The Wisdom Beyond Languages

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This paper is a report of my comparative research concerning the question "could there be a Chinese *Harry Stottlemeier*?" My comparative research focuses on Chapter One of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (hereafter *HSD*), one of the P4C novels. This book is based on Aristotelian logic and provides the opportunity for children to figure out many logical relations and rules by themselves. I examine how children who speak different languages, such as Chinese and English, understand *HSD*. I let two groups of children, Chinese and English, who were involved in the P4C project, read Chapter One of different versions of *HSD*, one in Chinese and the other in English, and discuss it in P4C classrooms. Although the focus of group discussions in China were very different from those in America both groups brought out some very valuable philosophical questions despite their different cultural backgrounds. This research leads me to conclude that P4C introduces a kind of wisdom that is beyond the limitations of any particular language, a wisdom that encourages all of us to keep a space open in our minds for a sense of wonder.

General Information Concerning My Work and the P4C Strategies Involved

HSD is one of a series of philosophical novels written for children by Dr. Matthew Lipman. It aims to achieve a number of objectives, which include the following:

1. *HSD* aims to present the idea of a community of inquiry to children through a story that involves children about the age of the students who will read the book (typically, ages 11-13). The children in *HSD* form a community of inquiry in their own classroom. In this community, they discuss a variety of issues, many of which are of philosophical import.

2. Lipman sees the development of the ability to reason as crucial to developing the ability to think for oneself and sees logic as central to developing one's reasoning abilities. A major theme in *HSD*, then, is a series of "discoveries" that, in large measure, present the basic content of Aristotelian logic. For example, in Chapter One, Harry discovers a rule governing the conversion of what we recognize as *A* and *E* propositions.

The story of Chapter One in *HSD* begins with Harry's mind wandering during science class. He then fails to correctly answer his teacher's question: "What is it that has a long tail and revolves about the sun once every 77 years?" He thinks that the answer is "a planet" because he hears "revolves around the sun" and remembers that "all planets revolve around the sun." After class, Harry tries to figure out why he made the mistake. Helped by his friend, Lisa, he discovers that one cannot reverse and maintain the truth of a sentence that starts with the word "all," but can do so with a true sentence that starts with the word "no." Namely, one cannot switch the places of subject and predicate in a universal, affirmative sentence, but can do so in a universal, negative sentence. Harry's first discovery is actually about the truth value of a universal, affirmative proposition (*A*) and its converse, and the truth value of a universal negative proposition (*E*) and its converse.

I studied both American and Chinese children's understanding of and responses to the relations between these two types of universal propositions and their converses after they read, respectively, the English and Chinese versions of Chapter One of *HSD*. Two groups of children were involved. Both groups consisted of elementary school students, the first from Honolulu, HI, USA, and the second from Jiaozuo, Henan, China. Both groups were made up of first, third, fourth, and fifth graders. In both groups, three constants were maintained: (1) the facilitators were experienced teachers of P4C who had received specific training in P4C theory and methodology, (2) the "Plain Vanilla" strategies for facilitating philosophical inquiry were used, and (3) participants were familiar with the "Good Thinker's Tool Kit."[1] My study focused on two questions: (1) how much does language itself affect children's understanding, and (2) how much does the traditional logic of a culture influence children's interests in what they consider to be the relevant topics in the *HSD* text?

Different Ways of Thinking Between Chinese and American Children—*Different Perspectives of Inquiry*

Asking questions after reading *HSD* Chapter 1 provides

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an initial point from which to begin inquiry. This procedure was followed by both Chinese and American groups. In looking at the actual questions raised by the students, I found three significant differences. First, although the actual questions raised by each group were similar in important respects, they were also different in terms of the questions that *were* raised by the Chinese students but *not* raised by the American students. Second, there were significant differences between the groups in the actual questions selected for discussion. Third, there were equally significant differences in the manner in which these questions were discussed. These differences, I maintain, are the result of two factors: first, the influence of each culture's natural language and, second, the imbedded structures of the traditional logical system inherent to each culture; that is, the "logical space" in the minds of Chinese children is structured differently than their Western counterparts.

A comparison of the questions raised by the American and the Chinese groups reveals essential differences in the thinking structures of each. Both groups understood the story in Chapter One of *HSD* at the natural language level and raised questions about why Harry reversed sentences. Also, both groups were curious about Harry's and the other characters' attitudes and thoughts, and questioned whether these attitudes were appropriate or inappropriate, right or wrong. Significantly, however, despite these similarities, there was a set of questions that dealt with the value or significance of Harry's discovery that were only raised by the Chinese children. These questions do not inquire about Harry's rules of reversing sentences — which was the main subject of inquiry in the American group — but about the essential worth of the rules and their implications for Harry as a person. In what follows, I examine these differences in preference for types of questions from the perspective of logical structures. By comparing the inquiry focus of the two groups of children, it will become evident how embedded traditional logical structures have impacted their ways of thinking and reasoning.

