

# Social & Cultural Contexts of Chinese Learners

## Teaching Strategies for American Educators

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### Introduction

This article seeks to evaluate the social and cultural context of education among Chinese learners in order to identify ways through which American educators can best serve such students. It is intended that such efforts will create multiple pathways to knowledge for Chinese learners by accommodating their varying learning needs.

Several common themes that emerge from current literature about the context of education in the Chinese culture suggest that Chinese learners emphasize the Confucian value of effort over ability, that they thrive under an authoritarian parenting style, and that they follow a constructivist learning style. American educators, by understanding Chinese culture as it relates to education, can adapt their pedagogy to better serve Chinese learners. Strategies and tools that emphasize effort, independent learning, and constructivist learning are therefore offered as guidelines to help American educators create appropriate pathways for their Chinese students.

Gay (2000) has stated that people's "cognitive processing protocols are learned from their cultural surrounding" (p. 150). She suggests using such understandings to develop rules and procedures to foster the acquiring of knowledge. She further asserts that such "rules and procedures continue to anchor how individuals process intellectual challenges for the rest of their lives" (Gay, 2000, p. 150).

Wu (2008) has observed that "lit-

erature on cultural matters in education has provided the premise that different cultures present different tools, habits, and assumptions that significantly affect human thought and behavior" that will impact how they learn (p. 101).

### Confucian Influence

According to Smith (1973), Chinese educators owe more to Confucius's teachings related to learning than to any other source. Chinese learning and teaching theories are heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy and practices. Wu (2008) explains that, according to Confucian philosophy, "success is less the result of the individual's innate ability than it is of the individual's single-minded effort and consistent practice" (p. 102). Confucius believed that success follows hard work, not ability (Huang & Rinaldo, 2007).

Wu (2008) has described several empirical and theoretical studies which attest to the importance of Confucian philosophy in Chinese thinking. Several researchers—including Chang in 1980, He and Chan in 1996, and Lee in 1996—have studied Chinese educators and found evidence of self-effort being more important than ability in Chinese education and culture. For example, He and Chan interviewed 50 professors in China and found that all the respondents believed that "non-intellectual factors, such as effort, motivation, and volition, were most important prerequisites for talented performance" (Wu, 2008, p. 103).

Wu (2008) also reports on a cross-culture study of 20,000 Chinese-American students in elementary schools and found that most of the students worked hard for two reasons: the Confucian value of the role of effort in education (p. 104), and to "fulfill parents' expectations" (p. 105). This leads to the second social factor affecting Chinese students' learning: parenting style.

### Parenting Style

The relationship between parenting styles and children's academic performance is anticipated to be different in different cultures. According to Wu (2008), parenting is one of the most significant factors contributing directly to children's academic performance and their emotional and social development. Chinese parenting, while generally identified as authoritarian and controlling, nonetheless has a positive effect on their children, leading to independent learning.

In contrast, the typical parenting style in Western cultures is more permissive and less controlling. The contrast often leads Americans to view the Chinese authoritarian and controlling parenting style as negative. In the traditional Chinese culture, however, the authoritarian and more controlling parenting style is viewed as "loving and concerned" (Wu, 2008, p. 106).

This authoritarian style, therefore, has a more positive effect on Chinese students than if the parents did not involve themselves so much in their children's learning. Western parents, too, value their involvement in their children's academic lives, but the extent of actual involvement of Chinese parents is far greater than that of most American parents.

One explanation for this greater involvement by Chinese parents is that they believe their children can work harder with their guidance and as a result ultimately become more independent learners. In contrast, American parents are reluctant to push their children beyond their ability and readiness at any given time (Wu, 2008).

According to Wu (2008), the extent of parental involvement affects the confidence level of the children. Most of the involvement of Chinese parents is intended to foster more effort and hard work, since those are qualities which can be impacted

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by parental control as opposed to ability, which can not be altered by parental control. The more the Chinese parents involve themselves in their children's day-to-day learning, the more their children's confidence level rises, and the more meaning they are able to construct from the knowledge they are acquiring. This leads to the third social factor affecting Chinese students' learning: constructivist learning.

### Constructivist Learning

American educators often view Chinese students as passive, but Chinese students defend their cultural learning style of listening to lectures and understanding the textbooks, and assert that they are in fact active while listening to the teachers and reading textbooks (Chen, Bennet, & Maton, 2008). Chen, Bennet, and Maton (2008) point out that Chinese learners prefer quiet listening because it allows them to construct meaning from the content. Chinese students are constructivist learners and like to construct their own meaning after listening completely to the lectures. Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) have also argued that constructivism hypothesizes learning from schemata building, in a process where new learning takes place with the support of the schemata. Typically Chinese students build this schemata by listening to lectures, copying notes, and memorizing key points.

