

# **The Issue and the Context: Australian Education & Chinese Students <sup>1</sup>**

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## **Chinese Abstract**

来澳学习的中国学生往往在学习和与本地教师交往过程中出现很多误解。本文认为, 问题产生的原因不仅仅是因为语言能力和沟通问题, 而且常常是因为文化差异和对教学的不同理解。

本文以跨文化交流和比较教育理论为基础, 对比中西文化教育价值观, 重点分析中西双方对教育的态度和教师学生相互期望值。本文强调, 在中澳两国教育交流日益频繁的情况下, 师生双方都应增加和改进对不同文化背景下教育价值观及其表现的了解。

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With the globalization of business and education, Australian university staff and administrative officers are increasingly gaining more experience with and exposure to overseas students. Before the 1980s the Australian education sector was largely national and local in orientation with an international development assistance program focusing on Australia's national interests. (The main expression of this approach being the Colombo Plan / AusAid development scholarships). The sector has been permanently altered through increasing numbers of full-fee paying overseas students creating strong 'market-driven' requirements.

Australia now has the world's highest per capita number of international students. In fact, international students comprise 22 per cent of Australia's tertiary students nationwide, while the State of Victoria had more than 25 per cent of students from overseas (according to former assistant director-general of education at the UNESCO, Sir John Daniel, *The Age*, Oct.6, 2004, p.9).

Education, in recent years, has become Australia's third largest export "commodity".

Among the 250,000 overseas students studying in Australian schools and universities, over 10 per cent come from China. During 2003, the 16,586 students from mainland China made up 19.8 per cent of all Victorian overseas enrolments (*The Age*, 10/18/04).

With the deregulation of the Chinese education market and especially with the rapid advance of Chinese economy, more Chinese students can be expected. Many Chinese parents take advantage of China's open door policy by sending their child

abroad to study as soon as they can afford it. In a survey published in People's Daily, 59.9 per cent of people prefer going overseas to study and of this group 89.5 percent prefer study at tertiary level (People's Daily, overseas edition, p. 2, Apr.26, 2002).

### **1. Problems for overseas students**

1. How do these students perceive and respond to different values, beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions?
2. How do these students cope with the unfamiliar requirements and expectations in their new studying environment?
3. Are both local staff and overseas students prepared for the different expectations and roles of their academic environments? The challenge is both self-evident and very real.
4. How well do Australian teachers understand overseas students?
5. How do they communicate and teach them effectively?
6. Why is it that overseas students feel confused, bewildered and frustrated?

Many Chinese students speak English well with few grammatical mistakes. Because of the good command of English they have gained entry to university in Australia, but not surprisingly they continue to behave and perceive education according to the rules of their own culture.

By the time these young adults reached Australian, they have already been exposed to and have internalized many basic values and beliefs from their own culture (Chinese culture). They have accepted the rules of behaviour considered

appropriate to their role in various situations and settings including places of education.

They have been educated in a system which emphasizes systematic learning from a standard textbook and requires them to complete lots of homework.

So when they enter the Australian academic environment which encourages a very informal and active interchange between teachers and students, they feel “lost and disoriented”. They are not clear about what to do and “have difficulties understanding the protocols, class arrangements, the ways of interacting with staff as well as the assessment criteria, etc”. Some even feel “confused and bewildered” or “frustrated, intimidated” and as a result lose confidence.

Overseas students from a Chinese background are usually attentive but quiet in class, rarely ask questions and expect teachers to lecture all the time. Despite the teacher’s encouragement they are usually passive and very reluctant to express opinions or make critical comment. When called upon to speak or participate in discussion some feel embarrassed or even ashamed.

Students, in fact, encounter certain problems at almost every stage from the orientation program onward. Many students never get past the initial stage of shock, annoyance and embarrassment.

Some members of staff may see these students as “slow, lazy or not mature” while students may see staff as “indifferent”, “too casual”, or “irresponsible”.

