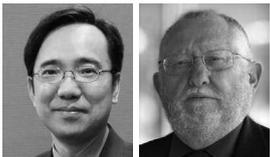


## Chinese Concepts of Learning

# A Break from Tradition?

The characteristics of the Chinese learner together with opportunities for educational exchange continue to be of academic and policy interest. Chinese society is now more urban and outward looking than in the past, yet it retains the core of its cultural heritage and is indeed trying to renew it. This article focuses on the effects of these changes on the learning styles of the Chinese at home and in the diaspora. This is important not only for foreign institutions hosting Chinese learners, but in understanding how the Chinese themselves may, through learning, bring about change in their society.

**It should be remembered that the Chinese learner is an individual, albeit one of 1.4 billion people who comprise** a civilization that has evolved in culture and learning over five millennia. To the Chinese the theory and practice of learning has found meaning during every major historical epoch from ancient to modern times. The era of the philosophers (6th to 3rd century BC) – Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi – provided a moral compass for individual and social behaviour with learning contributing to the cultivation of virtue and self-perfection, and service to humanity. The essence of Confucian learning was the examination system for selecting an official meritocracy, abolished only in the twilight years of the imperial Qing dynasty.



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Modern China has seen fundamental social and political change that has affected Chinese attitudes to learning and to culture. Republican China (1912-1949) experienced significant foreign influences on education and learning from the Occident, notably the United States, and from Japan in East Asia. The communist People's Republic of China in 1949 influenced at first by the Soviet Union brought with it the revolutionary ideology of Mao Zedong, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1965-1969). This aimed at uprooting traditional culture and replacing it with a communist cultural class consciousness. However, as Morgan (2017, p. 55) has observed "...the Chinese people showed that they could not be transplanted into fresh earth ready for the gardener's designs, and that individuals are

not, in practice, passive, malleable masses, subject for experiment". There was a greater acquisition of literacy, at least at the basic level, but this had also been an educational aim during Republican China.

The economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s and the country's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 ushered in a socialist market economy. China now has the world's second largest economy, with an emphasis on technology and innovation. This has resulted in fresh foreign influences on Chinese culture, not least in higher education.

## Confucian Concepts of Learning

The classical stereotype of the Chinese learner is of someone who learns by rote, an obedient learner who listens, seldom raises questions, is focussed on the syllabus, and on success in examinations. Such anecdotal description has led to an Occidental notion of the Chinese learner as a "rote-silent-passive learner" (Sit 2013). Such features of the Chinese learner match the traditional grooming of the scholar-official by which the student's character was shaped by the teacher, and learner autonomy was not a consideration. Traditionally the teacher's responsibility was emphasized, and learning was confined to the classics. It was the attitude towards the teacher that made a good student, and which defined learning behaviour (Tao/Jiang 2015). A deeper understanding

using a cultural model of learning offers a very different perspective, which we shall consider below. However, to understand how contemporary Chinese students learn and how to teach them, one must still consider the cultural roots of the Confucian tradition.

## Learning Styles of Chinese Students

In an empirical study, Li (2001) contends that the Chinese conceptual framework for learning is a comprehensive one, "...founded on an epistemology for learning that lays out clearly what knowledge is to be acquired. It also delineates behavioural types and standards of achievements for such learning. In addition, it outlines strategies to deal with learning difficulties". Her findings suggest that knowledge seeking is a moral striving for self-perfection throughout life, and the learner must be self-motivated with "hao-xue-xi" or "wanting to learn with heart and mind". Successful learning depends not only on the learner's intelligence or innate ability, but also on commitment and effort. Such achievement motivation is a culturally specific trait through which persistence (diligence, endurance of hardship, steadfastness, concentration) and affective role-modelling of the teacher combine to produce high-achieving Chinese learners from generation to generation.

This cultural model of learning questions dichotomized concepts such as between "ability" and "effort" and "success" and "failure", often preferred by Occidental researchers. The well-known "Paradox of the Chinese Learner" is a good example of such a dichotomized view that assumes a "rote-silent-passive learner". First, it puts most Chinese learners in the category of surface learners. Secondly, it questions why such apparently passive learners may also be high achievers. This is of interest as it counters Occidental assumptions about learning effectiveness that are based on participatory and active learning.

## Cross-cultural Psychology of Learning

There have been many research studies since the 1990s on the cross-cultural psychology of learning. It is recognized that the observed "rote-silent-passive learning" is insufficient as an explanation. For exam-

ple, to account for the academic success of Hong Kong Chinese learners, self-efficacy and connectedness are cited as contributory factors (Fong/Yuen 2015). The former is like the effort-driven pursuit of learning that is a core component of the Confucian tradition of learning, while the latter draws on the Chinese culturally specific familial, as well as school, support given to the learners to ensure they succeed. It is worth noting that other Occidental empirical research has not supported a "surface-deep" learning concept model (Purdie/Hattie 2002).

