

Investigating the Possibility of Change within the Transnational Higher Education in China Using a Freirean Study of the Promise of Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract

Transnational higher education (TNHE) was introduced to mainland China in the 1980s, influenced by the Chinese government's neoliberal university model strategy. Some existing literature discusses this strategy and its role. However, since then, little research has explored how teaching and learning impact students' agency within TNHE. Specifically, there is a gap in the studies examining the effects at a pedagogical level. In this Freirean study, it is set in the context of transnational higher education in China and explores students' perspectives of learning and teaching in these institutions, through a lens of critical pedagogy. This interpretive, qualitative study draws its data from five sequential focus groups with a small group of eight students. The data is then analysed through the detailed and considered application of several stages of qualitative techniques – each of which are illustrated clearly and hence presented for alternative readings. Findings are discussed carefully, and critically linked with the theoretical underpinnings.

The findings shed light on the prevailing “Banking Concept of education” embedded in teaching and learning, as well as students' timetables, which created a competitive learning environment that aligns with the expectations of a neoliberal society. Consequently, students

express feeling of powerlessness and helplessness in maintaining the status quo due to familial pressure, leaving them with limited options choosing alternative learning models other than the one provided by the college. Most importantly, this paper critically reflects on the participants' insight regarding the erosion of Confucius' wisdom of 'teaching each other' and examines the factors contributing to its decline within the framework of China's neoliberal development. By critically evaluating these issues, this study provides valuable insights into students' agency within TNHE and the broader educational landscape in mainland China.

Keywords: *transnational higher education, mainland China, Critical Pedagogy, students' agency*

Introduction

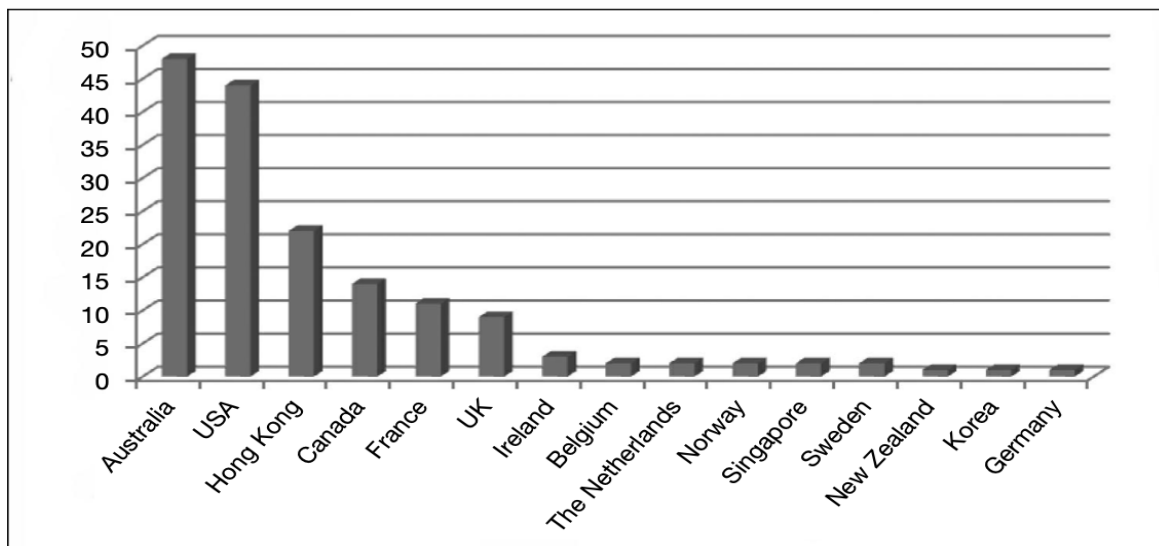
This paper explores the possibility of change by challenging the dominant education narrative of human capital development (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2007; Tan, 2014). Human capital is defined as “productive wealth embodied in labour, skills and knowledge” (OECD, 2001, p.251), and refers to any stock of knowledge or the acquired characteristics a person has that contribute to his or her economic productivity (Garibaldi, 2006). In essence, human capital theory proposes that education increases an individual's productivity and earnings; thus, education is an investment (Becker, 1962). In light of this set of assumptions, the logic of human capital theory becomes clear: education and training increase human capital, leading to a higher productivity rate, which in turn results in a higher wage for the individual. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, education and earnings are positively correlated, and thus education and schooling should be promoted (Tan, 2014).

This paper aims to rethink the theory of ‘education as a practice of freedom’ as per the alternative (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2010). From a post-development framework, education has long played a crucial role in international development. A great deal of research has been carried out to understand how these relationships work. Moreover, how education can be effectively applied to improve the quality of life, particularly in so-called ‘developing’ nations (Escobar, 2015; Gudynas, 2016). However, since many of these studies begin with development theories of modernisation and/or human capital, the assumptions underlying these methodologies impact the nature of the research. As a result, the findings tend to replicate Western thinking about development, which some claim had neo-colonial influences (Andreotti, 2006). However, in various situations, education can offer opportunities to contest the narratives and search for suitable and effective alternatives (Wang, 2013).

Since the early 1990s, in addition to the traditional forms typically characterised by mobility of students, scholars, researchers, academic cooperations, and joint research between different countries, TNHE has grown in significance and importance as an essential part of the internationalisation of higher education in many countries (Huang, 2007). TNHE in China has recently become one of the options available to middle-class Chinese parents whose children miss out on admission to prestigious domestic universities (Yang, 2021). TNHE is viewed as a gateway to postgraduate study in the West, so even though their costs are high by Chinese standards, parents have seen them as an investment in their children’s social status and human capital (Trahar, 2015). Although no official statistics are available, the media reported that in 2020, about 600,000 students enrolled in Chinese transnational higher education (Huang, 2022).

The Chinese government-approved degree programmes work with 164 foreign universities or colleges (Yang, 2008). These international partners are primarily

from developed economies with advanced technology. As shown in Graph 1.1, Australia (29.3%) and the USA (26.8%) are the dominant forces with the most significant shares of educational service export worldwide.



Graph 1.1 Countries of origin of partnership institutions (Yang, 2008).

