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ABSTRACT

A discussion of issues in the cultural adjustment of Chinese students in American universities compares and contrasts the educational philosophies and organizations of the two countries and the expectations and cultural norms of the two groups of students. The history of Chinese international exchange since 1949 is briefly reviewed, and the potential for cultural conflict is outlined. Contrasts found in educational philosophies include substantial differences in the student-teacher relationship, the moral-political nature of Chinese education vs. the strictly academic philosophy of American education, and the American view of education as a means to personal achievement. It is noted that these contrasts are manifested in Chinese students' attitudes toward American students. The degree of centralization and control of educational programs in the two countries is seen as the major difference in educational structures, resulting in new demands on Chinese students' sense of responsibility, initiative, and independence. Student attitudes toward education and the teacher's role and teaching style are contrasted, and specific areas of cultural confrontation and adjustment difficulties for the Chinese student are pinpointed. It is suggested that Chinese students need to be better prepared for the cultural differences they will face in American universities. (MSE)

Chinese students, American universities and cultural confrontation

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This paper attempts to look at some of the issues of cultural adjustment that Chinese students studying at American universities must face. This is done by comparing and contrasting the educational philosophies and the educational organizations of both countries as well as the expectations and cultural norms of the Chinese and the American students and teachers. How the differences in each of these areas are often manifested in the lives of the Chinese students studying in the United States is also discussed.

For thousands of years China had little or no contact with Western countries and long considered itself the center of the world, hence its Chinese name--"The Middle Kingdom." A more ethnocentric, culturally arrogant country would be difficult to find than the China of only two hundred years ago. The rulers and emperors of China believed China to be the most advanced and civilized people in the world, all outsiders being, de facto, "barbarians." But contact with militarily superior Western nations beginning in the 1800s forced China--rather harshly--to look at itself as but another nation in a world of nations. In opening up to Western countries, China has had to humble itself, a totally reprehensible thought even as recently as the turn of this century.

Since its founding in 1949 international exchanges with foreign countries in education, science, and culture have been an integral part of the national policy of the People's Republic of China (Huang, 1986). Unfortunately, these exchanges, like most international exchange programs, have fluctuated with the changing political winds. From 1949 to 1966, China, a fledgling socialist country all but at war with the United States and feeling humiliated at its treatment historically at the hands of Western countries, largely limited its educational exchanges to other socialist countries--mainly the Soviet Union. During this fifteen year period, China sent over 10,000 students to its socialist allies (about 8,500 to the U.S.S.R.

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alone), but less than 380 to the West--and none to West Germany, Canada, Japan, or the United States.[1]

In the 1960s, China's political relationship with the U.S.S.R. began to deteriorate, which inevitably affected its educational exchanges with both the Soviet Union and the other socialist East-bloc countries. From 1961 to 1965 fewer than 210 Chinese students were sent to study in the Soviet Union, as compared to more than 4,000 during the previous five years. Most Chinese during this period were forced to restrict their education to Chinese institutions as study abroad opportunities were carefully controlled. But even the limited avenues that were available for international educational exchanges were adversely affected by the decade-long upheaval in China known as the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. In fact, for five years (1966-1971) China suspended all educational exchanges with foreign countries, virtually closing China off from any contact with the rest of the world.

Beginning in 1976 with the normalization of relations with the United States, the end of China's Cultural Revolution, and the rise to power of the pragmatist Deng Xiaoping, a new political atmosphere began to emerge. This change in political thinking was quickly seen in the field of education when, in 1978, a radical new approach to educational interaction with foreign countries was established by the Chinese government. From this period onwards, China again started to send students abroad on a large scale, with over 12,000 government sponsored students sent to the United States alone between 1978 and 1984 (Huang, 1986). Today, with the leadership of China emphasizing economic reform and modernization, students and scientists are being sent to the United States and elsewhere to study and bring back the latest theories and developments in the realms of science and technology. As a result of this new desire to reach out beyond its borders, the Chinese have encountered a very sensitive problem: cultural confrontation. Before 1978, China had had only limited contact with Western educational systems, and many of these foreign-trained students either fled China in 1949 or were purged from positions of authority and humiliated during the Cultural Revolution because of their "evil" Western influences. Now, for the first time in China's history, tens of thousands of students are pursuing Western educations and, as a result, are encountering cultures totally alien to them, among them our American culture. Unfortunately, the encounters with these non-Asian cultures have not been as easy as most Chinese expected.

A culture has many different dimensions including a "society's system of values, ideology, and social code of behavior; its productive technologies and modes of consumption; its religious dogmas, myths, and taboos; its

[1]Unless noted otherwise, all statistics in this section are taken from *Achievement of Education in China 1949-1983*, 126-129.

social structure, political system, and decision-making processes" (Coombs, 1985). Whenever two or more different cultures meet there is cultural contact. Because cultures differ to a greater or lesser extent on each of these dimensions, cultural contacts typically are quite dynamic. There is a confrontation, a cultural confrontation, and it can occur on one or more of three different levels: international, institutional, or interpersonal (Chen, 1985).

