

## FROM FACE-SAVING TO SOUL-SEARCHING: ON THE SERVICEABILITY OF OVERAPOLOGIZING IN EDUCATION

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### Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry attempts to render more transparent the connection between students' failure to deliver as expected in school and, in communities strongly influenced by Confucianism, the culturally sanctioned, high-frequency style of apologizing for it. In a social environment that overwhelmingly promotes consent, resistance and counteraction may take on increasingly undetectable forms rather than vanish. What could be symptomatic expressions of a deep-level resistance lose their conspicuousness and thus gain in subversive efficacy if trivialized through frequent apologizing. The argument's conclusion is that by underestimating the educational role of conflict and the person's capacity to handle certain levels thereof strictly on her own, a culture also deprives its members of the possibility to experience an inner rift apt to break tenacious failure patterns. This disablement remains difficult to legitimize within a global context, although persistently regarded as indispensable to the specific cultural identity education is called to reproduce.

Keywords: *Overapologizing, Symbolic responses, Passive resistance, Incapacity symptoms, Failure patterns, Social credit*

### An Overabundant Insufficiency

Can a piece of equipment be said to function *too* well? Perfect adequacy to the task makes a tool inconspicuous, thus enabling it to escape the user's attention and get used up in its smooth functioning. As Heidegger's *Being and Time* reminds us, the better it works, the less it stands out. Yet it is this very inconspicuousness that also allows it to develop a clandestine, unsuspected connivance with other parts of the system the functioning of which does raise problems. A prime symbolic device for mending damaged social bonds, apology is no exception to this logic, as will be shown in the following.

A high-frequency style of apologizing appears disserviceable to education insofar as it diminishes the student's perceived need for self-change and dulls her vigilance regarding her own intentions. Indeed, apologizing when wrong is

the right *and yet insufficient* thing to do: one agrees that such an act should bespeak an intention in the apologizing party to undergo a deep-level change of comportment. It is the peculiar overabundance of this insufficiency and especially its tendency to pass for an impeccable substitute of profound change—almost too irreproachable to be suspected of lacking in depth—that are worth investigating. While fairly trivial for educational systems that downplay ritualistic conformity, the point might be less so for those in which the demand for it rivals with the expectation of genuine mastery acquisition, i.e., increased control *of the situation*.

The difficulty is familiar to western teachers involved in educational activities in communities strongly influenced by Confucianism, such as Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. According to this tradition, actually disrupting or even merely jeopardizing the harmonious functioning of society necessarily requires some reparation the symbolic part of which is massively produced in the form of apology. In these cultural contexts, what can be perceived as passive resistance to learning tends to be dealt with as an ethical issue with a matter-of-course, time-revered solution. Referring to Chinese culture, Bond (1991, p.16) notes that “passive resistance is rarely labeled as ‘aggressive’ and hence is not punished, although it may be equally effective in undermining the pressure of superiors.”

The pain expressed by ‘I am sorry’ aspires to be if not the substitute at least the indicator of another, less ascertainable pain that the apologizing party is more often than not reluctant to experience—the actual breaking of tenacious failure patterns in its own behavior. The lessons learned from the study of hysteria are not without relevance in this context: by externalizing one’s regret without reserves, its transforming but potentially traumatic power over the self gets dissipated rather than concentrated and internalized. In this subordination of self-care to care of the others, in the justification self-neglect finds in altruism one recognizes a classical pattern of neurotic behavior (which, of course, need not mean a neurosis as such).

The semiotic trap suspected of being at work here can be formulated as:

‘Trust me, this mistake won’t happen again.’

‘It did happen again, but you should still trust me.’

By taking initiative, the apologizing party attempts to control the meaning of its mistake so as to prevent the other party from venturing its own interpretation and demands. When the apology goes further by taking on self-debasing overtones, as in ‘I’m not worthy of your trust,’ semiotic pressure is put on the recipient to contradict that statement on humanitarian grounds, to

the effect of limiting the responsibility to be taken: ‘You remain trustworthy despite the new mistake made.’

