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The number of Chinese students coming to the U.K. to undertake postgraduate courses has been steadily growing over the past decades and comprises a large proportion of the international students at masters level in the U.K. Given their importance to the income and culture of UK universities, it is important to research the difficulties and challenges many students encounter in adapting to Western style critical argumentation and debate. Critical debate is a defining concept in western universities, and is rooted in the Socratic/Aristotelian pursuit and discovery of 'truth' through the disciplined process of critical thinking. Modern day critical thinking theorists (Paul 1994; Ennis 1996 and Siegel 1988), advocate this type of thinking as the highest form of reasoning for all human beings, though critics strongly argue that this is an ethnocentric view, and that different cultures employ and value different styles of reasoning (Gee 1994; Street 1994; Thayer-Bacon 1993; Orr 1989).

Many argue that universities should be places where ideas can be turned inside out, thoroughly scrutinised and looked at from all angles, and where contradictory or alternative viewpoints can be evaluated and debated fair-mindedly. From this viewpoint, such a robust approach to the pursuit of learning and to thinking should be the ultimate aim of higher education, where students are encouraged to problematise knowledge, and to challenge traditional assumptions about knowledge and its application (Barnett 1997; Caproni & Arias 1997; Facione et al 1995; Hutton 2001; Mingers 2000; Schwartzman 1995). Many would argue, however, that whether western style critical thinking neglects the cultural and academic norms of international students where they are different from western norms, and so fails to address possible mismatches of expectations. In an attempt to address this issue, the research project described in this chapter had two aims:

**1. To explore differences between the academic discourse expectations of U.K. lecturers and Chinese masters students regarding critical thinking and argumentation.** What do Chinese students understand by the term ‘critically evaluate’? This is a term frequently used by lecturers to denote critical thinking and analysis, and it contains bedrock assumptions that underpin academic writing practices in the West.

**2. To explore how Chinese cultural influences can facilitate or hinder the understanding of, and attitude towards, western-style critical thinking and argumentation.** What aspects of academic study in the U.K. do Chinese students identify as causing them the most challenges in relation to critical argumentation, and what are their lecturers’ perceptions of the difficulties they face?

The following literature review gives the background to this research.

## **Literature Review**

The development of critical thinking is a stated aim of higher education in Britain. This can be seen in the calls for ‘rigorous arguments’ and ‘critical analysis’ in the Quality Assurance Agency’s assessment criteria and demonstrable skills at masters level:

[Students should be] able to think critically and be creative ... organise thoughts, analyse, synthesise and critically appraise. This includes the capability to identify assumptions, evaluate statements in terms of evidence, detect false logic or reasoning, (and) identify implicit values.

(QAA 2007: section 3.10)

In western higher education, academic argumentation and debate is rooted in Socratic/Aristotelian practice of rigorous debate, an aggressive search for truth and a discerning of error, bias and contradiction (Paul 1982, 1993, 1994; Ennis 1962, 1984, 1987, 1996; Siegel 1988). Andrews (2007:11) describes western-style criticality as ‘assuming scepticism towards given truth, and weighing up different claims to the truth against the evidence’. This traditional view of western critical thinking has been described by Thayer-Bacon (1992, 1993) as ‘the battlefield mentality’ which results in polarized critiques, with theories and ideas rejected or accepted on the basis of

supporting evidence and logical argument. It is based on the premise that evidence should be held in doubt and subject to scrutiny until it can be proved legitimate and truthful. Indeed, this is reflected in the notion of the 'Null Hypothesis' used in quantitative data analysis:

The spirit of critical thinking is that we take nothing for granted or as being beyond question. In academic debate, arguments are analysed to find inconsistencies, logical flaws or evidence to the contrary.  
(Walkner & Finney 1999: 532)

So all viewpoints need to be considered and critiqued in a fair-minded manner, and for this a critical thinker has to be prepared to recognise the weaknesses and limitations in his or her own position:

When one becomes aware that there are many legitimate points of view, each of which - when deeply thought through – yields some level of insight, then one becomes keenly aware that one's own thinking, however rich and insightful it may be, however carefully constructed, will not capture everything worth knowing and seeing.  
(Paul 1993:23)

Paul's main argument is that critical thinking is a universal skill, ideally to be pursued by all human beings regardless of culture and gender; that it is superior to all other forms of thinking, demanding fairness, discipline and creativity; and that it is the key to full personhood and self realisation. Such thinking demands a deliberate and conscious examination of assumptions and beliefs, which can be an uncomfortable exercise:

Critical thinking is complex because it involves overcoming not only intellectual barriers to progress, but psychological barriers as well. We are comfortable, as a rule, with our ideas, our belief structures, our view of the world. Certainly, if we thought our ideas were flawed, irrational, shallow, or biased in an unfair way, we would have already changed them. When questioned about the validity of our ideas or beliefs, particularly the foundational ones, we typically interpret the question to be a challenge to our integrity, often even to our identity. (Paul 1993 ii)

Whilst many opponents of Paul argue that these notions are culturally biased, they nevertheless agree on one point: that all humans are capable of higher order cognitive skills. What they disagree on is how thoughts are *expressed* in the context of a diversity of cultures and across gender:

All humans who are acculturated and socialized are already in possession of higher order cognitive skills, though their expression and the practices they are embedded in will differ across cultures.

(Gee 1994:189)

Street (1993,1994) and Gee(1993, 1994) argue that the type of thinking advocated by the Critical Thinking movement is narrow, ethnocentric and that it represents male-oriented, Western logic. In Hofstede's (2001) terms, it reflects the 'masculinity' and individualism of Western cultures. Street and Gee believe that 'nurture', i.e. the social and cultural context, rather than innate 'nature' determines how these higher order cognitive skills are expressed. In other words, cognitive expression is integrally linked to culture and social communication, and in some cultures the type of logical, explicit reasoning used in the West is not culturally acceptable. It is not that some cultures are incapable of using certain patterns of reasoning, but that they prefer some patterns above others, such as diffuse thinking above specificity (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000). If Street and Gee are correct, and if Chinese academic discourse patterns fall predominantly outside the dominant western patterns, then Chinese students can be expected to have different notions from Western academics of how argumentation and debate should operate<sup>1</sup>. As a result, they will employ different communication strategies when expressing disagreement, criticism, or when arguing a point, especially in public discourses.

Western-style public disagreement assumes a separation of a person's ideas from the person themselves, separating knowledge from the knower. Siegel (1988:41) argues that strong critical thinkers are 'capable of distinguishing between having faulty

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper British and Chinese cultures are not viewed as monolithically describing all individuals within those cultures, but as representing large numbers of people conditioned by similar background, education and life experiences (Doney, Cannon & Mullen 1998). So, although the terms are used to suggest cultural commonalities and homogeneity among many of the members, there is no intention to stereotype, nor to obscure differences among individuals.

beliefs and having a faulty character’, and are able therefore to be ‘emotionally secure’ in their response to personal academic criticism. By this is meant that Western debate assumes that another’s view can be refuted and critiqued without involving psychological and emotional implications for those whose arguments receive critiques. Critical thinking is seen as detached, impersonal and transcending social interactions. This, however, is a very ‘masculine’ and individualistic perspective towards enquiry. The West tends not to view academic enquiry as a social activity but instead elevates isolation, separateness from others and individualistic speculation ‘at the expense of the collective wisdom of the community’ (Hird 1999:39).

In contrast to this, an inter-dependent relationship is developed between speaker and listener in collectivist cultures, and the reactions of each party are closely monitored by the other. In oral debates Chinese student will tend to empathize with the other participants; to reject or challenge ideas is to risk a personal insult to the originators of these ideas. The notion of adopting an identity of individualism is ‘quite foreign to his/her notion of a collective, relational sense of self-identity, and involves a reversal of acceptance, ‘face’ and politeness behaviour’ (Hird 1999:33). As Doi writes, students from collectivist cultures tend to demonstrate ‘a reluctance to carry rationalism to the point where it will make the individual too aware of his separateness in relation to people and things about him’ (1981:9).

