

Chapter 19

Deweyan Student-Centered Pedagogy and Confucian Epistemology: Dilemmatic Pragmatism and Neo-Patriotism?

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Abstract Drawing on empirical data collected for three separate studies in secondary school contexts in Canada, U.S., and Northwestern P.R.C, this chapter discusses how Deweyan student-centered pedagogy transpires in Confucian epistemological contexts. It illustrates the experiences and perceptions of secondary school immigrant students from Hong Kong, P.R.C., and Taiwan studying in Canada and their Canadian teachers; American high school students and their Chinese teachers; and northwestern P.R.C teachers. The chapter extends the traditional comparative education work further by showing the complexity of shifting practice and mixed philosophies that require consciousness raising, negotiation, and practical support. Through the examination of the clash and conflicts between Chinese Confucian teacher-centered pedagogical belief and American/Canadian Deweyan student-centered pedagogical belief, it speculates a new Chinese educational model that could be identified as dilemmatic pragmatism and neo-patriotism that stretches neo-liberal global competition to include exertion of intellectual knowledge influence maybe emerging in this global era.

19.1 Introduction

Globalization intensified migration of people, pedagogical practice, and philosophies in search best practice to maximize return for educational investment efficiently. For example, according to Institute of International Education Open Doors (2013), in 1998–1999 academic year, P.R.C became the leading sender of students to the U.S, with the number of students totaling 194,029 in 2011–2012 academic

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year. The number increased to 235,597 during the 2012–2013 Academic Year, an increase of 21.4 % from the previous year. 39.8 % of these were undergraduate students, 43.9 % of them were graduate students, 16.3 % of them fell into other categories such as Optional Practical Training. Many of those students chose to work in the U.S. after graduation in various fields, including education. P.R.C is also the number one country that sent its secondary school students to the U.S., the number of which counted for 32.3 % ($n=23,562$) of overall international secondary and postsecondary students in the U.S. in 2013 (Farrugia 2014). How international students' perspectives and preferences of teaching and learning interact with American education system and culture is certainly an interesting and important issue that deserves serious exploration. P.R.C has even “imported” the pedagogical practices of these countries, Deweyan student-centered pedagogy, through its recent curriculum reform in the P.R.C, for broader introduction of it to many more students and teachers (see Beckett and Zhao [in press](#)). Globalization has also contributed to economic growth of countries such as P.R.C. to the degree that they are no longer content with unidirectional learning from western countries and are working towards introducing their knowledge to western countries by “exporting” knowledge (Feng et al. 2013) with initiatives such as Chinese language teaching through Confucian institutions and Chinese as a Foreign language teaching in school contexts (Zhao and Beckett 2014; Zhao [in progress](#)).

Drawing on empirical data collected for three separate studies in secondary school contexts in Canada (Beckett 1999), U.S (Zhao and Beckett 2014; Zhao [in progress](#)), and Northwestern P.R.C (Beckett and Zhao [in press](#)), this chapter discusses how Deweyan student-centered pedagogy transpires in Confucian epistemological contexts. Specifically, it illustrates the experiences and perceptions of secondary school immigrant students from Hong Kong, P.R.C., and Taiwan studying in Canada and their Canadian teachers; American high school students and their Chinese teachers; and northwestern P.R.C teachers.

19.1.1 Significance

Unlike traditional comparative education work that stops at superficial comparison of eastern and western practices, this chapter discusses what happens when pedagogical practices clash with epistemological perceptions and discusses the philosophical rationale for different practices and perceptions. As such, it shows the complexity of shifting practice and mixed philosophies that require consciousness raising, negotiation, and practical support. Through the examination of the clash and conflicts between Chinese and American/Canadian pedagogy, it speculates a new Chinese educational model that could be identified as dilemmatic pragmatism and neo-patriotism maybe emerging in this global era.

