

Teaching at the Crossroads: Reframing Instructor-Centered and Learner-Centered Practices in China's Higher Education

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[Abstract] In this article, the author revisits the 2006 baseline study of teaching practices in Chinese higher education in which instructors scored high on climate building and relating to experience but low on learner-centered activities and flexibility to ask what should change in the 2020s. Using the findings as a lens, this analysis provides an updated continuum from centralism to guided participation to co-designed learning, calibrated to Chinese institutional realities of large classes, credential pressure, and rapid digitalization. This article contributes three actionable classroom archetypes with brief descriptions of instructional techniques and pairs them with low-anxiety assessment methods. It outlines a *stickier* faculty-development sequence that offers practical approaches for safely integrating student voice. Finally, it proposes a multi-site replication and extension of the (Wang, 2006) study to track change across modalities. The result is a pragmatic roadmap for moving toward co-design without sacrificing order, coverage, or equity (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

[Keywords] andragogy, Chinese teaching practices, pedagogy re-design, learner-centered teaching practices

Chinese higher education in the 2020s is being reshaped by three converging forces: system-level digitalization, pandemic-accelerated modality shifts, and a fresh policy push toward AI-infused teaching and learning. National initiatives such as the Smart Education of China platform have consolidated vast higher-education MOOC resources and teacher training at scale, signaling a long-term commitment to technology-enhanced instruction rather than a temporary pivot. The COVID-19 emergency further mainstreamed online and blended delivery after the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China directed universities to move instruction online and supported that transition with platform guidance and resources. Most recently, a 2025 guideline on accelerating education digitalization explicitly calls for integrating large-scale AI models into teaching, learning, and assessment, upping the stakes for pedagogical redesign in universities. Together, these shifts make the present an inflection point for re-examining teaching practices (UNESCO, 2023a).

Against this backdrop, the long-debated tension between instructor-centered and learner-centered approaches remains a live question in China. On one hand, policy and institutional signals increasingly emphasize student engagement and technology-supported active learning; on the other, recent classroom research shows that movement toward student-led methods can be slow

and contested as participants negotiate pedagogical values, roles, and power distance that have historically favored lecturer authority. Contemporary reviews of flipped learning in Chinese universities document both the breadth of uptake and the rationale to meet ministry expectations while boosting engagement yet also surface implementation variability. Meanwhile, qualitative studies of student-voice practices in mainland China classrooms highlight promising gains alongside persistent challenges in shifting interaction norms. These mixed findings underscore why *what works, for whom, and under what conditions* is still an empirical and contextual question in 2020s Chinese higher education (Kong, Li, & Guo, 2024).

Building on the 2006 study by (Wang, 2006) of teaching practices, the present article extends the inquiry across today's broader modalities and classroom ecologies. It treats modality as a variable, comparing face-to-face, blended, and fully online formats. Furthermore, it examines how design choices (e.g., flipped sequences, problem-based structures, and student-voice activities) interact with class size, disciplinary context, internationalization, and assessment regimes. It also addresses the contemporary layer of AI-supported teaching (from analytics-informed feedback to generative-AI-aware assessment) as part of routine practice rather than a novelty. In short, the article reframes the instructor-centered vs. learner-centered debate for the current policy and technological landscape, offering design principles and exemplars calibrated to Chinese universities' realities in the mid-2020s (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

To translate the preceding rationale into an executable study, the author used the following research questions to guide sampling, instrumentation, and analysis. The analysis of the resultant findings of his study is here customized for practical applications of methods and techniques by educators who seek to move to learner-centered instruction.

Research Questions

RQ1: Relative to the baseline study by Wang (2006), to what extent have instructional practices shifted along the centralism → guided participation → co-design continuum across disciplines and modalities?

RQ2: Do micro-participation structures and transparent assignment design predict higher student-reported clarity, fairness, and lower assessment anxiety, net of class size and course level?

RQ3: How do modality (face-to-face, blended, synchronous online) and enrollment interact with these practices to influence engagement and performance?

RQ4: In what ways do cultural expectations, organizational incentives, and policy instruments (e.g., digital/AI initiatives) enable or constrain movement along the continuum?