The described impasse is not so much created as rendered more acute by the global expansion of the educational market, which brings about the overlapping of semiotic fields with contrasting affective coloring in the interaction between students and foreign (e.g. Western) teachers. Undoubtedly, if and when apologizing becomes overapologizing depends on the standpoint adopted: what seems excessive to outside observers is whatever they are unfamiliar with (Yamada, 1997, p.48). But the virtue of such a possibly hyperbolic ‘mis’perception is that, by implicitly raising anew the question about the proper boundary between use and abuse, it could correct a hyperbolic self-assurance that traditions in general can be said to suffer from. I will highlight the benefits of this extraneous ‘mis’perception for education, in particular its capacity to disrupt the inertial, time-revered functioning of local stratagems for disguising ill will.

“In cross-cultural interactions,” writes Yamada, “simple misunderstandings are complicated by mutual misinterpretations of each other’s strategies, *and the guiding motive in each player’s gameplan*” (1997, p.50, emphasis added). This is not all bad; there are reasons to doubt the guiding motives behind students’ lavish display of apologetic zeal if anything close to pedagogical effectiveness deserves preservation. As a matter of fact, referring specifically to the Japanese, the same author concedes that

their drive to be connected is so strong that appearances are kept up at potential cost to sincerity. . . . Only careful listenership can weed out the true from the feigned, the sincere from the front. If you ask the Japanese how they can tell the difference, they will tell you “we just know.” (1997, p.49)

The self-assurance of this “we just know” can be at least as excessive as the outsider’s perception of apologizing as *overapologizing*. Both insiders and outsiders can suffer from hyperbolic distortions of their respective perceptions, especially when the object of these is as elusive as human motives and when the stakes are as high as in a debate about sincerity, i.e. face.

Insofar as the practice of importing foreign (Western) education bespeaks the host society’s response to existential uncertainties enhanced by comparisons with its peers, it can also be taken implicitly to express an increased need for heterodialog in its predominantly autodialogical relation with its own tradition. Kristeva (1988, p.17) points out that, through his reluctance to exchange attitudes according to the local code, the foreigner confronts his hosting community to

an a-symboly [*a-symbolie*] “which refuses civism and brings one back to an unveiled violence.” However, insofar as it turns the foreigner into the ally of a precious truth not easily acceptable within the respective community, this perhaps violent refusal is not without virtues: “From explicitly, manifestly, ostensibly occupying the place of the difference, the foreigner poses to the identity of the group as well as to her own identity a challenge that few of us are apt to take up” (1988, p.62). Carrier of a latent intrinsic disruptiveness, a society’s less acknowledged desire to differ from itself in the sense of overcoming its limitations, if sufficiently attested, would weaken the applicability of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, which at present can be said to guide the discourse on cultural dialogue (a wider project that this paper is part of).

The assumption underlying the argument formulated here is that a society’s possibilities of reorganizing its members’ affective fields through ritualistic action patterns are founded upon an irreducible affective fuzziness (Valsiner, 2007, pp.306-310). To this it needs to be added that *the latter does not disappear but simply recedes through the stabilizing use of signs*. The attestable semiotic promoters guiding an action do not exhaust the forces governing the agent’s affective field, as its density disguises an ever more elementary interplay of multidirectional undercurrents within each identifiable current. This means that the functioning of no promoter is absolutely free from its opposite: even when vehemently ascribed to ‘the other’ by a self naïvely trapped in phantasms of homogeneousness, this opposite continues to structure that naïve self unawares.

Whether or not the mentioned pseudo-absence of the opposite is conceived of as an unconscious is of no consequence to the present investigation. Crucial is to admit the impossibility of inventorying the promoters at work in any given culture, which presupposes a strong distinction between their presence and absence; put differently, each of these signs is necessarily ‘haunted’ by the specter of what it was *not* designed to mean. An economy of these specters is unfeasible; traditionally, the psychoanalytic project has professed to disclose and deal with those determinations of individual acts that remain unacknowledged by the agent herself but could appear to form an articulate, functional complex to the eye of an analyst.

Of Derridean inspiration, the present phenomenological investigation retains from psychoanalysis that the unacknowledged is more fundamental than, and as such determines, the explicitly acknowledged. The relevance of this to semiotics is that the promoters guiding the less acknowledged acts within a given society have chances to surface in the interaction between that culture and its other(s). The focus is on the clandestine life of signs, on that which exceeds the function ascribed to them, on the ‘side-effects’ that their smooth functioning

may obscure. It is not because a promoter is absent in a given culture and used explicitly only in others that it lays no claim on that culture's members; even crossed out, carefully avoided, or reinvested with another meaning it can continue surreptitiously to work within the semiotic field that attempted to purge itself from it—the above-mentioned 'haunting.'

