seems

to be well designed. But I feel that I learned much more here (in Nottingham) because the education system here encourages critical ways of thinking. … the term 'critical' appears to be a serious term from a Chinese perspective but it is so popular here in the UK, like cookies on the table.'

One of the students gave further evidence to the surface learning approach in China. She said that: '*I had a first degree in pharmacy and there were too many direct instructions with little flexibility'.* She continued *'Twenty years ago when I was doing the degree in a Chinese university, the teachers taught a very complicated equation, and one of my classmate asked why is it like this? The teacher said that is what I have learned from my teacher'. Teaching one textbook and assessing the memory of the book at the end of the term. There is no need to read other references. (surface learning approach).'*

To read a single text book is certainly not good enough in the UK education system. This evidenced from one student. He said：

'I felt very sad when I failed one module at the beginning of the programme (MPA). I did read the textbook and used some quotation from the book. But one of the comments I got was 'very descriptive' and limited understanding and reading. I used to be a very good student in my class in China and I had never failed any module.'

The different systems of teaching and learning in the UK and China affected the student learning experience, which were confirmed by individual interviews. This was also confirmed in the second focus discussion. In the second focus group, researchers used it as an opportunity to get ideas from the students about the programme. Many of the MPA students

said they would like to have more site visits to local councils. The reason for this was "*to learn how local people work in their organisation in the UK and the details of work patterns*. *To observe meetings would be useful'*. This reflects the view that students were interested in the detailed information about how organisations in the UK operate and they could easily know how UK organisations operate and implement in their own organisation without much effort to create something new. This further proved that the "surface approach" was accepted by the Chinese students. It suggested that the "surface approach" to learning was already embedded in students' learning experience. Other evidence to support this view would be that a number of students asked for more case studies in public sector to be delivered in class so that they could learn the details from the cases for the future practice in China.

The Chinese education system appears to have adopted targeted learning for thousands years, a system which contributed to individual benefits (Fry et al. 1999:9), for example becoming imperial servants. The standard exam system selected those people for promotion who performed the best. Teachers historically prepared students for exams so that they could get good jobs if they had good exam results. The system itself, however, did not encourage tutors to adopt innovative way of teaching as teachers were reluctant to take risks in case anything went wrong in adopting a new approach. There are many examples where students who failed a module complained that the teaching was the problem for their failure. As a consequences of this penalties were incurred (i.e. bonus reduction and no promotion/upgrading). There was no incentive to encourage people to do things differently in the Chinese education system. As one of the students said that "In the University's rewards and promotion system teachers do

not consider this element (new approach of teaching) so it does not encourage undertaking innovation". Both teachers and students were reluctant to take the risk of failing any assessment and the only way to achieve it was to repeat the same thing again and again and again.

The UK education seems to take a more personal learning approach and students bring different backgrounds and expectations to learning (Fry et al. 1999:9) to enhance their understanding. In the discussion with the MPA students most of them enjoyed the experiences in the programme as they were encouraged to challenge tutors and challenge fellow students.

Many of the students said that they learned a lot from the research module, especially from the process of doing their dissertation although many of them were struggling to do the literature review which required good skills of analysis and evaluation of current literature on the subject. This is because they learned how to identify the gap and what is a valuable research topic. One student said in the interview:

> *'In my first Master's degree which was received from a distinctive university in China, I did a research project but there was no such module which taught systematic research methodology and methods. We did not know how to define the research topic and use the literature. It was decided by the supervisor. – This is impacted by the culture – do what the teacher asked.'*

Another benefit that the students received from the programme was that a wider range of teaching and learning methods were employed in the programme. One of the students said

'as a leader we need to have good communication skills. One of them is in presentation and we need to have professional presentation skills. We used to give speech as without using the computer as a tool although we have very modern facilities, probably the most advanced facilities in the world as we have a budget to update the machine almost every year. However, I did not know how to use it. In the MPA programme not only have we learned how to use the machine (Power point software) but also to conduct a professional presentation, for example presentation on research progress etc. In order to do a good presentation we have to have good content and quality of slides as well as the oral presentation. That is a big challenge to us and I'll ask my staff to use it when I get back to China.'