RQ5: Which assessment configurations (short-answer reasoning with step rubrics, worked-example fading, brief interactive orals, portfolios) most strongly predict validated evidence of understanding and authorship while maintaining comparability at scale? (Zhou et al., 2025)

To anchor these questions and design choices, the following framework clarified the core constructs and their expected relationships in Chinese university contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The present study integrates adult learning (andragogy), social constructivism, and activity-oriented learning to explain how Chinese university courses can move pragmatically from centralism to guided participation and co-design. Andragogy foregrounds learners' prior

experience, readiness, and self-direction, aligning with the 2006 profile of strong climate building and experience-linking yet limited flexibility; it sensitizes our lens to micro-moves that increase choice and autonomy without sacrificing clarity. Social constructivism (e.g., scaffolding within a zone of proximal development) justifies brief, structured collaboration and negotiated criteria in ways that respect role expectations and face-saving norms.

The ICAP framework (interactive > constructive > active > passive) predicts learning gains from timed write-first prompts, pair-explain cycles, and short interactive orals. Transparency-in-learning-and-teaching principles (explicit purpose, tasks, and criteria) and assessment-for-learning emphasize fairness, comparability, and formative evidence at scale—critical in high-enrollment, exam-oriented systems. Finally, culturally responsive pedagogy (including attention to power distance and Confucian-heritage expectations) guides the pacing of change, privileging guardrails (clear objectives, milestone “gates,” co-created rubrics) that make co-design viable in Chinese institutional realities (Wang, 2006).

The Wang (2006) Baseline Revisited

The mixed-methods study of 40 distance-education instructors in Beijing and Shanghai (Wang, 2006) used Conti’s Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS) plus open-ended items to characterize teaching modes. Quantitatively, instructors scored highest on climate building ($M = 3.93$), relating to experience ($M = 3.38$), and assessing student needs ($M = 3.16$), with moderate participation in the learning process ($M = 2.88$) (Wang, 2006). Scores were lowest for learner-centered activities ($M = 2.48$) and especially flexibility for personal development ($M = 1.92$). The pattern indicates some attention to personalization and rapport, coupled with limited collaborative work and low adaptability to individual needs (Wang, 2006).

During the qualitative data collection, instructors consistently positioned themselves as providers of knowledge rather than facilitators, set objectives up front, and kept tightly to them regardless of learner variation. Collaborative structures were resisted and a well-disciplined classroom was seen as a driver of learning; and controversial, self-concept-related topics were avoided.

At the same time, nearly all respondents endorsed andragogical ideals in principle with 100% agreement among participants that educators of adults should help learners become self-directed. Yet, yet day-to-day practice remained directive and lecture-led, with scant use of learning contracts or negotiated priorities (e.g., only 22.5% reported negotiating curricular priorities; 5% used learning contracts). This belief–practice gap helps explain why learner-centered activity and flexibility lagged while climate-building and *relating to experience* were stronger. The study also documented a strong reliance on memorization and standardized testing as markers of progress, reinforcing knowledge transmission over dialogic knowledge construction. Instructors reported heavy use of formal, standardized measures and a preference for a single *basic method of learning*, with many believing memorization could foster autonomy, which is a position that aligns with a test-driven, content-centered format.

As a lens for this study, the baseline highlights two enduring dynamics in Chinese higher education: (1) instructors may invest in classroom climate and draw on student experiences, yet still keep control of goals, pacing, and evaluation; and (2) even when self-direction is valued rhetorically, institutionalized assessment regimes and role expectations can channel practice back

toward centralism. Subsequent research in the 2020s on power distance and student voice, large-class constraints, and policy pushes toward digital and AI-enabled teaching shows both pressures and possibilities around these same axes (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

A Clarifying Framework: From Centralism to Co-design

To interpret contemporary classrooms, we define a practical continuum with three benchmarks: centralism, guided participation, and co-designed learning, grounded in adult-learning concepts and your PALS-based distinctions. In a 2006 study, centralism mapped to pedagogy (teacher-dominated direction), while decentralism mapped to andragogy/constructivism (learner-centered, self-directed, collaborative problem-solving). The author adapted that logic into a usable spectrum for Chinese higher education: centralism → guided participation → co-design (Wang, 2006).

Working Definitions with Contemporary Anchors

Pedagogy (centralism). The instructor sets objectives, content sequence, and evaluation; students primarily receive and reproduce knowledge. This mode aligns with exam-oriented systems and large, credential-critical courses. Current reviews of learner-centered approaches emphasize that effectiveness depends on fit; in some contexts, teacher-led clarity is protective for equity and coverage.

Andragogy (guided participation). The instructor remains architect of outcomes but actively personalizes instruction, relates to learners' experience, and uses frequent formative checks. Agency increases through choice of problems, resources, or roles, while maintaining shared guardrails. Recent higher-education literature argues for combining andragogical elements with existing structures rather than replacing them wholesale (Wang, 2006).

