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REFLECTING ON THE INFLUENCE OF INVOLUTION TO THE SHAPING OF PEDAGOGICAL PARTNERSHIPS IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

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Throughout the last four years, I have been working on my doctoral studies at the University of Queensland. These studies focus on exploring how to understand conceptions of pedagogical partnership in Chinese universities. In my exploration, I have raised challenging questions regarding the role of culture and the necessity of creating discourses that support cultural understanding in shaping partnerships as a global scholarship. However, in this reflective essay, I will not delve further into the discussions around culture that have already been presented in my doctoral thesis and publications (e.g., Liang & Matthews, 2021, 2022). Instead, I will reflect on a thought-provoking motivation of Chinese university students I learned about when the student participants in my studies discussed how they engaged in pedagogical partnerships and collaborative learner-teacher interactions – driven by the phenomenon we may call “involution” or “rat race,” which I will explain. This is a hot phenomenon that is currently appearing in many areas of Chinese society, including university teaching and learning. In this essay, I explore what I see as the implications of this phenomenon for the shaping of pedagogical partnerships in Chinese universities.

Context

As a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) student, my engagement in learning and researching pedagogical partnerships began with my PhD studies in mid-2019. The theorisations, practices, and guiding principles that had emerged in partnership literature initially sparked my interest, as they suggested the potential for innovative changes to teaching and learning that could benefit both students and teachers. This excitement filled me with anticipation and curiosity regarding the offered opportunity to engage in scholarship and contribute to the broader conversation on pedagogical partnership. It equally compelled me to consider the unknown possibilities of exploring the conceptions of pedagogical partnership in the context of Chinese higher education.

Although I was holding that excitement, as a native Chinese person who has undergone 16 years of education in China, spanning primary school through university, I was never told or taught about such creative learner-teacher relationships. Therefore, when I was a Chinese university undergraduate student, I never imagined that students could be partners of teachers to contribute to teaching and learning processes. Instead, my experience was largely dominated by the examination system, which served as the primary measure of learning outcomes and student success. As a result, students were encouraged to follow instructions from teachers or institutions in order to obtain higher grades on exams. This situation created a significant power dynamic and identity divide between students and teachers, which was not conducive to the shaping of pedagogical partnerships, as also addressed in Western partnership literature. Therefore, prior to collecting data for my PhD studies, I was concerned about these potential limitations and challenges that such a situation might pose to my research.

However, as a PhD student in an Australian university studying pedagogical partnerships in Chinese universities, I found myself in the position of an outsider looking in. I was unsure of

the changes that had taken place inside and outside Chinese university classrooms since I graduated from a Chinese university undergraduate program four years prior. To address this gap in my knowledge and experience, I conducted a scoping review of partnership literature in Asian countries with one of my supervisors (Liang & Matthews, 2021). One aim of the scoping review was to investigate whether partnership practices had gained traction among Chinese scholars and universities. Surprisingly, our scoping review found half (nine) of the identified studies were conducted in China, with six from Mainland China. Subsequently, the survey data we collected from three different tiered Chinese universities further confirmed that partnership practices are unfolding in Chinese universities, with both student and academic participants indicating a willingness to grow such learner-teacher interactions. Interestingly, though, during follow-up interviews, a significant portion of student participants strongly expressed a sense of “forced engagement” when engaging or desiring to engage in such interactions.

“Forced engagement” as a product of involution

Before elaborating on my own thoughts, I would like to briefly explain the concept of “forced engagement.” The phrase “forced engagement” does not refer to pressure exerted by teachers but rather the peer pressure that compels students to engage in certain activities. I consider this notion to be highly related to the situations I experienced in the Chinese university as described above. In China, the sense of being “forced” to engage can be attributed to the phenomenon of *neijuan*. In English, the term *neijuan* can be translated as involution or rat race, and in this reflective piece, I use involution to capture this term.

Originally, involution was an anthropological term used to describe the issue of long-term intensive cultivation and investing a large amount of labour in agricultural societies without achieving economic breakthroughs (Geertz, 1963). Today, the concept of involution has been expanded to a phenomenon in which a model can neither stabilise nor transform or evolve into a new form after reaching a certain form, but instead continues to become more complex internally.

In Chinese universities, students gradually use involution to refer to the irrational internal competition or being volunteered into competition among students for limited resources, which can be regarded as the inflation of effort. The prevalence of this phenomenon has led to the occurrence and perpetuation of “forced engagement.” To provide further insights into the experiences and feeling of students in this situation, I present two cases shared by the participants in my PhD studies.

Case one: “I have to do that as everyone else is doing more.”

When I communicated with students in the interviews, certain participants recounted a common experience with regard to their engagement in partnership practices in teaching and learning processes. I share the reflection of a student participant (pseudonym: Tang) from a top research-intensive Chinese university who was the first person to talk about involution in the interviews.

When we had a conversation on the motivation of students to engage in such learner-teacher interactions, Tang said involution is currently the biggest motivation for students to engage in

these interactions in the university he was studying at. In doing so, teachers need not worry about the engagement of students. Tang then gave a simple example to explain this phenomenon: for an essay assignment requiring a minimum of 3000 words, students who wrote about 8000-10000 words received much higher scores than those who wrote about just 4000 words. This left Tang feeling confused, as he believed if the higher word count, the higher score, the initial requirement of 3000 words should not be required.

