



Chinese Students' Cultural and Behavioural Differences among Domestic and Internationally Oriented Educational Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Research has found a link between active student participation in the classroom and memory retention. Participation can encompass many aspects, including asking questions in class and partaking in classroom activities. Extensive studies have been conducted on Chinese students concerning their overall involvement in class. When compared to their Western counterparts, Chinese students are often regarded as silent passive learners (i.e. not active), hence negatively affecting their ability to learn in the classroom environment. The changeability of education together with ongoing globalization has led to an increase in Chinese students going abroad. As a result, there has been an increase in demand for international high schools and other educational training centres that prepare Chinese students for tertiary education in the West. This research investigates classroom behaviours and face values of students attending a Chinese international high school and compares them with students attending a conventional Chinese public high school. A MANOVA is used to assess these differences based on a questionnaire submitted to 349 students from Taiyuan, Shanxi province in China. Results show that students following an international program ask more questions in class, but no difference is found in regards to the Chinese cultural value of face. Subsequently, auxiliary qualitative research was performed to clarify quantitative outcomes. These outcomes showed that efforts to save face, academic pressure, classroom environment, and pre-existing individual factors contribute to this found difference.

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Keywords:

Classroom behaviour, international education, face value

1. Introduction

International education is on the rise, and Chinese students are leading the race. More and more students from China are looking to further their studies in Western educational institutions; in 2014 there was an 11% increase of Chinese students studying abroad, and although data is yet unavailable, this increase is expected to further expand (ICEF Monitor, 2015). The most popular places to go to are the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. Out of the almost one million international students in the U.S., one third are Chinese (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). The influx of Chinese students to the West has resulted in an increased interest in the underlying academic attitudes and behaviours of this particular group of students. In the Eastern-style classroom, students primarily listen and show respect to the teacher; they follow traditional manners in hope of achieving harmony. In contrast, students in the Western-style classroom are encouraged to raise questions and challenge the teacher for the purpose of promoting critical thinking skills (Roberts and Tuleja, 2008). Chinese education has been greatly influenced by Confucian values of respect for authority and seniority, while Western education has been influenced by the Socratic method of questioning (Lehman and Tweed, 2002).

These differences have led to a tendentious assessment of Chinese students by Western teachers. According to anecdotal evidence, Chinese students are considered shy, and show little participation in class. They are

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passive learners and value the teacher's opinion over those of their peers (Roberts and Tuleja, 2008). Though they value their teacher's insights, they do not ask many questions in class.

The different academic attitudes of Chinese students can be explained using Hofstede's factors of cultural diversity. Hofstede's factors include: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. Particularly eminent factors in the Chinese educational setting are collectivism and power distance. Collectivism in cultures relates to identifying in-groups and out-groups, working on tasks together, and focusing on commonalities within a group (Basu-Zharku, 2011). In traditional Chinese culture, the idea of collectivism comes from values of respect for age and hierarchical position, group orientation, face, and relationships (Lockett, 1988). Collectivism leads to different norms and expectations within a society. Power distance as a factor of cultural diversity can be considered when members of a society expect power to be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1985). It has been argued that respect for authority has an effect on the educational attitude of learners (Hwang, 1994). This could lead to a constraint in asking questions to a person in power (i.e. the teacher) since this might be seen as a challenge to the person of authority.

Collectivism and power distance are universally applicable concepts in terms of human behaviour. These factors of cultural diversity contribute to an ideological value which is distinct to Chinese society and is often referred to as face. The Chinese cultural focus on face can be defined as "the need to be respected by others and not be embarrassed in social situations" (Hwang, 1987). In regards to education, this value of face is related to certain classroom behaviours. For example, it can lead to the avoidance of answering difficult questions posed in public (e.g. during class). This type of behaviour can become problematic when a student doesn't learn the content because they do not try to answer questions asked by the teacher. Asking questions tends to be difficult as well, since not understanding something might be considered a lack of diligence or knowledge on the student's part. The behavioural observations by Western educators of Chinese students that they are shy and do not actively participate have been attributed to this specific cultural value of "face", and this jargon is preferred by educational researchers.

Face can have negative effects on academic performance and is therefore a topic of interest among educational researchers. It is evident that face is related to classroom behaviour and more specifically to feedback seeking behaviour in class. Moreover, it has long been accepted that active feedback seeking behaviour is positively related to multifarious cognitive aspects, such as critical thinking (Smith, 1977), motivation (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991), and intellectual development (Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). A student's behaviour in the classroom is regarded as representative of one's educational attitude, which is based on environmental factors and cultural influences. Inherent ideologies and values that are based upon cultural aspects are difficult to change. A student's behaviour however, can be considered malleable through environmental factors.