Nieto (1999) discusses two intertwined ideas of constructivist learning: transmission of information and creation of knowledge. Transmission of knowledge is the traditional, passive, "teaching as telling" (Nieto, 1999, p. 4) process in which there is a one-way flow of information—from teacher to student. In this learning format the student is expected to "memorize, remember, and apply" (p. 4) the information in preparation for assessment. In this type of learning, the focus is on "reproduction of socially sanctioned knowledge" (p. 3). The Chinese use this reproduction of knowledge to construct meaning and evaluative tools in this type of education usually take the form of standardized tests.

Construction of knowledge, on the other hand, calls for active learning by the student in contrast to teaching by the teacher. Many American students and teachers consider construction of knowledge to be the best active way of learning because information flows two ways, between students and teachers. This active form of learning, which Nieto labels a "habit of

mind" (p. 5), involves critical thinking by students about questions such as how, why, who, etc. In this type of learning, the "focus on reflective questions invites students to consider different options, to question taken-for-granted truths, and delve more deeply into problems" (Nieto, 1999, p. 6). Evaluative tools for this type of learning are not limited to standardized tests; rather they involve projects, portfolios, and other performance-based assessments to verify that learning has occurred.

Nieto (1999) has embraced the Chinese students' viewpoint that drills and memorization of facts should be thought of as a means by which we can achieve the ends of knowledge construction. This blending of transmission and construction of knowledge is consistent with the Chinese viewpoint that rote memorization should be part of the process, but not the entire process, of constructing knowledge.

### Multiple Pathways To Knowledge

In the Chinese context, innate ability is regarded as of less importance than effort. Wu (2008) claims that "effort and hard work might be a unique feature among Chinese-American people, as compared to mainstream American parents who might assign more importance to innate ability" (p. 101). A study by Watkins (1996) revealed that "Chinese students attribute success to effort, and failure to lack of effort, while Westerners tend to attribute both success and failure to ability and lack of ability, respectively" (Watkins, 1996, as cited in Wu, 2008, p. 103).

This can lead to mismatched pedagogy, teaching styles, and evaluative beliefs of White educators in American schools who are attempting to educate Chinese students. Chinese schools have extremely rigorous curricula, and Chinese students study far more at school and at home (Gardner, 1995, p. 31). More studying, even at the expense of extracurricular activities, constitutes a significant part of the self-effort of Chinese students and teachers. When children fail in academic performance, Chinese teachers assume that the students must not have worked hard enough, whereas Western teachers assume that they must lack ability (Gardner, 1995).

Another factor that hinders learning among Chinese students in American classrooms is the academic freedom of American teachers to digress from the textbook and supplement or replace the textbook content with other material of their own choosing. This confuses Chinese

students, who are then uncertain what they should be learning. Huang and Rinaldo (2007), citing Fu (1991), point out that in the Chinese culture textbooks have higher standing and authority than teachers, so teachers closely follow the textbook.

Thus, American teachers can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese students by personalizing lessons for them that strictly adhere to the textbook as the source for most if not all instruction and assignments. However, this kind of strict adherence to the textbook will for many if not most American educators reduce or eliminate their desire to personalize the content, and therein lies a challenge for American educators with Chinese learners in their classrooms.

In addition, to some extent the American liberal and permissive parenting style transfers to the classroom, since teachers behave similarly with their students, whereas Chinese students expect their teachers to be authoritarian and controlling. American educators can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese students by using their position of authority to more aggressively guide Chinese students' learning activities in order to achieve positive academic outcomes.

According to Huang and Rinaldo (2007), Chinese students have negative reactions to American classrooms because American students' often display unruly behavior and there is an apparent lack of authority of the teacher over the students. Huang and Rinaldo stated that Chinese students abhor that American students can be late to class, can question the teachers' authority, can interrupt the teachers at any time by speaking without permission, and can make jokes in class. American educators can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese students by reducing such student interruptions.

### Failing to Recognize

American educators too often fail to recognize that their instructional style of permitting free communication does not usually work for Chinese students. American teachers encourage class participation, whereas in a study by Huang and Rinaldo it was found that Chinese students reported that too much class participation and discussion negatively impacted their understanding of the lessons (Huang & Rinaldo, 2007). American teachers tend to praise bold ideas and discussions as promoting thinking, but Chinese students are used to "point by point lectures with

outlines and key points put on the blackboard (Huang & Rinaldo, 2007, p. 4).