Chan (1999) and Sit (2013) also offer some insights into Chinese learning styles. It is argued that rote learning is not necessarily simply a surface approach but is a significant strategy for ensuring success found in the Confucian learning tradition. In other words, learning by memorization and through understanding are connected rather than a dichotomy. As for silent learning, criticism has often focused on an authoritarian teacher-learner relationship, the Confucian tradition of structuring classroom order and the responsibility of the teacher as a role model are ignored. Chinese learners understand the teaching-learning situation in a way that has little to do with whether they are actively thinking while waiting to be asked to speak in class. The notion of passive learning is also a misconception in that Chinese learners look to bond with their teachers outside the classroom and choose to ask questions informally. This is a broader and indeed deeper understanding of how dialogue takes place. There is also an element of thoughtful reflection, about asking an appropriate question rather than simply one that comes to mind. The assumed passive Chinese learner may also be a reflective learner.

## Variants of Chinese Learners

An issue that complicates the understanding of Chinese learners is that of the diaspora. The initial encounters of Occidental researchers have been with Chinese learners in migrant communities (e.g. the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia), and in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore). Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan should also be considered as special cases. The diaspora Chinese community shares many cultural values which are

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within the Confucian tradition, such as great expectation for children's education that translates into high achievement at school and university. However, this cultural commonality has obscured the purpose, preference, and strategy for learning adopted by Chinese learners outside Mainland China as the socio-political contexts and therefore formal schooling are markedly different.

Chan (1999) attributes the drive for learning success amongst second generation diaspora Chinese to an aspiration to leave the ethnic economy and enter global professions that are more likely to provide material and social benefits. She observed that many Chinese learners in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore had a strong preference for Occidental educational institutions or those developed as such during colonial rule, rather than those on the Chinese Mainland or even in Taiwan (which is influenced by American models). This is clearly an instrumental choice of institutions that can provide valuable learning experience and, most importantly, an internationally recognized qualification. Hence, the diaspora Chinese learner can only claim similarity with classical Chinese learners in achievement orientation, but differs in motivation, as moral striving for self-perfection is evidently not a consideration. Academic researchers need to explain the characteristics of different sub-cultural groups of Chinese learners to avoid misleading generalizations.

## Implications for Western Institutions

China's development as a major economic power has seen a dramatic increase in exchange with the rest of the world, not least in higher education. There are several ways in which Chinese learners have an impact outside the country. First, there is the significant number of mainland Chinese students studying overseas or in branch campuses of foreign institutions in China. The supply of Chinese students to overseas universities continues to be a matter of financial importance to these institutions and requires policy attention (Liu/Morgan 2017; Gu/Schweisfurth 2017). There are implications for teaching and learning styles (Burrows 2016), especially in business and language programmes (Foster/Stapleton 2012; Li 2012). These concern the differences and needs of

Chinese learners who experience adjustment issues in class but may not raise them. The problem becomes an administrative matter for student support officers and personal tutors.

Again, overseas universities should not overlook the experience of branch campuses and other transnational programmes which have engaged with Chinese learners to improve the classroom experience. The studies cited show that Chinese students wish to be prepared for their class, are not averse to participatory approaches to learning, and would welcome help, not only on academic but also on social issues, to enable them to integrate into the local community. In short, these bearers of the Confucian tradition of learning have no qualms about adjusting to the Occidental classroom if a transition process is provided.

## Learning needs of Millennials at Home

Chinese learners who study abroad may not be representative of their contemporaries at home. For example, an important demographic phenomenon is that of the Chinese millennials. These are some 400 million comprising a formidable potential for change because of their high consumption power, digital proficiency, and generally well-educated background. Some foreign writers such as Fish (2015) characterize the Chinese millennials as open-minded, well-informed about global affairs despite strict Internet control by the authorities, well-travelled abroad, proud of China's achievements, but not blindly nationalistic, nor so materialistic as to be apathetic about social affairs. It is a generation that is willing to free itself from traditional cultural constraints and to experiment with other cultures.

Yet, the Chinese millennials also seem to value stability and development over changing the current political system despite its many known shortcomings. Chinese millennials use a subtle approach of non-confrontational activism that works around the system rather than creates antagonism. In the process, a networked activism, substantial in scale, is created that may bring about incremental changes to society and polity. To some extent, this is an expression of the traditional middle path approach of classical Chinese philosophy, but pertinent to the digital age, choosing neither friction (revolution

or protest) nor inertia (indifference and inaction). In short, the Chinese millennials are a thinking, reflecting, and doing generation that learns informally as well as formally, as it adapts to socio-political circumstances. It reacts also to events and trends outside China and stays connected digitally in a borderless world.

### **Influencing Chinese Society and the World**

We conclude that the Chinese learners embody both traditional and modern concepts of learning. There is an optimistic transformation and accommodation

of the Confucian tradition by the millennial learners especially as they look to reinvigorate Chinese culture and society. This is very different from the failed attempt to uproot Chinese culture during the Maoist communist inspired Cultural Revolution. Those who study overseas or engage in online learning with foreign universities are equipped to compare perspectives using the knowledge acquired. As the millennial generation, with its great numbers, assumes more and more responsibility for China's economic and social development, especially at the workplace (Zhao/Xu 2019), its aspirations may become forces influencing both Chinese society and the world. ■■■

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