

An ethnic cultural study on Asian students' learning statuses*

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Abstract: This paper describes the learning statuses of Asian students, and connects their individual learning status with their cultures, attitudes, histories, family relations, etc.. It also focuses on a wide range of aspects as academic performances, learning attitudes, cultures, race relations, schoolings, learning strategies, obstacles, etc., thus traces the causes of their learning cultures and learning obstacles, and also discusses some possible solutions to the obstacles.

Key words: Asian students; learning statuses; culture

1. Introduction

Wood's (2003) study found that "Diversity is probably the most powerful concept on American college campuses today" (p. 228). The expectations different programs have, individual abilities of these students to comprehend and assess their new context of study will be different; but, as referring to common backgrounds such as culture, habits, languages, etc., those people within one ethnic group share far more similarities than differences in the process of learning. A lot of researches have been done about the learning of the minority students in recent years, Asian students are among the most regularly stressed groups. Asian students pursuing knowledge in the field of learning encounter cultural difficulties as well as language difficulties. In terms of learning styles, academic performances, etc., Asian students share a lot of similarities as well as differences, which can be traced to their individual ethnic backgrounds, society, culture, traditions, habits, etc.

2. Definitions of Asian students

The term "Asian" is a broad term which "not only represents Asian Americans, and more inclusively, it is often used as a collective reference to the Asian and Pacific Islander populations; while the U.S. government includes in its definition of Asian, people from East Asia (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean), from Southeast Asia (e.g., Vietnamese, Laotian, Burmese), from the Pacific Islands (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Fijian), from South Asia (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Nepali), from West Asia (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, Turkish), and from the Middle East (e.g., Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian)" (Tatum, 2003, p.153).

Tatum (2003) also mentioned, "In 1960, most Asian Americans were descendants of early Chinese and Japanese immigrants. Changes in immigration policy in 1965 dramatically increased Asian immigration, significantly altering the demographic makeup of the Asian Pacific American community. By 1990, over half of the Asian Pacific Islanders in the United States were foreign born" (p. 154).

Attracted by the level of scholarship of American universities, and willing to take an opportunity to

* This article is also partial accomplishment of the project of the Hunan Provincial Educational Department "A Comparative Study of the Effects of Sino-African Ethnical Cultural Differences on EFL Learning" (No. 10C1011).

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participate in such a reputable educational system, foreign students begin their journey into American universities with great expectations from all over the world, Asian people are among the fastest growing ones.

3. Asian learning culture

“Culture” is a loose and slippery term that has been used in a great many different ways. In its broadest sense, culture has been defined as a way of life or the framework by which a group makes sense of the world or interprets reality (Guerra & Cunningham, 1998). For immigrant Americans, the term “primary culture” refers to the norms, beliefs, values, attitudes, language and socialization practices that derive from their ancestral homeland and continue to influence their behavior and give meaning and shape to their lives in the United States. It is sometimes taken to mean a fixed set of group traits that are passed on from generation to generation, an inheritance that is fairly impervious to changes in the social environment (Ogbu, 1995).

In arguing that the cultures of racial and ethnic groups strongly influence the educational performance of youths, people are simply saying that children first develop values, attitudes and skills as a result of their experience in the families where they have been raised. But those values, attitudes and skills continue to be shaped by children's interaction with their peers, teachers, neighbors and other aspects of their environment. The cultures of these racial and ethnic groups have altered as a result of changes in the social environment, and they will continue to change in the future.

Asian has the culture of valuing academic learning in the history. As implied in the Chinese ancient proverbs, “Gold is found in books”, “Learning is always beneficial”, “Live and learn”, etc.. Also, in Chinese culture, Asian students feel obliged to comply with their parents' wishes. Parents do not listen to children; parents are active commanders, while children are passive actors (Thernstorm, et al., 2003). And also, largely because of limited opportunities to receive a higher education, in China, for example, academic competition is intense from kindergarten to high school, and goes all the way up to higher education. Children are constantly pressured by parents, teachers and peers to perform optimally, and children who fail to meet standards of academic achievement are often regarded as highly problematic (Thernstorm, A. & Thernstorm, S., 2004). Academic achievement is highly emphasized by adults and peers in China, it is reasonable to argue that children's academic achievement may be of consideration, such as peer relationships, leadership status and other indexes of social competence. Academic achievement significantly and positively contributed to the prediction of social competence and peer acceptance, suggesting that academically competent children are likely to be accepted by peers and become more skillful and sociable in social situations.