Obviously there is a breakdown in communication between teachers and students. They misunderstand each other because of their respective cultural outlook and perceptions (e.g. p.153 Jean Brick).

Chinese students behave in a way that is acceptable within Chinese culture and the Chinese educational environment but this is quite different from the Australian way. Additionally student knowledge of appropriate local cultural patterns does not match their language skills.

Nevertheless, for many staff and students, until recently, cultural awareness was not a high priority within their teaching and learning.

In the last two years there have been many reports and publications in Chinese media focusing on frustrations/bewilderment/problems those overseas Chinese students experienced. Even worse fatal tragedies have happened in America, Canada and Australia around campus.

## **2. What is the basis of the breakdown in the communication?**

### **Why do these students speak good English but still not fit in smoothly or as quickly as they hoped?**

In recent years more and more research has been done to examine the cultural attitudes underpinning linguistic communication and culturally appropriate manners. People have realized that “Language competence alone is not enough to communicate successfully, for language itself is but a code which functions within the framework of its culture”. (Ronowicz, 1995, p. 1-2)

We need to understand properly the cultural reasons for the situation that results in the majority of Chinese students being usually passive, quiet in class and reluctant to participate in class discussions.

Hofstede's research findings on inter-cultural communication have been very useful in understanding the situation, especially his analysis on cultural differences. Through his work we may see further the hidden values which guide these students behaviour.

### **3. Inter-Cultural Communication: Value Dimensions**

Hofstede (1980), the Dutch researcher, in his well-known cross-culture research on business culture has identified four value dimensions, namely individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity, as the basis for most cultural differences.

Through his research in over forty countries, people's attitude and behaviour are clearly revealed and measured against these four identified dimensions. The four dimensions are significant in interpreting cultural differences but what most concerns us here is the power distance and the individualism-collectivism.

Power Distance (PD) is the dimension concerned with a person's attitude to authority. "In a high PD corporate culture, there is a significant distance between the levels in the hierarchy. The company in which subordinates hold their bosses in awe and where the bosses like it that way, has a high

PD culture. The organization in which a team member is able to contradict the team leader in public has a low PD culture.”

With Individualism-collectivism, we are interested in the extent to which individuals feel and are encouraged to be independent or interdependent. Some of the characteristics of those cultures that value individualism are “an ‘I’ consciousness prevails: competition rather than cooperation is encouraged; ...every individual has the right to his or her private property, thoughts and opinions. These culture stress individual initiative and achievement, and they value individual decision making.” “People’s personal goals take priority over their allegiance to groups like the family or the employer. The loyalty of individualists to a given group is very weak;” (Samovar, 1995, p. 89)

Although Hofstede’s research was conducted in the workplace at business companies, it nevertheless provides a model for exploring the cultural differences in the educational setting. It helps us to see the underlying cultural factors which have an impact on people’s behavior.

#### **4. Characteristics of Communication in Chinese culture.**

Obviously China and Australia are two quite different countries. China is, if we follow Hofstede’s analysis, a typical culture which emphasizes collectivism, conformity and respect for authority. Chinese, especially the younger generation, cannot avoid being influenced by these ideas and other age-old traditions at schools, at home and through social encounters. Eventually, the person starts to accept that:

---- age brings seniority;

- parents, teachers and bosses must all be obeyed;
- subordinates expect to be told what to do;
- individualism is taboo(there is a change in recent years with development of the economy);
- relationships are more important than tasks;

Chinese culture has specific rules and norms for everyday social interaction. The primary functions of communication in Chinese culture, Ge and Ting-Toomey (1998) argue, “are to maintain existing relationships among individuals, to reinforce role and status differences” (p. 6)

Lewis in his book “When Cultures Collide” summarizes Chinese values and the basic teaching of Confucius, thus: (p. 276)

- filial piety, modesty,
- the observance of the unequal relationships;
- one must behave in a virtuous manner towards others. Everybody’s “face” must be maintained.
- people are members of a group, not individuals and the family is the prototype of all social organizations;

Collectively these provide the context for Chinese educational ideas and pedagogical values.