Constructivist practice (Co-design). Students and instructors co-plan aspects of inquiry, criteria, or demonstration of learning; collaboration and reflection are routine. Contemporary studies link constructivist environments to motivation and complex thinking, though implementation quality and context are decisive.

“Fit” Conditions in Chinese Universities

Large classes and required/credential-driven courses favor centralism with targeted upgrades: clear exposition plus structured questioning, brief peer-explain cycles, and rapid checks for understanding. Evidence from Chinese synchronous-online courses shows class size depresses outcomes, so micro-structures that increase interaction without chaos are valuable (Zhou et al., 2025).

Mid-sized skills-building courses (e.g., lab, methods, or discipline-specific writing) suit guided participation: instructor-set outcomes with student choice among cases/datasets, rotating roles, and staged feedback cycles. Reviews of flipped learning in Chinese universities show engagement gains when structure remains strong. Capstones, studios, and professional projects can move toward co-design: negotiated briefs, co-created rubrics, and public artifacts. In higher-power-distance contexts, scaffolds (e.g., proposal templates, milestone gates) protect clarity while enabling authentic agency; student-voice studies in China underscore both the promise and the need for careful role negotiation (Kong, Li, & Guo, 2024).

Culture, Organization, Policy: Why instructors Teach the Way they Do

Culture. Long-standing exam culture and relatively high-power distance shape interaction norms: lecturers are expected to be authorities; students may avoid public risk-taking to preserve face. Recent work on student voice in mainland universities documents progress toward more egalitarian interaction, but also friction as pedagogical values collide. The Gaokao's social centrality reinforces standardization and competition beyond secondary school, subtly legitimizing transmission-oriented teaching at university (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

Organization. Class-size expansion and workload intensification push instructors toward scalable, predictable formats. New empirical evidence from a Chinese research university shows larger synchronous-online classes reduce grades and satisfaction, which helps explain why many lecturers default to tightly structured sessions and summative checks. Promotion criteria that privilege research outputs can also limit time for iterative course redesign, making low-friction adaptations more realistic than wholesale shifts.

Policy and Infrastructure. Since 2020, the Smart Education of China platform has consolidated higher-ed MOOCs and resources; in 2025, national guidance and MOE statements called for deep integration of AI into teaching, learning, and assessment. These levers raise expectations for active, data-informed instruction—yet they also increase compliance pressures and standard setting. Instructors feel both the affordances (content, analytics, tools) and the constraints (alignment checks, integrity protocols), which can either widen or narrow local room to move along the centralism–co-design continuum (UNESCO, 2023b).

Taken together, these forces help explain the persistence of patterns in the 2006 study by Wang (2006), i.e., —warm climate and personalizing moves nested within directive structures. This also points to feasible movement in small-step participation gains, transparency of success criteria, and structured opportunities for safe questioning within institutional realities.

Modalities and Methods in the 2020s***Face-to-face, Large-enrollment Lecture.***

Keep centralism for coverage but add low-friction interaction: pre-planned pause points with write-first prompts, brief peer-explain and re-poll, and anonymous “muddiest point” collection to surface questions without loss of face. Classroom research in China suggests interaction quality mediates satisfaction and perceived learning online and off, and recent medical-education work shows think-pair-share can raise participation equitably when tightly timed.

Blended and flipped formats. Flipped designs—when aligned to tight weekly structures—are gaining traction across Chinese universities, especially in language and foundational courses. The most reliable gains come from short pre-class videos with accountability, in-class problem sequences, and prompt feedback cycles. Reviews in 2024 highlight variability in implementation; success hinges on maintaining structure while reallocating class time to practice and explanation (Kong, Li, & Guo, 2024).

Synchronous Online. Evidence from Spring 2020 cohorts Zhou et al. (2025) indicates that as online class size increases, academic performance and satisfaction fall, reinforcing the value of segmentation (breakouts), structured questioning, and rapid formative checks to maintain engagement. Clear norms for chat, polls, and camera use reduce uncertainty and encourage contributions.

