

Educational Leadership at Chinese Universities: Exploring New Perspectives from Postmodernism and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Xuanwei Cui¹

Abstract

Global economic integration and the ongoing advancement of information technology have brought about rapid and profound transformations in Chinese society. The growing population of postmodernist university students in China is one of the most important factors advancing societal progress. The thesis of the current study is that educators at Chinese universities should exercise transformational and participative leadership to assist their students in succeeding in life. The contribution of the current study lies in not only introducing both the theories of postmodernism and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to the realm of higher education management in China but also adding to higher education's theories of social psychology and offering a practical approach to leadership for higher education in China.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Educational leadership, transformational leadership, participative leadership

Introduction

Chinese society has been undergoing rapid and far-reaching changes due to economic globalization and the constant updating of information technology. One of China's most influential forces driving social progress is the rising generation of students at Chinese universities. Contemporary students at Chinese universities live in the era of postmodernism which is a cultural movement that began in the 1970s in Western developed countries and subsequently became a worldwide school of philosophy in the late 1980s (Grenz, 1996). Because most educators in China's universities still "embraced fundamentalist conservatism" (Widjaja et al., 2019), they view education from the lens of modernism, focusing on the examinations and assessment rather than acknowledging that students at Chinese universities have unique potential and growth paths.

Postmodernism rejects any philosophical approach and the prevailing conception of awareness as the only viable explanation for the universe and instead emphasizes critical thinking about information (Bulter, 2010). Students at Chinese universities who adopt this critical thinking approach reassess and critically examine the long-held views of prevalent conventional wisdom to gain a better understanding of their origin and ramifications. Given that the impact of postmodernism helps students at Chinese universities form an open and diversified outlook toward life and the world, educators should also take into account the way students pursue knowledge under the influence of postmodernism in curriculum development (Patton & Prince, 2018). Because postmodernism has also profoundly impacted contemporary students' values and lifestyles, educators need to consider how to guide modern students in light of

¹ Lecturer, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China.

postmodernism effectively.

The current study aims to examine the influence of postmodernism on contemporary students at Chinese universities and suggest leadership styles to be exercised by educators in China from the lens of Maslow's (2013) Hierarchy of Needs and postmodernism. The thesis of the current study is that the impact of postmodernism on students at Chinese universities has a favorable effect on the development of their independent thinking and their pursuit of self-improvement in their study life, and educators at Chinese universities should exercise participatory leadership and transformational leadership to help their students excel in their lives. The contribution of the current study is that by introducing both the theories of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and postmodernism to the realm of higher education management in China, the current study adds to higher education's theories of social psychology and offers a practical approach to leadership for higher education in China. The remainder of the current study is structured as follows. A brief overview of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Postmodernism is offered, followed by an analysis of the impact of postmodernism on the thinking transformations of students at Chinese universities. The educational leadership that needs to be exercised at Chinese universities is then discussed followed by a conclusion.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow devised a pyramid-like hierarchy with five levels: Physiological Needs, Needs for Safety, Needs for Love and Social belongings, Needs for Respect, and Needs for Self-Actualization. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, not only do students at Chinese universities have different levels of needs, but it is generally believed that only after some levels of needs are satisfied that the other level of needs show the incentive effect. Maslow (2013) proposed Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from the perspective of human motivation, which emphasizes that human needs determine motivation, and hierarchy is one of the significant features. Specifically, Maslow pointed out a dominant need for different periods of life for human beings. With the development of society, the needs of contemporary students at Chinese universities, which are low-level physiological and safety needs, have begun to change into the need for respect and self-realization. Thus, educators need to understand how to lead students at Chinese universities from Maslow's hierarchy of needs based on their different needs.

Postmodernism

Modernism's theoretical foundation served as the starting point for postmodernism. Even though modernism refers to the period of significant technological innovation and technological revolution that began in the 1990s and continued into the twentieth century, the quest for modernity could be traced back to the Renaissance era when humankind was elevated to "the center of the reality" (Grenz, 1996, p. 2). Given that the individual self was upgraded to "the center of the world" in the Enlightenment, historians believed that the Enlightenment marked the beginning of modernity (Grenz, 1996). As far as the epistemology of the Enlightenment is concerned, knowledge was considered to be "specific, objective, and reasonable," and what was

central to this endeavor was capitalist efficiency and rationality (Grenz, 1996; Hicks & Slaughter, 2012). In particular, modernism believes that the pursuit of knowledge can improve science and education and liberate humans from the bonds of nature and society (Grenz, 1996, p. 4). However, the social and spiritual calamities brought about by the Second World War dismantled this belief. The destruction of the natural biological environment obliterated the so-called rationality carefully established by humans, pushing humans to reconsider their destiny through a new lens, namely postmodernism (Bargués-Pedreny & Schmidt, 2019; Widjaja & Boiliu, 2020; Yazevich et al., 2019).