Different Thinking Processes

From the perspective of Western thought patterns, it is sometimes hard to understand the thinking of Chinese children. Some American teachers who have taught in China have complained that they could not understand Chinese people, because it seemed to them that Chinese students did not discuss topics directly, but rather went around them in circles. In examining my results from a Western point of view, one would seem to meet a similar problem. One would hardly be able to understand the discussions of the Chinese children, especially why they mention many things seemingly peripheral to the main topic. Chinese children did not focus on what they learned or did not want to inquire about logical relations from Harry's discovery, although they seemed to have learned a lot from how Harry made his discovery. Aristotelian logical relations were simply not the kind of relations in which they were interested. Instead of focusing on the logical content of Harry's discovery, they searched for similar ways to have Harry's kind of discoveries in their own lives. This is a typical thought process according to Chinese logic: one should look for similar relations to see how to get future benefits from the application of the lessons learned from a singular case.

Chinese children did not have much interest in the topic of the *content* of Harry's discovery, the logical relations between subjects and predicates. Each class would typically offer a few sentences to illustrate Harry's rules and then turn to another topic. The story about Harry's discovery—and the Aristotelian logical relations that it relayed—had been successfully translated into Chinese and understood, so the lack of interest was not a problem of translation. The children simply had almost no interest in pursuing any inquiry into these kinds of logical relations. What they were interested in and brought to the text was a different set of relations. In other words, even though they read a story that focused on a discovery in Aristotelian logic, their own Chinese perspective prevailed. This reveals that there are two levels of understanding to a Chinese version of *HSD*. One is understanding at the level of natural language. Chinese children understood the content of what they read without any prior knowledge of Aristotelian logic. However, the Chinese children were not interested in the logical content of Harry's discovery, a major focus of the chapter, but in a different set of relations that were important to their culture and deeply embedded in the logic of their language. In effect, their thinking was influenced by traditional Chinese patterns, which include the following components: (1) associations of a singular case (Harry's discovery) and (2) how other cases might benefit from the singular case (how might one learn from and apply the wisdom of Harry's discovery).

Instead of focusing on the content itself or the examples involved in the discussion, Chinese children spent their energy looking for how they might benefit from Harry's story. Since the changing relation of *yin* and *yang* is essential in Chinese logic, it is taken for granted that no discovery, including a rule of logic, can be absolutely true at all times or for all people. Chinese children were thus more interested in the question "does Harry's discovery have value in our lives?" The way they tested this question was to ask "if one put Harry's discovery in another situation in one's present life, could one get benefits by following Harry's example?" The following is an exemplary segment of a discussion among a group of fourth graders in Jiaoxi Elementary School, Jiaozuo:

> The question picked by the children: What did you learn from Harry's discovery?
> Facilitator: A Chinese teacher
> B1 (Boy 1): I learned that I should listen to what teacher said. I should also learn from Harry to think hard.
> B2: I learned that if I have questions, I should ask

someone for help. If I do not understand a problem, I should test it.
G1: (Girl 1): I learned from Harry's discovery that I should not be scared of asking question.
G2: I learned from Harry's discovery that one should start by questioning. One should not be scared of being tested by others. One should use the facts to show the power of his/her knowledge.
G3: I have learned from Harry's discovery that in our daily life and classes I should often use my brain to think.
B3: I have learned that if Harry had listened to the class, how could he have made his discovery?
G4: I have learned that one should think hard and often ask questions.
G5: I have learned that one should not see things from one perspective but from many perspectives.

This is a pattern typical of Chinese thinking.

In contrast, the thinking of the American group focused on Harry's discovery itself: the logical relations between subjects and predicates. They were very interested in testing Harry's rules. Their discussions generally followed the topics that Lipman intended when he wrote the text. Even though they had no prior training in Aristotelian logic, they brought out the four kinds of propositions of the Square of Opposition (*A, E, I,* and *O*) in their discussion. It seems that this set of relations is important to Western culture and deeply embedded in Western languages. This characteristically Western thinking pattern includes the following components:

1. *Doubting*: American children doubted both the truth function of Harry's rules and their fellow students' interpretations of these rules.
2. *Testing*: American children developed many counter-examples to both test whether Harry's rule worked and challenge each other's propositions.
3. *Categorizing*: The American children were very good at putting terms into different categories and were interested in using Venn diagrams to represent the relations among these categories. In doing this, they discovered the various applications of the rules governing "Some," "No," and "All" propositions. By playing with these rules, they wanted to clarify the relations of *A,E, I,* and *O* propositions.
4. *Formulating*: American children addressed the problem by finding differences in detail. They formulated the problems of "All" and "No" propositions and pointed out that Harry's sentences have "All" in them, but no "Not." Some posed new sentences beginning with "All" according to Harry's rule.
5. *Defining*: When a child brought in a new application of a rule, the class defined the application's main concepts in order to make it clear. They then tried to discover new rules about "Some" propositions and "No" propositions. The children invoked some criteria to define the terms of their discussion. For example, at the end of one session, the children tried to locate one of their terms ("primate") in a hierarchical system according to a universal definition (the system of biological taxonomy).