AI-supported Teaching. National guidance now encourages integrating AI for feedback, analytics, and resource curation. Practical uses include formative question generation, rapid patterning of misconceptions from quiz data, and tailored study plans, paired with integrity protocols (e.g., proctored assessments, artifact-rich assignments). The policy push raises the ceiling on what guided participation and co-design can accomplish on scale. Across modalities, the throughline is pragmatic: retain order and clarity where they serve equity and credentialing, and insert precise, brief episodes of participation that grow students' thinking without derailing pacing. This is the actionable bridge from your 2006 baseline to mid-2020s practice (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

Three Classroom Archetypes with Mini-vignettes

Structured Lecture with Strong Climate Building. This archetype keeps the advantages of lecturer-led clarity while inserting brief, predictable moments of thinking and feedback that do not disrupt pacing. A 90-minute economics lecture begins with a two-minute “warm start” question students answer on paper before any slides (“In one sentence, what does elasticity measure in everyday life?”). Every 12–15 minutes, the instructor pauses for a 60–90 second write-first prompt, followed by a quick pair-explain and a whole-class poll. The poll is anonymous to lower face threats, but the instructor cold calls only on volunteer *explainers* who opt in on a card at the start of class. Think-pair-share cycles like these have been shown to broaden participation equitably and deepen discussion when tightly timed and purposefully framed (Guenther & Abbott, 2024). Assessment remains simple: one exit ticket with two lines of reasoning (i.e., What was your most confusing point and why?) and a weekly five-item short-answer quiz keyed to *show your step* rubrics. The design acknowledges large-class realities, protects order, and still surfaces misconceptions quickly. In contexts where synchronous class sizes are large, interaction quality and segmentation like this help counter the performance drop that scales with enrollment (Zhou et al., 2025).

Guided Practice with Limited Choice. Here, the instructor sets outcomes and core tasks but opens small co-design windows. In an engineering statistics course, for example, students work through a sequenced problem set where the first two problems are fully structured and the third invites a choice among three real datasets (e.g., manufacturing defects, hospital waiting times, or bike-share demand). In class, the teacher runs short cycles, models one step, releases to pairs for two steps, brings back for a rapid check, and then requires a 100-word *method note* on the trade-offs of the student's chosen model. Flipped and blended formats in Chinese universities show the best results when structure stays tight and class time is spent on coached practice and explanation rather than unbounded activities (Kong, Li, & Guo, 2024). Assessment uses a transparent mini-rubric shared in advance, focused on purpose, tasks, criteria, and a one-minute oral spot-check with two verification questions per team to confirm authorship. Transparency improves student understanding of expectations and supports more consistent judgments (TILT Higher Ed, 2024; Panadero et al., 2023).

Co-designed Project Studio. Best suited to capstones and professional courses, this archetype scaffolds autonomy while negotiating criteria. In a health-informatics seminar, students co-author a brief project charter in week 2, including a problem statement tied to a partner clinic, data sources, milestones, and a draft rubric. The instructor finetunes charters in a 10-minute

protocol and locks three non-negotiables (i.e., ethics, evidence standards, and public artifact). Midterm and final examinations include a 10-minute interactive oral to probe reasoning and confirm authorship, which is an approach increasingly recommended for integrity and higher-order thinking in the age of ubiquitous gen-AI (Highman et al., 2025; TE-CHE, 2023; McKenna, 2024). Student voice research in mainland China universities cautions that shifting roles must be negotiated; instructors can retain guardrails while expanding co-planning and reflection (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

Assessment Without Anxiety: From Memorization to Evidencing Thinking (Instructor Shift to SME vs Facilitator)

A practical pathway is to blend familiar checks with evidence that reveals reasoning, authorship, and growth without sacrificing fairness at scale. First, re-balance weekly tests by converting a portion of recall items into short-answer *why* prompts scored with concise analytic descriptors such as accuracy of claim, clarity of step, appropriateness of evidence. Meta-analytic evidence shows rubrics can improve performance and self-regulation when embedded within instruction rather than appended at the end (Panadero et al., 2023; Manrique-Arribas, López-Pastor, & Palacios-Picos, 2025).

Second, use worked-example fading across the term with early tasks including full solutions, then partially worked steps, then independent solutions. Each submission includes a one-minute *decision note* explaining a key choice.

Third, integrate brief interactive orals. A two-to-three-minute viva for every fourth assignment, with two unseen follow-ups about the student's submission, supports integrity while targeting conceptual understanding (Highman et al., 2025; McKenna, 2024; TE-CHE, 2023).

Fourth, add low-stakes portfolios for cumulative courses, using two artifacts per unit with a 150-word reflection linking evidence to outcomes. Recent work finds portfolio assessment can outperform exams on learning and well-being outcomes for university students when expectations are explicit (Language Testing in Asia, 2024; TILT Higher Ed, 2024). Sample rubric alignment to the continuum: in structured lectures involves a three-criterion rating scale (i.e., explains step, uses evidence, "communicates clearly) and enhances marker reliability and speeds grading (Şimşek & Bayram, 2024).