Chinese culture and Confucianism

Chinese culture has highly valued education for thousands of years, especially Confucianism as mentioned above. One of the most influential phrases in Chinese history was 'Wan ban jie xia pin wei you du shu gao' (万般皆下品， 惟有读书高). This means that only people who were educated could be in the top echelon in the society and had power over others. This was also derived from Confucianism, especially the hierarchical relationship principle. This was mentioned in Redding's work (1980) that Confucianism advocates the importance of commitment and patience, orders relationships by status….Within this cultural settings 'correct' interpersonal behaviour is determined by gender, age and position in society. Position was somehow determined by education level and result of exams. As mentioned

above, people would be in different positions from various level exams, such as *juren* (举人) who passed the local and the provincial levels' exams became or recommended man and *jinshi* (进士) or scholar who was eligible for the national level exams. In bygone times only education seemed to be able to change people's position but it remains the case nowadays in China as the national exam is always very competitive in China. The paper will not discuss this in detail, other than to say that importance of education has been a significant part of Chinese culture and to some extent it still affects students' learning experience and their outcomes within the education system which is established in the cultural context. The following section will mainly discuss the cultural impact from two main aspects of Confucianism, unequal relationships and "face" issues which were also mentioned as importance by the interviewees and focus group participants. Unequal relationships and "face" issues are regarded as significant cultural elements for the teaching and learning of Chinese managers and leaders.

Unequal relationships

Chinese culture encourages complex hierarchically based interrelationships and interdependencies (Redding, 1980) although it also stressed group harmony, trust, sensitivity and social cohesion. There were five hierarchical relationships derived historically from Chinese Confucianism. Confucianism defined five basic relationships and principles for each relation. These five relationships and their characters are: sincerity between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subjects, distinction or separate functions between husband and wife, order between older brothers and younger brothers, and faithfulness among friends

(Chen, 1995). These five cardinal relationships are based upon a differentiated order among individuals (*ibid*) and the five relations are called as *Wu Lun* (五论). Although there have been changes given the dramatic development achieved in China some of these five principles still play a role in people's behaviours, such as sovereign and subject… (Teng, 2003:212) and is still seen as the case in this research in terms of relationship between teachers and students in China. It is seen as an unequal relationship between them. One of the students cited the UK case of when Tony Blair, the former UK Prime Minister was challenged by an academic about the Third Way Philosophy. The student said in the focus group that:

> *'When Tony Blair proposed 'The Third Way and' it raised a lot of different voices from academics who criticises him from different angles (i.e. not new, not suitable to the current situation etc.). It was the time when Tony Blair was still in the most respected period. It would certainly not be the case in China. For example if the central government implements a new policy, academics would be reluctant to challenge the central government although different voices may be helpful to the government to form a better policy. There are areas, for example concerning ordinary people's life and are seen some critical evaluations but definitely not voiced publicly. There is a framework which limits people's critical thinking as they are concerned about the leaders' opinions. If the top leader said one thing there would be hardly any second voice about it.'*

Thus the Chinese system appears to lack a mechanism to encourage people to think differently because of the culture. It also reflects that people strongly respect the

Confucianism value. This does not just happen in governments, but also happens in schools and universities. In the focus group discussion one of the students commented, with reference to the Chinese education system that:

> '*The university seems to be teacher-centred and they always have absolutely top authority above students. Teachers are not willing to accept the critical thinking/ challenge from students*.'

Another student comment that the UK education system appears to be challenging to teachers and the relationship between teachers and students are not unequal. He explained:

> *'In the UK teachers and students seem to be at an equal position. Students are allowed and encouraged to challenge teachers. This is because they (*teachers*) believe this would develop students' creativity and also they are aware of that students came from different backgrounds and experiences and could be able to demonstrate different views on an issue from them. We were often encouraged to say different opinions in class room here in the UK. However, we feared to say different things at the beginning of the course as we used to believe that teachers were always right as they have much more knowledge than we do.'*

Another student added:

> '*I always respect my MBA supervisor at a Chinese university when I was doing my MBA. We had a very close relationship. He supervised a few students and we often went to see him, especially during the Chinese Spring Festival. We still carry the belief that being a teacher one day and would be father for a life (一日为师， 终生为父)'.*

The above reflects the unequal relationship between father and sons from Confucianism as noted earlier. In this principle, sons always had to obey their father. In other words sons could not challenge their father because he was above them all. In the context of education students had to listen to their teachers and not challenge them. As a student pointed out:

> '*Teachers are always right. Also teachers are frightened if students asked a lot of challenging questions. This is because they may lose face if they had no answers to the questions.'*

Clearly face is another issue from Chinese culture which affects students learning experience and will be discussed in the following section.

