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British and Chinese Secondary Educational Ideologies: Individualism and Collectivism

As Human society develops, education plays a more and more important role in the advance of the world than ever before, especially the secondary education that is a vital transition from primary education to higher education. Interested in the respective quality of British and Chinese secondary education, British Broadcasting Corporation, known as BBC, produced a documentary called *Are Our kids Tough Enough? Chinese School* (2015) to investigate the differences between British and Chinese educational styles. In the documentary, students from Grade Nine, Bohunt School, Liphook, Hampshire, Britain were divided into two groups to receive the Chinese and British secondary education respectively for a month, after which all of them would take Math, Science, and Mandarin exams to help educators figure out which way of secondary education was better.

In this research paper, I will respectively compare and contrast British and Chinese students’ behaviors, teachers’ notions of education, as well as ways to teach English, Math, Science, and Physical Education reflected in the documentary. Besides, I will interact with M Lee Manning’s article, entitled “Child-Centered Middle School” (2000), which explains the concept of child-centered middle school, as well as other peer-viewed articles to deepen the understanding of British and Chinese educational ideologies. While Ellen E Jones argued in her TV review on Independent that “while British schools have “a culture of child-centred

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learning”, Chinese education was characterised as “authority, discipline and ruthless competition””, I would argue that British educational ideology is based on individualism while Chinese educational ideology is based on collectivism. Furthermore, understanding the philosophy behind British and Chinese teaching styles enables educators to find out a better education pattern.

The educational ideologies are obviously reflected by the objects of education, the students. When Jones talked about the outcome of British education in her TV review, she mentioned that one of the advantages of British education is that “it produces lots of spirited characters”, which means that British education encourages its students to express themselves, a reflection of individualism. During a break between classes, Rosie and Angelina were “in a party mode”, dancing accompanied with pop music and shouting out its lyric in the classroom, regardless of other students (BBC), which shows that British students may feel free to pursue their own happiness without concerning others’ feelings. Besides, when Aiyun Li, one of the five Chinese teachers offering Chinese education, told her British students Confucianism that people should adjust themselves to fit in with the society, “free-spirited” Angelina held an opposite opinion by arguing that “In my opinion, I think that’s wrong. I think you should be your own person not just…You should not be forced to be what people tell you to be. You should be who you are”, which gained other students’ warm applause (BBC). The casual dancing, thoughtful opinion held by Angelina, and Angelina’s action to express her own ideas show individualism and that British students attach great importance to being themselves, which reveals the individualistic ideology of British education. By contrast, Chinese students’ daily behaviors are more “self-controlled” (Liu 32) than their British counterparts. During

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classes, Chinese students are seated silently, paying full attention to the teachers and making their own notes (BBC). While attending the self-study section, most of the Chinese students do their own work quietly instead of disturbing other students (BBC). Based on Chinese students’ mannered behaviors, someone may argue that Chinese students are isolated with each other, which seems to conflict Chinese collectivistic ideology. However, I would argue that the mannered behaviors show Chinese students’ respect to their peers’ “individual hard working” (Bush, Coleman and Si 189) and concerns about others’ feelings, revealing their strong sense of responsibility to their collective, which is, indeed, a reflection of Chinese collectivistic education style.

Students may be mainly influenced by their teachers, and the respective educational ideology is revealed even more apparently by the teachers’ notions of education than the students’ behaviors. When Raymond J. Bandlow talked about the organizing principle of child-centered schools in his article, he asserted that “middle grades should be a time for allowing students to grow and discover their own interests” (70), which is consistent to British teachers' individualistic ideology that encourages kids’ self-development. When Jay Bremner, a math teacher in Bohunt school, talked about his point of view on lessons, he maintained that “it’s not the teacher’s lesson any more, it is the students’ lesson and if we, as teachers, don’t develop lessons to tailor to the needs of our particular groups, it’s just going to fall on deaf ears” (BBC), showing a strong sense of child-centered educational ideology. Based on Bremner’s argument, it is logical to assert that British teachers treat their students as diverse individuals and attach great importance to adjusting their lessons to fulfill students’ various needs, by which the individualistic education style is obviously reflected. On the

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contrary, Chinese teachers hold a different attitude towards education. When JunYang, the Chinese teacher who delivered Science lessons, shared her point of view on Chinese education, she asserted that “Chinese education is not only delivery of the subject knowledge. Chinese education is, too, cultivating a human being. We teach them how to be sensible, responsible citizens of the country, because we serve our country” (BBC), which shows a strong sense of collectivism by mentioning service for motherland. Consistent to Yang’s argument, Miantao Sun argued that “The essential aim of this education system reform was to promote the quality of the whole nation and produce more qualified personnel so as to realize China’s socialist modernization” (314). Usage of the word “whole” and the phrase “realize China’s socialist modernization” shows that Chinese education treats all the students as a collective and that Chinese education is designed to help the advance of China. According to the analyses of students’ behaviors and teachers’ notions of education, it is logical to assert that British secondary education is based on individualism, focusing on kids’ self-development while Chinese secondary education is based on collectivism, emphasizing the collectivistic function of education.