One typical confrontation between cultures revolves around education. Education is a cultural universal; it is common to all cultures. Yet, like any other dimension of a culture (such as music and food), it is intimately entwined with the culture. Education, with language, is the key to a culture's identity and, thus, to its ultimate survival. Historically, it has been the role of education to conserve, protect, and pass on the idiosyncrasies of a culture; because of this relationship it is impossible to separate education from culture. Students do not gain knowledge in a vacuum. They also learn an educational philosophy; they learn what their roles as students are, what they can expect from a teacher, and what their places in society are. But these definitions of what education is, what students and teachers are, are not universal. Each culture has its own definitions.

The stage for conflict is set when a student from one culture enters a second culture's educational system. Chinese students studying in America are at the vanguard of a cultural confrontation in education. They are being forced to live and learn in ways that are often totally alien to them. What these Chinese scholars are finding out is that learning in a foreign country involves more than just reading new material in a second language. There is a whole underlying realm of culture intimately bound up in an educational system and this culture has to be learned (but not necessarily accepted) before a person can function successfully and comfortably. To gain the education they want so badly, the Chinese must learn the American philosophy of education, they must deal with the different roles that students in America have, and they must come to grips with the expectations that American society and institutions place on students.

Having briefly looked at the historical setting of China's contact with the United States, I want to explore in this paper some of the issues of cultural confrontation in the realm of education faced by Chinese students studying at American universities. What are the fundamental differences in the educational philosophies of China and the United States? How do these differences manifest themselves in the educational institutions and in the lives of students and teachers operating in these different cultures? In short, what are the most salient cultural issues that Chinese students are

going to have to confront and come to terms with while living and studying at an American university?[2]

CONTRASTS IN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

> *My lessons with Teacher Wei had come to involve more than reading and writing assignments. She was a teacher in the Chinese tradition, taking responsibility not only for my academic progress but for my development as a person. She had advice for me concerning my family and friends, my diet, my clothing, my study and exercise habits, and my attitude toward life. At times I got impatient with her and explained that in America, children leave for college and like to make decisions for themselves after that. She was appalled. "Don't your parents and teachers care about you?"*
>
> *"Of course they do, but--"*
>
> *"Then how can they leave you stranded when you are only a child?"*
>
> *"Well, we--"*
>
> *"And how can you possibly think you understand everything? You are only twenty-two years old! You are so far away from home, and I am your teacher; if I don't care about you, won't you be lonely?"*
>
> *She pointed out that the close relationship between teacher and student has existed in China since before the time of Confucius and should not be underestimated--besides, she was older than me and knew better. I couldn't help respecting her conviction, and she seemed to get such pleasure out of trying to figure and then straighten me out that I stopped resisting and let her educate me* (Salzman, 1986).

This exchange between an American college student and a Chinese teacher beautifully exemplifies the different perspectives that must be navigated when East meets West.

In order to better appreciate China's perspective on education, it might be helpful to look briefly at Mao Ze-dong's understanding of the purpose of education. Mao, the founder of socialism in China, had a lot to say about education and much of his thought is still considered relevant in China today. He was a firm believer in the Marxist-Leninist ideology that sees education as a part of the whole superstructure of society, intimately

[2] My assumption throughout this paper is that the reader is familiar with the American educational system. As a result, my efforts are directed mainly toward examining the Chinese system.

connected to a country's economic and political system, and a direct outgrowth of them. In 1940, Mao wrote:

> *A national culture with a socialist content will necessarily be the reflection of a socialist politics and and a socialist economy. There are socialist elements in our politics and our economy, hence these socialist elements are reflected in our national culture; but taking our society as a whole, we do not have a socialist politics and socialist economy yet* (Mao, 1977).

The key word in this quote is "yet." Mao's ambition, in essence, was to change China's culture. He was acutely aware that it is education that transmits culture and that the socialist national culture he wanted to impart would only come with the training of the masses. Education is the foundation--education that will teach the values and ideas necessary to build China's new Communist culture. However, in recognizing the significance of education, Mao played down its inherent qualities. He saw it as being used as a tool, not studied for its own sake. In fact, Mao saw education, reason, and logic as merely instruments (though important ones) for spreading and indoctrinating political ideology (Chu, 1980). In short, education, as viewed by Mao and now by China today, is very much moral-political. It is used to promote the moral, intellectual, and physical characteristics of the Chinese people as well as to ensure their development of socialist consciousness and character (Shi, 1984).