This is where international preparation programs come in place, and it is a booming business (Clark, 2014). Preparatory international schools are on the rise in China, promoting an educational environment that cultivates their students' academic attitude. Using an international style curriculum and appointing foreign teachers to deliver some or many of the courses, these schools try to simulate classes similar to those of Western countries. Through this simulation, students are expected to have a smooth transition for when they attend school in the West. In this paper the researchers assess face values and classroom behaviours of high school students in mainland China. A comparison is made between students attending an international program and students that follow the regular Chinese program. It is hypothesized that students who have been exposed to foreign teachers and their Western methods do not differ in face values but do differ in their classroom behaviour, compared to students that follow the domestic Chinese education.

2. Method

This research uses a quantitative and qualitative mixed methods approach. Data collection is of a descriptive nature. Quantitative results are followed by focus group qualitative data collection.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were Chinese students, grades seven to 12. All the students attended the

Subsidiary High School of Taiyuan Normal University, located in the capital of Shanxi Province, China. Half of the participants from this school attended the international high school department, which only included grades 10 to 12. These internationally bound students took classes which followed a mixed curriculum incorporating the local Chinese curriculum and a partner American high school's curriculum. The other half of the participants attended the same school but not in the international department. These participants were students from grades seven to 12 and they only followed the Chinese curriculum.

Table 1. Participant demographic information for Quantitative data

Item	Category	Number
Gender	Male	154
	Female	179
Grade	Middle School (7-9)	126
	High School (10-12)	223
Department	Chinese school	254
	Chinese International school	95

n=349 (16 missing items for gender)

Quantitative data results were followed up by four different focus-group discussions, with students and teachers. Participant distribution can be found in table 2.

Table 2. Participant demographic information for Qualitative data

Focus Group	Category	Number
International students	Chinese International school	4
Public school students	Chinese school	5
Mixed	Chinese International school	3
	Chinese school	2
Teachers	-	7

n=21

2.2. Instruments

The quantitative instrument used for this research was a 15 questions survey. Hwang, Ang, and Francesco (2002) created a valid and reliable questionnaire to assess cultural values and classroom behaviours specifically for Chinese students. For this paper a translation of the questionnaire into Chinese was used due to participants' varying levels of English. The questionnaire used was translated using forward and backward translation by three bilingual experts. Afterwards a pre-test was done using cognitive interviews, hereby following the translation process described by Su and Parham (2002). The questionnaire has five factors. INask, questions are related to feedback seeking behaviour in class. Facegain, consisting of statements related to the importance of gaining face. Faceloss, about the perceived importance of losing face. Outcheck, related to feedback seeking behaviour outside of class with other students. Finally, Outask, related to feedback seeking behaviour outside of class with the teacher.

Focusgroup discussions were used to collect qualitative data. Questions discussed focused on explaining quantitative outcomes. Four focus group discussions were held. A group with international students, a group with public school students, a mixed group of students with international and public school students, and a group of teachers.

Focus groups discussed the following topics:

- How are face values manifested in the current sample?

- Are there differences in feedback seeking behaviour between international and public school students?
- What are factors that are related to differences in feedback seeking behaviour between international and public school students?

2.3. Analyses

Quantitative data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. In the MANOVA the independent variable is school (public high school, international school, public middle school) and the dependent variables are factors measured by the questionnaire (Inask, Outcheck, Incheck, Facegain, Faceloss). The MANOVA was followed by ANOVA's for each dependent variable.

Qualitative data was analysed by transcribing the raw data from the focus group discussions into a text format. This text was then analysed and nodes were assigned to common themes discussed in the different focus groups, using the Nvivo software. These nodes were then cross referenced among different groups and summarized in the results section. Follow-up focus group interviews are used to explain quantitative findings. Findings found that students in the international education environment did not differ from students in the Chinese public education environment in terms of face values, but they did differ in terms of asking questions in class. After analyzing the data, concerning why Chinese international students asked more questions than Chinese public school students, three categories surfaced, including: face and pressure, classroom environment, and individual factors.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The Multivariate outcome is significant for the students' school. Pillai's Trace = .11, $F(10, 660) = 3.99$, $p = .000$. Further investigation using separate ANOVA's are reported in Table 1. Adjusting omnibus criterion of significance calculated through the Holm-Bonferroni Sequential Correction shows significant differences for the variables OUTcheck ($F(2, 341) = 8.67$, $p = 0.000$ ($\alpha' = 0.01$) and INask ($F(2, 344) = 6.46$, $p = 0.002$ ($\alpha' = 0.0125$)).