In the Western literature, shy, wary and inhibited behavior in challenging situations has been considered socially immature and maladaptive (Rubin & Assendorpf, 1993). Shy-sensitive children are likely to have difficulties in interacting with peers and to develop psychological problems such as negative self-feelings (Rubin et al., 1998). It has been argued that unlike Western cultures, shy and restrained behavior is considered as an indication of accomplishment and maturity in traditional Chinese culture; shy, reticent and sensitive children are often perceived as well behaved and understanding (CHEN, et al., 1999). Chinese overriding concern has always been the establishment of harmonious relationship with others.

As Rubin (1998) pointed out, cultural attributes of home, community and school, emerged very early in a child's life, East Asian American high school and college students spend much more time on their studies outside of school and are more likely to be part of academically oriented peer groups. In addition, East Asian parents are

more likely than the whites to train their children to believe success is based on effort rather than innate ability, and thus they instill in their children the values of hard work, diligence, thoroughness and self-discipline (Rubin, et al., 1998).

3.1 Academic performances

According to the research, "Asian students outperform whites by an average of 40 points on the math SATs" (Thernstrom, et al., 2003, p. 89). In the past 20 years, developmental and educational researchers have paid substantial attention to academic achievement in Chinese children. Researchers have consistently found that Chinese children outperform their North American counterparts in academic areas and that the differences persist throughout the elementary and high school years (Lapointe, Mead & Philips, 1989).

3.2 Attitudes towards learning

Asians also spend more time in doing homework. Asian families also have the tradition to focus on education, they strongly believe that their academic performance depends entirely on how hard they worked; their performance is within their control. "A grade below an 'A' was evidence of insufficient effort" (Thernstrom, et al., 2003). Asians treasure those who are smart, achieved a lot through their own struggling.

Many people of European descent tend to regard the Asian as the "model minority", they believe that Asian people are hard workers, they are really quiet, and they get good grades because they have tons of pressure from their families to get good grades, they are quiet, and so people can not have a problem with them. More than 30 years later, Asian American youth are routinely depicted in the media as star students (especially in Math and Science), supported by industrious, entrepreneurial and upwardly mobile parents.

3.3 Peers relationships and learning

As for Asians, peers' cooperation is treated differently in different countries. In Japan, the cooperative spirit is also much valued through their kindergarten to their college years, but they make their cooperation through the devaluing of individual function, besides, they also value qualities as obedience towards superiors, sacrifice of individuals for the overall benefits; Turker's (2003) research on Korean students at American colleges and universities revealed that in the Korean worldview, "abruptness and directness are impolite and even destructive. Relationships are valued and protected" (p. 7). And also, "the concept of keeping an idea to a student himself without contributing to the value of the group as a whole is foreign to the Korean worldview" (p. 7). In contrast, a lot of Chinese researchers also argued that, the problem of lacking of cooperative spirit is what Chinese education is facing in the new century.

Asian people, take Chinese people for example, academic achievement are greatly treasured among their peers. Within Chinese peers, good academic achievements are often regarded as superior, or proof of being smart, those who are good at study will usually have more chances, enjoy more benefits, being more popular among their peers. It is of such a vital importance that in terms of peers' popularity, good academic results mean one is in, fail to get it means one is out.

3.4 Educating and learning styles

The nature of learning preference is associated with the culture of an ethnic group. Asian students prefer reading and analyzing. Peacock's findings suggested that "Chinese students preferred kinesthetic and tactile with visual as a minor learning style" (Tatum, 2003, p. 28). That determines Science, Math and some other courses which require inner requiring and active reasoning are their strong points, but limited by their conservative education and inferior physical condition, they are not so good at competitive sports and are usually regarded as lacking of creativity.

4. Problem-solving strategies

The problem-solving strategies are consistent with the learning preferences and culture of a certain ethnic group. For those Asian students abroad, the term “culture shock” is quite popular. As these students prepare for a professional career in the American academia, they usually come directly into the university programs without time to solve problems of cultural adaptation. Pressures due to time limitations and high level of performance required from the very beginning put them in a disadvantageous position as they have to produce high quality work dealing at the same time with cultural, social and linguistic differences between American university program and their previous education.