19.1.2 Definitions

Deweyan student-centered pedagogy refers to experiential and interactive curriculum where students are provided opportunities to be part of their own learning, where their interests and experience are taken into account (Dewey 1938). It is about cultivation of individuality, acquisition of skills and techniques by working through educational activities that are of direct and vital importance to learners. For Dewey, the aim of education is to prepare for changing world by helping students learn how to learn (Dewey 1938). As the 77-page definition and discussion of epistemology by Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy indicates, much can be written about *epistemology*. For the purpose of our discussion in this chapter, we define *epistemology* as the theory of knowledge and justified belief (Winch and Gingell 1999). Likewise, a thorough discussion of Confucianism is beyond the scope of this chapter, where *Confucian epistemology* refers to philosophy and theories developed from the Confucian tradition, which reflects and affects people's beliefs and practices, in particular with education in this chapter. Confucian epistemology is an understanding and articulation of inherited cultural legacy as well as transmitting of wisdom and knowledge from classics (Zhao 2014); teaching and learning of moral cultivation (Zhao 2013); and proper attitudes and behaviors in social relations (Rošker 2014). Teaching under Confucian culture is considered more teacher-centered with teachers holding an authoritative role, passing down knowledge and information to students (Zhao 2013). *Dilemmatic pragmatism* in this chapter refers to the choices individuals such as students and teachers make pragmatically and in the context of a dilemma because the choices clash with their philosophical beliefs. For example, Chinese teachers who subscribe to Confucian teacher-centered pedagogical philosophy could make dilemmatic choice of adjusting to Deweyan student-centered pedagogical philosophy and practice for pragmatic reasons such as keeping their jobs. *Neo-patriotism* refers to the current Chinese patriotism that stretches neoliberal global competition to include exertion of intellectual knowledge by "exporting" knowledge (Feng et al. 2013) that some (e.g., decision making) P.R.C citizens deem necessary for the rest of the world to learn. Such neo-patriotism is reflected in Chinese government's funding of Chinese language programs in the U.S and other countries and the many Chinese teachers' journey to those countries to "spread Chinese language and culture" (Beckett and Li 2012) as a way to compete for global standing.

19.2 Practice to Theory

19.2.1 Evidence from Practice

19.2.1.1 Case 1: Perceptions of Chinese Students Towards Project-Based Instruction

Beckett (1999) ethnographically explored implementation of project-based instruction, a typical Deweyan educational model, in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in a Canadian secondary school. The participants of the study included three Canadian teachers and 73 students of Chinese heritage from P.R.C (n=2), Taiwan (n=46), and Hong Kong (n=25) at the time of data collection. While the participants were predominantly from Taiwan and Hong Kong, they are referred to as Chinese students whose perceptions are relevant to the issues under discussion because they shared common Confucian educational beliefs and experiences with their peers from P.R.C. According to the teachers and school Handbook, project-based instruction model was introduced to ESL classes to help familiarize ESL students with this common educational activity in Canadian educational culture and therefore a part of Canadian-born students' repertoire. Specific goals for the projects included teaching English language holistically through authentic tasks in real-world context, challenging students' creativity, fostering independence as well as group work skills, critical thinking skills, and enhancing decision-making skills. Classroom observation and analysis of students work suggested and teachers confirmed that, by choosing, designing, carrying out, and reporting their projects, those students achieved the project goals. Analysis of the data also suggested that students learned English language by listening to, speaking, reading, and writing through data gathering, analysis, synthesis and oral as well as written project reports. Additionally, they learned library skills and computer skills as well as social skills through their on campus and down-town library searches which included getting and interpreting directions by speaking to native English speakers on route and in the libraries and computer assistants. Interviews with teachers confirmed these findings and revealed that students learned much through project-based learning and met the goals set for them. Teachers were pleased that students were able to learn English holistically by carrying out authentic projects in real world contexts, rather than through separate skills based teacher-centered English listening, speaking, reading, and writing classes.

Analysis of interview data, however, revealed that 18 % of the students agreed that project-based approach to English language learning is a good model because it helped them improve their English by learning it through authentic activities in fun manner rather than falling asleep by reading boring textbooks. They acknowledged that the model helped them learn computer and research skills and feel a sense of accomplishment. Students also felt the work they did for their project contributed to improving their reading and writing skills. Twenty-five percent of the participants reported having mixed feelings about project-based learning stating

that while they learned much through project-based approach, they had difficulty knowing exactly what they learned and therefore longed for the traditional method of learning ESL they had in their home countries. They wished they learned from teachers more rather having to learn from peers through group work and that they learned fewer and “more important information” (facts) from prescribed texts rather than learning much through other sources.