Table 1. ANOVA's report

Anova's		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Inask	Between Groups	290.621	2	145.310	6.459	.002
	Within Groups	7738.514	344	22.496		
	Total	8029.135	346			
Outcheck	Between Groups	252.371	2	126.185	8.669	.000
	Within Groups	4963.556	341	14.556		
	Total	5215.927	343			
Faceloss	Between Groups	12.366	2	6.183	.271	.763
	Within Groups	7771.030	341	22.789		
	Total	7783.395	343			
Outask	Between Groups	15.133	2	7.567	.458	.633
	Within Groups	5664.869	343	16.516		
	Total	5680.003	345			
Facegain	Between Groups	4.338	2	2.169	.322	.725
	Within Groups	2310.645	343	6.737		
	Total	2314.983	345			

Outcheck

Outcheck differences were determined by one-way ANOVA. Due to violation of the homoscedasticity assumption the Games-Howell test was used for further post hoc investigation and can be found in Table 2. The average score on OUTcheck of students from the international high school was significantly lower (M= 13.89, SD = 3.49) than the public high school students (M=16.04, SD=3.44) and the public middle school (M=15.40, SD=4.37). The effect size is small, $\eta^2= 0.048$.

Table 2. Games-Howell Post-hoc test for OUTcheck

	(I) School	(J) School	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Games-Howell	International High School	Public High School	-2.148*	.474	.000	-3.27	-1.03
		Public Middle School	-1.512*	.536	.014	-2.78	-.25

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

INask

INask differences were determined by one-way ANOVA. Tukey HSD post hoc criterion for significance is used and can be found in Table 3. The average score on INask of students from the international high school was significantly higher than the public middle school students (M=10.33, SD=4.86). The effect size is small, $\eta^2= 0.036$.

Table 3. Tukey HSD Post hoc test for INask

(I) School	(J) School	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
International High School	Public High School	2.190*	.646	.002	.67	3.71
	Public Middle School	1.903*	.648	.010	.38	3.43

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

3.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Face and pressure. A reoccurring theme brought up during the focus groups included the need to save face and pressure. In other words, the students' willingness to participate depended on either fear of losing face or pressure from the teacher and the over all academic environment. Both the Chinese international students and public school students said they feared other students would laugh at them if they asked a low-level question. One student said, in order to save face, they would pretend to understand the questions posed in

class, even though they didn't. Another student mentioned that he/she felt ashamed to ask further questions due to prior response of other students to his/her previous question. Some students from the public school said they would save their questions to ask other students after class. The teachers in the focus group do not believe face is the primary reason. They believe it is mainly due to students' personalities, study habits, learning efficiency, class topic, and teaching style.

Students from both the international and public school said the differences in pressure attributed to their willingness to ask questions. For example, if the classroom environment is more relaxed and students have a good relationship with teachers, they will participate. Due to an often stressful environment due to pressures to perform well on the Chinese university entrance exams (Gaokao), some public students didn't feel comfortable asking questions. They also mentioned that the teacher has so much material to teach in preparation for the Gaokao, there is also not enough time. General conscientious among all students is the international department is overall more relaxed. One student from the international department did argue that they might not have the Gaokao, but they do have to prepare for exams like SAT, TOEFL, and AP.

Class environment. Focus group discussions found class environment to be a significant factor in students' classroom behaviour. Students and teachers discussed issues like overall atmosphere (e.g. stressful, quiet, lively, etc.), classroom topic, teaching style of teacher, and classroom size. Of the 21 interviewees, 12 felt teaching style either negatively or positively affected students' willingness to ask questions in class. Two of the seven teachers mentioned teaching style as a factor, while 10 of the 14 students identified it as a factor. A public school science teachers said, "If the teacher encourages the students to express their opinions freely, they will be more confident to do so, but if the teacher is strict and temperamental, students will not open their mouth". A public school student reiterated similar sentiments, "I will feel nervous if the teacher criticizes me". Among the three student focus groups, a common theme that came up was the difference in teaching styles among Chinese teachers and their foreign counterparts. Whether perceived or experienced, students generally felt there was a difference; that difference usually included Chinese teachers being stricter while foreigners were open and active.

After teaching style, students and teachers said the overall atmosphere affected classroom behaviour. If the students feel they are in a pressured atmosphere where they have to take in a lot of knowledge, they are less likely to actively ask questions. Students and teachers said if there is too much information to accumulate, there is not enough time to ask questions. At the same time, some students fear they might waste other students' time if they ask a question, especially an easy one. All groups stated that the pressures in the public high school are greater due to the Gaokao (Chinese University Entrance Exam). One student from the international department countered that argument with the pressures international students have with TOEFL, SAT, and AP tests, but the overwhelming conscientious was that the international department offered a more relaxing environment.

