



Transforming Chinese Intellectual Traditions into Explicit Knowledge: Pains and Gains of China's scholars

CGHE Webinar Feb 14, 2023

Yanzhen Zhu PhD Candidate

Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong



Agenda

Introduction

3

Theoretical Framework

4

Three Explicit Forms

5

Difficulties & Challenges

10

Summary

13



Introduction

1

World intellectual pluriversality and the potential contributions of Chinese intellectual traditions

2

The “twisted roots” (Altbach, 1989) of China’s higher education

3

Modern Chinese intellectual history of integrating East and West

4

The tough task of repositioning Chinese traditional values

5

How Chinese intellectual traditions function in China’s higher education



Theoretical Framework



Theoretical Resources

INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS

- “Tradition as the guiding pattern” of the adapting person’s actions or reenactments (Shils, 1981, p. 32-33).
- Intellectuals as bearers of intellectual traditions and the importance of intellectual activities and works.
- The indigenous perspective reflected by the literature on non-Western intellectual traditions and Chinese intellectual history.
- Chinese intellectual traditions refer to the stable and adaptable patterns that guide the actions of China’s intellectuals and have roots in Chinese indigenous culture.

EXPLICIT/TACIT KNOWLEDGE

- Explicit knowledge is public, objective, and can be set out in written forms and known from artificial “verbal utterances” (Polanyi, 1959, p. 12; Polanyi, 1969, p. 220).
- Tacit knowledge is unformulated and pre-verbal, so it may appear to lack the essential quality of knowledge (Polanyi, 1959, p. 12-13).
- “Tacit knowledge” cited by Edward Shils in his book *Tradition*.

CHINESE RESOURCES

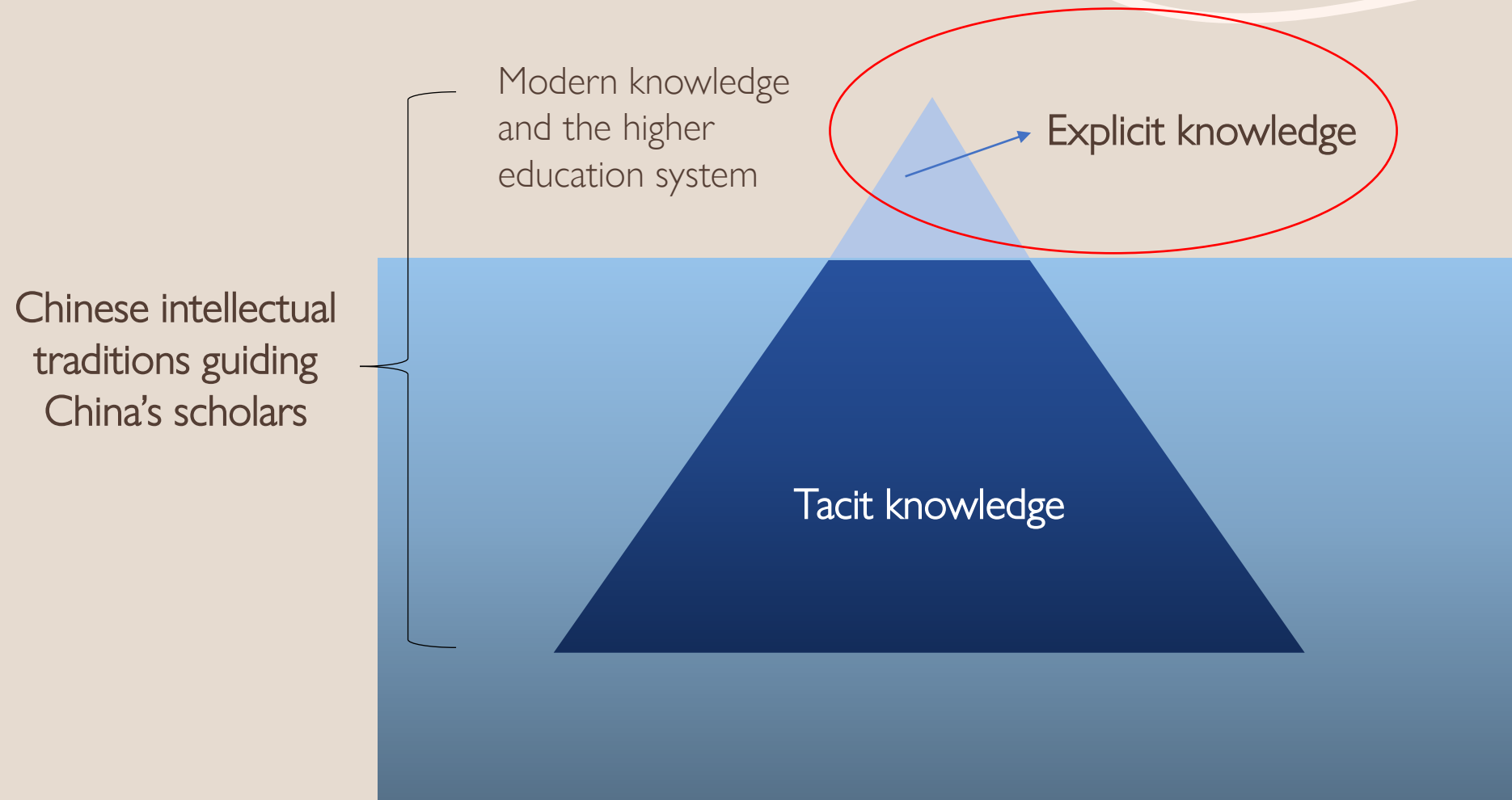
- “Dao (道)” and the Chinese translations of explicit (*yanchuan* 言傳知識)/tacit knowledge (*huiyi* 會意知識) (Shi & Liu, 2012).