A majority (57 %) of the 73 students reported not liking project-based approach complaining that projects require too much time learning things that are irrelevant at the expense of basic knowledge acquisition. The students understood that the goals for project-based learning included fostering critical thinking, but believed that critical thinking is job of adults, not students (“children” in the participants’ own words) like them. They said that teachers should teach from textbooks and that group work is a waste of time as peers have little to contribute to their learning. They said that ESL should be taught separately in ESL reading, ESL writing, ESL speaking, and ESL listening classes, not through Social Studies, English Literature, and Science, as was done at their Canadian school.

In summary, the students participated in this study learned much Social Studies, Science, and English Literature content knowledge and various skills as well as English language by listening to and speaking with their teachers, librarians, and with each other about their projects; by reading widely to research for their projects, and by presenting their research orally and in writing. Additionally, they learned how to learn through project-based instruction that their native born Canadian peers were used to, achieving all the goals their teachers set for them. The student participants acknowledged that they learned much, but still wished that their classes were organized into skills areas such as English composition, Listening, Speaking, and Reading classes and wished that their teachers taught more from textbooks, as how things worked in their home countries. As Beckett (1999) pointed out, while the desire to have separate English language skills courses may be explained from a linguistics perspectives whereby teachers engaged their students in content-based language learning from a systemic functional linguistics perspective that sees language as meaning-making resource (Halliday 1994) while the students held formal linguistics perspective that sees language as linguistic forms such as words, phrases, grammatical structures that are usually taught in bits and pieces separately. The linguistics perspective, however, does not explain students’ complaints about not having had more authoritative teaching from the textbooks by their teachers, which maybe explained from a Deweyan student-centered versus Confucian teacher and authoritative text-centered perspective. This will be elaborated in the discussion section of the chapter under Uniquely Chinese and Confucian vs. Western and Deweyan subheading.

19.2.1.2 Case 2: American Students and Chinese Teachers

Zhao ([in progress](#)) conducted an ethnographic case study for her dissertation examining Chinese language teachers teaching in American high schools to understand their perspectives and practice in a cross-cultural setting. Participants in the study included teachers from Mainland China and Taiwan. Preliminary findings of interviews with 23 teacher participants and a year-long observation of five teachers revealed many challenges faced by Chinese teachers in all aspects of their teaching due to differences in Confucian Chinese educational and cultural models and the Deweyan American educational model and social cultures. All of the teacher participants stated that applying Chinese ways of teaching did not work in U.S. classrooms. Most of them admitted that they had high expectations for students, expecting them to put efforts into studying both in and outside class and emphasizing strongly on students' grades in relation to their learning. For example, some teachers reported that during the first year of their teaching, they used to assign more homework than what they do currently. They also lectured most of the time with a few or no activities, as they wanted students to get more information from their lessons. Teachers reflected that the application of Chinese ways of teaching was very common at the beginning of their teaching career in the U.S. As a result, students were found not highly motivated or actively engaged in learning. Some of them even became resistant to the instructions. Chinese teachers' expectation of students' high motivation and demand for their academic achievements, "does not really match with American education that values all rounded development of its students", according to one teacher.

Applying the Chinese model of teaching with a strong emphasis on textual learning and knowledge input not only bores students, but can also cause classroom management issues, which affects student-teacher relationship negatively. Using an action research approach, Zhao and Beckett (2014) implemented Deweyan project-based instruction (PBI) in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in an American high school. In the middle of the first semester, the instructor noted behavioral issues and later found it was because students lost interest in the curriculum and felt bored with the class format, which was mostly about lectures and exercises. The teacher thus applied PBI as an intervention to get students more engaged in learning. Based on interview and survey data collected from nine students, it was found that PBI, as a student-centered pedagogy, motivated students, enhanced their cultural knowledge and communicative competence. It provided students space to use the language rather than just memorize vocabulary and grammar rules. All of the students agreed that they enjoyed doing projects and referred to it as fun breaks from their repetitive school work. Students stated that projects gave them the opportunity to do something fun and creative, which then added to the diversity of their class format. The majority of the students reported that doing projects offered insights into their personality by connecting their interests. The instructor was also able to rebuild her relationship with students through collaborating and facilitating the project works.