The reason I think these thought patterns are distinctly Western is that they are based on a belief that there is a fixed order in the world. Children took the principle of a single case (Harry's sentence) and, through their use of criteria, applied it to other cases (their own sentences). They felt happy with the order that the relation of subject and predicate in a particular case was located in the structure of genus-species. In short, from the perspective of thinking processes, one can see major differences between the thinking of Chinese and American children, differences that are clearly influenced by the traditional ways of thinking common to their respective cultures.

Discovering the Value of Different Ways of Thinking Through the Wisdom Beyond Languages

In Chapter Thirteen of *HSD*, Harry says:

> There are lots of different ways of looking at things and thinking about things. But I guess you have to find out about them for yourself. You get taught that there is only one way to think, and then you find out that there are a lot of other ways that may be just as good. I'd like to find out all the different ways in which it is possible to think (68).

To allow for and discover different ways of thinking is a basic principle of P4C. Children are encouraged to think for

themselves in a responsible way. Accomplishing this requires a shift from the traditional classroom structure, where teachers are primarily transmitters of information to their students, to classrooms that are "communities of inquiry." Such communities become intellectually safe places for both teachers and students. There is a focus on developing trust and courage amongst the members of the community, so that children feel free to open their minds and express their thoughts. In such an environment the classroom community then engages in inquiries that arise, as much as possible, out of the interests of the children. These inquiries involve questions that frequently have no single, correct answer. The role of the teacher/facilitator is crucial to the success of the endeavor. The teacher/facilitator is not there to guide the discussion to a particular end or specific answer, but to rather at once facilitate and participate in the inquiry with the children, serving as a co-inquirer. In an experienced community, the teacher becomes a fully equal participant. Members of the community call on each other rather than letting the discussion flow from the teacher. This classroom structure is crucial for discovering the value of different ways of thinking.

In an important sense, it does not matter how different the Chinese and English languages are. The ability to wonder and question does not depend on what language the child speaks. Putting it another way, the sense of wonder is the original power from which children question their world, though what happens to the wonder and questioning (how, whether, and in what directions it develops) is partly a matter of culture. Since the P4C classroom opens a wide space for the sense of wonder, the value of different ways of thinking blossoms. In other words, even though *HSD* is based on Aristotelian logic, no P4C facilitator limited the Chinese students to think within this framework by insisting they focus on the logical content of Harry's discovery which would have narrowed the space for wonder. The inquiries were allowed to flow in the direction of the children's interests. The inquiry of Chinese and American children thus revealed each group's cultural background and led to real philosophical discussions. Hence, keeping space open for the sense of wonder encouraged students from different cultures to demonstrate the valuable aspects of their own culture and ways of thinking.

As discussed earlier, while the American children focused on the formal logical relations present in Lipman's work, the Chinese children explored the practical value of Harry's discovery in daily life. Both of these approaches represent important forms of philosophical inquiry. They simply make use of different sets of criteria for what is logical. The Chinese set of criteria judges how a rule can be used practically in life. These criteria come from the underlying belief that the world is constantly changing—there is no pre-set order on which one can base a claim of universal truth. Thus, the value of any rule must be tested in the particular place and time to which one wishes to apply it. The American set of criteria judges how to correctly locate the positions of subjects and predicates in a hierarchical system of taxonomy. If the relation between a subject and a predicate fits the positions in a structure of genus-species, then one can judge the truth-value of a proposition. This set of criteria is based on a presupposition that there is a fixed order to the world. Without the guide of P4C principles regarding intellectual safety and the importance of developing inquiry out of the interests of the children, the Chinese children's understanding of *HSD* and their subsequent contributions to philosophical discussions might have been ignored or dismissed.

In Conclusion

Through the efforts of P4C, it is possible to open a philosophical discourse between children from different cultures who speak different languages. The core of this idea lies in one's ability to keep a space open for a sense of wonder. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty says this "space for the sense of wonder" is created by a lack of constraint in discourse. "Space," the opposite of "constraint," is described by Rorty as a room that can hold any thinking. To keep space open for a sense of wonder in a continuing conversation, we should give up the desire for constraint. Though some languages and cultures are different, just as one can always wonder about both the finite and the infinite, one should be able to also wonder about different ways of thinking and how they might be related. Keeping a space open for the sense of wonder will keep open possibilities for a discourse between different children in the world, which is more important than teaching that either Aristotelian logic or Chinese logic is the only true system of knowledge.

Philosophy for Children has contributed a great deal to this notion of keeping a space open for the sense of wonder. To allow for diverse understandings is the first essential condition of having a discourse with another language-game player, whether the group is Chinese or American, adults or children. It is easy for one player to simply claim that the other player's rule is wrong or illogical, but it is much more challenging to see his or her reasoning from the perspective of another system of logic. The possibility for a fruitful exchange between Chinese logic and Aristotelian logic depends on how much space each of them keeps open for the other. This is the step which each should take to make possible a common discourse.

When children come to school, they are full of wonder. As adults, we should assist them as much as possible in keeping this wonder alive. This is the wisdom that goes beyond any language.

Notes

1. For an explanation of Plain Vanilla and the Good Thinker's Tool Kit, see Thomas Jackson's article in this journal.