

The Impact of Existentialism on China's Democratic Education through Globalization

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With the process of globalization since 1960s, the world economy has been exerting a strong impact on the growth of economy as well as on other aspects of life such as politics, science and technology, environment, education, and culture. This impact has brought about opportunities and challenges. In the context of globalization, or some call it westernization; educational policy in China has been challenged. It has gone through a big transformation from education for political ideology to education for socialist modernization. In the process of globalization, the question of how to cultivate a person as a qualified global individual has been raised and been drawn to our attention. How would China be able to produce such an individual and make the education more democratic? The idea of Existentialism, the most influential philosophy in the twentieth century, offers great sources and suggestions for a way of building a richer, fuller, more genuine existence for all becoming persons.

Globalization and China's Educational Policy

“Globalization” has become a catch-word in the contemporary world and the most talked about social phenomenon on a worldwide scale in the last decade.

What is globalization? “Globalization is an objective, empirical process of increasing economic and political connectivity, a subjective process unfolding in consciousness as the collective awareness of growing global interconnectedness, and a host of specific globalizing projects that seek to shape global conditions” (Pieterse, 2003, p. 17). Experts in different social science disciplines give globalization different definitions. Economist Gray (1993) defines it as such “Similarity of economic conditions and policies across national boundaries” and Oman (1993) defines it this way: “Accelerated movement across national and regional barriers of economic ‘goods,’ i.e. people, products, capital, especially intangible forms of capital (technology, control of assets).” Sociologist Robertson (1992) says “Globalization...refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as whole” and Water (1995) calls “A social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people are increasingly aware that they are receding.” Historian and anthropologist Nederveen Pieterse (1995) gives this definition: “Globalization is a long-term historical process of growing worldwide interconnectedness.”

Globalization is a social phenomenon that is often explained in terms of a diversity of possible, plausible as well as antagonistic perspectives. For instance, in terms of its nature, Held, David, and others (1999) view globalization as an unprecedented social phenomenon, Giddens (1990) conceives it as part of the modernization process, Desai (2003) sees it as the new phase of capitalism, while Hirst and Thompson (1996) dismiss it as a myth. In terms of its effects, McLuhan (1964) argues that it turns the world into a “global village” while Harvey (1995) deems it a “global pillage.” In terms of its implications, Ohmae, (1995) looks at it as a

“melting pot,” while Schiller (1989) perceives it as cultural imperialism or more specifically as Americanization. In term of evaluation, Martin (1995) hails it as all positive, while Kalb (2000) and Woods (1999) loathe it for its threatening social consequences.

The diversity of definitions and interpretation of globalization confirms one thing: globalization is a complex, multilayered concept and it has multiple meanings and forms. It involves, in the words of Held, et al. (1999). “A process (or a set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial of organization of social relations and transactions, generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power” and has the impact of “widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, stretching from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to spiritual.”

Among all the flows and networks of activities, global education has emerged largely. International cooperation programs among universities, exchanging programs, establishing international schools on a foreign land, setting sister schools between countries, visiting programs and etc. are all bridges of connections between people. We call it “Global connectivity”—Globalization makes connections among people, thus, all importance behind material flows is interactions among human beings over boundaries. It is a new way of socialization. China is a large market with great potential in education and it actively engages itself in global exchanges and cooperation. Where do we find we are if we look at the level of education world-wide? What problems still exist? What adjustments do we need to make and what policy should we implement in order to keep abreast with the world?

With the global trend in the 1970s, it was realized that China was far behind the development of the world economy. The Chinese leaders represented by Deng Xiaoping, with the implementation of the reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970’s, began to realize the importance of education in achieving the national goal of the four modernizations. In the early 1980s, Deng proclaimed that education must be reoriented to meet the needs of China’s modernization, of the world and of the future. Deng’s remark represents the fundamental change in the conception of education. Prior to his proclaim, education in China had long been in the position to serve mainly political ideology and social stability. Deng’s thinking of the orientation of education sparked a number of documents that enhanced the conception of the importance of education in the economic development and social progress. Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, promulgated in 1985, stipulates:

Education is the basis of socialist modernization, and the State shall ensure priority to the development of educational undertakings. The whole society should be concerned with and support the development of educational undertakings.

Since China began to establish the socialist market economy system, the demand-supply principle has been adopted in education. The role of education has been more widely recognized. The ideology of education as an instrument to serve proletarian politics is replaced by a wider conception, which is best expressed by the Report to the 16th Convention of the CPC:

Education is the basis for developing science and technology and preparing talents, playing a leading and comprehensive role in modernization. It must be placed in a

strategic position and given priority in development. Education must adhere to serving the construction of socialist modernization and the people, combine with productive labor and social practice, and prepare socialist builders and successors who have developed morally, intellectually, physically and esthetically.