According to Hofstede and Bond (1984), maintaining harmony and avoiding offence or confrontation in China appear to be of greater value and importance than any search for absolute truth which might result in giving unnecessary offence. Hence, any evaluation of ideas would be based on the premise of first accepting all contributions with a view to conciliatory accommodation and dialogue. China is a high context culture (Hall 1976), where inference, indirect speech and an avoidance of public disagreement are the norm, whereas the British culture has been described as low context (Hall 1976), where explicitness and directness in speech are valued, and where more open disagreement and free expression of one’s beliefs and thoughts are acceptable. Teamwork for British students involves brainstorming of ideas, with a readiness to reject any contributions that do not stand up to critical analysis. Teamwork in China, on the other hand, lays an emphasis on listening to others, exposition

of accepted fact, and restraint in expressing personal opinions, especially when these are contrary to the common consensus or to those in positions of authority. Likewise, relationships among team members are more important than task completion, and critical evaluation of team members' ideas to achieve the best solution carries less weight than maintaining harmony.

To add to the complexity of these issues, feminist opponents of the Critical Thinking movement, (such as Thayer-Bacon 1993, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule 1986, Bailin 1995, Orr 1989, Nye 1990) and other writers such as Tannen (1990, 1998), argue that men's logic is different from women's logic, the latter accepting experience, emotion and feeling as valid sources of evidence. Orr claims that formal logic is dominated by masculine preference for polarised argumentation: "The West's conception of mind and rationality are overwhelmingly male" (1989:2). Bailin (1995), likewise, claims that formal logic was developed by white Western males and is biased because it excludes the practices of some groups. She argues that it reflects masculine styles of interacting and that their standards are made universal as the only legitimate mode of understanding. This mode can be characterised by aggression and confrontation, individualism, logic and a lack of emotion - the 'battlefield' mentality - as opposed to the more 'feminine', intuitive reasoning. A more collaborative, interpersonal context for discussion and debate, she argues, is more suited to many groups: 'different groups in society have employed different methods in constructing knowledge, but those in power have privileged their own ways of knowing' (Bailin 1995:194). Similarly, Orr (1989) contends that women prefer conciliatory reasoning (informal logic), where differences are accepted and not polarised, although she also points out that women, once allowed education, have proved to be as able as men to use the masculine mode of reasoning, but she argues that empathy and subjectivity can also be useful tools in reasoning.

Chinese students, coming from a culture that scores higher than the U.K. in Hofstede's (1991, 2001) femininity dimension, may therefore be disadvantaged by the educational practice in the West, as they may find it more natural and culturally acceptable to engage in conciliatory and sensitive dialogue than the 'wrestling debate' advocated in the west.

Thayer-Bacon moreover argues that dialogical or critical thinking is a relational and social process and not an individualistic endeavour:

We develop our thinking skills as we develop our communication skills and our social skills, by being in relation to others. Our thinking improves the more we are able to relate to others and discuss our thoughts with them. (Thayer-Bacon 1993: 337)

A relational model of thinking emphasises people working together – solving problems through conversing, listening and debating together, valuing all opinions and suspending judgement. Like Vygotsky (1962/1994) and many educational linguists (e.g. Bruner 1973, Graves 1978, Bakhtin 1984), Thayer-Bacon believes that ‘our thinking improves the more we are able to relate to others and discuss our thoughts with them’ (1993:338). Similarly, Scardamalia and Bereiter argue that conversation can promote the growth of thinking, especially when ‘controversial partners holding different opinions strive to reach a mutually agreeable position and in the process advance beyond the level of understanding that either partner possessed at the beginning’ (1994:297). Such endeavours to fair-mindedly consider and understand people’s ideas in order to find the best solutions to problems is described as *constructive thinking* by Thayer-Bacon (1993). She argues that one cannot separate the self from the object, the knower from the known, personal knowledge from expert knowledge (1993:324). In other words, reflective problem-solving thinking, which requires judgements, decisions and choices, must involve the whole person and not just the mind. Sensitivity, she argues, is essential if one is to be truly open-minded and ‘fair’ to others’ arguments. True critical thinking, Thayer-Bacon claims, requires one to know oneself and what one contributes to the knowing - in other words to be self-reflective and constructive, and for this relational skills are necessary to help open, not just one’s mind, but one’s heart:

A constructive thinker attempts to believe the other(s) to make sure understanding has taken place, before she uses her critical thinking skills to doubt and critique. Judging and assessing are vital parts of constructive thinking, but so are caring and awareness of one’s own personal voice. Caring is value-giving, whereas blind justice tends to be absolutistic and silencing. (Thayer-Bacon 1993: 327, 328)

In other words, one gives value and worth to the other person when one respects them enough to listen and try to understand their meaning before opposing, dismissing or trying to silence their viewpoint. Caring is an essential ingredient in critical thinking according to Thayer-Bacon: “Without caring, one cannot hope to be a good / constructive thinker. Caring is necessary to be sure ideas have been fairly considered and understood” (1993: 323). She defines *caring* as being receptive and respectful to what another has to say, being open to hearing the other’s voice more completely and fairly, and deeming it to be of value, of interest and worthy of close inspection. The notion of caring as an integral aspect of education is found in the Confucian heritage which advocates that a person can not be educated in the absence of strong, caring relations, and without developing the heart (‘jiao ren), as much as the mind. It also relates closely to the notion of ‘face’ (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998), and to Ting-Toomey’s notion of ‘mindfulness’ (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998), where participants in an interactive discourse take conscious care and are mindful of the other(s)’ face.

This discussion has highlighted some of the challenges facing many Chinese students as they encounter the requirements for western style critical argumentation in their studies. The question then arises as to whether it is possible, or indeed appropriate, for Western academia to consider *adapting* the Western style of critical discourse into a style that encourages and values conciliatory, constructive reasoning.

## **Methodology**

A cultural, interpretive approach was followed, and a qualitative, inductive methodology employed, as being the most appropriate for the research topic. Two universities in the U.K. were selected as case sites, and a third case site was a university in China. The choice of subject disciplines for the case sites depended on three criteria: that large numbers of Chinese students are recruited onto their masters programmes; that the course assignments demand a high level of critical thinking and evaluative writing; and lastly ease of access. Postgraduate students were targeted as masters courses are only one year long in the U.K., making it essential for international students to adapt very quickly to the new norms of academia if they are to succeed in their studies. It was therefore judged that such rapid adaptation would

be easier to reflect on for both student and lecturer participants. The China case site was a prestigious Foreign Language university where final year undergraduate students intending to study in the U.K. for a masters the following term were interviewed. The aim here was to explore their notions of critical thinking and argumentation immediately prior to their study abroad. The language of instruction at this university is English, and so the second language competency of this sample was good. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifty students: twenty four masters Chinese students in the U.K.; eighteen Chinese students in the Chinese university; and eight British students in one of the U.K. universities, for comparison and triangulation purposes. In addition, sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with lecturers at the three sites (five Chinese and eleven British). The researcher conducted and transcribed all the interviews, so the participants needed to have sufficient competency in English oracy in order to express their thoughts clearly. The sample was restricted therefore to those with a minimum of IELTS 6.5<sup>2</sup>. Although interviewing in their second language may be seen as problematic, this is arguably a suitable research medium for this study, as English is the medium of study in U.K. universities. All the interviews were tape recorded, and analysed using open coding (Corbin & Strauss 1990). Then by using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss 1967), emerging themes and categories were identified, and the data interpreted to generate the theoretical concept of 'The Middle Way' (see Figure 1). The next section distils the main findings. All quotes are from the student participants unless identified as Chinese or British lecturers, or as British students.

