

The Challenges of Implementing the Flipped Classroom in Chinese Higher Education: Confucian Cultural Influences

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Abstract:

In recent years, China's higher education system has faced criticism for its exam-oriented, teacher-centered practices that restrict creativity and critical thinking, prompting the introduction of the flipped classroom as a student-centered alternative. Drawing on journal articles published between 2016 and 2025,, this paper analyses the challenges of implementing the flipped classroom in Chinese higher education through the lens of Confucianism, with attention to teacher practices, student experiences, and institutional frameworks. This paper's findings suggest that cultural norms of respect, politeness, and face-saving, together with exam pressures and rigid governance, constrain the transition toward active, student-centered learning. This paper concludes that the flipped classroom holds promise in China if supported by culturally responsive adaptation, targeted teacher training, and parallel reforms in student learning preparation.

Keywords: Flipped classroom; Chinese higher education; Confucianism; Culture influence

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the traditional model of higher education in China has faced increasing criticism for its reliance on rote memorization, exam-oriented practices, and teacher-centered instruction [1]. While this system has effectively produced large numbers of academically capable graduates, it has also been accused of stifling creativity, limiting critical thinking, and discouraging active student participation [2]. In response to these critiques, scholars and policy-makers have called for innovation in Chinese higher education, particularly through the adoption of ped-

agogical approaches that foster independent learning and student engagement.

One widely promoted reform is the flipped classroom model [3]. The flipped classroom reverses the conventional teaching sequence: students first acquire new knowledge through pre-class activities such as readings or videos, while classroom time is reserved for applying this knowledge through discussions, problem-solving, and collaborative activities [4]. Advocates argue that this model not only encourages student autonomy and active participation but also deepens learning outcomes by shifting the focus from

passive reception to active construction of knowledge. Despite its potential, however, the implementation of flipped classrooms in China has encountered numerous challenges that deeply rooted in cultural traditions, particularly the enduring influence of Confucian values on Chinese educational practices. Although much of the literature discusses the challenges of implementing the flipped classroom in China, limited systematic research summarises and discusses it from the cultural perspective. Therefore, this paper will analyse how cultural heritage in China influences the implementation of the flipped classroom in Chinese higher education. The following section will first discuss the importance and influence of Confucianism in Chinese contexts, which provides the cultural foundation for understanding both the promise and limitations of flipped classroom reform.

2. The Importance and Influence of Confucianism in Chinese Contexts

Confucianism, founded by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE), is a philosophical and ethical system that has profoundly shaped Chinese society and East Asian cultures for over two millennia. Among its central principles are key virtues: ren, yi, li, and xiao. Ren, often translated as “humaneness” or “benevolence,” represents compassion, empathy, and kindness toward others, serving as the foundational ideal of interpersonal relationships. Li refers to ritual, propriety, and social norms, guiding individuals to behave appropriately within established hierarchies and reinforcing respect and harmony in society. Yi embodies righteousness and the commitment to act according to moral principles, even when such actions may conflict with personal interests. Xiao, or filial piety, refers to respect and obedience toward one’s parents and elders, which extends further to deference toward authority figures in broader society [5]. Together, these principles form the ethical foundation of Confucian thought, shaping both personal conduct and broader social values.

To realize these ideals, Confucian tradition places a strong emphasis on the role of education, particularly after the establishment of the imperial examination system (KE-JUZH)I), which closely links education to social status and political advancement. However, the system’s heavy reliance on rote memorization and knowledge cramming made examination performance the central objective of learning, often at the expense of fostering critical thinking and creativity. While this model successfully produced social elites and preserved hierarchical order, it also rein-

forced obedience to authority and dependence on established knowledge structures.

The enduring influence of Confucian principles continues to shape the values and behaviors within the modern Chinese education system. The virtues of ren, li, and yi contribute to an emphasis on collectivism, social harmony, and the avoidance of open conflict in classroom settings. Students are encouraged to respect and accommodate the ideas and perspectives of their peers, prioritizing group cohesion over individual assertiveness. This cultural orientation often discourages direct disagreement or confrontation, aligning with Confucian ideals that prioritize maintaining respectful relationships and social balance. As a result, classroom discourse tends to be restrained and harmonious, leaving students with limited opportunities to engage in critical debate or challenge dominant viewpoints. While this promotes civility and mutual respect, it may also suppress the development of independent thinking and the ability to question assumptions—skills that are increasingly valued in global education contexts [6].

