

# The Translation of Critical Thinking

by [Stacey Zhu](#)

In my first college writing class, I carefully did the assigned reading: adding notes in the margins, underlining the descriptions to help me understand the text, highlighting the effective strategies the author used, and summarizing how I appreciated the text in general. Then, the professor asked us to do something I hadn't expected: to inquire, challenge, and disagree with the text. My mind went blank. Reading through my notes, I hadn't marked one thing with a question mark. How could I write a five-page essay with an empty mind? I had agreed with everything the author said. Challenging the text itself became a challenge for me, and I was quick to attribute this to my insufficient English vocabulary and lack of nuanced understanding of the material.

But I soon found out it was not the language problem that made me stare blankly at the page. I realized this in my work as editor in a psychology club, where we regularly publish Chinese articles on our official WeChat platform. One day, I got feedback about my new article from my supervisor: "Fascinating description, but what are your thoughts? Any controversies and complications?" Again, I had no clue: once again, an empty mind. I couldn't generate ideas about complications even when I was writing about a topic in my comfort zone, in my native language. At that moment, I realized that the problem I had was not language, but a lack of critical thinking skills.

In the article "How to Demonstrate Critical Thinking in Your Writing," Dawnel Volzke defines critical thinking as going "above and beyond our existing knowledge to consider new information and alternative viewpoints," which "involves a cultivated approach to learning and excellence in thought." Critical thinking is a questioning, challenging approach to knowledge and received wisdom, and writing is one form of this approach. In my experience, almost every writing assignment requires building an intellectual frame out of analysis, assessment, and reconstruction to create a new understanding of the original topic. When revising my essays, my professor urged me to apply this critical lens. But applying critical thinking continues to be challenging. I often sit in front of my laptop for an hour without writing down a single word.

More importantly, I am not the only one who finds it difficult. In the article “Critical Thinking and Chinese University Students: A Review of the Evidence,” Tian Jing and Graham David Low contend that practicing critical thinking is a common difficulty for Chinese students studying in Western universities (61). They indicate that “[s]ome empirical studies” go so far as to claim Chinese students are “generally not disposed to think critically” (65). As a result, many Chinese students’ academic achievement might be affected. According to the article “Critical Thinking and Academic Success of English Language Students” by Amir Pušina and Amina Osmanović, there is a positive relationship between academic achievement and measures of critical thinking (151). Better scores on critical thinking tests are often associated with higher GPAs. In other words, strong critical thinking skills “are important for students’ academic achievement” (141). Since the struggle to think critically is fairly common among Chinese international students in American colleges, and because our struggle with this skill may negatively affect our academic success in college, it’s important to consider how our cultural and educational background may contribute to our challenges.

In their article “Critical Thinking and Chinese International Students: An East-West Dialogue,” Michael O’Sullivan and Linyuan Guo claim that the dominant emphasis on critical thinking in the American educational system emerged in the early 1980s, with the apparent aim of improving students’ reasoning and thinking skills and developing “the quality of mind required to maintain US superiority” (54). In China, the first evidence of interest in this idea of critical thinking emerged in 1986, according to Dong Yu’s article “Critical Thinking Education with Chinese Characteristics” (351). Yu writes that China applied the concept to higher education during the mid-1990s, when “a number of logic instructors began to look to the critical thinking movement in the West for ideas and inspiration.” They “translated and published critical thinking articles and books useful for educational reform.” In 1997, China established its own national MBA program entrance examination similar to those in America like GRE and GMAT, which contained questions that tested critical thinking skills. In this context, China appears to have seen the importance of critical thinking in education and followed the steps taken by Western countries – so why do many Chinese students still struggle when asked to think critically when writing? The key may lie in the relationship between critical thinking and Chinese culture at large, and I believe a better understanding of the association between Chinese culture and critical thinking may also inspire American college professors to adjust their teaching strategies to facilitate the learning of Chinese international students.

Yu argues that despite “rapid growth of recognition of [critical thinking’s] value” in China, “the actual progress is oddly sluggish” (354). The quantity and quality of the courses provided in school “cannot reach the goal of training students to build critical thinking skills” (356). When exploring the underlying reason, “Chinese tradition” is often assumed to play “a powerful and persistent role” (357). Yu notes that, in light of Chinese philosophical and social traditions, some have theorized that there is a

fundamental difference between Chinese and Western ways of thinking, namely that “Westerners’ reasoning is more analytic and uses tacit logical rules,” while Chinese people think about “relationships and use direct experiences” (358). In this view, critical thinking is assumed to be “essentially specific to Western cultures.” Similarly, various researchers also argue that critical thinking is a Westernized concept, foreign to China. In the article “Critical Thinking: Teaching Foreign Notions to Foreign Students,” Sandra Egege and Salah Kutieleh describe critical thinking as “a Western cultural product” rooted in the Western philosophical tradition (80). This tradition stems from the “classical Greek tradition epitomized by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle,” in contrast to the Chinese classical tradition. In other words, the incompatibility between Chinese cultural traditions and Western values impedes the development of critical thinking in China.