According to the author's previous research survey conducted at Harding campus, most Asian students prefer individual efforts than cooperative works in solving problems, 16 out of 20 (80%) Asian students chose to solve problems by themselves instead of seeking help; in contrast with 7 out of 22 (31.8%) African students tended to solve problems by themselves (LIU, et al., 2008).

This result is in accordance with Asian's comparatively reserved personality. Asian people tend to inquire inner solutions to a problem. Also, as mentioned above, Asian people stress so much of academic achievement that the showing of disabilities or innocence in front of others will result in some unfavorable feelings as shameful or embarrassments, thus, making them hesitate to seek external help.

What is more, in some Asian countries, lacking of cooperative practices in their educational system also causes their inactive of seeking help from other people.

4.1 Learning obstacles

As minority ethnic groups studying in the United States, Asian students encounter a lot of learning obstacles. Thernstrom's research showed that Asian American students often suffer from communication anxiety, feeling inadequate about their writing and speaking ability (Thernstrom, et al., 2003).

Most Asian students' learning obstacles are caused by language, for the native speakers start their language acquisition at birth and practice the language through daily life after learning to speak. The Asian students, especially those who are not America-born, begin their study in a new country where they have to think and communicate in a second language; they may find a separation between language and thought. For most of them, the second language is learned during the school years and practiced only in schools. They may speak, write and pass a test in their second language with effort and consciousness. But that is quite different from when the time comes for them to use this language as a tool to communicate, to learn and to think (Marin, 1996).

As for most of the Asian students, different from the African Americans, English is their second language and their native language background is quite different from the Anglo-American education system. Marin (1996) found that, “foreign students are students at risk because they become a central locus for cultural tensions in relation to: (1) educational systems and values; (2) socio-cultural and linguistic norms appropriate for college programs of study; and (3) ways these students construct and reconstruct their identities” (p. 6).

Asian students live with tensions that extend beyond problems of cultural adaptation to campus lives. Thus, in addition to normal levels of stress arising from rigorous academic training, Asian students find themselves pressured to perform at a disadvantage in comparison with their American peers, accruing cultural tensions along the stressful journey through their university lives (Marin, 1996).

In Asia, a greater emphasis has been placed on memorization rather than discussion in the course work (Robin, 1998). In Japan, university students are not expected to think critically or to question ideas but are

expected to memorize facts or figures (Kinderman, 1993).

As CHEN (1999) pointed out that, aggressive-disruptive behavior is predictive of adjustment problems, such as peer rejection in Chinese children. Unlike aggressive children in North America who display externalizing problems, because of the strong sanction against aggressive behavior in Chinese culture, aggressive children in China experience pervasive difficulties including both externalizing and internalizing problems, such as depression (CHEN, et al., 1999).

Wealth is another important reason which causes learning obstacles. Ogbu (1995) argued that wealth, which is an indicator of both financial and human capitals, can affect academic achievement, as well as help to explain the gap in test scores. Analysis revealed that wealth affects achievement through its effect on the amount of cultural capital to which a child is exposed. Asian parents have higher average incomes than whites and are more often college graduates. To some extent, the children's advantage in school mirrors their parents' advantage in income and education (Thernstrom, et al., 2003).

Besides language problems, Asians tend to focus too much on disciplines. Unlike the liberty education in the U.S.A., which helps to cultivate the children's creativity, liberal thinking and individual diversity, Asian culture tries to build up a certain standard for everyone to follow instead of focusing on people. Also take China for example, every day, parents will tell their kids, "Obey your teachers, Do your schoolwork, Stay out of trouble. You're there to learn, not to fight. Keep trying harder. Keep pushing yourself. Do your homework. After you have done that, you can watch TV" (Thernstrom, et al., 2003, p. 83). "In Chinese culture, parents don't listen to children, they say, 'Do this now'. And kids do.... People don't know how to be a friend to their children" (2003, p. 83). Obedience and acceptance of standard mode of thinking is always stressed by the combined efforts of the parents, schools and society, diversity is always eliminated by the overwhelming called "standardize effort". Some educators argued that too strict disciplines will ruin a child's creativity as well as his/her freedom of pursuing individual happiness. A research conducted in mainland China also showed that a large percentage of students feel unhappy under the pressure from their study lives and fierce competitions.