The development results from China's overall policy arrangements during recent decades of reforms (Yang, 2008). The alignment of China's educational reforms with those in the economic sectors has the most significant impact. Economists have produced educational policies to 'meet the needs of a socialist economy' (Lao, 2003). The market's role has been especially prominent in higher education, and most substantial reform policies have been implemented to make structural changes in education (Yang, 2003). Since the 1990s, China has had specific laws governing transnational education, including the Interim Provisions for Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools in 1995 and the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese–Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools in 2003 (Yang, 2008).

As cited above, Huang (2007, 2022), Yang (2008) and many others (Tan, 2014; Wang, 2013) have carried out significant theoretical research on TNHE in China. Their work has laid out a critical foundation for understanding the

policy, the contexts and characteristics, and the challenges and opportunities for the TNHE in China. Moreover, building upon the Freirean perspective, hooks (1994), and Giroux (2010) have extensively studied and promoted the movement of critical pedagogy in their writing in the Western context, mainly in North American.

Nevertheless, the application of empirical research to examine the potential for transformative changes within TNHE in China remains limited. Furthermore, critical education and critical pedagogy have been underrepresented in Chinese literature and research. Specifically, within the scope of rural education in China, the incorporation of critical pedagogy in a rural social work practicum, as a means to address social inequalities in rural areas, has not received much attention (Ku, Yuan-Tsang, and Liu, 2009).

Therefore, this paper employs a Freirean Study of Critical Pedagogy on challenging human capital development which is prevalent in current higher education in China and globally, to investigate the possibility of change within TNHE in mainland China. It aims to investigate the theoretical context of - Paulo Freire and bell hooks, to critically appraise Freirean literature in relation to the evaluation of students' academic freedom. In addition, to critically analyse the policy context of governing transnational education in China, implying the reinforcement of human capital development.

Freirean literature in the context of twenty-first century

The goal of this theoretical framework is to justify the adaptation and adoption of the theory 'education as a practice of freedom' in relation to the context of this research and how it relates to the aim and objectives of the study. A theory embodies a lens that can be used to view the world and be used to make sense of it, as an interpretivist on the more idealist end of the spectrum (Barnett-Page

& Thomas, 2009). 'Education as a practice of freedom' has been adopted to various situations to examine educational practice (Glass, 2004; O'Brien et al., 2022; Santos & Mortimer, 2002). However, 'education as a practice of freedom' in this study is rethought as a theoretical framework embedded within Freirean literature.

The phrase '*Education as the practice of freedom*' first appears as a book title which nourished the development of Freirean literature (Table 2.1). Paulo Freire wrote the first book in 1967 published in Portuguese with the title *Educação como prática da liberdade (Education as the practice of freedom)* (Freire, 1967). Due to his involvement with the Social Service of Industry (SESI), Freire was well acquainted with the proletariat's educational problems (Morrow & Torres, 2019). Here, he learns the limitations of "welfareism" [*asistencialismo*]: the answer is not to do things *for* people, but *with* people. As a result of this encounter, he develops into an educator who challenges dehumanisation and develops ideas beyond schooling in *Pedagogy of Oppressed* (Freire, 2000). From the writing of 1959 to that of 1967, with a slight alteration, *Education as the Practice of Freedom* now adopts the perspective of "open society" rather than "flourishing capitalism" in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 2000). Nevertheless, Freire only adopts a socialist perspective in *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Freire, 1970a), which comes in between the writings from the years 1968 to 1974. His final ambition, renovated in *Pedagogy of Hope*, is the utopian dream of a democratic socialist society (Freire & Freire, 1992). Later, bell hooks transfers these ideas to the classroom on teaching and teachers to become self-actualised through feminist practice, in which students from all levels of society have had an explosion of freedom (hooks, 1994).

Literature- what Is freedom?		Definition	
Education as the practice of freedom	Freire, 1967	‘welfareism’	not to do things <i>for</i> people, but <i>with</i> people
Pedagogy of oppressed	Freire, 1968	Humanisation	a necessary condition for humans to continuously strive towards completion.
Cultural action of freedom	Freire, 1970	Socialism	build knowledge <i>with</i> others
Pedagogy of hope	Freire, 1992	A democratic socialist society	democratic dialogue
Pedagogy of freedom	Freire, 1996	Open society	revising education and school
Teaching to transgress	hooks, 1994	Self-actualisation	to ‘transgress’ against racial, sexual and class boundaries to achieve the gift of freedom

Table 2.1 The development of Freirean literature

‘Education as the practice to freedom’ is organic in thinking and evaluating changes in humanity, society and education (Table 2.2), so that *‘in that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.’* (hooks, 1994, p.207).

Theoretical principles arise from Freire (2000)
Humanisation as an ontological vocation.
The world and mind are in a constant state of becoming.
Reality can be known, but not in a singular way.
Knowledge of reality facilitates transformation of reality.
Praxis as a dialogic dance.

Table 2.2 Theoretical principles arise from Freire (2000).

As participants in the process of emergence and transition of consciousness, humans are lost (Freire, 2000). Humans are submerged in historical conditions

that prevent their emergence into a society in transition, allowing for the transition of consciousness and people's insertion in their reality. Freire's perspective of human nature was that ontologically and epistemologically, human beings engage with and understand the world primarily cognitively (Sanders, 2020). As such, without reaching the criticality required for their integration and participation in their own destiny, humans can be crushed by industrialisation (Freire, 2021). In essence, critical consciousness and reflection, as emphasised by Ford (2022), are essential for promoting social emancipation and for enabling people to actively participate in their own destiny. Thus, Freire (2000) acknowledged the importance of rationality, consciousness, and reflection, which derives from the use of the “word.”

On the other hand, the limitations that prevent humans from achieving social emancipation are complex and multifaceted. Economic exploitation, overwork and underpayment, as well as cultural and political factors that limit consciousness and prevent people from fully engaging with their historical condition, are all listed by Ford (2022). As Freire (2000) argued, it was essential to name the world to be able to change it, hence dialogue is indispensable to the cognitive act of unveiling reality. Ultimately, consciousness is shaped through the interconnectedness of humans with the world, bringing it into existence.

Society transitions from a predominantly enclosed and authoritarian phase toward a new, more open and democratic situation (Freire, 1992).