This moral-political nature of Chinese education, however, is not a Communist innovation. Since Confucius (351-479 B.C.) it has been a part of China's culture. In Confucius' day the perfection of society was seen to come through cultivation of proper moral and ethical principles. With this in mind, Confucius presented the image of what the superior man should be like: "He was to be upright, righteous, loyal, forgiving and tolerant, cultured, a follower of the rites, and, above all, humane" (Rodzinski, 1984). Education was to be the tool used for refining these qualities. *The Book of Rites*, a description of the ceremonies and rites observed in the political and social life of ancient China, asks rhetorically, "When the ruler wishes to transform the people and to perfect their manners and customs must he not start from lessons in the school?" (Shi, 1984). Education's purpose was to produce gentlemen with virtue and wisdom for service to the state (Yeh, 1969).

From China's earliest dynasties education has been a political and moral tool of the emperor to help in the reign of the country. The belief that man possesses an innate goodness, which can be nurtured by the proper education in order to achieve his full potential, is among the most ancient in Chinese thought (Hook, 1982). This innate "goodness," however, has in practice always been defined as what is deemed most desirable for the

maintenance of the existing social order. The Communists have merely carried on this educational tradition with their policies, for even today education is meant to serve the ruling class--the Communists.

Ideological indoctrination has been an ever-present feature of educational life in China, particularly from 1949, when the Communists took power, until the death of Mao in 1976. During the Cultural Revolution years of 1965-1976, 'politics' dominated the curriculum in China in an unprecedented manner. Foreign language students, for example, had to use texts that consisted of nothing but translations of Mao's quotations. "To 'remold' their thought, [intellectuals and students] were also made to study prescribed Marxist texts and to participate in 'criticism, self-criticism' sessions, which usually involved a measure of public humiliation" (Hook, 1982).* Although this era of indoctrination as the main purpose of education has passed, the ancient notion that the state shall teach its citizens what to think is still the prevailing philosophy in China today. Recent events at Tianamen Square are only the most obvious examples.

American educational philosophy, on the other hand, is far less politically and morally oriented. Though reflecting the moral and political values of American culture, education in the United States is much less overt in its manifestation of them. Chinese often find the apparent lack of moral involvement by American teachers with their students disturbing. For the Chinese, good teachers, like Teacher Wei in the anecdote quoted at the beginning of this section, take an interest in the all-round development of their students. One visiting group of Chinese scholars observed the American school system for a few weeks and came away with the following conclusion:

> *Chinese teachers approach their students with a broader feeling of personal responsibility and more genuine caring and concern than do American educators. Chinese teachers tend to feel an* overall *accountability for the welfare of their students. They see themselves--and are seen by others--as mentors, concerned about not only their proteges' academic progress but also their moral, social, political, and physical development* (Grove, 1984).

American educational philosophy is probably more accurately described as a strictly academic philosophy. The central aim of an academic philosophy of education is to promote academic learning. Education is

* Editor's note: Ideological indoctrination is still in practice today. ABC News, August, 1989, noted that PRC government officials are requiring that all incoming Freshmen at Beijing University attend one year of military training and indoctrination before beginning their course work. The *New York Times* (Sunday, September 3, 1989), reports that university graduates will also now be required to spend two years working in the contryside before beginning white-collar jobs or graduate school.

equated with schools and must involve classroom teaching and the study of books. Success or failure of the school is based on the level of knowledge acquired by its students. Standards must be maintained or elevated and research is considered a school's lifeblood (Chen, 1981). America, with its paranoia for keeping the church and state separate, has in many respects denuded the public school system of any moral role in society. Recent Supreme Court rulings limiting what teachers can teach and how they are permitted to discipline are indicative of this. Where in China it is a teacher's responsibility to teach people to be moral and to do so by example, there are few such overt expectations placed on American teachers, except possibly in the area of educational ethics (e.g., plagiarism).

For many Americans, education is seen as a means to personal achievement, an opportunity to gain an edge in the competitive world of a market-oriented economy. The idea of education as a government tool in the political and moral transformation of society is alien and often reprehensible to the American, while to the Chinese it is an accepted fact of life. For the Chinese, education does not aim at forming an intellectual class, it is not an end in itself; education is seen as a means of making the students, the inheritors of the Communist Party's dream of a future Communist culture, more conscious of their role in society.

MANIFESTATION OF CONTRASTS IN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

These differences in educational philosophy can be quite unsettling to the unsuspecting Chinese who comes to the United States to go to college. Most of the cultural conflict in this area revolves around the moral-political nature of Chinese education and the apparent lack of it in the U.S. educational system[3]. One of the first impressions that some of the Chinese students I interviewed had about the University of Minnesota was that University students have rather "loose" sexual morals.

It is not hard to see why many Chinese students are surprised at some aspects of American university lifestyle when one realizes that, in China, students are generally not allowed to even date, much less have a boyfriend or girlfriend.[4] Dating is seen as a distraction and a temptation, and students are expected to devote all their energies to their studies. They may only date after they graduate.