As the teacher in Zhao and Beckett (2014) study did, after teaching in U.S. classrooms for a while, Chinese teachers began to adjust their pedagogy to better suit the needs and interest of the students, although the shift is not an easy one and requires constant consciousness raising and adjustment (Zhao [in progress](#)). In discussing their difficulties in transitioning into more student-centered Deweyan American pedagogy, teachers said it was because Chinese model of teaching is more towards teacher-centered versus student-centered in American teaching. The teachers became appreciative of and developed preference for student-centered teaching that recognizes students' learning styles and diversity as well as addresses their interests and needs. They believed that through student-centered pedagogy, students acquired knowledge by doing while enjoying the learning process. However, many teachers also thought adopting American pedagogy was dilemmatic as they found that compared to Chinese model of teaching students learned less about the language basics and grammar knowledge. Although students enjoyed doing activities, they often got carried away during the activities. Despite the fact that the Chinese model of learning was not favored, the teachers still believed that direct instruction, study of texts, and memorization play a fundamental role in learning due to their Confucian educational beliefs. Thus many teacher participants in the study adopted what they believed positive aspects of Chinese education into their current teaching practice. For example, according to the teachers, the adherence to the practice of greetings and bowing (*xing li* 行礼) at the beginning or end of a class, as a way to express respect between teachers and students, is an influence from Confucianism. All of the teachers said that the ideal pedagogy is one that integrates both American and Chinese teaching approaches.

19.2.1.3 Case 3: Northwestern P.R.C Teachers and Student-Centered Curriculum

In a qualitative case study, Beckett and Zhao (2014, 2015) looked at the influences of neoliberal market economy on teaching, especially the curriculum and pedagogical practices of the teachers in northwest part of P.R.C. Neoliberalism in market economy advocates open market and free trade, which promotes intense competition between countries for global resources. Under the guidance of neoliberal market economy, developing countries such as P.R.C. has introduced several rounds of educational reforms to improve its education quality and enhance the global competitiveness of its citizens. One of the reforms was the introduction and implementation of student-centered curriculum in its primary and secondary education system. The connection between neoliberalism and curriculum reform stems from a belief that in order to compete with countries such as U.S, P.R.C students must learn as American students do for a smoother transition to global completion. Different arguments can be made regarding what type of American education approach this could be, but the call for educating students who can meet the demand of changing reality through student-centered and inquiry-based collaborative and interactive activities are typical elements of Deweyan pedagogy. The analysis of curriculum

policies and interviews of 22 middle school teachers revealed that this new round of curriculum reform that took effect in 2004 was a sharp shift from its traditional curriculum and education system (Beckett and Zhao 2015). It adopted many western pedagogical concepts and practices including inquiry-based collaborative learning, school-based curriculum development, developmental evaluation, and portfolio assessment. It also called for decentralization of the educational system by encouraging and allowing the contribution of local governments and schools in its implementation, in contrast to its top-down approaches in policy implementation.

Many teachers reported changes in their instruction with fewer lectures and more interactive student activities (Beckett and Zhao 2015). All of them agreed that the new curriculum caters to the interests of students, enhances students' active participation in learning, meets the needs of ever changing globalized age, and thus should be carried out nationwide. However, some teachers indicated that new reform is a too fundamental a change that it disregards the traditional education philosophy. They expressed concerns about an extreme focus on intellectual knowledge acquisition and testing skills that overlooks moral education and character building which is the core of Confucian education, considered essential for the healthy development and well-being of the young generation (Beckett and Zhao 2015).

In addition, with the current exam system that remains unchanged, the implementation of the new curriculum poses more challenges than benefits (Beckett and Zhao 2014). *Gaokao* (college entrance exam) is still the primary benchmark for admitting students into colleges and universities. Interviews with teachers indicated that on the one hand teachers had to teach in alignment with *Gaokao*, and on the other hand, they had to design lectures and activities to meet the requirements of the new curriculum, which increased their work load and brought tremendous psychological pressure. What made it worse was the large class size in P.R.C. Most of the teachers interviewed taught two to three classes per semester, each between 50 and 70 students. They spent up to 3 h daily grading assignments, in addition to many more hours they used for lesson preparation. For many teachers, teaching and grading took almost all of their work hours during the day, especially for homeroom teachers. Additionally, teachers tutored students between classes or after school often outside their work hours and responsibility. They said that they worked long hours to cope for fear of being replaced and because they love seeing their students succeed, which makes all worthwhile.