Industrialisation results in democratic inexperience and the rise of the working classes in public life (Amorim et al., 2007). The situation requires action that could mitigate production-related issues in conjunction with the integration of humans in their own times (Mannheim, 1950). When confronted with a suffering and humbled humanity, Torres-Olave (2020) critically reflects that Freire provided measures for overcoming this antinomy through hope in a non-

idealistic but ontological manner, acting in the world to transform oppressive conditions and enhancing opportunities for social justice. Democratic dialogue that aims to "open up to the thinking of others" is important in achieving this (Freire, 1992, p. 110). Democratic dialogue could be viewed as a call to action to advance change that starts with the community rather than the individual. According to Freire (2000), as unfinished beings, we cannot exist without others; a change needs to happen in how we relate and build knowledge *with* others instead of *about* others.

The notion of human beings as "unfinished" emphasised a process of *becoming* and *developing* (Freire, 2000). This process is inherently social, as the understanding of the world is shaped by the interactions with others and the construction of knowledge is through dialogue with those around. However, Freire (2000) argues that much of traditional education and cultural conditioning fail to recognise this social dimension of learning and instead focus on "banking education", in which students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge learning about others rather than learning with them. This has resulted in distorted and limited understanding of the world that reinforce existing power structures and perpetuates inequality.

To overcome democratic inexperience, education and the school must be revised, including its curriculum, its formal and informal structure, as well as its grades and types, technical and humanistic content, as advocated by Dewey (2001). According to Gordon (1984), schooling practices contributes to the process of social reproduction, which is the process by which societal inequalities and hierarchies are maintained and reinforced overtime. Freire (1959) further emphasised that when ordinary people attend school, "when they have any, it's on average between two and three years" (p. 88). A few hours of schooling with a programme that is disconnected from reality does not help

understand critical issues. Education, according to Freire, is human education [formación] (Amorim, 1997). Thus, schooling practices play a crucial role in the reproduction of social hierarchies, which includes the conditioning of thinking and socialisation. Dewey (2001) argued that revising education and schools must take into account the larger social structures and hierarchies in which they operate to effectively promote democratic experiences and practices.

Antidialogue reinforces democratic inexperience; the arrogance of a few confronting the mute and silenced others serve as the foundation for Pedagogy of the Oppressed in 1968 (Freire, 2000). The prerequisites for dialogue are horizontal social relationships, a common language as a starting point, and respect for ordinary people. Such contrasts with the idea of a public, common interest, which does not exist (Bartlett, 2005). According to Amorim et al. (2007), democratic inexperience also implies that a person cannot understand their own historical significance when limited to vegetable-like interests. If done right, commitment presupposes that freedom necessitates paternalism's external and vertical authority to become flexible, internalised, and critical (Torres, 2001). In *Sobre Educação: diálogo* (Freire & Guimarães, 1982), dialogue means the discussion of authority, discipline and freedom would be resumed under a different political horizon.

Freirean in relation to the evaluation of students' academic freedom and application in the Chinese higher education context

To investigate the challenges of the possibility of change on how a Freirean framework can provide an alternative narrative to influence the understanding of education and how it can be applied in the Chinese higher education context. The nature of this study is Freirean research on Paulo Freire's legacy. Instead of reviewing the literature on Freire, this review covers three key areas of Freirean literature, combined with a relevant evaluation of students' academic freedom

in Chinese higher education. This study brings Freire's arguments into the 21st century and a Chinese context.

This journey into the fusion of critical pedagogy with the Chinese context does not take place in isolation. Rather, it unfolds against the backdrop of the importation of human capital theory into the Chinese educational paradigm. As discussed earlier, this theory advocates for education as an investment in human productivity and earnings (Becker, 1962). Its influence extends to various facts of the Chinese higher education system, emphasising the cultivation of a skilled workforce and innovation to propel economic growth.

Within the prevailing human capital discourse, learning is increasingly portrayed as job retraining which dehumanises students (Dale et al., 2005). This trend is particularly pronounced under a neoliberal climate that valued education solely in terms of its economic benefits, redefining educational goals in the language of human capital and individual self-interest (Stanistreet, 2021). Consequently, education is often viewed as a private interest rather than a public good.

Critics of the market-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism, such as Giroux (2010) contend that the market continues to devalue all facts of public interest, and equity is divorced from the consequences of excellence. On the other hand, Oplatka (2004) posited that the market-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism has imposed the principles of efficiency and productivity on education, leading schools to operate like businesses that prioritise profit maximisation and cost reduction. Consequently, schools are expected to be managed effectively and efficiently to achieve outcomes such as high-test scores, graduation rates, and employment rates.

The fusion of human capital theory into the Chinese educational context has not been without its complexities, given the nation's historical, cultural, and economic dynamics. The impact of the changing structure of schooling in China, including the disruptions caused by the cultural revolution and the subsequent reintroduction of examinations, was also felt in rural education (Chang, 1974; Ku, Yuan-Tsang, and Liu, 2009). Efforts were made to rebuild the rural education system after the cultural revolution, but challenges such as resources scarcity, lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate infrastructure persisted. This portrayal of social reality as something created and controlled by others, and the reduction of students to mere objects of history has been critiqued by Freire (2000).

The metaphor of the 'banking' model of education alludes to the dehumanising effects of education. Students gradually become static objects of deposition, far from being active participants in the classroom (hooks, 1994). In this way, a student is disconnected from his/her creative human power, and his/her potentiality is denied (Alam, 2013). The student-teacher relationship can also be criticised through the Marxist concept of class-consciousness (Lavine, 1984), in which the teachers belong to the upper class and have a storehouse of knowledge, while the students remain ignorant to receive knowledge from them. As a result, the banking model of education reflects a denial of intellectual potentiality and is a dehumanising mechanism (Freire, 2000).

Universities in China are already deeply embedded in the logic of human capital and university education as a 'private good', and they have contributed to its evolution in various ways. It is worth recalling that the current neoliberal university model is the result of state interventions and choices (Connell, 2019). The regulatory regime of TNHE in China has been analysed using Mok and Han's (2016) theoretical framework. They concluded that China is clearly a

market-accelerationist state with strong authoritarian liberalism in orientation. Over the past years, Chinese higher education has re-joined the international track with reform of the university sector. Underlying such reformation is the adoption of the logic of competition and marketisation as strategies for developing the domestic Chinese economy and its insertion into various transnational frameworks (Pringle & Woodman, 2022).