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[3]Since May 1986, as a result of a National Conference on Study Abroad that was convened by the State Education Commission, the moral quality of Chinese students seeking permission to study abroad is, in fact, given major consideration when deciding who will be permitted to take part in educational exchanges (Huang, 1986).

[4]Changes are occurring rapidly here, too, however. As Chinese youths are becoming more exposed to western culture, their views on dating and marriage are beginning to change as well (See Zhao, 1988).

Physical interaction between students of the opposite sex is also rare in China. One American professor teaching English at a Chinese university noted, "I don't think I ever saw a boy and girl hold hands on campus. I never saw anyone kiss..., although I once saw it in Tiananmen Square in Peking" (Jochnovitz, 1986). Since dating on campuses is not allowed, obviously no couple would want to be seen holding hands or kissing. But even if dating were permitted, Chinese cultural mores do not allow for the public showing of affection toward people of the opposite gender--even one's spouse. More than one Chinese male living in America has been shocked by a casual female friend innocently greeting him with a hug or some other display of affection.[5] In China, though colleges are coeducational, there are usually no physical displays of friendship between sexes. Women generally do things with women, men with men. Although Chinese do not see anything wrong with dating, physical displays of affection are not culturally accepted. It is through these moral glasses that most Chinese view Americans, and few American college students meet the levels of morality dictated by both Chinese tradition and Communist culture.

On a different plane, Chinese students often state that they are more hard-working and serious (as well as more puritanical) than their American counterparts. Professor Shi Mingde, a teacher from Jiao Tong University in Xian, gives two explanations for this (Shi, 1984). The first is a political motivation. He says that China is a developing country and its students realize the importance of education toward the fulfillment of China's Four Modernizations.[6] Education is indispensable for attaining this goal and the students, who want very much to see their country modernize, are devoting their every effort toward these ends. While this patriotic drive to gain expertise for the development of the motherland seems suspect to Americans, one needs to appreciate the deep love that the Chinese truly have for their country. Patriotism is instilled in them at an early age through their educational system and their culture, and many Chinese honestly exert much time and effort for the betterment of their country. It has not been uncommon for Chinese to give up high-paying and influential positions in Western countries to return to China in an effort to help bring about its modernization. While many university students may not strongly support the commu-

[5]One Chinese author, Liu Zongren, notes this aspect of Chinese culture when he writes of his first encounter with the family he would be staying with while living in Chicago for a few days: "Mrs. McKnight, a heavyset woman in her fifties, opened the door to greet me. She came forward and embraced me. I must have appeared very awkward to her when she did this; she was the first woman who had ever put her arms around me in front of others. Fengyun [his wife] had never even touched my hand in public" (Liu, 1984).

[6]The "Four Modernizations" is a term used to denote China's pursuit to modernize the agricultural, economic, scientific and technological, and military sectors of its society.

nist government currently in power, they do love and support their country. Many students even see themselves as agents of change.

The second explanation is a more personal one. Education is a scarce commodity in China and those who are able to further their education are those who work the hardest. Supporting institutions and the Chinese government are only willing to support the best students at overseas universities, and the ones who are the most academically successful are the ones chosen to go overseas. These are usually the students who place all other goals secondary to their education.

In either case, the Chinese students who end up at American universities are usually very diligent. Several of the Chinese I talked with expressed the fact that they see themselves at a disadvantage in that they are not native speakers of English. But every one of them was proud of the fact that they have been able to compete with Americans in their school systems and do just as well as, if not better than, the average American student. In fact, a few of the Chinese I talked with made statements along the lines that they were surprised to see that many American students often did not adequately prepare for class, were terrible procrastinators, and spent too much time doing things other than school work. Althen comments on this phenomenon in a handbook designed for foreign teaching assistants. He writes:

> *University students in many countries have studied and worked very hard to get into the university. They have learned a great deal, and they are usually very interested in learning more. That is not necessarily true of all university students in the U.S. While many students are quite interested in their studies and want to do well in their courses, many U.S. students are not particularly interested in their studies...Some freshmen enter a university not because they truly want to be students and learn more, but for some other reason or reasons. For example, they may have been unable to find a job...Perhaps their parents wanted them to go to a university, or some of their friends were going and they thought they should go too* (Althen, 1981).

This attitude is difficult for Chinese students to understand. Only through hard work have they been able to obtain their goals. They find it hard to relate to the laissez-faire attitude that many American students have toward education.

