

Reflection (Veronica Liu)

I have been in the UK for four years now. Time always flies by quickly, slipping away unnoticed. Amidst the busy life and academic pressures, I am about to conclude my time at the University of Warwick. This reflection allows me to take a moment to think about the various cultural clashes and experiences I have encountered in my initial four years in the UK before officially ending this chapter of my life. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to complete this task.

Given that I have been in the UK for four years, some of the memories of the impact caused by small cultural differences have become blurred upon reflection. Therefore, I will mainly focus here on the impact of the more significant differences in educational philosophies between Asians (primarily Chinese) and British people.

As the Chair of the SSLC (Staff-Student Liaison Committee) for the Undergraduate Education Department at the University of Warwick, I am frequently required to gather suggestions and feedback from students regarding the department. In my cohort, we have around twenty students, with half being Asians (including one student from Korea and the rest from China) and the other half being local British students. An interesting phenomenon occurs when I solicit suggestions for improvements to the department: the feedback I receive can almost be described as two extremes.

I remember clearly when we discussed whether the dissertation submission deadline could be extended. This proposal was primarily brought forward by British students, who were concerned about the significant pressure caused by the simultaneous deadlines of other assignments. They feared that such heavy stress could prevent them from performing at their best in these assignments. Due to these concerns, the proposal was put up for discussion.

When I conveyed this proposal to the Chinese students, they were very surprised. Their astonishment stemmed from the fact that it had never occurred to them that the dissertation submission deadline could be altered. Although we have options for self-imposed extensions and flexible extensions with evidence for some assignments, these options are not available for dissertations. Therefore, even though many students often complained in casual conversations about the tight schedule and the heavy workload, no one had ever thought to communicate with the department to address this issue.

This phenomenon is particularly interesting as it highlights the different responses to authority shaped by diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. In universities, teachers and school administrators represent authoritative figures for students. The approach to dealing with authority is influenced by perspectives gradually formed during early childhood. Previous research indicates that children's evaluations of the permissibility of behaviour and their acceptance of commands from authority figures vary depending on the context (Tisak, 1986). However, children do not uniformly regard all authoritative commands as legitimate; they also coordinate the domain of events with the type of directive and believe that authority is legitimate only in relation to acceptable behaviour (Killen, 1990).

Children perceive the role, power, or expertise of authority figures as context-specific (Yau, et al., 2009). They view legitimate school authority as individuals with appropriate social status, issuing proper directives within suitable environments. This tendency may stem from children's familiarity with authority figures. In particular social contexts, close relationships may be more significant than social status when young children consider obedience. Due to the close relationship with their parents and the responsibility of care and upbringing, children may find it easier to accept parental authority compared to others.

In contrast, within Chinese culture, it is not uncommon for parents to warn young

children to behave appropriately in the presence of public authority figures such as teachers, principals, and police officers (ibid.). This adherence to parental authority extends to following their instructions. Consequently, even if children are not personally acquainted with these figures, they recognize the inherent power associated with their uniforms and are more inclined to comply with their authority than with other strangers (ibid.). This results in the perception that directives from teachers and principals are authoritative and unquestionable.

Despite the formative influences of their early childhood and the fact that they are now far removed from the Chinese educational system and their parents, these educational perspectives have left a profound and lasting impact on them. Even though the British educational system continuously emphasizes that education is student-centered and that students have the right to participate in the progression of teaching, it appears that a considerable amount of time and patience is still required to effectively instill this mindset.

In contrast, the British students, who have been exposed to liberal ideals from a young age, stand up against authority when faced with injustice. They primarily championed this proposal, which I greatly admire. They never back down from advocating for their interests, regardless of the challenges they face. Influenced by their determination, I actively supported this initiative as the Chair of the Undergraduate SSLC. Furthermore, I believe I should encourage other Chinese students to participate, as this could significantly aid the advancement of the dissertation extension proposal.

However, despite informing the group about this matter and the efforts made by the British students and myself, the response from the Chinese students was underwhelming. By this, I mean that no one responded to my messages. Only a small number of students privately thanked me and the other students for our efforts. They explained that they did not respond in the group chat because they noticed others had not, and thus they were unsure if they should express their opinions. As a result, they

decided to reach out to me individually rather than post in the group chat.

This phenomenon reminds me of Olson's (1971) discussion on collectivism. Olson points out that while group members may share common interests in obtaining collective benefits, they do not necessarily share common interests in bearing the costs required to obtain those benefits. If individual contributions to the group are evenly distributed and not acknowledged, individuals lack the motivation to contribute, and as the group size increases, individuals may feel increasingly dispensable. Since the benefits of increased individual effort are shared equally among group members, individuals may opt to slack off to pursue personal goals, thus achieving both collective and personal benefits.