## **Findings and discussion**

The research found that by the end of their masters courses many Chinese students had rejected aspects of Western style debate, and they had no desire to leave aside their traditional, encultured ways so as to embrace the new mindset. There were four main reasons for this: a genuine dislike of the abrasive, polarized style of much of western argumentation; discomfort with the risk and uncertainty associated with it; pressure from members of their collectivistic culture to conform; and a pragmatic decision based on their view of the usefulness of such skills once they returned home.

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<sup>2</sup> International English language testing standard

One of the British students observed that ‘The whole educational environment and society in the U.K. encourages one to ask questions and query things without being ‘sat on’. We’ve all been institutionalised into the argument culture. However, many of the Chinese participants perceived western academic critique as being insensitive and unnecessarily offensive. A Chinese student remarked that ‘British students have been encouraged to challenge – too much. Rebellious!’ British students were also aware of the very different expectations that some of their Chinese peers had:

A Chinese girl in our class holds the view that we should think more and talk less, and she told us that she was really taken back by the English way of jumping in and saying things, and coming out with things loudly. And she almost thought we were a bit rude, and strange and a bit arrogant, and it wasn’t her way. So there’s definitely a marked difference in the way we see things. (British student)

In a class debate, direct disagreement or challenge was often seen as threatening and inconsiderate:

Sometimes when you are talking they (the British/European students) will stop you in the middle with disagreement. That makes you very embarrassed and scared. They should listen, at least until people have finished talking.

Chinese students are more concerned with preserving the ‘face’ of others, by not embarrassing or offending them in public:

If you disagree it could be taken personally. It’s like you are offending this person by disagreeing with them, and especially somebody who is above you.

In China if you make mistakes, people point them out secretly, try to avoid losing face, try to avoid embarrassing you. Also they may tell you in a very indirect way. But Westerners are very direct.  
(Chinese lecturer).

In contrast to western direct explicitness in expressing opinions, an aspect of sensitive, face-saving politeness is indirect, inferential speech:

Asian culture believes that a higher level of communication is communication without language. In Chinese everything is implicit. You can get the message

behind the language. There are a lot of ambiguities; you have to sort it out yourself. (Chinese student)

In Chinese, the readers will get the hidden message behind the language, but in western style writing you have to state it very clearly and everything has to be in logical sequence.

(Chinese lecturer)

These perceptions are in agreement with Tannen's (1998:6) claim that 'the scale is off balance' in western debate with 'conflict and opposition over-weighted' in Western debate. The consequence of all this is that contributing to class debates may appear alien at first to many Chinese students, and they may see western argumentation as being unattractive in light of their own cultural values. Some may choose to remain silent, preferring to listen for fear of making mistakes, looking unintelligent or offending others:

The majority of Chinese tend to watch and evaluate within themselves, and then they decide whether they want to say something out or not. They evaluate it in many ways, for example 'Will the teacher accept it?', 'What will the authority think?', 'What will be the danger if I speak out?', 'What will the other students think?' ....losing face. It's a very big struggle for them.

Disapproval from one's own cultural group can act as another inhibitor to critical thinking and debate. A Chinese girl described vividly how other Chinese students in her class criticised her for being too outspoken in the first few weeks of the course. She began the course as an outspoken student, actively engaging in class discussions, exhibiting individualistic tendencies even though she was from a collectivist culture (Triandis 1995). The lecturers all appreciated her openness and contributions in class, especially as the majority of Chinese students were very quiet during those first weeks, and this girl had a rich working experience which added value to her contributions. However, she quickly discovered that although the British lecturers and British students were very comfortable with her outspokenness, some of the Chinese students were not:

At the beginning I was very brave to give my opinion, but later I thought it was not that good to be so prominent in the class. Other students felt unhappy and they didn't want people to stand out in the class. Some people stared at me, black-mouthed me afterwards, and said I'm ambitious or something. It made me quite unhappy. So when I realised, I reserved my opinion.