The apology referred to here is exclusively that used for conjuring good will upon failure to meet the expectations of the other party. Note that, as a particular breach of trust, disappointment affects nothing but expectations (notorious for their connivance with phantasms); it revolves around the believed possession by the apologizing party of some capacities—its 'face,' or social image—the proof of which turns out to be unconvincing. But taking responsibility for someone else's expectations may be an exorbitant demand that strains the concept of responsibility to the utmost: pushed beyond its limits, responsibility threatens to veer into irresponsibility, as it will be argued below.

### **The Mobilization against Repetition**

Characteristic of this use of apology in education is that the regrettable event it refers to—nothing more than an ordinary failure to deliver as expected—is rooted in habitual patterns of behavior, in an inertial mode of being that gives failure a propensity to recur. It is highly relevant that the extant literature dealing with apology as a linguistic act signals the necessary existence of an "object of regret" (Coulmas, 1981, p.75) or "complainable" (Edmondson, 1981, p. 276) but does not list the speaker's commitment to prevent its recurrence among the a priori conditions for producing the act. Goffman (1971, p.113) does mention an "espousal of the right way and an avowal henceforth to pursue that course" but just as a structural element of apology that may or may not be present among several others. In and of itself an expression of regret warrants no assumptions about that indispensable complement of an apology, which is the commitment to enact self-changes—an issue raised but not developed by Fraser (1981, p.262, n.6).

The dynamics involved in forgiving a low-incidence type of occurrence differs significantly from that at work in forgiving something with an intrinsic high-incidence potential. Unlike other, rather infrequent social incidents—e.g. serious transgressions—eliciting apologies, failures in the learning process have par excellence a tendency to recur and represent a problem primarily inasmuch as they do so. Yet this is also what gives the party concerned multiple opportunities for factual interventions not a posteriori, at the level of meaning and social impact, but a priori, through an active control aimed at preventing unwanted future recurrences.

Action tends to follow the path of the least resistance. These possibilities of effective mobilization against repetition always compete for the agent's attention with those of symbolically accommodating a possible recurrence by securing the good will of the relevant social group. The fact that on occasion the agent can mitigate their conflict and do both does not prove that there is no fundamental rivalry between the two, as wishful thinking may suggest. In this competition, one of the contenders—the effective prevention—appears to be impaired by a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: in a mind preoccupied by the question ‘what are they going to think of my possible failure?’ the advent of the feared outcome is *prepared* through the questioner's slip of attention from her immediately given situation to a social context that unduly forces its way from the background into the limelight.

The logic at work here is not unlike that governing the behavior of an insured house owner who, in the event of a fire, focuses less on tackling the flames than on gathering the relevant evidence for securing the success of his insurance claim. Undoubtedly, he can do both, but given that the energy and time available to him in his specific situation are limited, one of these courses of action necessarily feeds on the resources of the other. And to say that apology functions much like an insurance against the loss of social good will is not to ask for a huge effort of imagination.

It takes a person individualizing training to withdraw her attention from the more distant horizon of social consequences into the intimacy of her *hic et nunc* context of action. This tight embrace of the action by its factual circumstances is the site wherein specific practical possibilities await disclosure handy, and yet ignored. It is precisely when our mind projects its act upon distant horizons of social meaning that we fail to tap these immediately given practical resources intrinsic in our individual, specific situation. As Heidegger points out in his analytic of Dasein, when a matter of concern, the spatially distant, meaningful others become phenomenologically closest to the agent; most relevant to education is that this can also mean *standing in the agent's way, hindering her individual action*. Heidegger's characterization of human existence as essentially noncoincident with one's corporeal position [*der Mensch ist ein Wesen der Ferne*] need not mean that the disclosure of distant horizons characteristic of philosophical thinking is essentially unobtrusive. Deep pondering over the ultimate issues can importunate the carrying out of more trivial actions, such as delivering according to expectations during a routine training.<sup>1</sup>

A plea for narrowing one's horizon in the context of a discussion on education may seem strange, but the order of priorities imposes itself upon the inquiry starting from the matters themselves. The pressure toward a total

mobilization for success appears most directly related to the difficulty of accommodating a possible failure within the social context, which constitutes the major alternative. The very idea of mobilization evokes an effort of concentration, of gathering one's scattered resources, of limiting the scope of one's mastery for the sake of a gain in intensity. Negotiating with the meaningful others their reception of one's failure can be pursued indefinitely (in an imaginary or real dialog) but only within a few short moments of arduous practical struggle can individual failure actually be turned into success. It is therefore crucial that on this unique occasion the social resources at one's disposal be kept out of the picture, and thus out of competition with the other, strictly practical resources for actual change embedded in one's concrete individual situation. Keeping the former out as if they formed a practical obstacle to the elaboration of the individual action might be the key factor in fostering a strong, self-reliant sense of agency; at the same time, this 'neglect' encounters a strong social resistance rooted in ethnic affirmation—the Confucian spirit of social interdependence.