The development of education has been included in the overall goal of building China into a well-off society.

Now human society has stepped into the 21st century, the knowledge-based economy and the Information Age. The world market has been further explored and the world trade been sharply expanded. A large number of multinational enterprises with powerful economic strength have grown up and started to reshape world political pattern. A new technology revolution has not only promoted the development of the world economy, but has also intensified the global competition.

Development and competition have posed new demands for education, producing more competitive talents who are able to orient themselves to the world, to acquaint themselves with the world and to communicate properly with the world (Chen, 2003). In the development and competition, the talented, qualified global individuals are needed. The cultivation of the qualified global individuals is not only necessary but also very important. How can we produce such individuals? What kind of individuals can be called qualified individuals? The western philosophy Existentialism sheds some light on building a richer, fuller and more genuine existence for all the becoming persons.

Philosophy of Existentialism and Its Impact on China's Democratic Education

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was the leading existentialist philosopher of the twentieth century. He made significant contributions as a playwright, novelist, journalist, and literary critic. Sartre had fought in World War II and been active in the French resistance to the German occupation of France. These experiences influenced his personal quest for meaning and identity in a universe that he perceived as devoid of moral absolutes. Sartre in his classic work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) took as its basic premise the idea that existence precedes essence, which means, that one's material being exists prior to and independent of any intrinsic factors. In his work "Existentialism" (1945), existence precedes essence is interpreted as this:

First of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialism conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.

Sartre's premise challenged the fundamentals of traditional philosophy: Plato had identified "essence" as Forms (or Ideas) that were eternal and unchanging. For Aristotle, reason - humankind's capacity for rational thought - was the "essence" that separated human beings from the lower animals. Philosophers from Descartes

through Kant followed the ancients by defending the notion that primary internal principles of being preceded being itself—a view that was metaphysically compatible with Christian theology. (Fiero, p. 70)

He proposed that human beings have no fixed nature. They are not imbued with any special divinity, nor are they rational. They are neither imprisoned by unconscious forces (as Freud had held) nor are they determined by specific economic conditions (as Marx had maintained). Born into the world as body/matter, they proceed to make the choices by which they form their own natures. In Sartre's analysis, each individual is the sum of his or her actions, in that human beings must choose at every turn between varieties of possibilities. In Sartre's words (1992):

I am indeed an existent who learns his freedom through his acts, but I am also an existent whose individual and unique existence temporalises itself as freedom...I am condemned to be free.

Moreover, since every choice implies a choice for all humankind, each individual bears the overwhelming burden of total responsibility. (Fiero, p. 70)

For Sartre, no forms of human engineering, technocratic or otherwise, can usurp the human potential for free action. To fly from freedom and responsibility is a form of self-deception and inauthenticity. "We are alone, with no excuses," according to Sartre (Fiero, p. 70).

Sartre's philosophy inspired our thinking that human being is independent and alone. We are nothing but what we make of ourselves. It is not "We are what we are conditioned to be," but "We are what we choose to be" (Fiero, p. 69). In a way Sartre's philosophy casts light on the question of education and how an individual should be treated and nurtured. Some education theorists were greatly influenced by Existentialism and they examined education through the lens of existentialism. Among them, Maxine Greene (1945-) was the one that understood, appreciated and supported Sartre's idea most closely.

Maxine Greene has been at the forefront of educational philosophy for well over half a century as a teacher, a lecturer and author. She has been called "The consummate Spiderwoman, as she weaves threads from philosophy, literature, psychology, and education to make of life and learning an aesthetic whole that is replete with meaning" (Hancock production).

Existentialism in education appeared in the literature around 1951. Maxine Greene in 1967 edited a book, *Existential Encounters for Teachers*, intended for teachers confronting a problematic and confusing world. She believes, correctly, that existentialism is a personal study. It is important who you are, where you are situated, and what you understand. Existentialism is not doctrinal; the individual comes with awareness and draws forth the salient learning for her situated meaning-making. Existentialism is the "heightening of consciousness with respect to existence as a 'single one'" (Greene, p. 7). The individual is not an essence or an abstraction but an aware alienated being with anxiety thrust into existence with the task of creating herself. To essentialize the individual, that is, to define him according to gender, race, religion, hair-color, IQ, social class, sexual orientation, genetics, nurture, etc., is to ignore the actual unique particular of each self (Blenkinsop, p. 8).