Postmodernism was built on the theoretical foundation of modernism; however, in addition to forcing people to reconsider the so-called rationality that humans had painstakingly constructed, the social and spiritual catastrophes that followed the Industrial Revolution also forced humans to reconsider and view human society from the perspective of postmodernism, which is the antithesis of modernism. (Bargués-Pedreny & Schmidt, 2019; Widjaja & Boiliu, 2020; Yazevich et al., 2019). Although theoretically, it was Nietzsche who initiated the critique of modernity, the widespread opposition to modernity began in the 1970s when deconstructionism emerged as the development of structuralism in literary theory “influenced a new movement in philosophy” (Grenz, 1996, p. 5). Postmodernists oppose rational discovery through scientific means, reject the notion that “knowledge is intrinsically good,” and highlight the critical role of humans who should work with nature rather than try to dominate and subdue nature (Grenz, 1996; Widjaja & Boiliu, 2020).

Given that postmodernism initially emerged as a philosophy that rejects modernism, it was viewed as racial philosophical thinking represented by the doctrines of Derrida’s deconstructionism and Foucault’s post-structure theory. Deconstructivists asserted that because the exact text can be interpreted in various ways, the text’s meaning is determined by the interpreter’s interaction with it. For this reason, Derrida argued that one should reject the metaphysics’ ontology and instead focus on relativity (Bulter, 2010, p. 16; Widjaja & Boiliu, 2020, p. 191). Moreover, because “knowledge is the result of the use of power” (Grenz, 1996, p. 6) and “to name something is to exercise power” (Grenz, 1996, p. 6), Foucault contended that “every interpretation of reality is an assertion of power” (Grenz, 1996, p. 6). These relativistic perspectives highlighted that because the understanding of the universe is formed based on individuals’ interpretation and power, humans may not be sure that the constructed concepts are what they “really are” (Bulter, 2010, p. 21). As a result, Richard Rorty suggests that human people should renounce the pursuit of truth and instead focus on interpretation (Grenz, 1996, p. 6).

In response to radical thinking in postmodernism, constructive postmodernism later emerged in Western society. Compared with radical postmodernism, the constructive postmodernist philosophy espoused by David Griffin also adopts a fundamentally pessimistic view of modern civilization. However, constructive postmodernism “seeks to overcome the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of worldviews, but by constructing a

postmodern worldview through revising modern premises and traditional concepts” (Griffin, 1997, p. 2). That is to say, constructive postmodernism emphasizes transcending modernity through critical reflection on modernity and establishing a new worldview to fulfill the demands of contemporary society.

Regardless of the radical thinking or constructive thinking of postmodernism, because a postmodernist perspective precludes postmodernists from thinking more logically and systematically than modernists (Grenz, 1996), the advent of postmodernism heralds the end of a unique and universal worldview. Because postmodern philosophical thinking “stimulates maturity in terms of thinking” (Widjaja et al., 2019), students at Chinese universities tend to be more critical thinkers, placing a higher premium on self-development, and emphasizing individuality and uniqueness. Moreover, a new way of communication marked by the collaborative involvement of educators and students is also suggested by the egalitarian postmodernist perspective on the interaction between educators and students at Chinese universities.

Postmodernism and Its Impact on Thinking Transformation

Because the postmodernist movement strongly emphasizes the limits of human reason, the complexity of the legal system, and the diversity of society, students at Chinese universities have developed a critical and reflective mindset. Specifically, students at Chinese universities have developed a distinct style of thought within the postmodernist framework, which involves challenging and rejecting conventional wisdom. This line of reasoning developed from critical epistemology, which is the central tenet of postmodernism. In addition to rejecting the centralization of modernism, postmodernism equalizes discourse and places value on personalization, including individual experience, emotion, and imagination (Grenz, 1996). Postmodernism also has had a significant impact on students at Chinese universities, who are particularly sensitive to changes in ideologies in society, resulting in a shift at Chinese university students’ thinking, values, and lifestyles.

