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Engaging Bourdieu's habitus with Chinese understandings of embodiment: Knowledge flows in Health and Physical Education in higher education in Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper begins with a question: can concepts generated in the Chinese context in the sociocultural relations of the periphery contribute to the development of the social sciences in the field of Health and Physical Education (HPE) that have their roots in the metropole? Setting the scene in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), a postcolonial city reverted to the rule of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, this paper aims to develop a critical sociology of HPE by having a dialogue among Continental philosophies (e.g., Bourdieu) and Chinese philosophies around embodiment concepts. Although HKSAR is a complex meeting point of Eastern and Western ideologies, the current HPE field tend to focus on Western and 'scientific' ways of knowing, such as the measurement of health and physical fitness, and often at the expense of sociocultural perspectives, social justice and diversity and inclusion in HPE. In other words, the (post) positivistic research paradigm underpins the HPE field. This paper argues that in order to reap the benefits of a more holistic health education for academics and students in HPE, it is vital to de-imperialise the positivistic ways of teaching and being in HPE. In doing so, this paper creates a space for Bourdieu's habitus to meet Chinese perspectives on embodiment to engage in a dialogue for knowledge production that extends the current knowledge base in HPE.

Keywords: Hong Kong SAR, Health and Physical Education, Chinese philosophies, Bourdieu

Beyond the Binary: Thinking about Bodies in HKSAR's Health and Physical Education

Doing research is about asking questions and finding answers and solutions. The different paradigms underpinning a research study influences how the questions are answered and therefore what types of solutions can be found. This paper begins with a question: can concepts generated in the Chinese context in the sociocultural relations of the periphery contribute to the development of the social sciences in the field of Health and Physical Education (HPE) that have their roots in the metropole? Setting the scene in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), a postcolonial city reverted to the rule of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, the paper aims to develop a critical sociology of HPE by having a dialogue among Continental philosophies (e.g., Bourdieu) and Chinese philosophies around embodiment concepts. As I illustrate how research is underpinned by different knowledge systems, I also show how they may affect people's understanding of what bodies are, can do and can be.

Researchers in the West have long critiqued the biomedical knowledge in promoting physical activity in HPE partly due to their ongoing struggle to move beyond the binary oppositions of mind-body/ rational-irrational/ subject-object underpinned by most Western philosophical paradigms (see Kirk, 1991, Gard, 2011, Silk, Francombe & Andrews, 2014). Similarly in HKSAR, scientific data from studies (e.g., as noted in the Hong Kong Student Obesity Surveillance project, see Mak et.al., 2010) 'work' to objectively define the levels of people's physical activity. These studies fail to recognise people's experiences and perceptions as valid sources of data or treat people's subjective experiences as 'second-class' data that need to be matched with first-class data (i.e., scientific and rational knowledge). These biomedical discourses underpinned by a (post) positivist paradigm offer essentially a structuralist approach that seeks a

classification system and a strategy to define and organize people's understanding of bodies that, it claims, can be controlled. This means that there is a strong emphasis on the measurement of health and physical fitness, often at the expense of sociocultural perspectives and in particular those that examine social justice and diversity and inclusion in HPE.

The current juncture creates a need for an inquest as I seek to contribute to and enable the circulation of Chinese discourses as theoretical tools in HPE. I acknowledge that Western feminism philosophical perspectives, and feminist scholars more broadly, have written extensively on embodiment, which aims to displace dualism and emancipate notions of the body from Cartesian mechanistic models. Still, as Man (2016) noted philosophical debates on the binaries on issues of gender, body and the mind seldom look beyond the West. If it is to address Chinese embodied experiences, then the current theorisation must be transformed to explore how body discourses from Chinese philosophy can provide sources of reference for the development of the further understandings sought by Western feminist scholars.