Since the Chinese government is never a liberal state, the government has been pragmatically rational in adopting the ideas and practices generated by neo-liberalism (Tan, 2014). The adaptation shapes and develops the education market while promoting efficiency in managing these newly emerging TNHE institutions and programs (Mok & Han, 2017). Thereby, the universities have been given more autonomy and flexibility in running the TNHE institutions and programs (Mok, 2006). However, the extent of autonomy exercised by these TNHE operators is limited (Mok & Han, 2016). They are subject to the dual governance structure charged with the president's responsibility, which is led by the party secretary's leadership. Eventually, the operators must follow the Ministry of Education's policy directives and instructions, and the term "centralised decentralisation" aptly describes the educational governance of TNHE in China.

To that end, competition has been introduced into the Chinese university sector in various ways mirroring the government's promotion of market logic in higher education elsewhere, adopting unquestioningly criteria for "excellence" developed in the rich world (Lu, 2021). It is a paradigmatic instance of a broader stance adopted by elites in China, most often described in international relations scholarship as an acceptance of the rules of the global 'liberal order' (Zhang, 2020). While limitations on academic freedom in the Chinese context are often attributed exclusively to communist party control, falling into the

broad category of threats to this freedom by authoritarian states premised on their lack of democratic institutions (Pringle & Woodman, 2022), another perspective (Huang, 2007; Mok & Han, 2017) suggests that at this time in China, managerialism associated with marketisation and internationalisation can also work against the exercise of individual and institutional autonomy, which is central to definitions of academic freedom. In this sense, the debate over academic freedom is not solely on the rights of academic faculty but also on students' academic freedom (Macfarlane, 2012 & 2015).

Contemporary educational practices are increasingly perceived as undermining students' academic freedom. A key example of this is the evolution of attendance policies. Historically, such policies have existed, but their recent stringent implementation, particularly in the context of neoliberalism, raises concerns about their impact on academic freedom. While these policies are not inherently connected to neoliberal ideologies, their current application often does little more than serve as a mere attendance register, neglecting to address the root causes of student disengagement, such as subpar teaching methods. Moreover, the 'domestication of the student voice,' as described by Macfarlane (2012), suggests a trend where student feedback, though sought, is subtly constrained to align with institutional expectations, thus diminishing its genuineness and effectiveness. Macfarlane (2015) further explores this idea, noting that in modern higher education, students, as adults, are subjected to various performative demands. These include the visible demonstration of learning through physical presence in classes or online forums, dispositional engagement in group activities and discussions, and emotional alignment with social values and norms (Macfarlane, 2016). Such practices, while apparently aimed at enhancing engagement and learning, may inadvertently restrict the very essence of academic freedom by imposing rigid performance criteria and limiting authentic student expression.

However, this emphasis on performative aspects, which referred to as ‘performativity’ (Macfarlane, 2016). It can be seen as potentially restrictive to academic freedom, as it may limit the exercise of personal choice and the adoption of more democratic approach to learning. It is crucial to engage into broader conversation about the multifaceted dimensions of academic freedom, including its intersection with performativity and the potential consequences for students’ development as scholars, critics, and responsible citizens.

The importance of the social construction of knowledge is emphasised and reinforced for the development of work-related skills and behaviour. A mix of institutional and departmental policies on attendance arguing about punctuality and reliability is due to its relationship with students’ responsibility to be accountable to society (Leufer & Cleary-Holdford, 2010). Moreover, in the shape of a curriculum to develop an informed citizen with independent and critical thinking, a so-called ‘student-centred’ curriculum and pedagogy changes are simply demonstrated in the form of discussion-based activities (Sander et al., 2000). Despite the learning benefits frequently cited in the literature, especially in language learning (Alfares, 2017; Yu & Hu, 2017), students often view working and learning with others on group tasks in a negative light (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003) and discussion as discomfort (Ni Raghallaigh & Cunniffe, 2013). As society needs and appreciates extrovert personalities with compliance in their social values, higher education institutions enforce policies and change curriculum to prepare students for the ‘real’ world, which implies the job market (Macfarlane, 2015). As a result, students report anxiety and insecurity when teaching is organised in an avowedly student-centred way (Lea et al., 2003).

In their work, Segall et al. (1990) advanced concern on the practice and said we are what we are because of culturally based learning. McConnell (2018) further

contextualised this within the Chinese higher education, describing how students' lives and learning in conventional and campus-based universities in China are constrained by the campus during their four years of undergraduate study. Chinese students are frequently characterised as hard-working and diligent, with a utilitarian view of learning (Salili, 1996). Especially in the aftermath of the cultural revolution, as China underwent economic reforms and opened up to the world, the structure of schooling started to change again. The Chinese government reintroduced examinations as a means of evaluating students' academic performance and determining access to higher education (Chang, 1974). Wang (2005) epistemologically summarised the Chinese higher education in the way that knowledge is seen as useful information or objective truth. The importance of achievement and examinations in determining social status and economic opportunities re-emerged, and the linkage between authorised knowledge, testing, achievement, and eventually privilege was re-established from primary school through university in China (Pratt et al., 1999).

However, according to MacIntyre's (2009) analysis, the undergraduate education trend should be viewed as having distinct goals from graduate or professional education and not just as a prelude to those programmes. When considering the curriculum in this manner, undergraduate education implies giving students' ample opportunities to add breadth to their specialised studies through elective courses (Macfarlane, 2012). However, when they have the freedom to roam between institutions of higher education, pursue the courses they prefer and attend as they wish. The student academic freedom further depends on university pedagogy that enhances the self-actualisation and self-consciousness of students to develop as independent and humanised thinkers (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994).

The importance of critical pedagogy cannot be overstated in sustaining the university as a democratic public sphere (Giroux, 2006). Critical pedagogy argues that teaching as a deliberate act of intervening in the world, with the goal of teaching students to question “the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life” (Bauman, 1998, p.5). Moreover, it is required for both conceptualising and enacting the ideas of justice and democracy itself.