The last two issues concerning class environment discussed during discussions include class size and classroom topic. All but two of the student participants mentioned classroom size affecting their willingness to participate. The larger the class, the less likely they are to ask a question because they are fearful of making a mistake in front of many students and they don't want to waste other students' time. Classroom topic also had a relatively high influence. If the student enjoys the subject, the more likely they will remain engaged, and vice-a-versa. One public school student noted, "In art class, students take notes carefully, but the situation is different in science class".

Individual factors. Individual factors, such as home situation and personality traits, were also discussed during focus groups. Public school students agree that family situations have no influence on their behaviour in class. To the contrary, some international students propose that parents' personality traits reflect the students' attitude in class. For example, one student said, "My parents are conservative, so I don't like to ask questions".

Teachers in the focus group argue that personality differences play a big role in the students' behaviour. They also believe that these differences exist between international and public high school students. For example, one teacher argues, "Students from the public high school tend to be conservative and, you know,

very typical in Chinese traditional culture. But for the international school students, they are more open-minded, more free-wheeling". It is argued that this influences their feedback seeking behaviour and increases their willingness to ask questions in class. Another difference the teachers see is the attitude towards education. According to them, the international students and parents see themselves as "customers" (it is a private school) and they believe the school should serve them well without any consideration.

To conclude, focus group interviews with students and teachers from international schools and teachers discovered various reasons for student participation – or lack thereof – in class. According to the groups, efforts to save face, academic pressure, classroom environment, and pre-existing individual factors all affect students' classroom behaviour.

4. Conclusion & Discussion

Previous research has clearly demonstrated that class participation improves deep learning and knowledge retention (Smith, 1977; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Chinese education has traditionally applied a strictly didactic approach, while this has proved successful at primary and secondary level its effectiveness has been questioned at tertiary level where deeper learning is required. The large numbers of Chinese students entering western style education has also served to highlight the gap between an Asian didactic approach and the western dialectic approach. This gap has been especially damaging in arts and social studies majors where students are required to explore the subject under guidance, rather than be provided with ready made answers.

Previous research has identified a range of factors which underpin Chinese student behavior including – English language skills, saving face behavior, modesty related to Confucian values and Kiasu. This report indicates that smaller groups, improved language skills and closer teacher relationship can reduce 'silent student' behavior by impacting on the first three factors - language skills, face & modesty. Conversely the qualitative data indicates that the high competition associated with international programmes, and the associated qualification for foreign universities, can increase Kiasu behavior which results in a reduction in questioning and class interactions.

International schools, in China, are proving to be effective at preparing students for overseas universities by challenging the rigid assumptions of state education. Smaller class size and improved transparency have impacts on class interactions. Overseas educators further shift the permissible behaviors and are in high demand precisely because of their ability to engender new behaviors in Chinese students by breaking the existing educational paradigm.

5. Limitations

Despite the relationship found in this study between classroom behaviour and learning environment, there are a number of limitations which must be addressed. First of all, though the students in the international high school clearly have a lot of exposure to learning environments that encourage active participation, it does not necessarily mean all the public school students have not been exposed to the same environments in some capacity. It is very common for Chinese students – particularly students residing in urban settings – to attend English training centres that employ foreign teachers. Furthermore, in a globalised world, educational systems all around the world are sharing ideas and theories. Over the last century, China has moved—and continues to move—from a traditionally Chinese system to a more Western-style of education, which includes curriculum and teacher expectations (Niu, 2007). Therefore, though the international students have a specific curriculum preparing them to go abroad, similar elements might be present in public school students' educational experiences.

Generalisation of found results should be limited to a similar socio-economic grouped population. The Subsidiary High School of Taiyuan Normal University is a relatively affluent high school located within the city boundaries. Students who have the privilege of attending international high schools with the purpose of attending universities abroad are overwhelmingly well-off for the simple reason that it is expensive to go to schools overseas.

Due to the descriptive nature of the used research methodology a causal interpretation is not justified. This was addressed during qualitative data gathering and findings suggest that pre-existing differences might have contributed to the found significant effect. For example, students in the international school are described as more open, this personality type could contribute to differences in feedback seeking behaviour, as has been suggested in other contexts (Krasman, 2012).

6. Suggestions for future research

To further show the influence of face on classroom participation, students from the Chinese countryside with no exposure to Western methods can be compared to Chinese high school students already living abroad. This research believes the dichotomy would be even greater. Furthermore, other variables that could influence classroom behaviour could be tested in more depth. Examples could include: class size, teaching styles, personality traits, and more.

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