Furthermore, the principles of li and xiao reinforce a hierarchical social order within educational settings, where teachers and elders are viewed as authoritative figures deserving of obedience and deference. Students are expected to listen attentively, follow instructions without resistance, and refrain from challenging the teacher’s authority. This respect for hierarchy, rooted in Confucian ethics, translates into a teacher-centered classroom model, where knowledge is primarily transmitted from teacher to student. In practice, this aligns closely with China’s examination-driven education system, where academic performance, measured through standardized testing, dominates both teaching objectives and student motivation. To succeed in this system, students often rely on rote memorization, mechanical repetition, and intensive teacher instruction, strategies that are effective in achieving high test scores but may hinder the cultivation of creativity, critical inquiry, and autonomous learning [7].

While this system is helpful for students to succeed in high-stake exams, it also reflects the deep-rooted impact of Confucian educational values on contemporary Chinese schooling. For example, recent studies demonstrate that flipped classroom models, although promising, still encounter resistance due to students’ reliance on teacher-centered practices and their limited self-discipline, both of which are strongly influenced by traditional learning cultures [7,8]. Confucianism has thus become a deeply embedded cultural heritage within the Chinese education system and continues to exert a profound influence on

educational values, classroom norms, and hierarchical teacher-student relationships [6]. Therefore, this cultural heritage brings some challenges to pedagogical innovation in Chinese higher education. The next section will discuss the challenges of the flipped classroom in Chinese higher education.

3. Key challenges of flipped classroom in Chinese higher education

In recent years, the flipped classroom, as an innovative teaching model, has gradually attracted attention and been tried out in Chinese higher education. Compared with traditional teacher-centred lecture-style teaching, the flipped classroom emphasises students' independent learning and classroom participation, striving to enhance the depth and efficiency of learning. However, in the actual promotion process, this model also faces criticism and challenges from many sides, especially in the Chinese context, which is deeply influenced by Confucian culture.

3.1 The Challenges of Shifting from Teaching Authority to Instructional Scaffold

Confucianism has long been deeply embedded in the Chinese education system, especially in shaping the traditional role of teachers. Within this cultural framework, teachers function not only as knowledge transmitters but also as moral paragons and behavioral role models. This reverence for teachers has contributed to the widespread acceptance of a teacher-centered model where instructors serve as authoritative figures, and students are expected to listen respectfully and passively absorb knowledge [9,10]. Therefore, many teachers are used to being the central figures in the classroom, maintaining control over the teaching process and classroom dynamics. By contrast, the flipped classroom emphasizes student-centered learning, where students engage with core content independently before class and use classroom time for active problem-solving and collaborative discussion. This approach not only encourages learners to take greater responsibility for their own learning but also promotes deeper understanding through interaction and application [11]. As such, Chinese teachers might feel mentally lose control of the classroom as research shown that Chinese teachers often struggle with the shift in authority and power dynamics inherent in student-centered approaches due to the preference for the teacher-centered approach [12]. Furthermore, teacher-centered lecturing usually targets the whole class

as a homogeneous group, delivering the same content at the same pace regardless of students' diverse backgrounds and needs. However, in the flipped classroom, students can engage with learning materials at their own pace, revisit difficult concepts, and progress at a personalized pace. Therefore, Chinese teachers are lack of experiences in being the facilitators as many teachers lack sufficient training and professional development in facilitation skills, making it challenging for them to scaffold students' active learning effectively [13].

For example, some empirical studies show that some teachers in Chinese higher education assign pre-class videos or readings but still conduct traditional lectures during class time. As a result, the teaching structure may appear different, but the underlying pedagogy remains unchanged. This situation, often described as "flipping without turning," not only fails to enhance student engagement but may also increase teacher stress and frustration [14]. Similar findings were reported by Han , who found that many university teachers in China struggled to redesign in-class activities, which led to limited improvements in student participation[15].

Therefore, despite the structural changes introduced by the flipped classroom, many teachers in Chinese higher education struggle to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered pedagogy, often leading to limited student engagement and greater teacher stress.

3.2 The Challenges of Shifting from Passive Learners to Active Learners

Confucian culture has traditionally emphasized respect for teachers and authority, positioning the teacher as the moral and intellectual role model from whom students are expected to learn by observing and following [16]. Under this cultural influence, students in Chinese classrooms are typically habituated to listening, memorizing, and reproducing knowledge rather than questioning or independently constructing it [9]. Learning is thus often conceptualized as a process of absorbing wisdom from the teacher, rather than an active pursuit of knowledge through exploration. The flipped classroom is an instructional model in which students first encounter new content outside the classroom, typically through videos, readings, or other resources, before class [17]. Class time is then dedicated to applying knowledge through interactive activities, problem-solving, and discussion. In this context, the flipped classroom's emphasis on student-centered learning presents a significant challenge. However, influ-

enced by Confucian culture heritage, many students lack the training and confidence to engage in such independent learning. Years of exam-oriented education with rote memorisation and teacher-led instruction have contributed to a lack of skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative inquiry [18]. As a result, students may feel overwhelmed or disengaged when asked to take responsibility for their own learning in the flipped classroom.