Students at Chinese universities embrace a pluralistic view of the world in the framework of postmodernism because they believe that the world should not be perceived in a one-dimensional fashion but rather in multiple dimensions. This is because postmodernism is devoid of absolute knowledge or universal truths, postmodernists emphasize how each person is unique and autonomous in how they perceive the world. In other words, “concepts such as knowledge or reason are only justified within the context in which they are being discussed; there is no ultimate authority, but an ever-shifting framework of assessment” (Wheatley, 2021). For example, Bulter (2010) asserted that because postmodernists viewed skepticism as a virtue, “postmoderns conclude that all attempts to describe an objective, unifying center-a single real world-behind the flux of experience are doomed” (Grenz, 1996, p. 83). In other words, according to modernist thinkers, a new civilization was supposed to be built on universal logic alone; however, postmodern thinkers, in contrast, believe that everything is delegitimized and urge an attack on any claim related to universality (Grenz, 1996). The rejection of universality also

implies that the previously accepted philosophical theories in modern society that emphasized the knowledge's ability to liberate human beings from bondage and the previous philosophical thinking that stressed an authoritative narrative establishing unity among expertise, such as Kantianism and Hegelianism, have lost their rationale for existence (Bulter, 2010).

Students at Chinese universities actively work to develop an equal educator-student relationship against the backdrop of postmodernism. They reject conventional ideas of authority and hierarchy, place an emphasis on equal communication and interaction between educators and students, and work to create an inclusive, open, and free learning environment. As explained by Plato's educational philosophy (Hare, 2013), the interaction between educators and students is always at the center of educational activities since the main goal of education is to increase students' intrinsic motivation to study. Human society's educational activities are constantly conducted within a process of reciprocal impact and interaction, which occurs not only between students and educators but also between students and themselves. Given that a critical task for educators is to teach students how to be decent and ethical, philosophers accord significant value to educators and offer them authority (Zamir, 2021). Ever since the Enlightenment, the educator-centered approach has dominated classroom dynamics. Modernists support the idea that teachers are the ultimate arbiters of morality and that teaching students universal values should be an integral part of their education (Kestel & Korkmaz, 2019). Especially at Chinese university classrooms, educator-centered teaching methods, which grant professors complete authority, have long been seen as an essential and successful educational tactic, particularly for students at Chinese universities. Nonetheless, in the context of postmodernism, students at Chinese universities hope to dispel educators' absolute authority and build an educator-student relationship on an equal basis in classrooms. This is because postmodernist thinkers, however, offered sharp criticism, holding the view that "the advent of postmodernism has contributed to the general mistrust of all forms of authority" (Burston, 2018, p. 97). As a consequence, the postmodernist view of the educator-student relationship on a cooperative basis pushes for forming a new communicative relationship characterized by an egalitarian educator-student interaction. Because this new mode of interaction rejects conventional ideas of hierarchy and authority in favor of equal discourse between educators and students, students at Chinese universities aspire to create an inclusive and open learning environment.

Educational Leadership Styles from the Lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Postmodernism

Educators at Chinese universities are suggested to exercise participatory leadership

To satisfy the Chinese university Students' Needs for Self-Actualization in the context of postmodernism, educators are suggested to exercise participatory leadership by adopting a constructivist pedagogical approach at universities. Given that "the emergence of postmodernism exacerbated widespread suspicion of all types of authority" (Burston, 2018), students at Chinese universities anticipate lessening educators' absolute authority and establishing an educator-student interaction on an equal footing in universities. The generation of information by

computers also enabled students at Chinese universities to learn about events happening worldwide, which signifies that individuals are part of an interconnected world community (Grenz, 1996). For example, different AI products can help students at Chinese universities more easily access relevant resources for their research. With the development of online information, such as Coursera, it has been shown that because students can access almost any knowledge they need and technology they wish to learn through the Internet, the classroom and professors in universities are no longer the only way and sources for students to receive knowledge. To this end, to better stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning, contemporary educators can exercise a participatory leadership role by adopting constructivist teaching methods to solve students' desire for self-realization.

A significant reason educators are suggested to exercise participatory leadership when adopting the constructivist pedagogical approach is that participatory leadership is a democratic leadership type that encourages students at Chinese universities to take an active role during classroom studies. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, pioneered the theory of constructivism (Wadsworth, 1996). Jean Piaget believed that infants eventually acquire knowledge about the external world by interacting with their surroundings and developing cognitive structures (Kouicem, 2020). That is to say, by adopting a constructivist pedagogical approach, educators can actively assist and encourage the learning processes of students at Chinese universities by leading and guiding them. This will make the entire educational process at Chinese universities student-centered. In this regard, exercising participatory leadership may play an integral role in helping students at Chinese universities view accomplishing those objectives as their responsibility and ultimately helping them achieve their studying objectives. According to Maslow's needs theory, because students at Chinese universities in the context of postmodernism may aspire to establish a collaborative relationship with their educators and expect their educators to acknowledge and respect their voices in the classroom, the adoption of the constructivist pedagogical method can help to fulfill Chinese university students' needs for self-actualization.