In his article “How East and West Think in Profoundly Different Ways,” David Robson suggests that this incompatibility is at least partially rooted in the difference between individualism and collectivism. Being an individualist means considering “yourself to be independent and self-contained.” On the other hand, being a collectivist means to be “entwined and interconnected with the others.” Fan Shen, in his article “The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition,” writes that “in China, ‘I’ was always subordinate to ‘we’ – be [it] in the working class, the Party, the country, and some other collective body” (460). Resulting from the influence of the ideology of collectivism, Chinese people often “[favor] a holistic perspective and the collective good which places a great emphasis on harmony” (O’Sullivan and Guo 55). In Chinese, we have an idiom called ‘yi he wei gui’ (以和为贵), which means, “Harmony is the most precious thing.” To maintain harmony, we consciously and unconsciously avoid confrontation with others, including “the conflict inherent in intellectual contention” (70).

Therefore, many Chinese tend to praise rather than criticize the intellectual work of others. In fact, critical thinking is translated as ‘pi pan xing si wei’ (批判性思维) in Chinese, which means “thinking of criticism and disagreement.” ‘Pi pan’ literally means criticizing or “looking for faults in others” (O’Sullivan and Guo 56). To put it another way, although critical thinking contains many aspects like observation, analysis, reflection, and evaluation, the Chinese translation highlights the elements of doubt and disagreement. Therefore, Chinese people may “easily conclude that critical thinking is negative thinking.” I myself didn’t have a comprehensive understanding of critical thinking until I attended an international high school. My teachers in Chinese primary and middle school rarely mentioned this concept in class and never explained it to us in detail, and I never learned to apply it to discussion or analysis. Like me, many Chinese students may not only misunderstand critical thinking but also have limited opportunities to learn about the broad meaning and applications of this concept. The lack of emphasis and instruction about critical thinking in school further strengthens the perception that being critical is disrespectful and breaks the principle of harmony.

Along with harmony, Chinese culture focuses on the principle of an “authoritarian orientation,” which means “the tendency of respecting and obeying authorities” even “under the trend of modernization or globalization,” according to Chin-Lung Chien’s article “Beyond Authoritarian Personality: The Culture-Inclusive Theory of Chinese Authoritarian Orientation.” Where Western values might encourage challenging authority, “reverence for, and obedience to, authorities has never faded away in Chinese societies,” creating a norm that “a subordinate should treat or serve a superior in hierarchical relationships” (Chien). The culture “encourages respect for authority and advocates conformity” in the classroom as well (Tian and Low 65).

This expectation of deference to authority often manifests itself in the way Chinese students interact with texts. Chinese students tend to view authors of assigned articles and essays as models and regard their work as exemplary. As novices, we feel like we are not ‘qualified’ to disagree with them. Back in my Chinese classes in middle school, the texts we read were usually classic articles written by famous masters. We called the process of analyzing and interpreting those articles ‘shang xi’ (赏析): ‘shang’ means appreciation and praise, and ‘xi’ represents analysis. The prompts to interpretation most often asked us to consider, ‘why is the author’s use of x here effective?’ As a result, I was used to reading articles in a positive light without discussing any controversial side. I automatically assumed an article was effective even before I read it. I had no experience analyzing an article critically, so I found it difficult to challenge any reading. As Tian and Low suggest, such learning experiences are “of more immediate relevance” than “critical thinking elements . . . found in ancient Chinese culture” and are “likely to affect performance” (61).