For example, empirical studies in Chinese higher education have shown that many students struggle to adapt to the active learning demands of the flipped classroom. Hao found that Chinese students often skipped pre-class preparation or engaged with materials only superficially, which limited the effectiveness of in-class activities[19]. Similarly, Zainuddin and Halili reported that students with limited self-regulation skills tended to feel disoriented or disengaged when required to take more responsibility for their own learning, a challenge that lies at the very core of the flipped classroom model where independent pre-class engagement is essential for successful in-class participation[20].

Therefore, while the flipped classroom offers the potential to promote active, student-centered learning, its implementation in the Chinese context faces significant cultural and pedagogical barriers. Deep-rooted Confucian traditions, exam-oriented practices, and underdeveloped critical thinking skills all contribute to difficulties in adapting to this model. As a result, without parallel reforms in teaching practices and student learning preparation, the flipped classroom risks being reduced to a superficial structural change rather than a meaningful pedagogical transformation.

3.3 Politeness and Avoiding Losing “Face” in Flipped Classroom

Confucian culture not only places strong emphasis on respecting teachers and authority but also highlights the importance of harmony, politeness, and the preservation of “face” (the preservation of self-respect in interpersonal interactions).. Within this cultural framework, students are often socialized to avoid behaviors that could foment conflict, embarrass others, or erode group cohesion. Speaking up in class, especially when it involves challenging teachers or peers, can be perceived as impolite or disruptive, and students may prefer silence to maintain harmony. In the flipped classroom model, however, students are expected to actively voice their opinions, participate in debates, and engage in collaborative problem-solving tasks.

This generates a cultural tension: while the model values openness and active dialogue, students’ concern for politeness and face-saving often discourages them from full participation. As a result, classroom dynamics may remain passive despite structural changes in pedagogy.

Empirical research has documented this phenomenon across Chinese educational contexts. Li found that students often hesitated to participate in peer discussions or ask questions in class, fearing that mistakes would damage their own image or embarrass others[21]. Similarly, Qiu and Luo observed that Chinese learners frequently avoided classroom interaction to maintain face, especially when confronted with uncertainty or the risk of giving an incorrect answer[22]. In a study on Chinese university students, Han also noted that students tended to remain silent during group discussions because they associated open disagreement with impoliteness and potential loss of face[15]. More recently, Li found that even in interactive pedagogical models, students demonstrated limited engagement due to anxiety about public performance and peer evaluation[21]. These findings suggest that the cultural imperative of saving face strongly shapes students’ willingness to engage in the kind of open, interactive engagement required by the flipped classroom.

Therefore, while the flipped classroom aims to create a participatory and collaborative learning environment, the cultural norms of politeness and face-saving in Chinese classrooms often pose significant challenges. Students may remain reluctant to speak up, challenge ideas, or openly share their thoughts, which undermines the student-centered goals of the model. To address this issue, teachers need to carefully design classroom activities that create a safe and supportive space, where mistakes are normalized as part of the learning process and where questioning is framed as constructive rather than confrontational. Without such culturally responsive adjustments, the flipped classroom risks reinforcing existing patterns of silence and passivity rather than transforming classroom participation.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the implementation of the flipped classroom model in Chinese higher education against the backdrop of enduring Confucian traditions. It has argued that while the flipped classroom offers the potential to foster independent learning, critical thinking, and active participation, its localization in China faces significant challenges. These challenges include the dif-

ficulty of shifting teachers' authority from knowledge transmitters to facilitators, students' limited preparation for autonomous learning, the cultural emphasis on politeness and face-saving that inhibits open discussion, and the constraints of hierarchical governance and exam-oriented evaluation systems. These factors collectively highlight that the difficulties in implementing the flipped classroom in China are not merely pedagogical but also rooted in the cultural and institutional context.

This paper suggests several implications for both theory and practice. First, it underscores the importance of cultural responsiveness in educational reform: innovative pedagogies cannot be transplanted wholesale but must be adapted to align with local values, traditions, and institutional realities. Second, it highlights the dual role of Confucianism as both an asset and a barrier: while its emphasis on discipline, respect, and collective harmony provides a stable learning environment, it may also restrict openness, creativity, and student-centered practices.

Based on these insights, this paper offers three practical suggestions. Policymakers and institutions should provide teachers with professional development opportunities that equip them with facilitation and classroom design skills, enabling them to scaffold active learning effectively. Students should be gradually trained in self-regulation, collaborative inquiry, and critical thinking to ease the transition from passive to active learning roles. By integrating pedagogical innovation with cultural sensitivity, Chinese higher education can move toward a more balanced model that combines the strengths of its traditions with the benefits of student-centered approaches such as the flipped classroom.

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