Pedagogy, at its best, is neither training nor political indoctrination; instead, it is a political and moral practice. Giroux (2006) brought the argument further and appraised that critical pedagogy provides students with the knowledge, skills, and social relationships that enable them to broaden their understanding of what it means to be critical citizens. It could be unpacked as critical pedagogy challenges teaching and learning in using knowledge and skills to deepen and extend the possibilities of living in a substantive and inclusive society. Giroux (2010) also argued that pedagogy acknowledges that education and teaching entail the crucial act of intervening in the world and the understanding that human life is conditioned rather than determined. Critical pedagogy invests in the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform the teaching, as well as critical self-consciousness about what it means to equip students with analytical skills so that they can be self-reflective about the knowledge and values they encounter in the classroom (Freire, 2000).

A framework for analysis

As discussed above, the underlying philosophy of banking education is deeply rooted in socio-cultural context and systematic structures, making it difficult to abandon. In a classroom where the banking model is prevalent, both the teacher and the students have a distinct theory of knowledge and learning which is context-dependent and socio-culturally interdependent. If the banking model of education has been rejected, this socio-cultural design of knowledge must likely be rejected simultaneously.

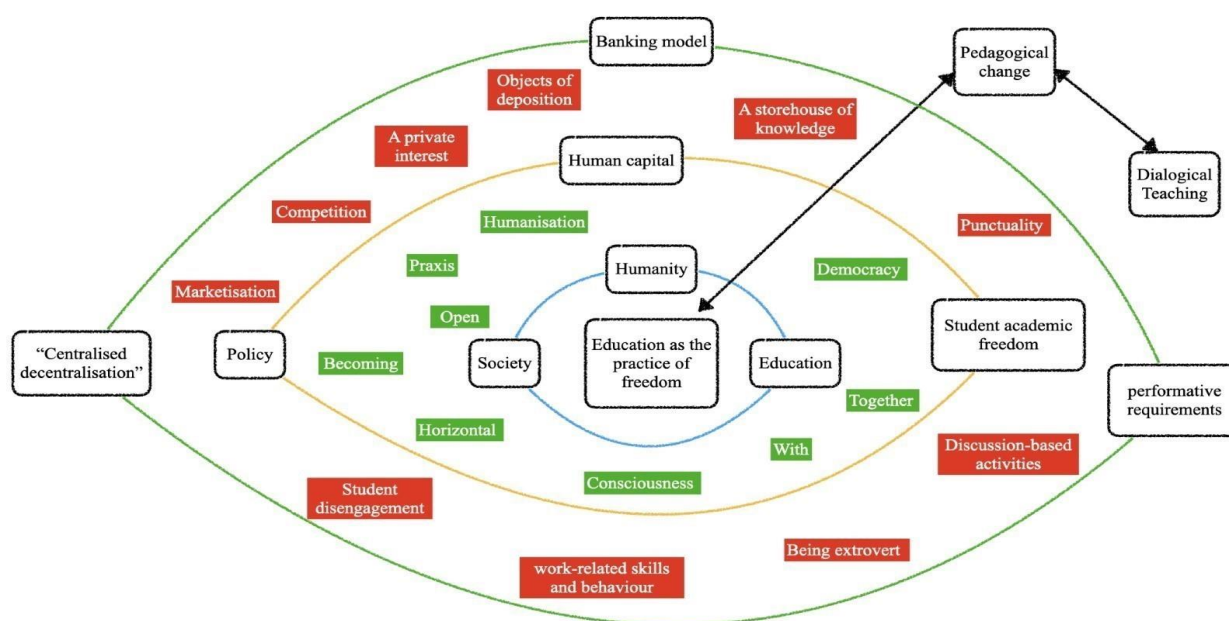


Diagram 2.1 My summary of the Freirean literature and theoretical framework (author, 2022)

In all the studies reviewed here, Diagram 2.1 is recognised as the concluding summary of the above literature and theory findings and illustrates an analysis of the regulatory regime and contextual situation of the current TNHE in China in light of the theoretical framework. The evidence presented in this section suggests that the layers of humanity, society, and education enfolded the practice of freedom. To reach the core, the promise of critical pedagogy spreads the impact by penetrating the constraints structured by policy and policy-oriented human capital development to achieve ‘freedom.’

Methodology

This research study is placed at a college. *The College* is a ‘Joint Education Initiative’ between one University in China and one University in Australia. The college is located in a city in the eastern Shandong Province of China. The research was carried out in May and June of 2022, before the summer break.

When deciding who to sample, numerous practical issues, obstacles, and concerns are considered. Strauss (1987) emphasised the importance of groups or subgroups of populations for the emerging theory in the theoretical sampling process in his qualitative analysis approach for social science. The sampling process does not follow the same rules as quantitative research. The sample group is categorically representative of the population, including age, year group, gender, and race (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). These categories may or may not be relevant. Participants in this study are viewed as holistic individuals who are not easily summarised by such characteristics (Strauss, 1987; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

The participants are from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) backgrounds. *The College* offers three four-year undergraduate programs: Mathematics and Applied Mathematics, Biotechnology, and Food Science & Engineering, the participants were from all three programmes in the same year group (Table 3.1). All programs use bilingual teaching language and charge tuition fees of RMB 60,000 per year. Participants also shared their timetable; the name of the units have been erased for ethical consideration (Table 3.2).

Year group	Pseudonym	Gender	Gaokao result	Programs
2	John	M	590/750	Food Science & Engineering
2	Christine	F	597/750	Biotechnology
2	Adam	M	601/750	Biotechnology
2	Sarah	F	590/750	Mathematics and Applied Mathematics
2	Oliver	M	587/750	Food Science & Engineering
2	Molly	F	589/750	Food Science & Engineering
2	Amy	F	596/750	Biotechnology
2	Eve	F	621/750	Biotechnology

Table 3.1 Participants' profile



Table 3.2 Participants' timetable in August of year 2021/22(left side: Biotechnology; right side: Food Science & Engineering)

With this philosophical positionality in mind, interpretive approaches focus on action (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). The data collection process was designed to be conducted as a focus group to collect the discussion and interaction between participants with eight participants in five semi-structured discussion sessions. Moreover, the data yielded a collective way on students' perception rather than an individual view (Morgan, 1988). Furthermore, the number of participants followed and referred to Morgan's (1988) and Fowler's (2009) suggestions, considering the bearer of the particular characteristics to make background homogeneity as well. In addition, an open discussion was planned after the data collection was completed. With their current lock-down situation, the sixth session's design was ethically significant. It was a safe space

for them to talk about anything related to their studies that would not be recorded or collected.