For Greene, existentialism is concerned with the subjective: my own unique experience coming from awareness located within me. This awareness is not restricted to reason or intuition alone but includes experiences of feelings, faith, pre-reflective conscious actions, and relationship. It is through relationship, through encounter with the other, that Greene demonstrates her deeper understanding of Sartre and draws education towards its deeply relational and social equitable roots. The awareness, drawn from within, leads to freedom, the “dreadful freedom” that realizes the potential of non-being whilst opening the vista of possibility (Greene, 1967).

The dreadful part is that I must choose and I can choose badly. This palate of choice makes me free, and I alone am responsible for what I choose. But this coming to know freedom causes the individual to be more sharply alive. Greene acknowledges that many people shy away from this sensation and hide complacently in the crowd, living, stereotypically, without intention, out of touch with themselves, others, and the world around (Greene, 1967). These are the living dead, the hallowing people, the crowd or the masses and it is this limited existence to which the existentialists have always reacted (Greene, 1967). For educators, this problem exists in the apathy within the profession, the unwillingness to act in the face of a smothering bureaucracy, in the notion of the “average” student to who one can teach the same thing over a thirty-year period. It is also the resignedness of the students themselves as they enter the classroom as if their very life force is left in the frantic joy of the hallways, the unwillingness for even the most excited students to take the initiative and suggest their own learning needs, and the never ending question “will this be on the exam?” which runs any enthusiasm for learning aground before the ship is even moving. For her, existentialism reacts to this. Existentialism requires that the individual face subjectivity and freedom and take up the heavy task of becoming. This is the encounter that Greene is offering, and the lens through which education is examined (Blenkinsop, p. 9-10).

In the following, some implications to education are to be presented and discussed in which the key concept, individual, will be the focus because this concept is rarely known to our Chinese and is lacking in our education system. These implications can shed light on and bring more democratic elements to Chinese education, particularly to the teachers on how they could treat and nurture their students to be independent and aware beings and to the students on how they could struggle with anxiety and perform the task of creating themselves.

The learner begins in the formless and inchoate; and, in order to be, he must struggle against blankness and inertia, and commit himself to his “fundamental project” which is the achievement of his full human reality. To do this, he must be conscious of himself as a responsible individual, not an instance of some universal, nor yet a mere member of a group. (Greene, 1967 p. 19)

This fundamental project is the existential project itself. It means that the individual starts to separate himself from the crowd and begins the process of fulfilling his own possibilities proposed by himself. He is a very conscious being that he knows he must be responsible for what he does. This is more than rationality and it is the real meaning of life and creativity. Human beings have to strive with great difficulty to achieve and to learn.

In Chinese society since ancient time, the education system has been exam-oriented. All the effort put into education has been for the best grade in the exams. People who receive

high marks on the exam could get a chance and a position to serve the emperor in the palace in ancient times and to work as a high ranking official in modern times. To work for the best grade on the exam means that the students must study for the right answer. And usually, there is only one right answer for each question. That means they work for only that one answer. With the right-answer driven phenomena, teachers expect the students to give the correct answers all the time and students would like to meet the teachers' expectations to find the correct answers. Teachers would praise those who can find the right answers and usually pay no attention to those who can't. Therefore, students who are not sure of their answers would not like to participate in the class activities and remain silent. They would not like to be laughed at or looked down upon by the teachers and other students. They hide their ideas and different answers and conform to the majority. They would rather find security than creativity. They would like to achieve high scores on the exams and get a better job in society. Both teachers and students become unconscious beings therefore. They don't feel they have the responsibility for what they do. They just follow what other people would say and do. They lose their own consciousness in being an independent individual and they are not aware that they have the strength and power to perform a better task than others. Their individual self and creativity have been buried and the fulfillment of possibilities of oneself has been ignored. The real meaning of life is nowhere to be found. In this case, how could one move forward and finally learn according to Greene and how could one realize his own value and potential in learning? How could he positively achieve his full human reality? Their good job can only secure them a good salary and a respectable social status. However, it cannot equip them with the power of achieving the full human potential as described by Sartre and Greene. The idea of "existence precedes essence," or "we are condemned to be free" is rooted in western minds, but not yet in the minds of eastern, particularly Chinese. The idea of being a conscious individual with full responsibility for what he does has not yet been known and even appreciated by our Chinese, let alone encourage this quality in education policy and practical teaching. In the time of globalization, education in China is also seeking for ways to improve itself and striving to get abreast with other developed countries in the ideology, education standard, and methodology. Hopefully, the democratic elements can be infused into our education system and specifically into the minds of teachers and students. Teachers should learn to encourage their students to have independent and critical thinking rather than having them conformed to the crowd and losing their vitality and wisdom while students need to learn that they are all by themselves and they are all aware human beings with the capacity of creating and projecting their own tasks and realizing their full reality.