Zhuangzi: “Meanings (of Dao) can be implicit. The implication cannot be transmitted precisely in words (意有所隨。意之所隨者，不可言傳也)” (Zhuangzi & Wu, 2008).

- The “dao-qi binary (道器)” and “explicit/tacit” mentioned by 6 out of 28 participants

The Classic of Change (Yijing 易經): “what is prior to physical form pertains to the Dao, and what is subsequent to physical form pertains to the concrete objects (qi)” (形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器) (Lynn & Wang, 1994).

An “iceberg model” of Chinese intellectual traditions



“Traditional Chinese values exist tacitly in the living world, just like an iceberg under the water.”



Three Explicit Forms



Approaches

EVIDENTIAL INVESTIGATION

- *Kaozheng* (考證) or *kaoju* (考據) from Han learning (*Han xue* 漢學): Examining Chinese classics, critically and always on the basis of textual evidence (Yu, 2016, p. 8).
- Textual criticism

MORAL PHILOSOPHY

- *Yili* (義理) from Song Learning (*Song xue* 宋學): Establishing Confucian moral principles chiefly through metaphysical speculations and interpretations (Yu, 2016, p. 8).
- Hermeneutics

WRITING

- *Cizhang* (辭章) or *wenzhang* (文章): Skills of literary expression ((Huters, 1987, p. 58) and stylistic excellence (Jin, 2020, p. 11).
- Dialogic genre (問答體), biographical genre (*jizhuan* 紀傳體)



Methodologies & Paradigms

METHODOLOGIES

- The Dao of *yin-yang* (陰陽之道) as a methodology of translation
- “Putting oneself in the other’s position” (*tui ji ji ren* 推己及人) (Fei, 2015, p.88) as an anthropological methodology

PARADIGMS

- Traditional epigraphy (*jinshi xue* 金石學) as an archeological paradigm

The term *jinshi* (metal and stone) appeared as early as Eastern Zhou in the 5th century BCE, and evolved into epigraphy, a tradition of antiquarian scholarship. It combined the collection and connoisseurship of antiquities and studied steles for their historical, epigraphic, and calligraphic values (Wang, 2022).



Theories

EXTRACTING THEORIES FROM TRADITIONAL RESOURCES

- The **five** fundamental Confucian virtues (wu chang 五常)—benevolence (ren 仁), yi (righteousness 義), propriety (li 禮), wisdom (zhi 智), and faithfulness (xin 信) (Yao, 2003, p. 660)— as a theory of moral education
- Mohist ideas as a theory of scientific education

THEORISING CHINESE TRADITIONS AS COUNTERPARTS OF WESTERN THEORIES

- The theory of great unity (*da tong* 大同) and cosmopolitanism

Great unity is a political, social, and ethical ideal in the Confucian tradition. In ancient China, it championed a harmonious world in which all people are brothers, and all things are companions. By the latter stages of the Qing dynasty, Kang Youwei (康有為) brought together a sophisticated idea of great unity (see his *Da Tong Shu* 大同書) (Yao, 2003, p. 171).



Difficulties & Challenges



Western-Oriented Mindset & Official Audit Culture

Ingrained
Western-
Oriented
Mindset

Underestimated traditions

Misunderstood traditions

Rigid Audit
Culture

High publication productivity

“Yield half the result with twice the effort.” (事倍功半)

Unified standards

“Cut the feet to fit the shoes.” (削足適履)

Language Barriers & Epistemic Bias

Language
Barriers

Cultural baggage makes translation intractable.

Bilingual writing makes efforts double.

Epistemic
Bias

“What’s your contribution to world aesthetics?”

“Is ‘Chinese philosophy’ philosophy?”

Summary

“It’s the time to grasp the nettle.”

- There is a growing awareness of traditional culture in China.
- Frequent international academic interactions promote mutual respect and understanding.

It’s a long way to go to achieve intellectual pluriversality,
but each step can make us closer to it.

References

- Altbach, P. (1989). Twisted roots: The western impact on Asian higher education. *Higher Education*, 18(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf0013895>
- Fei, X. (費孝通) (2015). *Globalization and cultural self-awareness*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Hutters, T. (1987). From writing to literature: The development of late Qing theories of prose. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 47(1), 51–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2719158>
- Jin, C. (2020). Textual patterns of the eight-part essays and logic in ancient Chinese texts. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press.
- Lynn, R. J., & Wang, B. (1994). *The classic of changes: A new translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang Bi*. Columbia University Press.
- Polanyi, M. (1959). *The Study of Man*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Polanyi, M. (1969). *Knowing and Being*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Shils, E. A. (1981). *Tradition*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Shi, F. & Liu, Z. (石仿, 劉仲林) (2012). The rise and meditation about “tacit knowledge” in the contemporary China (“意會 (隱性) 知識”在當代中國的崛起與沉思). *Studies in Dialectics of Nature (自然辯證法研究)*, 28(1), 123-128.
- Wang, J. (2022). Textual, material, visual: Exploring an epigraphic approach to the history of imperial China. *Journal of Chinese History (first view)*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.20>
- Yao, X. (姚新中)(2003). *RoutledgeCurzon encyclopedia of Confucianism*. RoutledgeCurzon.
- Yu, Y. (余英時) (2016). *Chinese history and culture (volume 2): Seventeenth century through twentieth century*. Columbia University Press.
- Zhuangzi., & Wu, C. (2008). *The wisdom of Zhuang Zi on Daoism: Translated with annotations and commentaries by Chung Wu*. Peter Lang.



Thank you

Yanzhen Zhu

zhuyanzhen@hku.hk