Unfortunately, this situation has worsened over time, and students appear to be forced to engage in more activities and to complete extra work above the required standard, to do more than peers, in order to achieve higher grades and to gain favour with teachers. Although Tang was uncomfortable with this phenomenon, he resolved to follow the crowd and do more in the face of the pressure brought by involution, as he said that he has to do that as everyone else is doing more.

Case two: “I am refusing as the waves will overwhelm students out of breath.”

In the same environment as presented in the previous case, some student participants in my PhD studies also expressed strong dissatisfaction and resistance toward the phenomenon of involution. A student participant (pseudonym: Niu) from a leading provincial Chinese university expressed that she hates the word involution, and she thinks that many students are deeply affected by this phenomenon.

Niu reflected students always regarding teaching and learning activities and learner-teacher interactions solely as tools for achieving higher scores and gaining more attention from teachers is far from the original intention of these activities. As a result, even if students engage in activities and practices and put in lots of effort, it does not necessarily reflect their growth and the development of skills and knowledge. Moreover, Niu felt that such “unhealthy” competition or “forced engagement” resulting from peer pressure can potentially make it difficult for students to balance their time and energy between engagement, studying, and life.

Niu indicated that a good way to escape from this predicament is refusing to engage in some non-compulsory activities and practices, as once students start to engage, they can easily fall into involution and the ever-increasing waves of pressure will eventually overwhelm them out of breath.

What can involution bring to partnership?

Based on the two cases presented above, my sense is that part of the ultimate aim of students caught in the phenomenon is still the pursuit of grades. This observation aligns with my personal experience with the education system in China, where grades and examinations are the dominant measure of student performance and success. This evaluation system, coupled with limited resources for the future development of students, has significantly contributed to the emergence and intensification of involution in Chinese universities. In addition, I noticed that the desire for increased attention from teachers among students has also played a pivotal role in promoting involution, as many of the student participants in my PhD studies truly believed that the benefits of such attention-building connection could positively influence in their academic performance and future prospects.

In light of the phenomenon of involution in Chinese universities, I believe that partnership practices can further increasingly emerge in this context, but will be premised on teachers exercising their leadership. I believe this because what I found in my PhD studies is that many teachers count student engagement in partnership and related pedagogical practices in students' academic performance, and this will be a driving force behind many students falling into involution in relation to partnership work. However, this grade-linked approach does present plenty of opportunities for teachers to further explore and implement pedagogical partnership practices in Chinese universities, as Tang reflected that teachers do not need to worry about the issue of lack of student engagement. Nonetheless, the negative impact of involution on the meaningful development of partnership in Chinese universities has provoked more reflection and concerns from me.

I cannot and should not directly judge whether the growing individualism among students in involution is right or wrong; in a highly competitive environment such as Chinese society, most people may tend to choose the most advantageous paths for their survival and development and continually adapt to changing social norms. However, if we only consider the nature of partnership, involution indeed poses many challenges. While I am eager to see meaningful exploration and evolution of partnership in Chinese universities, the reality contradicts the ideals, and I have thus encountered a paradox.

When I talk about partnership, the first thought that comes to my mind is that partnership is fundamentally about meaningful and creative learner-teacher relationships in teaching and learning (Matthews et al., 2018). The reason why the learner-teacher relationships are meaningful and creative is that the taken-for-granted identities of, and assumed power arrangement between, students and teachers are reshaped during the development of partnership. These changes bring opportunities for students and teachers to work together to co-contribute and bring new awareness of responsibility to rethink how to be students and teachers. As Cook-Sather et al. (2014) explained, pedagogical partnership is “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (pp. 6-7).

These partnership ideals seem to me to be unrealistic when partnership is embedded in the learner-teacher relationships surrounded by involution. Situated in the context of involution, students' utilitarianism appears to me to be a major challenge to the building of meaningful learner-teacher relationships. Even with increased engagement, I am not sure whether students' perceptions of their identity will change. If student commitment to participation in partnership work is all an illusion created by utilitarian desire, teachers may be fooled by this illusion, even if they have desire to make changes. Even if the illusion is noticed, I worry that it may be ignored by teachers' self-deception brought about by the sense of accomplishment. Then, when students and teachers cannot truly resonate with each other, the building of the partnership is just a repetition of the previous relationship under a gorgeous appearance.

For these reasons, I am concerned that in Chinese universities, the outcome of simply designing expected practices may not align with the nature of partnership. Of course, the best solution is to have changes on the student evaluation systems in Chinese universities. However, due to the governance structure of Chinese universities, this seems to be beyond the ability and duty of students and teachers. Therefore, I think the role of teachers will be important in breaking through involution in exploring and enacting partnerships. To my

mind, when teachers exercise their leadership, instead of mainly focusing on how to involve students into partnership practices, they should pay more attention and think about how to take actions to dispel students' competitive emotions that reduce the influence from involution. This could be achieved by removing the ties to student grades, or by creating "rules" to maintain an equal and respectful engagement environment. These actions may greatly reduce the enthusiasm of students who are embracing utilitarianism, but at least they may ensure to a greater extent that those who are genuinely interested in engaging can obtain authentic experience and feelings. Although partnership emphasises equal opportunities for community members to engage and contribute, in the environment of involution, I think it may be a more effective way that a few members to experience and build awareness first, and then motivate the majority.

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