In regard to the transcendence and becoming, Greene (1967) stated:

If he has the courage to attune himself inwardly, however, to confront Nothing, to live in astonishment and suspense, he will – by means of learning and thinking – transcend what was first disclosed to him through his own bodily involvements, through the spectrum of his moods, even through calculation. He will begin to "signify", to symbolize more and more diversely what was once merely sensed and perceived; he will begin to be.

Individuals who understand their own existential project realize they are in constant change, striving continually to become what they have designed for themselves. I am not

Anna, but I am in fact Annaing. I am in the process of becoming Anna. I am choosing the person I want to be. A snake sheds its skin, taking on that new form, expanding. I am like the snake and I am transcending myself or am in the process of self-transcendence. I am not like the snake, I am not transcending in a metaphysical sense but in ethnical and esthetic one. Through my own changes in knowledge, capacity, mentality and vision, I start to sense more about what is happening in our daily life and what is happening out there in the universe. I begin to realize what it means to be a human being different from the lower animals, to be an independent individual different from the crowd, to be someone who is able to sense, to perceive and to act. I just want to show and tell the significance of this becoming, and the pleasure of beginning to live.

For education this involves the orientation of the student. The student comes to school in a form not yet reflected. He has the idea of being existential, but not the idea of being alive. This is because he has not yet come to choose, to distinguish himself as a self. Education can begin guiding the student in the direction towards himself as a subject, in understanding himself in different situations, in assisting the child to begin the lifelong project of self-transcendence, to begin becoming. According to Greene, this means that the teacher “becomes an occasion for permitting a child to decide consciously on freedom and becoming” (Greene). The teacher’s thoughtfulness may assist the student to begin to see his own limitations and also inspire him to break away from mere thereness (Blenkinsop, 2004, p. 22).

Teachers in China seldom or never know about the state of mind of their students when they first come to school and they seldom or never think about how they can assist them to begin the life-long journey. What they know in their teaching is the strictness with the students, the discipline, the high marks, and the conformity. They suppress more than encourage and they criticize more than appreciate. They dominate more than being equal. Students who express freely and strongly with unique views are usually the targets being attacked and suppressed. If the students show individuality in expressions or acts, they would be sent to the school authority for punishments of different kinds. Their views are seldom seen as the young sparkling wisdom and intelligence and valued as the rareness of talents. The teachers on one hand are not willing to and on the other hand are not able to recognize the worth of those thoughts and consequently ignore or even kill them. How can a student design for himself and how can he become what he wants to be in such a situation? How can he transcend himself and expand like the snake sheds its skin and take a new form? How can he realize what he is and what he intends to become? He is never having a chance to know who he is, where he can lead his life to, what his life goal is and how he can possibly achieve it. He never has the condition to be aware of his own unique character, personality and potentiality. He will never be able to learn in a real sense and begin to live. The implication of the transcendence and becoming to Chinese education is vital. Chinese students need to be cultivated to think independently, critically, and understand the real meaning of life and learning and what they will become. They should be nurtured to be someone with a sense of becoming a smart citizen with global vision and knowledge, strong capacity and mentality in this globalization age. They may then be able to communicate, cooperate and negotiate with people from other nations. Chinese education wishes to be more democratic with humanity.

Conclusion

Globalization has promoted economic development on a large scale and at the same time has brought great impact on other aspects of life, politics, environment, education and culture. The science and technology in China are realized far behind other developed countries in the process of globalization and therefore the Chinese reformist leader Deng Xiaoping put forward the new educational policies and has them implemented in the educational law aiming to build the socialist modernization for a new China. In this new age, the qualified individual talents with a global vision and characters are urgently needed in order to learn, to create, to communicate, to cooperate and to interact with people from other nations. The twentieth century philosophy Existentialism casts light on the ways to nurture and treat the students to become this kind of individual. John-Paul Sartre, the philosopher of Existentialism, states "Existence precedes essence," indicating that human beings are all alone, with no excuses. They must make choices at every turn and be responsible for what they do. Maxine Greene, the famous educator in philosophy of education, puts that the human being is aware being with consciousness of who he is, what situation he is in and what he does. They both provide insightful ideas on how teachers may nurture and treat students to become individuals with independent and critical thinking and how students themselves may learn to struggle with anxiety and perform the task of creating. With the individual awareness in their growth, the students are able to realize that they are advanced human beings different from other lower animals, they are themselves different from the crowd, and they are conscious being and they are creative and can achieve their full human reality. They also are changing during the whole process. They strive to become what they have projected for themselves and become who they want to be and they are transcending themselves. They are very conscious about the importance of this becoming and the happiness of beginning to live. These democratic thoughts in philosophy and education offer Chinese education wonderful as well as necessary nourishments in cultivating our young people in the age of globalization and assist China to become a country with real talented intellectuals.

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