Educators at Chinese universities are suggested to exercise transformational leadership

To satisfy Chinese university students' Needs for Self-Actualization in the context of postmodernism, educators are suggested to exercise transformational leadership by establishing a diverse assessment system. This is because, according to Bulter (2010) and Grenz (1996), because the postmodern ethos lacks a central emphasis, the postmodern society's various disparate components are not consolidated into a unified whole, meaning that postmodernism signifies the end of a single global worldview. For example, heterotopia was coined by Michel Foucault to describe the postmodern world in which there is no central point (Grenz, 1996). To put it differently, there are no universal criteria to which individuals may refer when evaluating, judging, or valuing ideas, opinions, or lifestyles (Grenz, 1996). Consequently, educators in the context of postmodernism should acknowledge the differences and characteristics of each student at Chinese universities and exercise transformational leadership to provide individualized care by establishing diversified evaluation criteria to examine Chinese university

students' performance.

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, when students at Chinese universities feel understood and valued and realize their potential, their self-actualization needs can be satisfied. On the contrary, if educators at Chinese universities fail to recognize and value Chinese university students' uniqueness and individualism, Chinese university students' personal growth will suffer. Their potential to innovate will likewise be limited. Thus, educators should reject the educational paradigm of merely utilizing standardized criteria or exams to measure students' performance; instead, they should design a flexible and diversified assessment system to suit students' diversity. Additionally, in the context of postmodernism, Chinese students in the postmodern era do not believe that "truth is certain and thus completely rational" (Grenz, 1996); instead, they believe that emotion and intuition are equally significant modes of acquiring knowledge (Grenz, 1996). In this regard, educators can incorporate more elective courses into the curriculum to suit Chinese students' needs for acquiring knowledge in the postmodernist era. Specifically, educators may provide students at Chinese universities with classes such as sociology, psychology, literature, and art, to assist them in growing holistically as persons in society.

Conclusion

The anti-modern philosophy of postmodernism is a feature of Western philosophy. Under the influence of postmodernism, university students in China have displayed their initiative and developed their capacity for creative thought by embracing a pluralistic and critical viewpoint. Consequently, the influence of postmodernism inspires Chinese university students to boldly and persistently explore both individuality and diversity in their scholarly work and personal development. In this regard, not only should educators exercise participatory leadership by adopting the constructivist pedagogical approach but also exercise transformational leadership by establishing a diverse assessment system for students at Chinese universities. By doing so, educators can ensure that students at Chinese universities are on the path to a fulfilling life so that their need for self-actualization, which is the highest incentive for human development, can be fulfilled according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

References

- Bargués-Pedreny, P., & Schmidt, J. (2019). Learning to be postmodern in an all too modern world: “Whatever action” in international climate change imaginaries. *Global Society*, 33(1), 45-65.
- Bulter, C. (2010). *Modernism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Burston, D. (2018). Authority, tradition and the postmodern university. *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, 3(5),90-99.
- Butler, C. (2002). *Postmodernism: A very short introduction* (Vol. 74). Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Grenz, S. J. (1996). *A primer on postmodernism*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Griffin, D. R. (1997). *Parapsychology, philosophy, and spirituality: A postmodern exploration*. SUNY Press.
- Hare, R. M. (2013). *Plato*. Oxford University Press.
- Hicks, D., & Slaughter, R. (2012). *World yearbook of education 1998: Futures education*. Routledge.
- Kestel, M., & Korkmaz, I. (2019). The impact of modernism and postmodernism on teachers. *Online Submission*, 1(1), 28-33.
- Kouicem, K. (2020). Constructivist Theories of Piaget and Vygotsky: Implications for Pedagogical Practices. *dirasat nafsiyat wa tarbawiyat*, 13(3), 359-372.
- Maslow, A., H. (2013). *A theory of human motivation*. Martino Publishing.
- Patton, A.L., & Prince, K. L. (2018). Curriculum design and planning: Using postmodern curriculum approaches. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 32(3), 93-114.
- Wadsworth, B. J. (1996). *Piaget’s theory of cognitive and affective development: Foundations of constructivism*. Longman Publishing.
- Wheatley, Lia B. (2021). *The impact of postmodernism on 21st century higher education*. (Master thesis, Hollins University). Hollins Digital Commons. <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/malsfe/50>
- Widjaja, F. I., Simanjuntak, F., & Boiliu, N. I. (2020). Repositioning mission in postmodern culture. *Advances in Social Science.Education and Humanities Research*, 414, 189-193.
- Yazevich, M., Kalinina, O., & Zhironkina, O. (2019). Ecological Consciousness in a Shift of Scientific Paradigms. In *E3S Web of Conferences* (Vol. 134, p. 03004). EDP Sciences.
- Zamir, S. (2021). Teachers’ Authority in the Postmodern Era. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 10(3), 756-767.