She felt hurt and upset, so much so that she made a conscious decision to be quiet in class unless directly addressed by a lecturer. This frustrated her because 'the purpose of me coming here is not to keep silent all the time'. She used a Chinese proverb to explain this phenomenon: 'The bird which flies higher can easily be shot by the hunter', so 'one should not fly higher than the others. You should be the same'. Thus, whilst British lecturers may encourage a student to engage in critical debate and discussions in class, there may at the same time be a counter-influence from the student's cultural group peers suppressing individualist public expression, exerting pressure to conform and not tolerating westernisation of her behaviour. In this way students from collectivist cultures may demonstrate 'an unwillingness to be cast into a world of objective reality' if that world isolates them from the collective consensus and mind (Matsumoto 1988:407).

A third reason for some Chinese students not wanting to exercise critical skills is that these may appear threatening or uncomfortable, and they may not want to take unnecessary risks:

If you are critical all the time about everything and everyone, it may just make you upset since you see the 'truth' about things, and how the world really is, clearly..... It is very hard to confront with ourselves, it is a struggle to write. Thinking in English is like arguing with another person. I am not allowed to confront or to conflict with myself in Chinese. (Chinese student)

The traditional mentality of the Chinese is to be safe and to be stable. To conform. They don't want to take risks. They want to be safe or take the middle way. They don't go to extremes. (Chinese lecturer).

Finally, students may draw back from developing western style critical skills believing that, pragmatically, there is no long-term purpose in pursuing these skills. They may make the conscious decision that as they are only transient in the host culture, and will be returning home where critical skills may not be so acceptable, it would be a futile, and even detrimental exercise to pursue their development. They may, on the other hand, recognise that they do not have the time in one year to fully adapt, and that further experimentation would not further their main goal of achieving the degree award.

Having briefly discussed some of the reasons why Chinese students may be reluctant to take on board the style of critical argumentation encouraged in universities in the U.K., the research findings also reveal that most students appreciated some aspects of western style critical thinking, and that they endeavoured to combine the best elements of this approach with their own traditional values. What they appear to be rejecting is the confrontational, battlefield approach, which is doubt orientated, and which emphasises an aggressive search for truth. Instead, they favour the more empathetic, 'constructive' thinking advocated by Thayer-Bacon (1993), and the conciliatory reasoning which values maintenance of relationship above the need to push forward one's own opinion on others (Orr 1989). This may in part explain why a more nurturing, less aggressive approach to debate may be more appealing to Chinese students. Many, however, did appreciate the value of western explicitness in communication and in expressing one's opinions openly, one Chinese student admitting that always having to infer meaning can 'be very tiring and difficult'.

The majority of Chinese postgraduate students seemed to reach a point in their adaptation journeys when they decided 'thus far and no further'. The extent of adaptation depends on many factors: their attitude to the host culture and its cultural norms; their social mixing with host nationals; their competence in the host language; and the amount of support they receive from lecturers and fellow students; and how far students are willing and able to engage in reflexivity. Unlike previous cultural adaptation models (White 1976, Kim 2002, Van Oudenhoven & Eisses 1988), there is no inevitability about the tendency towards acculturation. Students act autonomously and exercise their individual right to terminate the process when they feel they have gained what they personally want from it. For many students, however, it would

appear that the adaptations described above can be detached, if and when necessary, and do not constitute an inward transformation of self-perception and identity:

I am not sure if this kind of critical thinking will fade away or not after I go back home. But if I don't do any academic research like this in the future, or apply this kind of thinking to other general things, I think it will fade gradually. After all, it's just like you don't use it, and it's gone, because since it can be 'developed', I think it can be 'undeveloped' as well.

The overwhelming preference of Chinese students in this research study, however, was to opt for what I term 'The Middle Way', as a means of retaining those elements of the new mindset which they accept, and believe can be accommodated with relative ease within their traditional cultural boundaries, and which pose less risk and uncertainty on return home.