CONTRASTS IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Because of the different philosophies on the purpose and function of education in China and the United States, there is also a marked difference in the organization of the educational structures of the respective countries. China's political system is infamous for creating bureaucracy. It has a cen-

tralized government that rules over nearly every aspect of the country. In the field of education, the Chinese government has established the National Education Commission, which is responsible for every element of education. This National Education Commission is a department of the State Council and is equal in rank with China's State Planning Commission and State Economic Commission (Swanson and Zhang, 1987). Because of this high standing in the national government, "the commission can give direction to all educational programs in all ministries in every province" (Swanson and Zhang, 1987). There are no private or religiously-affiliated schools, all schools are government owned and operated.[7] At the secondary levels, textbooks, curriculum, teaching materials, even class scheduling are generally unified across the country. A person studying a course at one school will be studying the same text at the same time in basically the same manner as a student in another school in another city. The government is the final authority on what texts may or may not be used at each level of education and in what manner the texts can be taught. According to Communist ideology and Chinese tradition, it is the right of the ruling party to edit learning materials for its political purposes.

In the United States there is no centralized ministry of education. A "public" school falls under the jurisdiction of a district or, at the highest level, of a state. Each state, each district, often each school is essentially autonomous in most aspects of the day-to-day affairs of education. They can independently decide what curriculum, what methods, what subjects they want to teach. In addition to the public schools there are private schools of all different types: technical, liberal arts, specialized, and so on. There is no government arm that unites them or has jurisdiction over them all (except in certain specific areas where laws like equal access, affirmative action, etc. govern all institutions and businesses).

In fact, while China may have one of the most centralized educational systems in the world, the United States' system is definitely among the most decentralized (Donovan, 1981). As a result, the American educational system is much more flexible than the Chinese. People can choose what type of an education they want, and if there is a market or a need for an addition to a school's curriculum, this can be done relatively quickly and easily. Schools, or school districts, individually decide on teaching plans and curriculum; programs for research and social involvement are decided upon by individual institutions; and decisions for expansion and/or improvement are also both institutional decisions.

However, there are advantages to the Chinese system. While their centralized system is often rigid and onerous, it is reasonably equitable (though this may begin to change with the new reforms scheduled to be

[7]There are seminaries, monastic schools, and other schools of religion in China, but all of these are government owned and operated.

implemented) (Swanson and Zhang, 1987). China has been able to make reasonably good education accessible not only to regions of wealth and strong academic tradition but also to regions of poverty with leaders uncommitted to education, mainly because of the active involvement of the national government. Since the government maintains the right to assign students jobs when they graduate from college, it is relatively easy for good students to be sent to teach at schools that would otherwise be unable to attract them.[8] In the United States there can be an extreme imbalance of available funds and qualified teachers from one school to the next--say between an inner-city school and a suburban one, or between an Ivy League school and a community college--with no national bureaucratic arm to exert a leveling influence. The inequality of minority and low-income community schools, for example, has long been a major issue of school systems in the United States. While some schools in China are much better endowed than others, this is a result of a conscious decision by the National Education Commission, not a result of "market" forces.

Another drawback to the extreme decentralization of American universities and schools is the inability to achieve any sort of national standardization of education. Where Chinese universities operate on nationally established and monitored guidelines, American universities are left to independently monitor and maintain their own standards (although many do subscribe to an accrediting board, this is not required). Of course China has its "top" universities as the United States does, but the key point is that they are established and supported by the government.

MANIFESTATION OF CONTRAST IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATION

These organizational differences can be fraught with difficulties for the Chinese student. The advantage of a centrally-controlled school system is that every course of study is mapped out by the authorities. The curriculum is generally very rigid and does not give the students many opportunities to express their personal preference in classes. Each major has a certain sequence of courses and each person in each class generally takes the same courses at the same time during their four years at school. One American teacher in China remarked that, at his college, "The English majors all know each other very well. Their roommates are also their sectionmates. They take almost identical programs. There are almost no electives, although the students may choose French, Russian, or Japanese as their second foreign language" (Jochnovitz, 1986). There are few decisions to be made once students have started their work, and it is next to impossi-

[8]Two of my former students in China had to take teaching positions in an "undesirable" town because the provincial government refused to give them jobs in their home towns. From my discussion with friends in China, this is not uncommon.

ble to change their major once they have started a program. For Chinese students to come to an American university and suddenly find themselves responsible for which courses they will take, when they will take them, which professor to choose, whether to take an extension class from another school, etc., can all be very overwhelming. Most Chinese have had only minimal control over the course of their education, and to be forced suddenly to make all these decisions is often a traumatic experience. Colleges in China provide a number of services and have certain measures of control over students that have no counterparts in the United States. "It is perfectly natural for a PRC student or scholar to assume that the American institution's "Bureau of Foreign Affairs" will monitor his or her progress, help solve personal problems and mediate between the individual and the school. It is also natural to assume that the school will provide housing and will specify precisely what courses are to be taken--because that is what happens in China" (Donovan, 1981). What we consider to be an enviable trait, i.e., the flexibility of the American school system, demands a lot of responsibility, initiative and independence on the part of the student; for people who come from a culture where independent thinking and acting are often discouraged, or are at least not encouraged, this is not an easily acquired trait.