Would the person who has learned to quell the inner heterodialog in this way still readily allow it to resume at a later point? One has to concede that acquiring mastery over one's own irresponsiveness (remaining deaf to the voices of one's meaningful others) is a feat apt to render the person *too* unaccountable for his actions.

### **Self-change and the Vicissitudes of Trust**

Psychologically, failure to deliver as expected has an ambivalent value: (a) it is unpleasant to the agent insofar as it exposes her weakness and makes her lose face; (b) it is also pleasant insofar as it allows her to capitalize on that precious support from her community that endures against all odds. Failure to meet certain conditions happens to be the best test of availability and serviceability for this unconditional love, or interdependence, that forms the most intimate texture of Confucian societies. It is the individual's most veridical albeit only implicit inquiry into the identity of her group.

According to the defining logic of social distinction, one is not truly great, or does not quite do the greatest thing within one's power, unless giving *unconditionally*. Expressly formulated by the apology, a demand for the acceptance of what is only difficultly if at all acceptable, while lowering the self-esteem of the demanding party, is by the same token bound to heighten the esteem enjoyed by the group. Failure to deliver as expected tests the social bonds and elicits a response whereby the group implicitly makes an identity statement, defines its status, draws the limits of its dependability with a signature-like gesture.

Needless to mention that, within the limits of its self-understanding, the group may overtly claim to be highly concerned about the emancipation of each individual from his dependency on it and about the necessity of individual self-change. But how much credit can one give to these explicitly articulated wishes after reading Freud? How transparent are the group's intentions to itself, or how deeply within itself can its understanding reach in principle? Not a priori exempt from narcissism, it also needs to feel indispensable and irreplaceable as *the* security provider, which is a serious reason to suspect it of trying unawares to maintain the individual in a state of dependency and to sabotage self-change.

By casually accepting apologies, the group implicitly restates its own stability, resourcefulness and quasi-miraculous capacity to deal with 'bad loans' undisturbed. This insensitivity to the vicissitudes of the real situation, together with the phantasm of freedom from contingency that it indulges in, are of divine inspiration and as such threaten to induce a symmetric insensitivity and alienation from reality (a numbing of the sense of measure) in the apologizing party.

As for the 'bad loans' as such, it has been rightly pointed out that the concept of indebtedness is crucial to understanding the functioning of apology (Coulmas, 1981, p.72; Lebra, 1986, p.50). Indeed, indebtedness for continuing to grant the demanding party good will despite its disappointing performance is at least implied if not expressly acknowledged in apology. Unfortunately, however, this acknowledgement does not necessarily go together with the speaker's actual resolve to repay the debt, which is the crucial issue for education. When it comes to social credit—the trust one benefits from in the others' eyes—the idealistic disregard for a distinction between good and bad 'loans' constitutes, among others, an invitation to abuses. The concept of trust involves, in essence, "committing something of oneself, such as material resources or information, to the care of another, where one has *no control* over how that other person may use this trust (Bond, 1991, p.37, emphasis added)." This absence of control raises questions of efficacy and responsibility.

When and how to write off a 'bad loan' without creating dependency and diminishing the debtor's responsibility might be a matter that resists being simplistically regulated. But, as project of reproducing the structure of a society, education cannot avoid facing the issue of solvency, no matter how the repaying be conceived of in each specific culture. Lebra (1986, p.50) stresses that for the Japanese "the norm of reciprocity implies moral asymmetry, where it is imperative for the debtor to repay but the creditor's claim for pay-off should be suppressed. An explicit anticipation of reciprocal pay-off for kindness on the part of the creditor would therefore be distasteful to the Japanese."