### **The Middle Way**

In the Middle Way (see my theoretical model: figure 1), traditional basic values, such as maintaining harmony are apparently retained, basically in tact, and are not deconstructed at all. Synthesized into them, however, are aspects of the Western mindset which expand or complement their own cultural values. Thus the 'Middle Way' synthesises the two different approaches of 'conciliatory dialogue' and 'wrestling debate' Although characterised by constructive dialogue (Thayer-Bacon 1993), which is inoffensive and which involves empathetic listening to the other's viewpoint, the Middle Way nevertheless does allow some challenge. This, however, is indirect and the focus is on reasoning which aims to bring together, rather than separate. Participants are therefore very 'mindful' (Ting-Toomey 1999) of their use of language and are sensitive and circumspect in their use of explicitness in positing an idea. The aim is not to battle between two polarized positions, as in the Western adversarial approach to debate, but to sustain a more conciliatory approach which allows ample space for diversity of opinions.

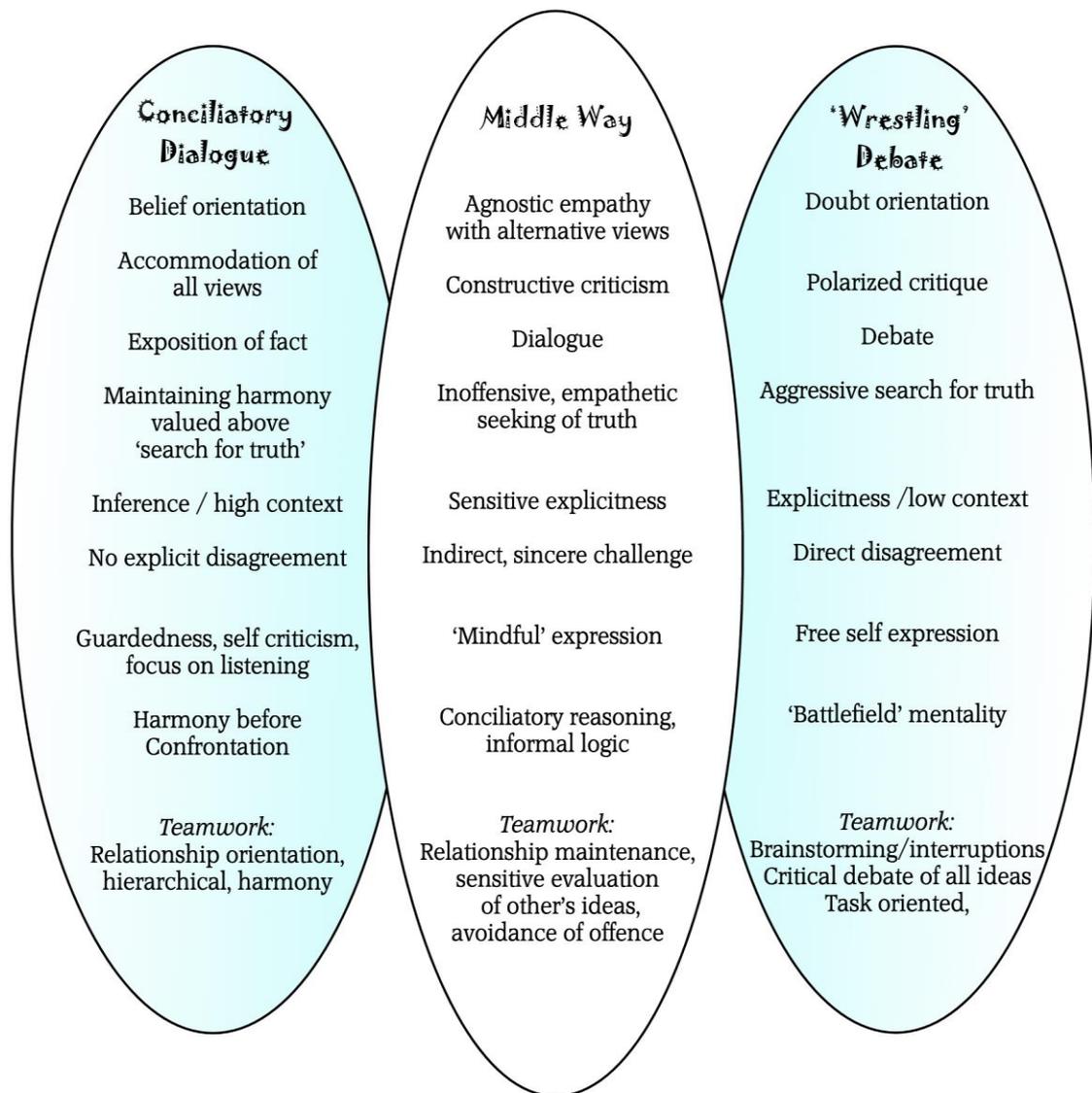


Figure 1: The Middle Way

In this 'gentler' approach to critical debate, one of the top priorities is to maintain relationships and preserve the dignity and integrity of all participants. The Middle Way thus begins the search for truth with an 'agnostic empathy' towards all views presented. The term 'empathy' here, is used in line with Thayer Bacon's (1993) definition of it, to describe a sensitive 'openness' to another's viewpoint, a determination to listen fair-mindedly and delay judgement and critical evaluation until the other's position is fully understood and 'entered into' in a sympathetic fashion. The Middle Way also synergises the U.K.'s stress on low context explicitness with China's preference for high-context inference, resulting in what I am terming

‘sensitive explicitness’ (see Figure 1). This kind of sensitivity towards others’ feelings and ‘face’, merges with a search for truth in the Middle Way, so that one can be true to oneself and honest, without being offensive. This would also mean a moving away from having to always infer, or guess at what people are really thinking.

