

## **Understanding the Chinese learner and teacher today**

by *Nirmala Rao and Carol KK Chan*

This article looks at the Chinese learner and the Chinese teacher against the present day background of a changing cultural context in order to try to explain a seeming paradox. How do Chinese students succeed when they learn within an educational system that adheres to traditional concepts of learning? Professor Rao and Dr Chan are both members of the Faculty of Education at The University of Hong Kong.

With China's phenomenal economic growth, there has been great interest in how the Chinese student learns. The students achieve notable success, and among the large numbers of Chinese studying overseas many excel. Nevertheless, there has always been the stereotype of the Chinese "rote" learner, simply regurgitating at exam time, with apparent passivity.

One must then consider why Chinese students consistently outperform their counterparts in other countries, attaining high scores when measured for in-depth learning and understanding of subject matter. These questions are of particular interest in the light of socio-economic and technological changes as well as the rapid educational reforms worldwide.

Right up to the present day, one can see the influence of Confucian values in the Chinese attitude to knowledge, education and achievement. The concept that all children can do well if they try hard enough is a deeply held belief. Interestingly, it has transcended geography and seems to be very much apparent in Chinese communities not only on the mainland, but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and further afield.

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While the Confucian beliefs have evolved over time, Confucius himself advocated a philosophy of learning that includes dialogue, thinking and reflecting, as well as memorizing. The concept of "heart and mind wanting to learn" (*haoxuexin* 好學心) is also useful in understanding this process of learning, involving as it does diligence, self-motivation and persistence.

Various factors affect the way students learn and how much they achieve, including motivation, teaching methods, parental involvement, expectations and aspirations, the actual time spent at school and the sheer amount of effort made to learn. Research done by Marton and colleagues, published in *The Chinese Learner* in 1996 (see the [Reading List](#)), looked at rote learning and memorization by Chinese students. Marton found that it was used as a strategy for achieving understanding through a long process that required great effort. Again, this fits with Confucian values, the search for self-perfection and personal commitment to learning.

Contemporary researchers, David Watkins and John Biggs, co-editors of both *The Chinese Learner* and *Teaching the Chinese Learner* (see the [Reading List](#)), cautioned against polarized distinctions such as teacher-centred versus

student-centred approaches and using a western lens to examine teaching and learning in Chinese societies. Many teachers in Mainland China do work with large classes, in classrooms which might appear to a western eye to be very teacher-centred. But Chinese teachers also have ways to orchestrate the classroom in order to ensure that students are quietly engaged in learning.

Furthermore, Chinese teachers believe that they have a cultivating role to play, where they must offer moral guidance as well as helping students acquire knowledge. Therefore, the duty of the teacher is more than simply to impart knowledge in order to ensure that students pass exams. It is also to help students find the “right” path to adulthood. Although it has similarities with the “whole person development”, championed in the west, there is emphasis on moral education and moral values in the curriculum in Mainland China.

The recent changes in socio-economic and global contexts, learning and instructional paradigms, and the educational reforms which affect school organization, curriculum, and assessment methods cannot be denied. This situation is not unique to China, but common to every country where changes associated with globalization are taking place.

With the introduction of new classroom pedagogy against the background of changes in educational policy and reforms, the stereotyped view of Chinese students as passive rote learners can be questioned further. Various aspects of Confucian beliefs continue to serve today’s modern Chinese learner well. Nevertheless, Chinese students are shown to be cue-conscious and respond well to new pedagogy when provided the opportunities.

Just as memorization goes hand in hand with understanding, Chinese students integrate traditional with new approaches of learning to meet their needs. In fact, it is said that while Chinese students like teachers to guide them, they also want to be allowed space to develop views of their own. Similarly, Chinese teachers fuse traditional beliefs with western practice when adopting changes to their classroom pedagogy.

Where continued professional teacher development is concerned, a characteristic model in both Japan and China is the “lesson study”, where teachers work together, reflect on teaching methods and refine them collectively, rather than individually. Among mainland teachers, crafting a lesson for observation by others is common, and matches the Chinese concept of learning and striving for perfection. This continues to fit in with the students’ expectations of what it means to be taught.

China is at an interesting point in its history. How it copes in the long term with the educational changes taking place remains to be seen. Perhaps there will be an amalgamation of practice, embracing western concepts and Chinese beliefs about teaching and learning. This will augur well for Chinese learners. The changing global context, in which different cultures interact with evolving knowledge and learning, will be key factors in the process.

*For those who wish to discover more on this fascinating subject, a reading list is provided below. A full reading list can be found in: Chan, C.K.K., and Nirmala Rao, eds. Revisiting the Chinese Learner. Changing Contexts, Changing Education. Comparative Education Research Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, 2009.*

## Reading list

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