In guided practice, a short analytic rubric adds choice rationale and error analysis. In co-designed studios, a co-created rubric includes stakeholder value, methodological justification, and reflection on feedback, with the interactive oral verifying authorship and transfer. These configurations synthesize recent work on rubrics, oral assessment, and portfolio-based evaluation in higher education (Panadero et al., 2023; Highman et al., 2025; McKenna, 2024; TE-CHE, 2023).

Faculty Development that Sticks

Change endures when it is incremental, coached, and visible in evaluation. Start with micro-moves tied to observed pain points: one write-first prompt per lecture, one transparent assignment revision, one two-question oral per unit and cycle these through coached iterations. Peer observation of teaching (POT) provides structure when it is collaborative, formative, and anchored by clear instruments; recent systematic reviews catalogue usable tools and emphasize constructive dialogue over judgment (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015; University of Chicago, Chicago Center for

Teaching and Learning, 2023). In Chinese universities, lesson study has gained traction as a practical, classroom-rooted PD model; a four-stage cycle (pre-class goal-setting, research lesson, debrief, and feedback) fits course teams and aligns well with guided-participation goals (Zeng, 2023).

A feasible semester plan pairs POT and lesson study. During weeks 1–2 a target course outcome is chosen, and two observation foci are co-defined.; During weeks 3–7 two research lessons are provided, and two reciprocal observations are required. During weeks 8–10, assignments can be revised using the TILT framework. Finally, during weeks 11–14, a short interactive oral can be piloted. Departments can legitimize the work by linking one documented micro-change per term to teaching portfolios and annual reviews, not as add-ons but as evidence of continuous improvement. Complemented with short clinics on rubric calibration and online peer assessment, the latter shows positive achievement effects in higher education when rater training and anonymity are well designed (Lai et al., 2025).

Safely Integrated Student Voice

Design questions without loss of face or control by combining anonymous channels with structured talk. In large lectures, use a simple, moderated question queue for one confusion and one curiosity, paired with the muddiest-point prompt at predetermined pauses. Furthermore, address a subset of questions immediately and roll the remainder into the next opening explanation. While working, think-pair-share with opt-in explanations reduces on-the-spot risk while still strengthening participation (Guenther & Abbott, 2024). In seminars and labs, rotate discussant roles with those of summarizer, challenger, evidence-finder, for example, with one-sentence sentence starters to normalize entry. For courses with projects, institute a two-week pivot window wherein teams can propose a minor scope change based on early findings, this channels voice into actionable co-design. Recent classroom research in China underscores that shifting interaction norms requires careful role negotiation and explicit framing to reconcile expectations of lecturer authority with student initiative (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

Recommendations: Replicate and Extend the 2006 Wang Study

Revisit the baseline of Wang (2006) study with a multi-site design, sampling large public universities and selective institutions across three regions, and across three modalities (face-to-face, blended, synchronous online). Retain the PALS core to permit longitudinal comparison, adding items on interactive orals, rubric use, transparent assignment design, and AI-supported feedback. Pair instructor surveys with brief classroom observations using a lightweight POT instrument and student micro-surveys (three questions on perceived participation, clarity, and fairness). The original results showed high scores on climate building and relating to experience but low scores on learner-centered activities and flexibility; the replication tests whether micro-participation gains and transparency practices are now more common and whether they mediate student-reported clarity and fairness (Wang, 2006).

Hypotheses: H1, compared to 2006, mean scores for participation-oriented practices and flexibility are higher; H2, courses reporting transparent assignment design and rubric calibration show higher student-rated fairness and lower reported anxiety; H3, in synchronous online courses, class size negatively predicts engagement unless offset by segmentation and structured questioning

(Zhou et al., 2025); H4, student-voice mechanisms predict higher perceived relevance, moderated by course level and disciplinary norms (Ying & Briffett-Aktaş, 2024).

Conclusion: Pragmatic Pathways toward Co-design

Chinese universities can preserve the strengths of structured, lecturer-led teaching while opening deliberate space for student thinking and authorship. The near-term, high-leverage moves are modest and measurable as identified in this analysis, including timed write-first and pair-explain cycles to lectures; redesign one assignment with transparent purpose-task-criteria and a short interactive oral; calibrate a two-or three-criterion rubric for short-answer reasoning; and run a small POT/lesson-study cycle in at least one course team. These approaches, aligned with existing evaluation systems, move courses along the centralism-to-co-design continuum without sacrificing order, coverage, or fairness. They also indicate authentic evidence of student reasoning, verified authorship, clearer criteria that travels across modalities and scales, positioning departments to meet policy expectations while keeping pedagogy humane and culturally responsive (UNESCO, 2023; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025; The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

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