Following Chen (2010), my work seeks to decolonise the established cultural imaginary and the senses of the self and the Other that the encounter between colonialism and local cultures and practices generates. Unlike post-colonial researchers who regard the West as the Other and have, thus, trapped themselves in a similar binary logic, this paper aims to mobilise Chinese linguistic resources and knowledge in an intellectual dialogue *with* the 'West' and thus widen the knowledge base in the current HPE field in HKSAR. This interflow of knowledge should provide new ways of knowing that move beyond the usual characterisations of the 'Western' and 'Eastern' bodily hexis. For example, research in New Zealand has attempted to synergise the contribution of traditional Māori and Pasifika knowledges to enhance Western

approaches to embodiment in HPE (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Fitzpatrick & Burrows, 2017). In the next section, I will outline Bourdieu's key concepts alongside a higher education context and HKSAR's HPE to further this discussion.

Bourdieu, higher education, and HKSAR's HPE

Bourdieu's study of university rules and logic, *Homo Academicus* (1988), can be applied to understanding HK's HPE in higher education. He describes, for example, different power struggles and career path strategies within French universities. In Bourdieu's account, there exist different hierarchies within the university and different positions among different university disciplines. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus of capital, habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984), this paper provides a theoretically informed discussion of the higher education culture of HK's HPE. This discussion, in relation to other fields such as different disciplines, academic structures, and broader macro fields of power, will provide a deeper understanding of the need to reap the benefits of a more holistic HPE curriculum. This paper hopes to developing a critical sociology of HPE that can work towards deimperialising¹ (Chen, 2010) positivistic ways of teaching and being in HPE.

Among the various ways in conceptualising health (Eberst, 1984; Ereshefsky, 2009), and in how health is defined within Physical Education elsewhere (Kirk, 2012; Penny, 1998), this paper takes on Nutbeam's (2000) notion of health literacy (Functional, Interactive, Critical health literacy) as the basis for arguing for a more holistic health education in Hong Kong. It envisions a holistic health education

¹ Deimperialisation, according to Chen (2010), is the reexamination and undoing of ideas and concepts that people have inherited from the imperial past and which have been reinforced by the current ongoing and growing national influence in order to move beyond the "West and Other" dichotomy. Chen (2010) argues that globalization without the deimperialization of European theories/perspectives is simply the disguised reproduction of European imperialism. Instead of being reactive to colonial powers and trapping oneself as merely 'being different' from the West/East, the dialogue with Chinese concepts will provide useful ways to think about embodiment and redirect the Eurocentric current.

encompasses health as a multidimensional concept, and more importantly extends its understanding to embodiment concepts stemming from different philosophical origins. Knowledge and values that stem from this perspective would enable educators and students to develop critical thinking skills and capacity to act on those social, economic and political influences of health (Nutbeam, 2000).

In this paper, I discuss HPE as a field, and within this field, the subfields of various disciplines such as sport science, sport sociology, sport pedagogy, sport psychology etc. Bourdieu (1988) discussed there is a continuum between the autonomy and heteronomy of field effect, otherwise noted as the internalism and externalism (Maton, 2005) of the higher education field. In this sense, the HPE is a relatively autonomous field as it is a structured site of hierarchy where researchers from subfields struggle over power to distinguish the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ research and thus acquire dominant or subordinate ‘expert’ positions in the field. Bourdieu (1993) argues that the lack of recognition or misrecognition of the Other (e.g., critical scholars researching the sociocultural forms of HPE) is understood as a form of exercising symbolic violence in which agents are subjected to forms of violence that include being treated as inferior, having limited resources and restricted social mobility, thereof a lack of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Although capital in various forms and quantities plays an important role in defining the position of HPE academics, it is not the only mechanism that structures the practice of the research culture within the field. The changing dynamics of power and position depend on “the changes within the field itself or occur in response to outside influences” (Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 511). Bourdieu defines this

as the heteronomy of the field effect²; HPE researchers are simultaneously being influenced by the macro effect of the higher education system.