## **5. Pedagogical/Educational Perspectives**

Not all cultures educate people in the same way. Each culture bases its educational endeavours on a set of different assumptions and beliefs. Teachers’ and students’ attitudes and beliefs about education will inevitably influence their interaction with one another.

Attitudes in Australian and Chinese culture towards learning conflict in several important ways including philosophical understanding, attitudes, interpretation of the nature of learning and teaching, role perceptions and the responsibilities of teachers and of students.

## **6. Attitude**

Attitudes may affect the way we perceive the people and things around us, and may prevent us from approving and accepting things as well as from rejecting things.

In order to understand attitudes towards learning we need to better understand the relationship between the teacher and the learner, and the role and the expectations from both sides.

Chinese perceptions and attitudes towards the learning process have something in common with traditional Western attitudes. Learning involves mastering a body of knowledge. This knowledge is presented by the teacher and the student is expected to understand and reproduce that knowledge later on.

However, learning in Chinese eyes is fundamentally considered as “bitter/suffering”. Students are expected to endure under arduous conditions and to make painstaking efforts. Learning has never been associated with ease and comfort. There are many anecdotes, fables and stories dating from ancient times to the present to remind learners of this.

In Western countries, enjoyment, curiosity, adventure, excitement, exploration and inquiry are emphasized and encouraged at least since Dewey in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As mentioned above, Chinese believe learning is a process in which learners can refine and temper themselves both mentally and physically by mastering certain knowledge. It is considered essential for the learners to follow closely the teacher's instruction for the mastery of a body of knowledge. Deductive reasoning therefore tends to be favoured over inductive.

This situation certainly strengthens the teacher's position as the only one who can guide and help in this process. The teachers have already mastered the knowledge and have been trained professionally to hand it on to the learners. Students who follow teachers' words receive encouragement.

Chinese attitudes to the teaching-learning process appear rarely to emphasize or encourage challenge, critical thinking, or even creativity, whereas encouragement of these aspects is generally believed to be one of the key aims of Western education. (Brick, 1991, p. 154)

## **7. Western Educational Ideas**

Both Chinese and Western educationalists/educators believe education and learning have an important role to play in passing on knowledge from one generation to the next. But the West also emphasizes another important role, that is, to provide people with skills that enable them to analyse, diagnose and question (Hills, 1982, p. 137).

One definition of learning is that "it is important to realize that learning need not be correct, deliberate, or overt". (Page and

Thomas, 1979, p. 203) Here are some basic parameters on how the west actually sees the process of learning:

- learners need to be actively involved with their own learning;
- learning is achieved through initiative and creativity;
- learning needs to be seen as relevant and significant;
- learning should be linked, where possible, to existing knowledge and understanding;
- learning should be reflected on;
- learning should be presented in logical order;
- learning should be sufficiently challenging  
(Communication Skills)

In putting this notion into practice, it is important that the education/learning process should involve teaching people to think analytically; and this may lead to questioning many things and developing a critical attitude to society.

This is obviously different from Chinese traditional ideas. Critical thinking does not receive as much attention. Additionally, authority in the educational environment (the teachers' authority), may under no circumstances be challenged.

### **8. A Teacher's Role and Teaching Style and T-S expectations**

Traditionally the teacher in China is typically viewed as a leader with absolute right and the person in control. Some common traditional Chinese beliefs are:

- Since the teacher has the knowledge students should listen quietly in class while the teacher lectures.
- Challenging a teacher's opinion or disagreeing with the teacher is a sign of disrespect.
- Memorizing a lot of information is more important than learning how to think critically and creatively in studying;
- textbook knowledge and learning and written work are more important than discussion, debating and oral work.

Teachers in Australia however have quite different set of assumptions about the above; some of which obviously conflict with those of Chinese students and their teachers.