Notwithstanding this, minors' obligations may need to be stated less subtly: the emotional blackmail Japanese parents often have recourse to (De Vos, 1986) tends to suggest that inculcating the norm of reciprocity in children requires, like everywhere else, a more sober, pragmatic version of idealism.

This means at least two things: (a) enabling the debtors to pay back; (b) making them feel the necessity to do so, which implies the acknowledgement of a debt to be paid off. The two are bound together dialectically, as means and ends, within a circular scheme that appears particularly vicious when formulated as 'drowning in debt is the surest way to discover how much credit one actually has and no reason to do so is as sound as disability.' Inasmuch as it grants credit unconditionally, the trivialization of apology renders superfluous the enabling process that education is responsible for. At least the institutionalized version of this process resists an abrupt emancipation from the framework of an economy of self-change (characterized by such quantifications as how much improvement is achieved, through what effort, and over what period of time).

What in apology poses a threat on the formative process is its rather fuzzy borderline with expressions of mere sympathy for the wronged party, hence the fact that "the object of regret does not have to be indebted for the speaker" (Coulmas, 1981, p.76). Sympathy for the disillusioned party and a commitment to meet its expectations remain embarrassingly nonequivalent. Despite Kant's contention that "the endeavor to appear good ultimately makes us good" (1963, p.148) which also subtends the Confucian injunction to conformism, an increased ability to deceive has often turned out to be the only ascertainable 'gain.'

Tavuchis (1991, p.36) considers the offending party's promise of reform to be implicit in the state of 'being sorry,' and therefore does not explicitly list it among the fundamental requirements of an apology. The problem with his approach—partly explicable in terms of the purely theoretical rather than practical motivation for his investigation—is that it does not make much of the distinction between sign and signified. He allows himself to be fascinated by "the immense power of the spoken word" (1991, p.39) to the point of neglecting its obscure side altogether. Actually, the eulogized power of symbols happens to be immensely useful not only for mending broken social bonds but also for deceitful manipulations meant expediently to exonerate the apologizing party.

This might not be the last reason why, although criticized by Tavuchis (1991, p.136, n.41), Goffman gave little credit to expressions of sorrow and regret, as traditionally the most counterfeit currency of human exchanges.

Moreover, it would also explain why the latter saw apologies as interpersonal management ploys for increasing the user's moral credibility. According to Yamada,

The Japanese have a reputation of being polite because their need for interdependence creates dozens of standard expressions in thanking, apologizing and inviting others to go first, which when translated literally, sound comically polite. But for the Japanese who use them, they are remarkably ordinary, sometimes even to the point of emptiness (1997, p.47).

After all, it comes as no surprise that the most miraculous power also turns out to be the most manipulated. What compromises the social bond is *both* the absence of apologies with their power symbolically to undo what has been done *and* their overabundant presence apt to induce a confusion between symbolizing zeal and effective self-transformation.

Overall, with regard to the possibility of expressing sorrow, Tavuchis' positivistic account of apology disregards a basic tenet of psychoanalytic prudence: an easily acknowledged guilt may not be so deep, and vice-versa, the deepest sorrow may be denied access into a due apologetic discourse by uncontrollable mechanisms within the very psyche that experiences it. The more trivial the verbalization of one's regrets, the less profoundly felt they tend to be, as by definition the most traumatic issue for the speaker gets most tenaciously avoided in his speech. Clinical experience shows that one's capacity to express the most painful cannot be taken for granted; symbolically relating to one's greatest sorrow *at will*, which means being able to reach and deal with it without resistance, proves *ipso facto* that the "object of regret" is not quite so hurtful.

More recently, based upon a large amount of literature in support of the idea that adopting the wrongdoer's perspective can foster reconciliation, Takaku et al. (2001, p.145) recommend a manipulation called *hypocrisy-induced dissonance*. It consists in making the accusers feel hypocritical about blaming the other party, since either they have done the same wrong in the past, or would be ready to do it if in similar circumstances. Notwithstanding the merits of such a practice in other contexts, one wonders how much education can benefit from it. At least when dealing with minors, education seems to rely upon a fundamental asymmetry of positions between educators and educated—the former have at some point taken the latter's perspective, but not the other way around—which makes them less interchangeable than in other areas of social interaction.