HK's higher education system

Situated under the 'One Country, Two Systems' policy after reverting to Mainland China's rule in 1997, HK's higher education has a unique governing system. The intersections of Eastern and Western ideologies, regimes and practices left by the British legacy continue to haunt its complex cultural and social practices. Nevertheless, everyday discourse around Chinese communities is often characterized as collective, with people focusing on conforming and relating their behaviours to social interests or a group rather than their own identities (Lieber, Yang, & Lin, 2000). Such views feed into politics of difference, viewing 'us' and 'them' as fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilable. Binary thinking about 'East' and 'West' within academic practices and discourses, which Kuokkanen (2008) terms 'epistemic ignorance', has enabled the Othering of non-Western epistemic and intellectual traditions. In pursuing the epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007) of reclaiming an in-depth sociocultural research focus in HK, I will make a point at the conclusion of this paper about how to advance epistemic justice in HK's current research field. This will benefit both critical sociocultural researchers and students who want to enter this field but are deterred by the current prospects of the field.

Bourdieu outlines different types of field strategies in the reproduction and transformation of power relations: conservation, succession and subversion (Wacquant, 1998). Conservation is performed by those who are dominant, who hold and retain their

² According to Bourdieu, one of the features of 'field' is how it lies along a continuum between autonomy and heteronomy (Grenfell & James, 2004). That means the dynamics of positions in the field depend on "the changes within the field itself or occur in response to outside influences" (Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 511).

superior positions in the field and who practice (post) positivism research in HPE (e.g., sport science, health and physical activity/obesity researchers). Succession means the pursuit of access to dominant positions by new entrants (i.e., an intergenerational transmission of (post)positivism paradigm). Subversion is a strategy pursued by those who expect to gain little from the dominant group and who will not pursue access to the field (Swartz, 2012). This localised logic of practice can partially explain why the current academic environment has inevitably confined the types of research that HPE researchers are (dis)engaged in and points to questions over who enters, stays in and/or leaves the field (Bourdieu, 1990). In Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), he described 'doxa' as 'what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying' (p.167), which constitutes a tradition that has deeply internalised presuppositions that are not up for negotiation. In other words, the (post) positivistic paradigm in HPE is a tradition that maintains its discursive boundary (orthodoxy) which seems to dominate the field. Alongside, the critical sociocultural perspectives constitute the heterodoxy that challenges the discursive boundary and struggles over legitimacy and competes over the (post)positivistic paradigm and resources.

In the following sections I will first offer a dialogue between Bourdieu and Chinese perspectives on embodiment, aiming to reconcile the current 'East' and 'West' divide. Then, I will provide insights into how to normalise meaningful dialogues between the East and West and strategies for those who want to enter the critical sociocultural research field amidst the current research doxa (Bourdieu, 2013).

Chinese language, linguistic capital, and body discourses

Discourses of 'internationalisation' pervade Westernised universities, with Hong Kong no exception, often describing the philosophies and paradigms of 'Western' and 'Eastern' scholarship in binary terms. Explanations of difference across East and West

are often over-simplified, invoking unquestioned assumptions about traditional culture and current global geo-politics. In practice, such dichotomies are misleading. Equally fuzzy concepts such as ‘Confucian values’ are eulogised or otherwise criticised as detrimental to producing high-achieving students while weakening their mental health as Asia, and China in particular, prospers economically.