Here is a comparison of two different styles of teaching. The characteristics presented in this diagram can be found in all educational systems and in all cultures. Some learning strategies, however, are given greater importance than others according to the context. It is the context that determines the preferred learning strategy.

Pattern A	Pattern B
Class teaching style and methodology	
(for both t & s) Discussion, role play, debating, survey, project, problem solving, simulation, improvisation; pair and group work; more collaborative learning is encouraged	(while t) lecturing, (s) listening attentively, (t) writing on the board and (s) copying from the textbooks, (s) memorizing, reciting and receiving,
Teachers' role	
As a team member, partner, activities organizer, facilitator, guide	As an authority, dominant master, supervisor, authoritarian, director, boss,

	superior
Students' role	
Active, discovering, contributor of knowledge and information, input valued; Are encouraged to express, to communicate, to argue	Passive role, receiver of knowledge, performer under teachers' directions; be obedient; ready to accept and to show proper respect; Not encouraged to challenge

Because of their individual economic and political milieu Australia and China have different understandings about the nature, form and practice of education, particularly the teaching and learning. This in turn, influences different learning strategies and the assumptions about the expectations between teachers and students in terms of their respective roles and responsibilities.

This is why many Chinese students do not enjoy the classroom freedom, and the invitation to spontaneously put forward their own initiatives or opinions. They prefer to follow a routine.

As these students are used to traditional Chinese expectations and the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, they “tend to feel uneasy in a more egalitarian communicative learning environment and find it difficult to suspend their beliefs to engage in light-hearted learning activities on the one hand and critical self-expression on the other”. (Hu, 2002, p. 100)

## 9. Conclusion

Australian international educational professionals have been active in China since 1985. During that year major changes to

Australia's overseas education policies opened Australian education to the world (Blight, 1999).

It has already been argued that Chinese educational ideas and teaching-learning practices which many Chinese students use are in conflict with several aspects of Australian teaching and learning practices.

As mentioned above, many Chinese students have already been socialized in their traditional culture. Conformity, collectivism, obedience, deference to authority and modesty are well accepted. Such students take time to follow the new rules appropriate to a different cultural place in which individualism, personal initiative, assertiveness and differences are emphasized and encouraged.

There is a need for both staff and students to further their understanding of each other's teaching-learning patterns

For staff, they need to appreciate what they take for granted and understand their own cultural assumptions as well as those of the Chinese students whom they teach. They need to be aware and to recognize the cultural characteristics which appear to predominate in this group of students.

Staff development needs to address the requirements of teaching in an international context and achieving success for the overall benefit of Australia's overseas student education program.

Chinese students need to realize that successful communication "depends not only on phonetic and grammatical correctness, but also on an understanding of the

context when, and where and how things should be said or whether they should be said at all.” (Ronowicz, 1995, p. 2-3)

No doubt the lack of awareness and sensitivity to differences in culture, particularly in teaching and learning practice and teacher-student’s expectations has an impact on almost every aspect of academic life for both universities and overseas students in general and Chinese students in particular.

We should develop strategies for enhancing the ability to communicate with students from other cultures. Some of these strategies require:

- self-examination,
- more conscientious effort and
- more commitment from both sides to develop their own approach to cross-cultural sensitivity.

Many members of staff have realized and accepted that the concept of cross-cultural communication is one which needs to be addressed particularly in the context of the increasing number of overseas students.

A more solid research project should be designed, developed and implemented:

- to provide a more theoretical, empirical and contextualized account of the reality of daily teaching-learning interaction between local staff and overseas students particularly Chinese students.
- to help overseas students learn more effectively and have a better understanding of another culture; and

----for guiding sustained advancement of the export of Australian education.

It is hoped that this paper may contribute to a better understanding of the teaching-learning process and facilitate more effective academic exchange programs between our two countries.

As international student exchange is a critical component of the modern university in all countries, it is further hoped that this paper may help promote and advance international education.

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