As a result, the group interaction during the five-session discussion would be the emergence of data. This study brought together a carefully selected group of students from a TNHE college to discuss a specific theme in each session centred on the main topic of 'education as a practice of freedom,' and the interaction with the group resulted in data and outcomes (Smithson, 2000). The focus group's contrived nature was its strength: it was time efficient, producing a large amount of data in that one-hour discussion. Despite the fact that Hyden and Bulow (2003) claimed that focus group discussions produce less data than interviews with the same number of people, the purpose of the research is to encourage groups, rather than individuals, to voice opinions.

Findings

The research findings are presented in relation to the thematic analysis. As students' voices are the heart and soul of this research, this part is organised to emphasise students' voices once more. The focus group discussion transcripts analysis revealed several key themes based on the codes that were most prevalent and relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Theme 1: adapting different ways to ask questions - virtually on WeChat at out of office hours

Amy: I ask more questions outside of class, outside class it seems to be a little less in front of everyone, so I'm more used to asking questions off-class.

Christine: WeChat, email, face-to-face

It was evident that participants, including Amy and Christine, adapted their ways of communicating with teachers. Notable, a trend observed in the focus

group discussion was the inclination of participants to ask questions via WeChat during the teachers' out of office hours. This adaptation, while reflecting a shift towards more accessible and flexible communication, also raises critical questions about its alignment with neoliberal educational trends. The tendency to extend academic interaction beyond traditional office hours can be viewed as a response to neoliberal demands for increased flexibility in education. Participants also present numerous reasons for this adaptation.

John: that question if I do not send, I forgot. I normally start my learning at their off-office hours.

This learning style appears to be the result of their study hours. Participants said they have a set schedule that begins at 8.30 a.m., and teachers' out of office hours are usually after 6 p.m. and on weekends. While this shift potentially enhances student-teacher interaction, it also reflects broader societal changes where boundaries between work, learning, and personal time become increasingly blurred for both teachers and students, a characteristic feature of neoliberalism's influence on learning. More evidence suggests that teachers, too, adapt this type of learning and teaching.

John & Christine: Look at this, the older teacher, who may not play Wechat too much, will not return or return very slowly. Younger teachers will return faster, back in seconds.

Eve: Some will also have a work number and a life number, and then there is a group, that is, it pulls us into a group chat, and we answer questions on it.

This shift towards digital communication platform like WeChat can be partly attributed to the structured nature of classroom settings. Traditional classroom environments often follow a strict agenda and teaching schedule, leaving limited space and time for individualised question-and-answer sessions.

Consequently, students and teachers find alternative means to communicate, opting for platforms where questions can be asked and answered flexibly, respecting both teachers' and students' time constraints. This adaptation also reflects a thoughtful approach by students who seek to respect the boundaries of formal class time while still engaging in their learning.

Theme 2: teachers being omniscient and students being as Siri or ATM

Response patterns revealed participants' perceptions of both banking and problem-posing teaching and learning methods. Participants clearly demonstrated more talking and cross-talking when the extract of the 'banking' method was read during the second focus group discussion. However, in the third session on the problem-posing method, there was more silence and less participation. Christine, like the other participants, used the latest words as the analogy from their generation, like Siri and ATM, to describe the 'banking' model. Other participants added to their understanding:

Eve: I think teachers are copying themselves and letting students 'inherit' things from their teachers that they sometimes deny new things that they don't know.

Adam: It's like the 'squid game', right, where the teacher sets the rules of the game, and the students participate.

While some explicitly stated that teachers are more actively involved in learning than students, implying that the knowledge teachers possess gives them the ability to make choices, others made broader statements on education and schooling.

Christine: I feel it's a 'compromise' type of education.

Sarah: Also like a 'factory'.

Theme 3: status quo: be satisfied with the existing state of affairs and reluctant to move forward

Participants demonstrated the discussion *around* the topic rather than *about* it while discussing problem-posing and freedom-related topics. Some were asking for clarifications on the topics from me, indicating that they were interested in learning more about them. However, the participants perceived the problem-posing model as novel, with many citing more general education and teaching to elicit their points. In assessing the changes that could be made by implementing the problem-posing model, there was once again an implicit sense of powerlessness and helplessness by commenting that *people are habitually not exploring outward, accustomed to the domesticated state, which is already inertia (Oliver).*

Furthermore, the expectations from teachers and parents also enhanced the state of the current ways of teaching, as they value certainty in life, which is how they demonstrate good parenting and teaching by providing guidance from the life they have experienced.

Molly: I know, I think teachers and parents are more willing to accept certainty and become afraid of uncertainty, preferring that we have a stable life in the future so that the uncertainty of the future becomes less.

The role of 'student' is uniquely imprinted in students' minds by teachers and parents with the responsibilities they defined. They would ensure that students were students and did what students should do, *if you are a student, you should do what a student should do (Amy).*

Theme 4: considering values in the way of seeing "self"

Participants discussed their perceived freedom and agency in relation to themselves, while they value 'self' in terms of their own future goals and

ambitions. Some students place a higher value on what is best for themselves when it comes to learning and teaching.

Amy: I feel that the questions that I feel after thinking about them off class are the ones that are really more valuable to me.

Some students, on the other hand, believe that learning is a personal matter. It all comes down to self-improvement and self-processing. It is all about self-improvement and self-processing. The same process of weighing them against each other produced clearly different results. For example, a student felt that freedom and agency is derived from 'self' rather than why *we need to take how others see us (Adam)*.

Oliver: I don't want other people's approval of me; I see learning as a process of discovering myself and affirming the progress of my own thinking. The objections of others, the initial thoughts on things still originate from myself, and I will feel justified, but not necessarily changed.

The concept of 'self' appears to be the underlying factor for relevance, importance, and usefulness, which were discovered to be interrelated in the preceding analysis. It is possible that the underlying reason for students to reach out to the teachers on WeChat can be traced back to how students value learning as a private matter. Additionally, digital communication allows for asynchronous interaction, enabling students to formulate their thoughts and questions more coherently and at their own pace like Eve observed. Therefore, while valuing learning as a private matter might be a contributing factor, it is crucial to recognise that students' preference for digital platforms also stems from convenience, accessibility, and comfort these digital mediums offer.