Furthermore, professional development and trainings in general were not in place to support the implementation of the new curriculum (Beckett and Zhao 2014). Teachers found that the new concepts introduced were abstract and vague to understand and there was a lack of clear guidance and steps for transforming teaching practice both from the policy and administration levels. Even though various trainings have been provided by schools as well as local and central ministries of education, it only helped them understand types of changes that have been made in the curriculum, without adequate support for teachers' transition to the required changes. As a result, many teachers fell back onto traditional mode of instruction (e.g., textbook, lecture-based) and increased only students' activities in class, for

benefit of their students. Clearly there are discrepancies between policies and practices that need serious and systematic examination.

19.3 Uniquely Chinese and Confucian vs. Western and Deweyan

Beliefs that informed the Chinese students' and teachers' practices has to do with how Chinese societies have historically oriented towards tradition, honoring individuals who have mastered the classics, with a belief that basics are more important than creativity for school children (Gardner 1989). From this perspective, individuals need to acquire considerable body of knowledge before they can be creative (Gardner 1989; Pratt 2002). Common and proven knowledge that must be mastered by all are respected among Chinese in schools and in work place. Creativity is encouraged only after extensive modeling on the work of masters according to established rules as evidenced by the Chinese saying "once you read 10,000 books, your pen performs wonders" (读书破万卷,下笔如有神).

In Confucian Chinese educational culture, theoretical knowledge is more valued than practical learning skills, which could explain students' desire for more information rather than learning skills. For example, a bright child is referred as *cong-ming* (聪明) having acute ears to receive and analyze information accurately and sharp eyes to be sensitive to external objects, suggesting that listening and observing are more important than hands-on activities (Beckett 1999) for intelligence. According to Mencius, for example, "those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their hands are governed by others" (Dobson 1963, p. 117).

Although many of the Confucian educational concepts discussed in the chapter, including those above, were not originally what Confucius advocated, his ideas and practices were further developed by his followers generations by generations to what is known as Confucian education nowadays (Elliot and Tsai 2008). It was the interpretation and application, including misinterpretation and misapplication of Confucius' thoughts, the adaption of his ideas to fit the needs of every succeeding age, and the branches of Confucian school over the centuries that made it to Confucianism (Nylon and Wilson 2010). According to Nylon and Wilson (2010), even values that existed before him or belonged to his critics are now dubbed as Confucian. In this chapter, we are using Confucian education and epistemology in its plural form to capture the present-day practices of Chinese education that was developed from the Confucian tradition.

One such extended development of Confucius' views includes the primary concern with perfection of traditional values with little regard to practical skills as reflected in the civil servant exam that is still in practice. Traditional Chinese education is about delivering content and developing character (Chyu and Smith 1991). Teachers are seen as "encyclopedia" (Gao et al. 1996, p. 22) who transmit knowledge and model characters and therefore the natural center of the classroom and

highly respected. Learning is viewed as acquisition of knowledge from others as a change in understanding of something external to oneself with extreme deference to teachers and other authorities (Pratt 1992). Structure and close guidance are expected (Beckett 1999).

The rationale behind such practices is that Chinese societies have been hierarchically organized for centuries, where the leaders are always clear and everyone else fits in relation to the center of power. It is believed that older authority figures know what younger people should learn and how they should behave. These could be the reason for students' desire to learn more from their teachers rather learning from peers in groups. Traditional Chinese perspective also holds that education process involves transmission of proven/authoritative knowledge by teachers systematically through prescribed textbooks (Garrot 1993; Ping 1995). According to Ping (1995), Chinese revere books as embodiment of knowledge, wisdom, and truth and follow textbooks strictly. Teaching without books could be seen as casual and unprepared. These could be the reasons behind students' (Beckett 1999) frustrations with research and desire to learn from texts taught by teachers.

In Zhao's studies (2014, *in progress*), Chinese teachers under the influence of Confucian epistemology, emphasized efforts, hard work, and endurance of students (Hue 2007) that they focused less on making the class fun and engaging, thus leading to the resistance by American students. For teachers, learning is an individual effort that requires students to work on the learning tasks they are assigned, endure the boredom of learning, and pay attention to what teachers say and also show self-control (Hue 2007; Zhao *in progress*). Brought up in a Confucian culture, teachers put strong emphasis and demand on students' efforts and academic achievements (Yao et al. 2011; Zhao 2014). Such beliefs and practices in Confucian education apparently conflict with Dewey's teaching philosophy that stresses teachers' responsibilities in designing activities that are both engaging and educational.