4.2 Causes of learning speciality

Academic excellence in Asian students can also attributed to different reasons. First, "Although Asian Americans experience racism, they do not usually get stereotyped as less intelligent than whites, so they internalize and transfer messages about themselves that are different from those of blacks" (Thernstrom, et al., 2003, p. 81). Second, it may also due to traditional values and a strong emphasis on achievement in their culture (Ho, 1986), Lapointe (1989) found that Asian American high school and college students spend much more time on their studies outside of school and are more likely to be part of academically oriented peer groups. In addition, he also pointed out that, it is more advantageous to be Asian than to be wealthy, to have non-divorced parents, or to have a mother who is able to stay at home full-time, trains their children to believe success is based on effort rather than innate ability, and thus, they instill in their children the values of hard work, "diligence, thoroughness, and self-discipline". Third, from the part of Asian students, family plays a very important role in pressuring them to study hard. Most Asians attach great importance of their family members, they want to shoulder off the burden of their family, and they are willing to sacrifice their own happiness and benefits for the rest family members.

Last but not the least, especially serious in the densely populated and under-developed Asian countries, educational opportunities are very limited, in order to have more chances, to live a better life, people have formed the habit of pushing themselves extremely hard for the uneasy gained educational opportunity, they will put academic achievements a place above all in their lives.

5. Educational strategies and suggestions

According to the research of Bean and Metzner (1985), there are 3 main strategies that help to support this population: (1) peer support in classes as an incentive for their learning; (2) faculty-student relationships; and (3) extra-curricular activities.

The instructor is usually responsible for planning, implementing and evaluating the learning that takes place (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

The community needs to provide academically successful role models, publicly recognize achievement, and encourage schools to infuse multi-cultural perspectives into the academic curriculum to counter students' idea that to achieve is to act, and to help students develop a sound self- concept and identity. The schools, in turn, need to develop strategies to help parents take a greater role in the academic life of their children, and to help them learn to be academically self-motivated and persistent.

Teachers need to recognize that their expectations have an effect on their students' concept of themselves as learners and achievers and the internalization of negative or positive beliefs about their intelligence.

Schools need to provide parents information on tracking practices, and about differences between honors and advanced placement classes, regular classroom placement and remedial classes. Parents also need to be helped in working with teachers to monitor and effectively enhance for their children's academic progress.

As for Asian, the suggestion for the solution to their language problem is "two-way bilingual education", which

"lends itself very well to cooperative learning and peer tutoring and supports the goal of striving to nurture a democratic classroom community.... Children remain fluent and continue to further their abilities in their native language, while they also develop fluency in the second language. They learn the curriculum content in their stronger language, so they do not lose ground in subject areas. They learn to be more sensitive to cultural differences and appreciate the difficulty of being bilingual as an asset rather than a deficit that must be overcome" (Collier, 1989).

Asian also needs to learn from the Western education. It is true that, to some extent, they are enjoying some advantages in terms of academic achievements, there is still something else left for them to learn or to gain. Aristotle (1978) believed that "we acquire none of the moral virtues by nature, but nature gives us the capacity to receive them" (p. 111). Moral virtues as "liberality, kindness, and temperance" and intellectual as "wisdom, understanding, and prudence" "result from the repeated performance of just and temperate actions" (Aristotle, 1978, p. 110). As the proverb goes, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy", Aristotle also said, "Happiness, therefore, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the 'End' at which all action aim" (p. 108). According to a bunch of research results, Asian students feel far less happy than their Western counterparts. They need to shift from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education, for too much stress on academic achievements, such as memorizing work will not help build a healthy and strong personality; fierce competition will help achieve more academically, but it also does tremendous harms to the nature being of a human, it causes a lot of communicative barriers between the competitors. The rigid standardized process will also cause a man to lose his ability of independent thinking and his own individuality, which is a disaster not only to an individual, but also to a nation. More cooperative tasks and hands-on works need to be set up in Asian educational system from kindergartens to college levels to enhance students' creativity and cooperative spirits. All in all, academic achievement is a mean to an end, not an end in itself, it should be stressed, but should not be stressed at the cost of kids' happy childhoods and a nation's balanced, healthy growth.

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(Edited by Chris and Suky)