Teachers also represent authority. In ancient China, “parents and [teachers] were regarded as the supreme authorities comparable to heaven and earth” (Chien). In Chinese, we have an idiom ‘zūn shī zhòng dào’ (尊师重道), which means to respect teachers and honor their teaching. Most Chinese classrooms are teacher-centered: “students are . . . expected to respect teachers and listen quietly and carefully in class” (Tian and Low 69). For example, I was told to follow what teachers say, and taught that arguing with teachers was equal to misbehaving. This is decidedly different from the Western teaching style, where teachers often offer indirect guidance and do not always assume a single correct answer, looking instead for a variety of perspectives and opinions. My writing professors in the American system stress that my writing should aim to offer a new complication rather than a solution. In contrast, to maintain the teacher’s authority and status in the classroom, Chinese Confucian ideals propose that the “answers teachers would give should be the final solution to their students’ puzzles, not a clue or guide for the students to find their own answers” (Yu 362). Otherwise, it would be “a proof of their [own] ineptness.” In my classes in Chinese public schools, teachers gave us universal writing templates, which we could use repeatedly for various writing topics on exams. When revising my essays, my teachers would tell me

exactly where and how to rewrite in detail. Every time, I would accept their advice without questioning it because they were experienced authority figures.

Accustomed to such an approach to learning, I found my first college writing class challenging. Without writing templates from professors, I was unsure if my essay was on the right track. When I asked my writing tutors for suggestions, they always asked me back, 'What do you think?' or said, 'It's up to you.' I was confused. If I knew what I was going to do, why would I ask the tutors my questions? I complained to my friends: 'My tutors' advice is not helpful. I wish they would tell me what to do directly.' That was what my teacher-centered education taught me to expect. I was like a baby, used to being fed. Suddenly, I needed to learn how to cook for myself.

While many Chinese international students like me struggle with Western critical thinking models, I have found the struggle worthwhile because it has helped me learn to explore my own thinking process. In the article "The Role of Metacognitive Skills in Developing Critical Thinking," Carlo Magno shows that metacognition is closely connected to criticism: identifying metacognitive skills is "a key element to reach critical thinking," as critical thinking engages "specific metacognitive skills like monitoring [one's] thinking process, checking whether progress is being made toward an appropriate goal, ensuring accuracy, and making decisions about the use of time and mental effort" (150, 138). Reflecting on my mental process has trained me to become an independent thinker, to develop my own insights and take control of my work: I can write down what I want to say.

Chinese international students need a bridge between East and West that facilitates our development of critical thinking. In China, we need a more comprehensive understanding of critical thinking. Teachers should emphasize critical thinking and encourage students to apply it instead of "transmitting infallible knowledge" (Yu 365). On the Western side, university professors should be aware of the potential cultural differences, and they should design course work that is more responsive to their students' various levels of preparation for thinking critically. Building this bridge will be a long and ongoing endeavor, but each new brick in this bridge provides a step toward a brighter future for Chinese international students.

---

## Works Cited

Brookman-Byrne, Annie. "Thinking about Thinking." *BOLD*, 22 June 2018, [bold.expert/thinking-about-thinking](https://bold.expert/thinking-about-thinking).

Chien, Chin-Lung. "Beyond Authoritarian Personality: The Culture-Inclusive Theory of Chinese Authoritarian Orientation." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 7, 2016.

Dong, Yu. "Critical Thinking Education with Chinese Characteristics." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Thinking in Higher Education*, edited by Martin Davies et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 351-368.

Egege, Sandra and Salah Kutieleh. "Critical Thinking: Teaching Foreign Notions to Foreign Students." *International Education Journal*, vol. 4., no. 4, 2004, pp. 75-85.

Magno, Carlo. "The Role of Metacognitive Skills in Developing Critical Thinking." *Metacognition and Learning*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 137-156.

O'Sullivan, Michael W. and Linyuan Guo. "Critical Thinking and Chinese International Students: An East-West dialogue." *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 53-73.

Pušina, Amir, and Amina Osmanović. "Critical Thinking and Academic Success of English Language Students." *Život i škola*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2018, pp. 141-155.

Robson, David. "How East and West Think in Profoundly Different Ways." *University of Michigan*. [lsa.umich.edu/psych/news-events/all-news/faculty-news/how-east-and-west-think-in-profoundly-different-ways.html](https://lsa.umich.edu/psych/news-events/all-news/faculty-news/how-east-and-west-think-in-profoundly-different-ways.html).

Shen, Fan. "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1989, pp. 459-466.

Tian, Jing, and Graham David Low. "Critical thinking and Chinese University Students: A Review of the Evidence." *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2011, pp. 61-76.

Volzke, Dawnel. "How to Demonstrate Critical Thinking in Your Writing." *Mount Vernon Nazarene University*, [studentsuccess.mvnu.edu/demonstratingcriticalthinking](https://studentsuccess.mvnu.edu/demonstratingcriticalthinking).