Some have suggested that there are HK researchers drawing on a sociocultural approach in HPE, yet their work does not seem to have had international resonance similar to that of their Western counterparts. While some researchers attempted to write about ‘Asian values’, specifically drawing on Confucianism, many Anglo-Celtic scholars had little experience of living in Asia and/or relied solely on English texts written by, for example, New Confucianists living outside China, such as William de Bary, or Tu Wei Ming on the subject of New Confucianism and Chinese culture. Some of the researchers may not have sufficiently explored theoretical concepts they intend to use in their research and thus could have undermined the potential impact of illuminating people’s unique experiences. For example, researchers have drawn on the philosophy of Confucianism in explaining young people’s education and/or physical activity behaviours (Au, 2006; Johns & Dimmock, 1999; Lau et al., 2004; Shuttleworth & Chan, 1998; Yu et al., 2006). In these writings, however, including my previous master-level work (Pang, 2008, 2010), researchers may have only drawn on some of the commonly known Confucian concepts (e.g., Yin-yang, Wen-wu) and therefore have been unable to make in-depth connections to the vast knowledge that originates from a Chinese epistemological perspective. I argue that this area of research remains currently under-developed and results in a lack of meaningful dialogue between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’. As such, there is a remarkable lag in Western (or Western-educated) scholars in taking up Chinese linguistic and epistemic resources as part of

their academic habitus in the HPE field. It is obvious to ask then what does it mean to have an in-depth understanding, and by drawing on both epistemic traditions when conducting sociocultural research in HPE.

A Dialogue between Bourdieu's Habitus and Chinese Understandings on Embodiment

As mentioned previously, HK's HPE is underpinned by a (post) positivistic paradigm which have overlooked the importance of sociocultural and social justice perspectives in bodily discourses. The current state of knowledge base is partly a result of the lack of understanding of the sociocultural field of knowledge and what it can offer to a more holistic HPE education in HKSAR. This section aims to bridge the chasm by offering an overview of Bourdieu's habitus and Chinese understandings on embodiment, and then a dialogue between them that highlights how the 'East' have the linguistic capital in knowledge generation and extension to Western conceptual understandings of embodiment.

Bourdieu's critics have long argued that his conceptualisation of habitus is enigmatic and difficult to understand and, more specifically, that he has not indicated the generative potentials of the habitus and thus that there is no room for change in practice (King, 2000). On the other hand, Bourdieu's habitus has been justified as a set of dispositions that is 'generative' from our social positions and throughout our lives. Habitus is embodied, as it involves all our bodily actions of talking, moving, eating and speaking (Maton, 2014), and agentic, as it can generate a 'wide repertoire of possible actions' (Reay, 2004, p. 433). In addition, habitus is an integration of collective and individual trajectories, reflecting the idea that individuals have similar but not identical habitus in a given social space (Bourdieu, 1998). Furthermore, habitus is a complex interplay between the past and the present, despite its durable nature as it responds to

present circumstances. In other words, habitus is intended to transcend a series of deep-seated dichotomies that are in tension and that influence ways of thinking about the social world.

Drawing on the background of Bourdieu's corporeal sociology, research in the Western contexts have examined physical capital in HPE. The notion of physical capital is embodied state of cultural capital, or the bodily hexis (Shilling, 2004). Physical capital refers to the everyday use of the body such as various modes of movements, postures and appearances (Light & Quay, 2003) and the "value placed upon the size, shape and appearance of the flesh" (Shilling, 2004, p. 474). Despite a consistent body of research conducted in HPE that are underpinned by Bourdieu's conceptual framework (Fitzpatrick, 2013; lisahunter, 2004; Smith, 2014; Wrench & Garrett, 2012), there is a lack of engagement with concepts generated in the Chinese contexts that could contribute to the development of the social sciences in the field of HPE which this paper has offered. To extend the debate, this paper draws on Margus's (2017) six Es of embodiment, Cheng's (2002) explanation of Ti, and Farquhar's (2002) discussion on flavour, aiming to extend Bourdieu's notion of habitus.