Equipped with respective education philosophy, British and Chinese teachers deliver lessons to have their impacts on students. As a result, curriculum also reveals educational ideologies. Specifically, I will compare and contrast the differences between British and Chinese education styles in teaching English in this paragraph. At the beginning of an English lesson, a British teacher shared some of his/her points and showed the students how to deal with problems. After knowing the methods, students were asked to answer questions that were set by their teacher independently, after which they would discuss the questions, and

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solutions would be offered by the teacher (BBC). This kind of “enquiry-based” (BBC) English lessons concerns students’ individual needs by offering them an opportunity to come up with answers to questions by themselves, during which their own thoughts are respected, and their critical thinking skills are trained, revealing British individualistic education philosophy that students’ self-development is encouraged. When Manning discussed “the instructional practices and learning environment in a child-centered middle school” (157), he argued that young adolescents should be allowed to make significant academic and management choices and decisions (157), which is consistent to the “enquiry-based” (BBC) British way of teaching English that encourages students to have their own ideas. Different from its active British counterpart, Chinese way of teaching English seems to be passive and boring. During the entire Chinese-style English lesson, Aiyun Li, the Chinese teacher who taught English grammar, stood in the front of the classroom and kept repeating the knowledge she wanted her students to learn regardless of the reaction of her students (BBC), which is in accordance with Meng Deng and Zhenzhou Zhao’s statement that the Chinese traditional passive learning style relies on memorization and regurgitation (808-809). Besides, the students had few opportunities to ask questions or express their own ideas, resulting into students’ loss of attention to the teacher (BBC). Based on the scene in a Chinese-style English class, it is reasonable to argue that Chinese teachers treat all the students as a collective regardless of the differences between distinct individuals, because Chinese teachers have their own pace to deliver lessons, and they may not adjust their speed of delivery to fit in with students’ diverse competence, which shows Chinese collectivistic education philosophy.

Apart from the linguistic course, educational ideologies are also reflected by Math

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lessons. When Manning talked about the characteristics of child-centered middle schools, he argued that “Specially trained teachers provide educational experiences that address young adolescents’ needs, interests, and perspectives. Similarly, educators recognize and address young adolescents’ differences resulting from culture, gender, and sexual orientation” (154), which shows child-centered schools’ emphases on kids’ individual diversity. Similarly, British Math education shows its respect to individual diversity by separating students into “classes of different abilities” (BBC). Furthermore, students were divided into different groups to do their group work, discussed Math problems with their groupmates, and received necessary help from their Math teacher in a British-style Math lesson (BBC), where “autonomy and questioning are encouraged” (Wollaston). Based on the pattern of a normal British-style Math lesson, it is rational to assert that British secondary education reveals its individualistic ideology in Math lessons by showing respect to individual diverse abilities, because typical British Math lessons are designed according to students’ diversity in competence. However, there are few similarities between Chinese Math lessons and British Math lessons. Though with a common pattern of Chinese education that a teacher stood in the front of the classroom to deliver lessons, a typical Chinese Math lesson was even harder for students to follow than an English lesson, because difficult Math material was delivered in a fast speed (BBC). Besides, the number of students who attended a Chinese Math lesson was about 50 (BBC), which shows that students are treated as a collective and that individual diversity in abilities is neglected. When Bush, Coleman, and Si talked about the syllabus of secondary schools in China, they argued that “The main approach to teaching is to carry out the syllabus decided by the government and teachers have little right to change the curriculum” (189), which

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means that Chinese teachers need to stick to “the syllabus decided by the government” (Bush, Coleman and Si 189). As a result, it may be hard for Chinese Math teachers to adjust their lessons to suit to students with diverse abilities, resulting in collectivistic education philosophy that students are considered as a collective. Based on the analyses of British and Chinese methods in teaching English and Math, it is reasonable to argue that British secondary education shows respect to students’ individual ideas and competence while its Chinese counterpart treats all the students as a collective and neglects their individual diversity, which is consistent to my thesis that British secondary education is based on individualism while its Chinese counterpart is based on collectivism.

Slightly different from Math lessons, British Science education takes students’ individual needs into account by encouraging “self-discovery” (BBC) instead of separating students into “classes of different abilities” (BBC). Consistent to British Science education, Manning argued in his article that “Provide exploratory programs (both curricular and special interest), so that young adolescents will have opportunities to discover their talents abilities and values” (154), which emphasizes that kids should be provided with the chance to explore the unknown on their own. In a typical British Science lesson, practical methods were not shown directly by the teacher (BBC). Instead, students divided into various groups needed to work as a team to discover correct methods and acquire Science knowledge themselves, during which notions of Science that “getting it wrong and then correcting it, and finding the way to do it” (BBC) are emphasized. Furthermore, students’ abilities of self-learning are improved, and Science knowledge is connected with each other in practical Science lessons, which is in accordance with Manning’s argument about child-centered middle schools that

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“Place emphasis on thinking and learning how to learn, rather than focusing only on isolated and disconnected facts” (157).

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