Theme 5: enlightened by Confucianism: teaching each other

Participants requested more clarification after the translation of the extract on reading materials during the discussion of the third session on problem posing methods and the fourth session on perceptions of freedom and student agency, as mentioned above. After many rounds of back-and-forth comprehension on Freire's writings, John discovered an echo in an ancient Chinese poem from Confucianism, which Christine expanded on.

John: it is 'teaching each other' (教学相长).

This Confucianist saying is new to me, but not to the others. Amy stated that it is included in their eighth-grade Chinese literature textbook. They had to analyse and remember the entire poem. I asked them what they thought about 'teaching each other,' and if they had had this type of learning experience at their college. During the debate among the participants, they contended and concluded that it is not the same thing. What we now refer to as "teaching and learning" emphasises that teachers and students promote one another, and that "teaching" and "learning" are two distinct subjects. In contrast, the phrase "teaching and learning" in the poem's text refers to the same subject, referring to the teacher's own learning and the improvement of his/her understanding during the teaching process, which are mutually reinforcing.

Conflicts in Implementation in Chinese TNHE Classrooms

The findings on Themes 1, 3, and 4 clearly reflect Pringle and Woodman's (2022) conclusion that Chinese TNHE is a byproduct of the educational reformation for domestic economic development and adopts and adapts the logic of competition and marketisation. They shed light on Chinese TNHE at a macro level, a national level. However, this research expanded the discussion on how adaptation to competition and marketisation impacts students' daily learning on a micro level: the classroom (Figure 5.1).

The sense of 'self' triumphs the sense of community

Given that Freire (1996, 1992) advocates an "open society" to think of others and hooks (1994) encourages collectively imagining ways to move beyond boundaries, the most surprising finding was that students have a strong sense of "self" in their communication with others. Participants prefer to ask questions privately on WeChat rather than discuss them in class, which contrasts with the conclusion of Ni Raghallaigh and Cunniffe's research (2013). They argued that students were highly engaged and that the combination of 'doing,' 'observing,' and 'reflecting' contributed to their engagement. If students do not have space to reflect in class, the reflection will be moved to off-class hours, which leads to the clue of WeChat communication with teachers at off-office hours.

Furthermore, their research also concluded that the classroom environment should be safe and comfortable to encourage questions and discussions, but they did not specify who should be held accountable for this safety and comfortability. In addition, participants in this study stated that they felt unnecessary after asking questions in class and thought they were being stupid. Participants also stated that it was neither the teachers' nor the other students' fault that they felt this way. It is themselves who felt that they are the cause. This finding raised interest in discussing why they are worried about being excellent and flawless. Where is the pressure from?

One crucial interpretation of this behaviour could be reflected in Macfarlane's (2015) claim as one of the performative requirements. From top to bottom, the government has regulated higher education to perform "excellently" (Lu, 2021). The hidden rule adopted by the university requires students to demonstrate as adults by performing excellent attendance and engagement in the classroom (Macfarlane, 2015). The 'banking' model of teaching demonstrates in the content delivery and the scheduled timetable. The finding on participants' weekly timetable shows the longest day in a week was from 8 am to 5.20 pm, with four two-hour lectures, which shows a 'factory' working model as Garibaldi's (2006) definition of human capital. This model dehumanises students' agency and results in students' anxiety and insecurity. This learning model envelopes a sense of competition among students, leading them to think of questions, ask questions and face reality individually, or, quoting the participants, 'privately'. The educational goal for the participants is similar to Stanistreet's (2021) claims on education as individual self-interest. This finding may suggest that the current learning and teaching in TNHE in China is exercising human capital development and demonstrates the bitter taste of the fruits of the development. There is no trace to be found in this research on Freire's idea of society's transition of thinking of others and building knowledge with others.

Parents' perception on 'certainty' maintains the state quo

Parents make a conscious decision to invest in their child/children's education. Due to the nature of TNHE in China, parents typically pay nearly ten times the annual tuition fees in order for their child or children to obtain two credentials from both Chinese and Western partnered universities and be an expert in two languages academically and professionally both Mandarin and English. Parents expect the TNHE to provide their child or children with the high-level skills needed to work in professional, managerial, scientific, and creative jobs at the

top of the new occupational hierarchy. While the literature on human capital development strongly expects that these abilities should have aided economic production and earning potential (Garibaldi, 2006; Tan, 2014; Stanistreet, 2021), students' feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness explain the pressure they felt from their parents, school, and society on learning and being just a student.

The psychological phenomenon "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1972) would be a term to reformulate with this educational context to make sense of the student's feelings and behaviours. Students are repeatedly exposed to situations over which they have no control, putting them under significant stress. Such exposure leads to passivity, decreased interest, and a decrease in response initiation. This scenario also echoes the arguments made by Paulo Freire (2000) in "The Banking Concept of Education." Instead of allowing students to search through into the complexities of society, parents frequently shortcut this enquiry by providing a path that they believe is best for them, such as selecting a university, a major, and a future career. Students begin their higher education from a position of certainty, leading them to seek sources that agree with their parents and social status position. If students are asked to find any sources that might challenge their prior assumptions, parents' opinions are frequently used as token sources, allowing the student to set up a straw man argument in an either/or binary position. This merely teaches the students that their parents were correct all along and that the current situation did not need to change in the first place. It merely reinforces people's sense of certainty rather than challenging their assumptions about the world around them. This also leads to students adopting a neat view of the world, emphasising its blacks and whites while leaving little room for the greys that comprise the dynamic reality in which we live.