Many Chinese students at the University of Minnesota have quickly learned how to ease this period of adaptation to the individual demands of the American school system by tapping into an amazing network of information and help offered by the Chinese students already situated on campus. While American students studying abroad may get some assistance from other Americans studying at the same school, they would not generally expect much help from their fellow nationals. Chinese, on the other hand, take great pride in taking care of their own. One Chinese woman I talked with had, within 24 hours of arriving in the United States, a low-rent apartment close to campus, clothes appropriate for winter, and a list of phone numbers and names to call for help with various things, all provided for her by Chinese compatriots that only a day before she did not even know. This same network provides Chinese students with information on which classes to take, which professors are most helpful to international students, which advisers to try to get, as well as where to buy certain items at the cheapest prices. While the American educational system can be bewildering to Chinese students, they have found ways to successfully navigate these potentially troubling waters. Lacking a bureaucratic structure to tell them what to do, they often look to their compatriots for direction.

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN CHINA

To understand the perspective of students from China today it helps to appreciate some of China's past traditions which still influence their thought in education. From Confucius' time until the 1800s, education was seen as the key to advancement, but it was only undertaken by those willing

to devote their whole lives to that pursuit. By the time an advanced student was able to pass all the exams necessary to be appointed as one of the educated and ruling elites of the country, he (the students were always men) was usually well over twenty years old and often in his thirties. For over two thousand years the texts of study were always the same: the ancient classics. They had to be memorized verbatim, from cover to cover, and fully understood. The civil service exams for hundreds of years were to a large extent a test of a student's ability to memorize and internalize tremendous amounts of material. Discipline and self-development were considered critical to a good education (Yeh, 1969). Students were not expected to interact with, give their opinions on, evaluate, or discuss the classics; they were expected only to memorize them. Even the slightest deviation in thinking from established orthodox thought was likely to result in failure (Ebrey, 1981). Mencius (371-289 B.C.), one of China's great scholars and interpreter of Confucianism, said, "I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own. I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients" (Waley, 1977). His was an example to emulate--learn, but don't alter.

Today there is a certain irony in the resemblance of China's modern Communist education to this traditional, "feudalistic" view of education. This resemblance manifests itself in several ways. First is this concept of unquestioned allegiance to the themes of instruction, as exemplified by Mencius. The Communists have defined their own truth and to question its validity is not generally considered wise. The underlying assumption that both the Confucians held and the Communists now hold is that they have a corner on truth and "education" is the teaching and learning of this truth--and this does not include looking for ways to improve it. A good example of this is modern history. The Chinese school system must teach a government-approved version of recent historical events and any alternatives or "corrections" may only be presented through government initiative. Competing views that permit examining different sides of an event or issue are not considered desirable, nor is it politically wise for an individual to support them. This view implies a rather passive role on the part of the learner, who is seen as a receptacle into which knowledge is poured for safekeeping. This prevalent view of students in modern China is well illustrated in the following excerpt from a Chinese student's description of a good student: "A Chinese student comes to the classroom *to take in* knowledge, to learn everything he doesn't know yet. He is ready *to receive* whatever his teacher is going to offer. He will listen to the lecture carefully, *write down* everything from the blackboard [into] his notebook, and *follow* the instructor's chain of thought...So long as he can *take in* everything, comprehension is not of the primary concern. Usually he will spend hours after a lecture [going] over his notes and [digesting] the information he took [down]" (Chen, 1985. Italics added).

The resemblances of the Communist educational perspective to that of the Confucian is also seen when comparing the perceived position of the teachers in society. Both the Confucians and the Communists highly respect the teacher's role. Ancient Chinese philosophers had many things to say about the student's relationship to the teacher. Among them, the student was instructed that

> *Nothing is better than establishing rapport with the teacher;*
> *Nothing keeps progress better than intimacy with one's teacher;*
> *Nothing quickens progress more than affection for one's teacher* (Shi, 1984).

As Teacher Wei pointed out in the anecdote quoted earlier, there has been a close relationship between teacher and student in China since the time of Confucius, and this manifested itself in many ways in the day-to-day interactions of ancient China. Teachers traditionally enjoyed a very high status in society, coming in fifth behind heaven, earth, emperor, and parents. A maxim from antiquity notes that one should "Respect the teacher; Cherish the student." Education in old China was always looked upon with much respect.

Modern China carries on this tradition in its own way. Although the teachers in recent years suffered great persecution and humiliation under the Communist rule, this was due more to the fact that they were perceived as ideologically maleficent rather than occupationally suspect. Today in China teachers are accorded much respect as they are seen through Communist ideology as the "engineers" of the soul and, as mentioned earlier, mentors concerned with the student's all-round development. There is in fact an active campaign which is attempting to restore both the status of teachers and the respect accorded them that was lost during the Cultural Revolution.