The revelation that Chinese perspectives of embodiment bring to extend Bourdieu's notion of habitus is that the differences of things between two entities are only opposite insofar as they are complementary. That is, the differences do not constitute tension or antagonism. As Cheng (1991) noted the experiences and perceptions of conflict, struggle and contradictions are seen as a call for a moral and practical transformation of humans, and the adjustment to self-cultivation is a process of harmonisation. For example, Margus (2017) interpreted the *Analects* 論語 alongside embodiment and discussed our bodily knowledge in six 'Es', each of which grapples with seemingly conflictive but virtually relational entities: our bodily knowledge is

embedded in temporal and spatial contexts (e.g., we learn to become flexible and sensitive to various contexts), *emergent* as we encounter different situations, *enacted* as we perform our embodied knowledge into action, *extended* to others (e.g., Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire (*Analects* 12.2 and 15.24; Lau, 1979) 己所不欲，勿施於人), *emotive* as our being-in-the world and being-with-others is enabled through the deepening and refining of emotions, *effortless* as we are able to be joyful and at ease with our choices and ourselves (similar to Wu Wei 無爲).

Similarly, Cheng (2002) discussed Ti (體) as the concrete corporeal body that a person possesses. Ti, however, is not just a matter of physical elements but a living body of subjective experiences. TiYan (體驗) is where we experience an event intimately and derive meaning into such situation. Thus, TiYan is a way of understanding reality and making meaning. Ti as a verb also means embodiment, in which one's body is totally immersed with a thing or a situation. To immerse into the system thus implies the interdependence of ecological beings in nature. The body's meaning will change according to the contexts, and its possibilities and limits will only be revealed by its ongoing interactions with the environment (Man, 2016). A third meaning of Ti is to practice or to implement. It implies the unity of one's value and life practice and the cultivation of *ren* (仁) (virtue) in forming one's personality. As such, Chinese notions of embodiment and specifically TiYan encourage a relational and non-dichotomised view of nature and culture that recognize the cultural and historical specificity of bodies.

The conceptual underpinnings of Bourdieu's notion of habitus is similar to Margus's (2017) interpretation of Chinese embodiment and Cheng's discussion of TiYan when individuals interact with the environment. In essence, the non-dichotomised view of culture and nature that values the temporal and spatial bodily

practice is recognised in both orientations. How can we apply Chinese embodiment to extend our understanding of Bourdieu's notion of habitus? Habitus relates to our ways of perceiving space and place and how these perceptions influence our actions. Therefore, habitus engenders a system of embodied senses. Senses in relation to embodiment are discussed in seminal works, such as Geaney's (2002) *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought*, which examined sense perception and the Chinese notion of 'Heart-mind' (心) that diverges from the prevalent Western 'five senses' model in sensorium research (Ong, 1991). Heart-mind refers to a person's self-awareness and a holistic understanding of the world and can be understood as the interactive relationship between humanity and nature (*Tianren Heyi* 天人合一). This 'heaven-centric' orientation to the body that differs from the Western one lays the ontological foundation for the Chinese perspective to contemplate the interrelationship between humans and nature in metaphysical and religious terms (Yao, 2017). Likewise, Farquhar (2002) discussed the notion of flavour in relation to Chinese medicine. He discussed the body is interpellated as the subject of experience through our senses of flavours. The 'five flavours' are pungent, sweet, sour, bitter and salty, each of which is understood to have a different function in restoring the balance of a healthy body. The Western school differs, in that it does not offer sufficient linguistic descriptive words for bodily senses. As Farquhar points out,

English does not offer a language for whole-body responses to tastes... perhaps the closest we come is the notion of 'heavy' or 'light' meals affecting our alertness, or learning that certain foods 'disagree' with our stomachs... We think of those forces and entities that actually alter our bodies as properties of the food that are quantifiable (e.g., fat, vitamin, or protein content) and inhere in the food whether we eat it or not. (Farquhar 2002, p. 66)