An adult need not feel hypocritical when suspending an automatic acceptance of apologies coming from a possibly manipulative minor; it is rather a matter of refusing a regression to earlier stages of development characterized by insufficient control over one's acts and lesser responsibility. The problem is how to help the minor overcome his own possible hypocrisy ('I want but I cannot') to which, based on personal experience, the adult can indeed relate only too well. The presumption of innocence should remain nothing but a presumption, not a conviction. Short of this necessary 'hypocrisy' of an adult reluctant to accept without ado a youth's apology just for the sake of a hasty reconciliation, the project of helping the young overcome certain patterns of infantile behavior in order to mature is forfeited in its very essence.

### **Splitting Up with Failure Patterns**

According to Goffman (1971, p.113), the apologizing individual "splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that dissociates itself from the derelict and affirms a belief in the offended rule." It is the categorization, or conceptual management of this socially unfit first part that differs significantly from culture to culture, and with it the nature as well as depth of the split itself. Required by the community to which the individual supposed to experience it belongs, the split can be more realistic or more symbolic, depending how strong the exigency of realism is in that particular community. Correspondingly, the type of evidence proving that this split has actually taken place remains also bound to the understanding of the community eliciting it and may be deemed rather unconvincing outside it.

This is the bone of contention regarding the frequent use made of apology in Confucian education, which is expected to produce significant improvements in the students' performance, yet without challenging such practices locally regarded as powerful statements of cultural identity. In analyzing the way responses to a questionnaire vary with the language used as vehicle, Yang and Bond (1986, p.260) signal another aspect of the passive resistance to 'foreign' teaching—one that they term *ethnic affirmation*. The interpretation of the 'didactic contract' seems to depend on the student's particular relation to the teacher (Perret-Clermont et al., 2004, p.317) which acquires additional complexity when foreignness comes into play.<sup>2</sup>

Short of readily available, familiar signs to convey one's opposition to semiotic promoters at work in one's culture, students experience understandable difficulties in acknowledging a possible resistance in their own comportment. Granted that the use of signs stabilizes affective life, there are reasons to suspect

that by systematically suppressing signs of an uncertain phenomenon, such as resistance, one also preserves and nurses its very instability, thus binding it to this obstinate disregard. Pronounced peremptorily, ‘there is no X at work here’ performs the same semiotic function as ‘there is X at work here’: it turns into a sign the uncertain absence of a phenomenon for the sake of stability. The criticism of entifying (Valsiner, 2007) also pertains to this ‘nihilating,’ which is its faithful shadow.

A learning failure that breaches the relevant group’s trust remains closely bound to the habitual assumptions made by that group about individual intention and capacity. The same holds for the counterpart of breach: reconciliation. The nature of the ultimate power credited with the capacity to restore harmony changes the understanding of the inner split required of the apologizing party, especially with regard to the possibility of repeating the breach in the future. Does the split attempt to uproot the very potential for reproduction that any action has, i.e. is it a radical one? Or is it mainly catering to the group’s narcissism and as such meant to cover up the existence of the problem rather than solve it? Be that as it may, the discomfort it creates in the apologizing party increases in proportion to its depth—a disturbing truth to communities for which education may appear essentially reducible to a version of overprotective mothering. According to Suzuki, “it is the mother that lies at the bottom of Oriental nature. The mother enfolds everything in an unconditional love. There is no question of right or wrong. Everything is accepted without difficulties and questioning. Love in the West always contains a residue of power. Love in the East is all-embracing” (cited by Doi, 1981, p.77). Unconditional love translates into unconditional, unlimited social credit. Sharply contradicting Suzuki’s thesis, though, when faced with unmotivated offspring, Japanese mothers often have recourse to guilt-inducing techniques expressed as “if you frustrate my expectations, I will die” (De Vos, 1986) which may be called anything but coercion and power-free.

Depending on the nature of the power presiding over the transfer of social credit, the transaction may be licit or illicit. Not every power can be satisfied merely with a ritual manipulation of symbols devoid of in-depth change, even when the latter is sanctioned by custom. How profound the inner split needs to be has to do, among others, with how deeply the intention of the splitting individual can be grasped. In its turn, this depends on how much courage one can muster to unveil it; the risk for the group is to have its deepest beliefs shaken. *It is primarily in this respect that the distinction between local and foreign/non-insider teachers acquires its due significance.* As a group action, automatic

reconciliation may bespeak a fear of dealing with the more serious problem of a possibly structured resistance (what psychoanalysis terms a *complex*).