Teachers of "old" and "new" China share other similarities. In Confucian China, teachers had disciples who studied under them and learned the "correct" interpretations of the classics required as part of their education. What the teachers taught was considered absolute truth and one did not disagree with them. To do so would be to place oneself in a position of authority over one's teacher, which was unthinkable. In comparison, in the modern Chinese classroom, instruction is teacher-centered--almost always a lecture. The class will always be serious with little room for jokes or light-hearted discussion with students. Teachers are seen as authorities in their field and what they say is also accepted as truth. One Chinese student I talked with said: "In one word, [a teacher] should be perfect...It would be fatal if he showed any lack of knowledge in front of his students. He would rather give a wrong answer than admit 'I don't know.'"

A third area of resemblance between education in traditional China and modern China is with the students themselves. While this has been touched on in the above paragraphs, it is helpful to look at these characteristics a little more closely. As has been noted, both traditional and modern China consider the quiet, passive person the ideal student. Students are not expected to talk in class unless called upon, and they are not encouraged to ask questions during the class period. For both old and new China, the classroom is a serious place and students are expected to be attentive, which includes sitting up straight in their chairs, and being polite and respectful to both teachers and classmates. No student would think of coming late to class and none would dare to get up and leave class early without prior permission, as this would be terribly disrespectful. Chinese students have always been diligent and today, as in years past, will often spend incredible lengths of time attempting to master new material. A good modern example is the way Chinese graduate students bound for the USA study for the TOEFL exam. Typically they will spend weeks memorizing grammatical patterns from old TOEFL tests in the hope that this will aid them on the actual test--with apparent success.

AMERICAN STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: THE CONFLICT

Of all the aspects of education, the behavior of American students is probably the most noticeable area of contrast with the Chinese. Education in America has had a very different (and much shorter) history. Probably the most significant difference has been the accessibility of education to the average person. Education, at least primary and secondary education, has been almost an assumption for most children growing up in the United States over the past century. In China, on the other hand, before the 1950s approximately 90 percent of the population were considered functionally illiterate. Today, at the collegiate level, most Americans who want to go to college can, and many schools are even looking for ways to increase their enrollment. In China, there is harsh competition for the few available places in a handful of colleges.

Since education is not seen as such a precious commodity in the United States students do not tend to have the same amount of respect for it nor take it as seriously. American students think nothing of dividing their interests while in school; for example, taking on a job or having a boyfriend or girlfriend--things Chinese students rarely do. American students also do not have two thousand years of tradition influencing their behavior. Education in America in many respects is seen and treated as a product that is bought and sold. The student has paid for the opportunity to sit in on a class and if he does not want to listen, or wants to come in late or leave early, it does not matter. He has paid his money; he can do whatever he wants as long as it does not disrupt the class. On the other hand, since students have paid money to be in a class, many want to get as much out of it

as they can. They will ask questions, argue with a professor, even accuse a teacher of being wrong. Few would criticize a student for stating his opinion and most teachers encourage it.

Education in the American school system is not seen as information to be memorized, but a process and a way of thinking and exploring that is to be developed (Chen, 1981). As a result, American education is usually considered to promote active learning, where the students are very much involved in and often responsible for much of the learning that takes place. The ideal student is considered to be creative, inquisitive, resourceful, and-to some respect--skeptical.

Chinese students often have a negative reaction toward student behavior at American universities. The first comments are almost always about the "lack of respect" that American students have for their teachers. As noted earlier, coming into class late, interrupting a teacher with questions, making a joke in class, *et cetera*, is considered to be terribly rude and disrespectful. It is an honor to be able to study under an educated person and to treat her disrespectfully is a disgrace.

The whole competitive atmosphere at American universities is also looked at negatively by the Chinese. Chen, quoted earlier, made the following observation about American students:

> *One of my deepest impressions about American college students is their self-centeredness. They come to the classroom as individuals, study whatever subjects they are really interested in, and do not care much what other people think of them. After class, they would never mind what their fellow students are going to do. When I saw many ads posted in the library and various teaching buildings offering or asking for tutors, I realized that co-operative learning was non-existent here. Students regard the knowledge they acquired as their own possession, as merchandise they have paid for, and thus do not at all feel uneasy to sell it. The competition in class is a reflection of the competitive nature of the [American] society* (Chen, 1985).