The implementing gaps of the new curriculum in north western P.R.C certainly are caused by various factors including professional and psychological challenges to teachers, lack of resources and support from school administrators, and inadequate guidance from professional development institutes. The most important factors, however, are the radical change from its educational tradition and the mismatch with exam-oriented education culture (Yan 2012). As noted earlier, Chinese societies respect tradition and cultural legacy. The new curriculum adopted a process oriented student assessment that considers student' learning processes and daily behaviors rather than solely counting on test scores. However, as a nation with a long tradition of national curriculum and standardized testing, the transformation of its exam-oriented system is probably not foreseen in the short future. The dilemma between implementing western educational and sticking to its Confucian tradition will continue as reflected in teachers' efforts in reconciling requirements of *Gaokao* (高考) and new curriculum reforms.

19.4 Future Trends

It is clear from the above discussion that traditional Confucian views that the Chinese ESL students in the Beckett (1999) and teachers in Beckett and Zhao (2014, 2015), Zhao and Beckett (2014) as well as the Zhao (in progress) held and applied suggested their practice of dilemmatic pragmatism and neo-patriotism. As pointed out earlier, neo-liberal patriotism is a result of Chinese confidence in their ability to compete globally and continue their beliefs about the virtues of Confucian Chinese pedagogy. This transpired in Beckett (1999) student participants' desire to learn from authority, valuing facts and individual learning rather than learning process and group learning, and "basics" rather than creativity, but pragmatically continuing their studies in Canada to achieve their larger goal to enter major universities in North-America, hinting a dilemmatic pragmatism. The teacher in Zhao and Beckett (2014) also adapted dilemmatic pragmatism by changing her Confucian pedagogy to Deweyan project-based instruction pragmatically as she came to a realization that the former might be a mismatch with students' expectations of pedagogy in U.S teaching context and was therefore demotivating. The teachers in Beckett and Zhao (2014, 2015) embraced the new curriculum reform introduced with neo-liberal market economy, seeing some of its virtues, but when faced with dilemma to ensure students' success in the absence of adequate support, they pragmatically reverted back to their traditional textbook and lecture-based pedagogical approach. The pedagogical practices of teachers in Zhao (in progress) study suggest a neoliberal patriotism in that despite the fact that traditional learning approach was not favored, these teachers still believed that Chinese model of teaching, especially direct instruction and study of texts and memorization are fundamental. They adopted aspects of Chinese education into their current teaching practice in U.S., including incorporating a Confucian practice of greetings and bowing (*xing li* 行礼) at the beginning or end of a class, as a way to express respect between teachers and students. All teachers in this study believed that the ideal pedagogy is one that integrates both American and Chinese teaching approaches for U.S schools. In transitioning into a Deweyan, student-centered curriculum, the concerns about neglect of Confucian tradition expressed by teachers, along with how Chinese teachers strived to integrate Confucian teaching into their U.S. classrooms all explained their pride and value of their cultural heritage. In a way, it also indicates the importance of Confucian tradition in education and people's belief that the wealth of Chinese education model can be made known to the rest of the world. We believe this suggests neoliberal patriotic attitude that comes with P.R.C's new-found economic and political power, without which Chinese people learned from U.S and Canada unidirectionally and their practices admirably.

As P.R.C continues to grow economically, politically, and militarily and as more and more Chinese people desire to be part of the middle and upper class strata, we believe the dilemmatic pragmatism and neo-liberal patriotism identified in this chapter will continue to grow. More empirical research would be helpful for further understanding of these theories. For example, many more students and teachers in

different contexts can be interviewed regarding their beliefs about the current and future trends in Chinese models of education. Questions could directly focus on the connections among neo-liberalism, neo-patriotism, and dilemmatic pragmatism. Teachers and students can also be observed to see how their beliefs transpire in action during formal and informal teaching and learning. Multimodal discourse analyses can be conducted to see how Chinese governments and societies encourage neo-liberal patriotism and various contexts.

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