Although admittedly in the wrong, the author of an apology need not feel guilt as such, i.e. as a burden to be dealt with utterly individually, in the dimension of an inner voice carrying the accusations of a conscience free from deception. One cannot take for granted this capacity to experience not just shame but guilt, which is a highly mediated cultural concept irreducible to an economy of social exchanges and based on specific metaphysical assumptions.<sup>3</sup> While retaining the distinction as useful both theoretically and practically, I take *transparency* to be the main criterion therein: shame presupposes the possibility of concealing the shameful intention from others, whereas guilt evokes a merciless exposure of the subject's intention to a critical gaze from which in principle it cannot hide. This approach is consistent with the metaphysical assumptions underlying the western concept of human consciousness in its fundamental distinction from divine consciousness. The accusation implied in guilt harks back to a court of judgment transcending the social, to ethical commandments with universal rather than just particular (ethnic) scope. In this sense, I can experience guilt for something I did against my community without being caught and exposed to shame—e.g. Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov—or even against a community with no survivors left to feel ashamed of.

In principle, individual shame is erasable *without remainder* by the group, whereas guilt tends to endure beyond that, until the guilty consciousness feels prepared to deal with it personally, in its most intimate interiority where the accusing gaze of one's conscience resides. In this most private recess, the very distinctions between sign and meaning, speaker and listener, impression and expression do not operate, as Derrida (1967) has shown. Like the burden of shame, that of guilt can also be lifted, but the act whereby this takes place receives its guarantee of authenticity from a (divine) consciousness by definition invulnerable to deception and present within oneself as one's conscience.

The existence of a conscience rules out the possibility of hypocrisy, since it is characterized by direct and full access to the agent's most obscure intentions. Before one's own conscience one has always already lost face, or more accurately has not had one to start with (since structurally its position is not *in front of* but rather *behind* the face); hence, the authentic experience of guilt starts where that of shame before one's meaningful community ends. Implying a comparison with the perfection of the infinite, it is what Levinas (1971, p.82) calls "being ashamed of one's own freedom," not of the judgment of one's community. At least in education, the idea of having a conscience might be quite instrumental in containing self-deception.

### Social Magic and Its Temptations

The global expansion of the education market now offers cultures worldwide a choice between, on the one hand, fostering a more self-exigent and because of this reluctant to apologize type of personality and, on the other, cultivating a more self-complacent though also more obsequious observance of social rituals. Obviously, the alternative need not be conceived as a strong dichotomy implying a tragic choice and a dramatic loss of identity, as practice allows for countless compromises. As China tops the world with the number of people studying abroad (“Chinese studying abroad,” 2002), it is perhaps worth remembering that Ulysses himself did not complete the circle of becoming by relying on his own resources; he was brought home, returned to his ownmost and thus re-entrusted to his essence *by strangers*. The inculcation in schools of a sacrosanct respect for the limitations that cultural identity imposes on individual development competes with the task of empowering individuals as members of the global community, in spite of a predictable reluctance of their groups of origin.

The question still stands as to whether the educational ambitions nurtured by a culture are not more likely to be achieved through practices less familiar to it. Could a culture’s evolving from “as is” to “as if” be best supported by “as is *not*,” i.e. its other? Should something akin to a controlled alienation from oneself be entrusted to aliens? Post-Maoist China’s National Conference on Education of May 1985 set as its main goal to produce “more able people” (cited by Tao et al., 2007). It seems unlikely that this superior enabling envisaged was meant to include the individual’s ability to put into question and change the system itself, which remains, however, part and parcel of the growth process. Notwithstanding the risks involved, it is safe to assume at least that foreign/outsider teachers remain largely immune to their host group’s narcissism and the self-deception ploys it surreptitiously stages, which is not a negligible credential.

The problem with recognizing responsibility only toward one’s social group of origin is that it can disguise a deeper irresponsibility—an infantile tendency to get by in life seeking by all means unconditional love, which is what Doi (1981) approvingly depicts as the Japanese psychology of *amae*. But the drawback of heeding only that inner voice invested with the prerogatives of a higher conscience is that it reduces the person’s heterodialog to an autodialog, not to mention the perhaps even greater danger of exposing him to that voice’s excessive demands. Hence, the idea of a balance between *two* poles of authority one of which transcends the boundaries of one’s culture of origin might deserve more consideration.