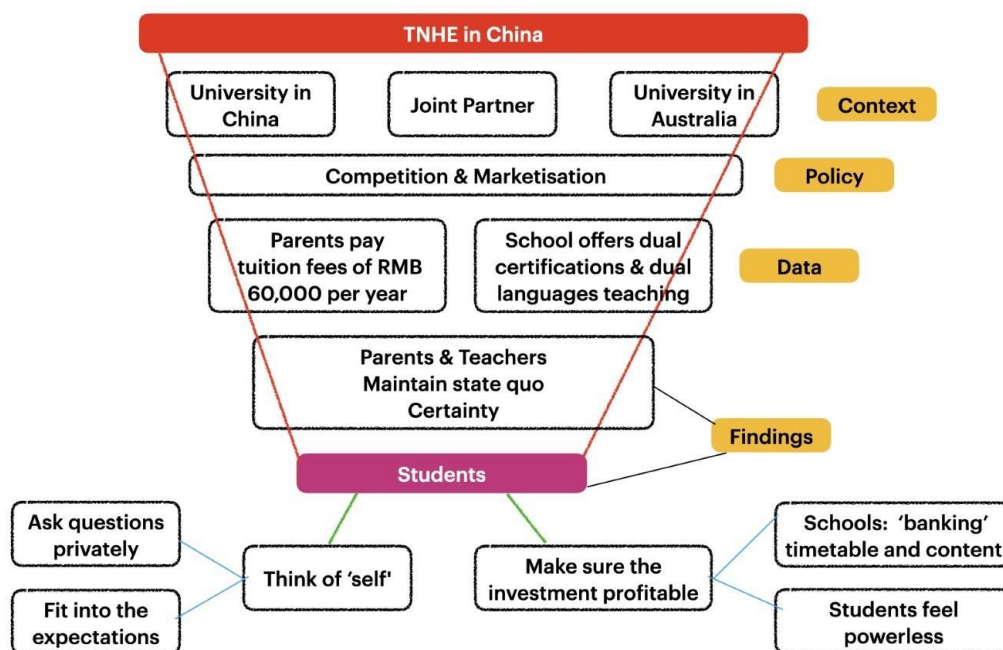


Diagram 5.1 My discussion on the findings at a micro level: in the classroom on the pedagogy of the TNHE in China

My reflections on the connection of Freire and Confucianism

The most surprising finding in this research is that the participants bring the connection between Freire's problem-posing model and Confucianism to the principle of teaching and learning. As their former teacher, the research process evolved into a learning experience for me. Participants taught me how to look at teaching and learning through the lens of an ancient Chinese poem. The poem's implication on 'teaching each other' implies that in the teaching process, teachers' teaching and students' learning complement and promote each other; it also implies that teachers' teaching and students' learning promote and improve each other. Concerning the teaching principle, it is an important Confucian and Freirean idea.

Participants encouraged me to learn more about Confucianism's teaching and learning principles. By conducting this research, we learned together and from each other. I have been teaching for seven years in China, but I know little

about "teaching each other," and I always have the impression that it is plausible but not. I was enlightened and finally knew the meaning of "teaching each other" after studying Freirean literature and implementing it in the classes I taught at the College. 'Teaching each other to grow' is a phrase from the Book of Rites and Records of Learning, which states, therefore, learning and then knowing the shortcomings, teaching and then knowing the difficulties (Bahtilla & Xu, 2021). Knowing the shortcomings allows for self-reflection; knowing the difficulties allows for self-improvement. As a result, it is said that teaching and learning will grow in tandem, which indicates that teaching and learning influence and promote one another, and both are improved.

I also finally comprehend what Confucius meant by a teacher need not be more virtuous than a disciple, and a disciple need not be inferior to a teacher. With good students, it is hard for teachers not to improve. It could be referred to the broadening of a teacher's perspective, enhancement of pedagogical skills, and deepening the subject matter understanding. This improvement is not just for the sake of personal or professional development but aims at creating a more dynamic, respective, and effective educational environment. Engaging with inquisitive and motivated students challenges teachers to continuously refine their teaching methods, update their knowledge, and become more adept at facilitating learning. In this context, as an educator, the improvement means evolving which could foster a learning community where both teachers and students are learners and teachers simultaneously. This aligns with the Confucian belief that a teacher need not always be more virtuous than a student, and a student need not be inferior to a teacher. In a thriving educational setting, good students can inspire teachers to reach new heights in their teaching practice.

This type of teaching and learning is referred to as 'learning together' or 'teaching each other' in Confucian terms; horizontal teaching or democratic learning in Freirean terms. As we can see, it has a long history in Chinese culture. But where has it gone? This research allowed me to connect and reflect on Confucianism and Freirean ideology. According to the findings, Confucianist and Freirean learning models are being abandoned in favour of banking education, which serves as the political indicators of competition and marketisation. According to the economic term of this rhetorical analysis of the Banking Concept of Education, this type of education is no longer effective. Students do not have the opportunity to think critically about their education, do not participate in class, and do not feel the need to ask questions in class.

Conclusion

In many contexts, education can offer opportunities to contest the dominant narrative of human capital development, and this work aims to look for suitable and effective alternatives. Rethinking our understanding of the development and the goals, an alternative narrative need to be carefully considered to raise living standards. The alternative means by which education might help to achieve these goals have been explored in this study. In particular, the topic of transnational higher education (TNHE) has been examined in the context of China. The alternative narrative of 'education as a practice of freedom' has been explored in Freirean literature and investigated in focus group discussions. Particularly at a pedagogical level, 'education as a practice of freedom' has been explored in the effects of teaching and learning on students' agency on the development of TNHE in China.

The findings of this research evidenced that given that the policy states more autonomy and flexibility in running TNHE institutions to the university, it does not necessarily reflect their underlying educational purpose for students' agency.

Rather, this study provides a valuable indication of students' potential powerlessness in the face of competition and marketisation. For starters, 'self-centered' learning implies that the sense of competition has been deeply embedded in students' learning journey. Secondly, the high tuition fee, dual certifications, and dual language learning indicate that, as a significant investment, the TNHE must ensure the parents' profitability in maintaining or improving the family's status quo.

However, during the focus group discussion, participants asked me, when I made the claim that human capital development has been embedded in higher education for the job market, does it actually prepare them for the workforce? This question inspired me as well to conduct further research. As the findings here suggest, education should train students to have a deep understanding of their discipline's culture and a commitment to supporting the humanity of all people. The question is how to do it in practice to uncover humanity to prepare students for the real world. I have a deep belief in Freire's critical pedagogy, especially on dialogue and participatory concept of education. Hence, hopefully, these questions could be explored further in a more holistic study on policy, practice and implications.

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