Is this Middle Way then, as Tannen (1998) and Thayer-Bacon (1993) suggest, a more creative and caring, more ennobling and humane way of managing opposition and disagreement, and in the search for ‘truth’? Or does it go too far in attempting to avoid conflict and in emphasising harmony and conciliatory dialogue, for Western educational goals? Tannen (1998:12) argues that truth is often ‘a crystal of many sides’, a complex overlapping of different perspectives, all of which are legitimate and are to be respected. The reforming founders of Western democracy, on the other hand, claimed that there are absolutes to the truth and that it cannot, and should not, accommodate all perspectives. If indecisive and unacceptable compromise is to be avoided, they argue, then conflict and polarisation of views is inevitable. The question arises, then, as to whether this Middle Way approach can work in practice and whether it could have a place in Western higher education. Is it possible, appropriate, or even desirable for universities in the West to adopt such a constructivist approach to critical thinking and debate?

The evidence from this research suggests that lecturers in the West could also develop their own ‘Middle Way’ which does not lose the rigorous ‘quest for truth’, even if it results in polarized viewpoints, and even offence to some. This new ‘Middle Way’ could, however, also integrate the caring, more holistic and empathetic emphasis of Chinese cultures. This would soften the masculine, linear logic of the Socratic dialectic tradition, and bring more conciliatory reasoning into the often cynical scepticism of post modernist thinking in the West. This need not lead to what I call ‘agnostic empathy’, however, where no firm convictions or convincing evidence underpin and drive an argument, and where direct challenge is avoided. This ‘Middle Way’ for lecturers would therefore be a merging of the best of both conciliatory dialogue and ‘wrestling’ debate, whilst leaning more on the heritage of the West - even as the ‘Middle Way’ of Chinese students’ leans more towards Chinese traditions and belief systems. In this way, U.K. lecturers and Chinese students could move

closer together in their expectations and thinking, without either group abnegating their unique cultural identities and beliefs.

As more U.K. lecturers enter into dialogue with each other, and with their students, regarding these issues, a way may be brokered for university educators to develop a new 'Middle Way' which need not result in reducing the rigour of academic critical thinking, but rather, one could argue, enhance it by making it more humane and holistic. Perhaps, however, some intellectual humility is required for this kind of mind-shift, and this in itself requires a willingness to begin a journey of ongoing learning.

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