Face issue

Chinese culture, especially requires respect for tradition, frugality in consumption, reciprocation of greeting, favours and gifts, and imbues a sense of shame through its construction of the concept of 'face' (*mianzi* 面子) (Teng, 2003). Everybody is concerned about their 'face' – how other people see them. In the Chinese education context it is inevitably a big issue as both teachers and students were concerned about their face. One of the students gave an example from his Chinese MBA experience. He said:

> *'Before the exam the teacher asked students if they liked a closed exam paper or an open one (Interestingly the form of the paper had not been decided in advance). Most students were happy to have an open paper. It is simply because students would easily get a pass so that both teachers and students had good "face" because of no failure. It*

would be different if they took a closed paper which both teachers and students "face" a difficulty if some students fail.'

To protect peoples' "face" the Chinese education system aimed at getting every body a pass. This appeared to influence their teaching and learning approach – surface learning. On one hand teachers teach the knowledge they know and on the other hand students remember what teachers have said. Good memory would help them to get good results in the exam. Both teachers and students achieved a happier ending - both retained "face". This legacy from Chinese system caused some problem to MPA students at beginning of the course in Nottingham. The students were reluctant to challenge teachers. They feared asking a wrong question. One of the students expressed that:

'*I was not willing to ask any questions, especially in the fist two modules. There were a couple of reasons. Firstly, I thought my English was not good enough and I wondered whether the teacher would understand my question. Secondly, there are many of my colleagues who have better English then mine and they may laugh at me if I say something wrong, such as grammar and pronunciation. Speaking in the whole group with some mistakes I would have no "face" although my colleague may not say so directly but I was scared.'*

Another "face" issue relating to the teaching and learning was the need for academic rigour in using references properly. It was unpopular in Chinese articles to use a lot of references, as there is a belief that the author would appear to lack of knowledge if s/he used a lot references in their work. In other words this would damage the author's "face". In the UK appropriate

refereeing other people's work is a requirement, with the need to name each author in the work. Otherwise it would be treated as plagiarism if they failed to do these. Students had a strong view on this, as reflected in following quote:

> '*I did not want to write many references in my paper as this could devalue my paper in China. However we learned from the UK that we have to acknowledge other people's work in the assignment otherwise we would fail the module. I also know that more references used in the paper could be seen as more "critical" as more views could be drawn into the paper. Importantly I would not lose "face" if I do so. In contrast I may get good "face" by having a good mark from the assignment by using more references appropriately.'*

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the findings illustrate that culture and education systems influence teaching and learning strategies, students' learning experiences, assessments and learning outcomes. The Chinese education system has been well established and run for thousand of years, on a strongly embedded Confucianism culture. The paper has argued that in the Chinese education system students had little opportunity or a platform to develop their creativity, due largely to unequal relationships between teachers and students, and the persistence of both surface learning and "face". Data presented in this paper was collected from only one cohort of Chinese leaders/managers studying for one year in Nottingham on a UK developed MPA. It is therefore limited, but provided useful insights into the perception, feelings, and attitudes of a group of senior current leaders/managers. The paper presented

valuable results, which will enable academics in UK institutions to better understand why international students sometimes have difficulties in learning in a different context from their traditional background.

The findings should enable UK institutions to improve students learning experiences and outcomes. Equally they highlight valuable insights in to the ways in which Chinese universities might alter exiting teaching and learning approaches, assessments and learning outcomes to develop students' creativity, and better prepare them for teaching and learning approaches in another state or jurisdiction. The importance of the impact of culture on an embedded education system suggests that cultural influences are crucial considerations for innovative teaching and learning approaches to be developed.

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