Indeed, there are multiple alternatives to the entrenched Western dualism that allow us to rethink body-mind relationships, and the Chinese understandings of embodiment is one of them. The works of Bourdieu and Chinese scholars on embodiment (e.g., Tu Wei Ming, Cheng Chung Ying) belong to a similar time but different cultural origins. Chinese philosophy was developed on the basis of ontological, epistemological and metaphysical paradigms that differ from those of Western theoretical discourses. The discussion in this section is meant to be seen as neither a comparative reading of both works, as there are others who focus on the comparative philosophy in bodies (e.g., Man, 2000, 2016), or of bodies in Asian contexts (e.g., Turner & Yangwen, 2009), which could provide a comparative analysis regarding the fundamental ontological differences between the ‘East’ and the ‘West’. What this paper offers instead is a highlighting of the need for epistemic justice³ (Fricker, 2007) and an argument for drawing on Chinese embodiment concepts that could usefully extend the discussion on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, including linguistic capital. The caveat, though, is that the acquisition of English as a dominant language in the global higher education structurally contributed to academics, educators, and students legitimate competence in their field. As Bourdieu noted in *Language and Symbolic Power*,

The position which the educational system gives to the different languages (or the different cultural contents) is such an important issue only because this institution has the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers/consumers, and therefore in the reproduction of the market without which the social value of the linguistic competence, its capacity to function as linguistic capital, would cease to exist (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 57).

³ Fricker (2007) characterised epistemic justice in two forms: “testimonial injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge and hermeneutical injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding” (p.7). In others words, to promote epistemic justice is to recognise the capacity of the knower.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on how the body and physicality is conceptualized and represented, and then theorized in HK's higher education in HPE. It specifically offers insights into the meanings and challenges associated with the co-production of Chinese and Western discourses and knowledge in efforts to move beyond Cartesian dualism and positivistic paradigms in bodily research in HPE. The challenges to an account of Bourdieu's heteronomy and autonomy of the field are obvious: the lack of engagement of the West with Chinese discourse creates a barrier for the West to move beyond a binary logic of understanding bodies. In this sense, the West seems to have an orthodoxy that others alternative epistemologies and position them as heterodoxy. A dialogue between the two bodies of discourses, as demonstrated by the examples in this paper, illustrates that it is possible to bridge the current false imaginary disjuncture. Furthermore, this paper has highlighted how a critical sociology of HPE has the potential to subvert this orthodoxy in the current HPE field.

This paper demonstrated that concepts generated in the Chinese context in the sociocultural relations of the periphery has the potential to contribute to the development of the social sciences in the field of HPE. Examples could be found in relation to Chinese perspectives on embodiment, including the interactive relationship between humanity and nature (*Tianren Heyi* 天人合一), and Ti (體) as the concrete corporeal body that a person possesses, and TiYan (體驗) is where we experience an event intimately and derive meaning into such situation.

The broader implication of this form of co-produced scholarship is that it aims to extend the current knowledge base and seeks to challenge epistemic injustice. As these knowledges are translated into the programmatic level in HPE, students will be able to appreciate and take up the linguistic capital of a critical social paradigm that is

recognised by the linguistic market. This feeds back into the change needed for researchers to move beyond the marketisation of positivistic research that generates income for the university. Bourdieu's 'reversed economy' (in Söderman, Burnard, & Hofvander, 2016) speaks to those who aim to work on non-commercial, sociocultural research with cultural and artistic ambitions that can produce high value and cultural capital despite, or indeed, thanks to, its relatively lack of economic success. When this form of knowledge is translated to a micro-level, it could create spaces for critical sociocultural researchers to thrive in a (post)positivistic dominant HPE research field.

This paper invites researchers to enter an epistemological space of pursuing studies that is underpinned by non-positivistic paradigms in HKSAR's HPE. As this paper demonstrated, a shift to using Chinese perspectives of embodiment indicates a departure from the western approaches that have informed Euro-centric tradition of research. Such a shift reorients thinking around (post)positivist research that continues to perpetuate dualism and fails to capture the complexity, ambivalence and entangled relations of our embodied lives in HPE. As researchers take up this space, it is hoped that it could spark a new academic habitus, a new generation of Homo Academicus in the critical sociology of HPE that can work towards deimperialising (Chen, 2010) positivistic ways of teaching and being in HPE.

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