Despite my awareness of these potential consequences and my mental preparedness for them, encountering this situation firsthand still makes it difficult for me to understand why they cannot collectively support other students who are working hard on this issue. However, I do not blame them; everyone has their own ways of dealing with situations. It can only be attributed to cultural differences.

Furthermore, this may also be attributed to the contrasting values of individualism emphasized in Western countries and collectivism prevalent in China. From an early age, Chinese students are taught in classrooms that "everyone is part of a collective" and "everyone should collectively uphold the honor of the group." Even when individual students make mistakes and are disciplined, the lesson often includes the notion that "one person's mistake means everyone suffers punishment."

However, what is more intriguing is that despite the prevalence of collectivism in China, the younger generation exhibits different manifestations of this ideology. According to Earley's (1989) research, traditional collectivism in China emphasized that everyone should contribute to the honor of the group, thereby discouraging idleness. In contrast, in the individualistic culture of the United States, individuals

may reduce their contributions to the group if they believe others are contributing sufficiently. However, this conclusion contrasts starkly with current observations.

Chinese students, to a certain extent, adhere to collectivism, as they are reluctant to advocate for a dissertation extension based on personal desires. However, it is noteworthy that this reluctance does not solely reflect their personal will. In casual conversations, there is widespread lamentation that a dissertation extension would lead to better outcomes. Therefore, this can be seen as a collective goal that many aspire to achieve. Yet, no individual stepped forward to propose it.

As the person responsible for the SSLC, I relayed this situation to the department. According to the department's response at the time, the deadline was set by university regulations, which they were unable to amend. I chose to accept this explanation and conveyed it to other students. It is worth noting that at that time, I did not foresee that through persistent meetings and continuous pressure on the department, we would eventually succeed in obtaining the extension. I found myself complying, despite realizing this, as I attempted to advocate for everyone's interests. However, when faced with insurmountable authority and challenges, I ultimately complied.

However, this matter sparked strong reactions among British students. Many expressed their willingness to petition officially if necessary. They remained adamant about their desire for the department to reconsider. In response to this situation, I engaged in multiple rounds of communication with the department, consistently conveying the strong sentiments of the student body. Eventually, after a period of deliberation involving discussions within the department and university, our request for an extension was granted.

This was very positive news, both for the matter at hand—allowing us more time to complete our dissertations—and for us as students, demonstrating our ability to influence changes in the educational process. This was a significant revelation for me

personally, considering my educational background spanning twelve years in China's conventional education system from elementary to high school. Never before had I imagined that student needs could lead to adjustments in school policies, teacher arrangements, and educational schedules. Moreover, this change was not merely a minor adjustment to class schedules but a unified extension of university graduation theses.

The individualism prevalent in Western countries manifests when everyone actively strives for collective benefits with unanimous agreement. Conversely, in China's prevailing collectivist culture, there is silence in such situations. No one is willing to stick their neck out. There's a saying in China, "The first bird to stick its head out gets shot," implying that those who advocate first will be targeted and punished. Therefore, everyone avoids being the initiator. This reluctance is evident not only in their failure to proactively request an extension but also in their lack of responses to messages I posted in our group. They seem to believe that by remaining silent and blending in, they will achieve the same outcomes as their peers. Whether favorable or not, as long as someone else acts similarly, they do not perceive it as unfair, even though it may not align with their ideals. Moreover, the ingrained obedience to authority instilled from a young age exacerbates this phenomenon. Challenging rules is seen as disruptive and selfish. Thus, despite many being dissatisfied with the rules, the prevailing norm of non-confrontation leads to compliance.

In conclusion, the cultural distinctions between individualism in Western countries and collectivism in China significantly influence student behavior and their approach to authority. While British students actively advocate for their rights and work collectively to effect change, Chinese students often exhibit reluctance to challenge the status quo, influenced by deeply ingrained cultural norms of obedience and fear of standing out. My experiences as the SSLC Chair at the University of Warwick highlighted these differences, demonstrating how cultural backgrounds shape students' responses to academic policies and authority. Despite initial compliance,

persistent efforts and cross-cultural collaboration can lead to positive changes, illustrating the potential for integrating diverse cultural perspectives to enhance the educational environment. This reflection underscores the importance of understanding and respecting cultural differences while fostering an inclusive environment that encourages all students to voice their needs and contribute to collective goals.

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