In a previous study by Huang (2005), 66.8% of the Chinese students reported that anxiety and stress were created by too much question-asking, by both teachers and students, which negatively affected their learning (Huang & Rinaldo, 2007). This negative affective filter was enhanced when the Chinese students were English learners or their proficiency in English was limited.

Most Chinese students consider rote memorization of basic facts as a pathway to more critical thinking, whereas American teachers discount the value of memorization and only emphasize critical thinking which grows from permitting students freedom to speak as they choose. American educators can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese students by directly lecturing them and incorporating more blackboard writing that includes point-by-point key ideas, followed by class time for the students to copy the notes from the board.

Many White teachers insist on promoting only English at the exclusion of foreign languages—which collaterally excludes foreign cultures—in the classroom. As a result, some teachers do not reach students who have had different experiences than the teachers. According to Nieto (1999), by being averse to embracing the linguistic and cultural differences of their students, teachers “lose a golden opportunity to build on their students’ lives in the service of their learning” (p. 8).

This disposition alienates Chinese students even more. McIntosh (1990) has explained that this treatment by White teachers of minority students is a result of their own experiences—the White privilege passed down through the generations. McIntosh describes the effects of this privilege, “in proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated” (p. 5). American educators can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese students by validating the Chinese language and culture and by including Chinese events from history, literature, and sciences in the curriculum.

Chinese teachers, according to Chen, Bennet, and Maton (2008), laud the quiet, listening, acculturation of learning since it allows them to manage large class sizes and tightly structured courses and assignments. Thus, American educators can create a pathway to knowledge for Chinese

students by following the course syllabus and rubrics as closely as possible.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 offer some specific strategies and tools for American teachers to consider and utilize when teaching Chinese students. Table 1 addresses emphasizing effort, Table 2 emphasizes independent learning, and Table 3 stresses constructivist learning.

## Conclusion

Educators tend to teach in congruence with their own learning styles. However, when teachers teach in a certain way, it works for some students—those with similar experiences to the teacher’s—but not for others. Ideally, both the teachers and the students should accommodate each other’s teaching and learning styles by learning about each other’s culture. Nieto (1999) has claimed that “critical pedagogy

is an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world” (p. 103).

In real life, however, there are mismatches in the ways students learn and teachers teach. Chinese learners use memorization as an integral component of learning and use it as a pathway to critical thinking. They rarely question authority figures such as parents, teachers, and textbooks, and show little interest in class discussions or participation (Chen, Bennet, & Maton, 2008).

Chinese educators tend to see learning as requiring much effort, rote memorization, listening to lectures, and copying notes. Watkins (1997) suggests that, “Such views are grounded in hundreds of years of Chinese philosophical thought.” Attempts by American educators to reform their pedagogy in order to effectively educate Chinese students must take into

**Table 1**  
**Strategies and Tools Used to Emphasize Effort**

<b>Minor strategies</b> i.e., strategies contained within the major strategy of emphasizing effort	<b>Tools</b> used for instruction and evaluation
Use tasks involving memorization	Choral drills Rhymes Fill-in-the-blanks quizzes Tests focused on reproducing content (i.e., mental recall)
Help develop good learning habits	Routine daily assignments and tasks More homework
Teach self-control	Affective filter

**Table 2**  
**Strategies and Tools Used to Emphasize Independent Learning**

<b>Minor strategies</b> i.e., strategies contained within the major strategy of emphasizing independent learning	<b>Tools</b> used for instruction and evaluation
Give numerous chances to accomplish tasks	Revision and resubmission
Push beyond comfort level	Challenging assignments Tutoring

**Table 3**  
**Strategies and Tools Used to Emphasize Constructivist Learning**

<b>Minor strategies</b> i.e., strategies contained within the major strategy of emphasizing constructivist learning	<b>Tools</b> used for instruction and evaluation
Allow quiet listening	Audio lessons (CDs, DVDs)
Write point-by-point notes on the board and give them enough time to copy everything	Blackboard, whiteboard, easels, scaffolding sheets
Encourage memorizing key points from notes and textbooks	Didactic questions
Help rephrase and restate information	Journals, portfolios

account these social and cultural context of learning, thereby change their pedagogy and instructional style to create multiple pathways to knowledge construction for Chinese students. Strategies and tools that emphasize effort, independent learning, and constructivist learning are offered as the primary guidelines to help American educators create such pathways.

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