America also differs in its traditions that define the roles of the teacher. Generally the teaching profession is not looked upon with as great respect as in Asian countries, though teachers are seen to be authorities in their field of study. The biggest cultural difference, however, is probably teaching styles. Where Chinese professors are serious and generally stick to lectures, American teachers often use humor and varied, informal instructional methods--even taking students outside on nice days. Compared to the Chinese, American college students in general have a much more casual relationship with their teachers, and it is not uncommon for a playful rapport to develop between the teacher and the class. No moral mentor relationship usually exists. For example, if students want to come late or

skip a day, that is their prerogative. The teacher's only responsibility is to teach the class, though he may well consider class attendance a requisite for a good grade. In China, truancy is not tolerated. There are other differences, too. A Chinese teacher would never sit on a desk in front of the class, but many American professors feel no impropriety in this. American teachers often do not feel reluctant to admit their ignorance on a topic, nor will they be angered or embarrassed by challenging questions, in contrast to Chinese teachers. American teachers usually do not look at themselves as founts of knowledge but as facilitators of learning. Americans will probe for questions, encourage discussion, praise creative thinking and daring ideas; but often they will not give direct answers. They do not feel constrained to follow the syllabus, nor do they worry about getting sidetracked onto some tangential topic in the middle of a lecture.

Classrooms in America, in contrast to China, are not governed by rules of formality. The classroom itself often seems disorganized and even chaotic. Chairs are spread out around the classroom, students sit wherever they want to, and they even eat and drink during class. Chinese students find this distracting, interfering with their concentration. They have come to class waiting to be told a prescribed amount of material in an organized, precise manner. To be in a classroom where "disrespectful" students and a teacher spend a whole class period arguing the different views of an issue seems a waste of time. "Why doesn't the teacher just say what the correct view is and go on to the next point?" is not an uncommon reaction for Chinese students in classes like those. Most Chinese students are completely handicapped in classes where discussion is the main mode of instruction, and few feel comfortable participating--that is not the traditional role of a student, in their view.

For a student used to point-by-point lectures with outlines put on a blackboard, the anecdotal meandering of many college professors is very confusing. American university lectures and discussions tend to be broad and extensive, while in China they usually are intensive, very narrow, and detailed. One Chinese student I interviewed said she felt frustrated because she was not always sure what exactly the teachers wanted her to know. When she asked a teacher to help her out, his response of "You don't have to understand everything" *really* confused her. Chinese students like to come away from a class with detailed notes, which are hard to get in discussion oriented classes. When they fail to acquire what they had expected from a class, they tend to come to the conclusion that American teachers are not as resourceful and responsible as their teachers back in China. In reality, the teacher is probably just expecting the student to do a lot of the information-finding on his own outside of class.

It is precisely in this area (i.e., classroom expectations) that Chinese students often encounter the greatest difficulty in adjusting to American colleges. It is here that they have placed their highest hopes for gaining the

education they crave; but the discontinuities between American instructional methods and the customary learning interaction styles of the Chinese create formidable obstacles (Tharp, 1987).

CONCLUSION:

Roland Tharp points out that

> *Social organizations willy-nilly emphasize different interaction styles--competition or cooperation, individualization or group linking, personal or impersonal teacher relationships, formality or informality of teaching style, peer-peer or student-teacher relationships--which in turn, implicate cultural norms* (Tharp, 1987).

In this paper I have tried to show how American and Chinese cultures are at opposite ends of the continuum for each of these interaction styles. It is hardly surprising that Chinese students find their tenure at American universities to be a very stressful experience. To find two educational systems which stand in greater opposition to each other than the American and Chinese would be a difficult task. The cultural confrontation is blatant, though its causes may be subtle, and Chinese students are always immediately aware that there are differences that they are going to have to contend with while they live in the United States. There is a whole new realm of cultural norms they must learn in order to succeed.

Unfortunately, most of the stress of this cultural confrontation falls on the student. Many problems which develop are due to misunderstandings between pupil and teacher arising from different culturally based assumptions, but it is usually left to the student to make the adjustment necessary for success. It is my hope that, by providing some historical, social, and philosophical reasons why Chinese students will often face problems when adjusting to American school systems, this will make the adjustment process for both the Chinese student and the American teacher much easier as they *both* negotiate a mutually comfortable learning atmosphere.

What the Chinese want from American education is knowledge; but both the knowledge and the educational process are encapsulated within a cultural context, obscuring the knowledge and hindering the learning. Only when the cultural assumptions of learning are understood to the point where the Chinese can work within them is there relatively free access to the information and the education they seek. If Chinese students coming to the United States realize that they will be entering a university system whose whole underlying philosophy of education is different, whose expectations for students and teachers are different, whose whole organizational structure is different, they will have gained a powerful tool to aid them in

their quest for knowledge. But more than this, they will have also gained confidence through successful interaction within another culture, turning their struggles with cultural confrontation into a positive experience. If the American teachers and schools interacting with Chinese students also understand the different assumptions and expectations that these students will have, it can only help to facilitate the difficult cultural adjustments that must be made.

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