If apology represents a social group's magical power of regenerating itself (Doi, 1981, p.49), one needs to remember that magic also has a darker side. From a formative point of view, precisely because of its exceptional powers to dispel conflict, it is unlikely that the collective 'magician'—the social group—will ever feel prompted critically to reexamine its practice with a view to self-growth. Directly responsible for the latter, education appears to be rather impaired by such a magical preservation of self-sufficiency. It is only when the magic of reconciliation fails that its performer gets a chance to sober up from its spell and see it for what it also is, i.e., a form of self-indulgency uncensored by a higher instance of judgment. By downplaying the educational role of conflict and especially of the capacity to accommodate certain levels thereof strictly within the person, a social group also deprives the latter of the possibility to experience via an inner crisis a rift that claims credit for breaking tenacious failure patterns.

Indeed, nothing seems further removed from aggression—understood here as violation of the 'communication contract' (Perret-Clermont et al., 2004, p. 315)—than a lavish display of apologetic zeal. On closer inspection, though, the author of this practice appears to deprive the other party of initiative in the exchange, which is a gesture of power. The recipient of apologies comes to realize that, thus marginalized to the status of spectator to a self-unfolding drama, there is hardly any viable option to forgiving. Apology wants to have not only the initiative but also the last word on the issue: the receiver's attempt to nuance the description of the situation in dialogue is invariably met with reiterated apologies. The defensive 'aggressiveness' of this consists in trying to maintain the situation under the apologizing party's control. It is not one's own acquired habits that the aggression primarily targets but rather the other's possibility of intervention with a view to censoring it. The implicit message 'I replace you as judge of my action and I symbolically carry out the due reparation' essentially preempts the space of heterodialog.

Paradoxically, the more zealously one claims responsibility, the more effectively she renders inaudible the voices that elicit her very response and make it be what it is: a *re*-ply, a *re*-turn, i.e., the second step in a sequence that presupposes a first one. Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, it can be said that the one who overresponds does not quite respond, as there is little if any listening on his part to start with. When I 'respond' compulsively, repetitively, excessively—when I *over*respond—with a plethora of signs of responsibility, the sheer massiveness of this production protects me against an interpellation of other voices. The positions in this social dialog are not mere 'givens' but get "themselves learned and negotiated in social situations by individuals *with their own personal*

*agendas*” (Perret-Clermont et al., 2004, p. 326, emphasis added). As I have attempted to argue above, a number of the items on any such agenda remain beyond its possessor’s own grasp, so not personal in the strict sense.

To conclude, in education a strategic temporary suspension of forgiveness in uncertainty might be the best response to apology. It is only insofar as the latter degenerates into a routinely, tactlessly usable, taken-for-granted aid that it may raise problems. The moment when a conciliatory social interpretation of individual failure gets delivered determines the response just as much as the content of the interpretation itself does. As willingness to forgive, social support might remain most productive of individual growth when somewhat slow and uncertain to surface, as if granting less amounted to giving more. Not unlike divine help, it might be most efficaciously formative when only assumed to be at work, without however having to produce proofs of reliability beyond doubt.

Although not a priori exempt from the suspicion of cultural intrusiveness, a version of (foreign) education that restricts the use of apologies promises increased efficacy. Personal growth cannot be reduced to knowledge acquisition but also involves one’s ability to implement self-change and social transformation in accordance with a higher instance of judgment regarding the common good. Endlessly debatable, the success of this enabling campaign *through ‘foreign’ education* requires, against the noninterventionist prescriptions made by a simplistic mythology of cultural relativism, support from the host culture in the form of an increased receptivity to heterodialog. According to Phillips (2005, p.189) “the sane parents can never get protecting their children right; indeed don’t think of parenting as something that one can get right, but as something that one muddles through.” This relative freedom from the prescriptions of one’s tradition toward a more experimental approach to education would certainly have beneficial effects on students taken individually.

If, as Freud believed, it takes each of us a lifetime to forgive our parents and recover from the sequels of the received education, would it make sense to expect apologies from our respective social groups for having deprived us of competing alternatives?



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For Heidegger's critique of the preoccupation with things immediately present, see especially his analytic of Dasein (1962, pp.67–269).

<sup>2</sup>One could perhaps call *linguistic hysteria* the symptomatic display of inability to comply with the conventions of a foreign language (in subjects who on different occasions have proven perfectly able to carry out this task).

<sup>3</sup>For a brief review of the intellectual history the distinction between shame and guilt has traversed, see Cheung, 1986, pp.205–207.

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