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Understanding Chinese Culture and Learning

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Abstract*: This paper examines Chinese learning traditions and research on Chinese learners' conceptions of learning. It begins with the analysis of Chinese culture and its influence on learning and teaching traditions. Some commonly held opinions and recent interpretations of Chinese learning and teaching are also presented. The influence of the basic tenets of Confucian conceptions has been pervasive over the centuries and can still be felt in contemporary Chinese education. It is a complex tradition which embraces various goals for learning, but it has been reduced to a simple stereotype by some Western observers, for instance, rote learning and examination culture; authoritarian teacher and obedient student; and transmissive teaching and passive learning. Recent years have seen some reinterpretations and new understandings of Chinese learning and teaching: "Confucian confusions", memorising and understanding; a family relationship between student and teacher; a mixture of authoritarianism and student-centredness; and "Chinese learner" paradox. This paper argues that Chinese learning and teaching are more subtle and complex than they appear to be in some representations of them. Relevant studies also provide evidence that conceptions of learning, teaching and knowing are deeply rooted in specific cultural antecedents and social structures.*

Key words: Chinese culture, Chinese learners, learning and teaching

Chinese Learning in Confucian Tradition

We are what we are because of culturally based learning (Segall et al., 1990).

In any social system, culture serves as a perceptual framework that guides the interpretation of interactions and the construction of meanings (Cortazzi, 1990). In educational institutions, this can include perceptions regarding rights, rules, roles and unspoken assumptions about how to learn and what is worth learning (Barker, 1997; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Hofstede, 1986). Hence, an investigation of the Chinese culture and learning traditions provides an appropriate backdrop to understanding Chinese learners' conceptions of learning.

Chinese education and learning traditions have been influenced by Chinese culture in general and Confucianism in particular for centuries. Within many schools of thought in Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism has been the most important influence. The great teacher-philosopher, Confucius' (551 BC) notion of education as changing people for the better remains at the heart of the purpose of education even in the early years of the third millennium (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Wong, 2001). The development and characteristics of the system of Chinese education have been greatly influenced by Confucianism and this

traditional culture (Wang & Mao, 1996). Cleverley (1991) argues that traditionally the Chinese have placed a high value on education. While modern schooling has been accompanied by far reaching attitudinal change, "the Chinese people have not lightly discarded the patterns of thinking and action from their rich historical past whose values have permeated the new Marxist precepts" (Cleverley, 1991, p. xii).

Some scholars believe that all education in mainland China is based on Confucian principles even though the teachers and students are often unaware of the source (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). These principles include the high value placed on education by society; beliefs that learning involves reflection and application; that hard work can compensate for lack of ability; that the teacher is a model both of knowledge and morality; and that learning is a moral duty and studying hard is a responsibility to the family (Watkins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Lee (1996) argues that contemporary explanations of the cultural contexts of Chinese learners highlight a number of Confucian conceptions which continue to have currency.

The significance of education

The significance of education features highly in the Confucian tradition. Education is perceived as important not only for personal improvement but also for societal development. *The Great Learning* constitutes one of the *Four Books*, and the opening sentence of Confucius's *Analects* (I.1) refers to the significance and joy of learning: "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?" (*Analects*, 1990) Education is not only important for personal development, according to Confucius, society requires learned people to be officials: "The officer, having discharged all his duties, should devote his leisure to learning. The student, having completed his learning, should apply himself to be officer" (*Analects*, XIX. 13), a similar notion to Plato's philosopher king, who asserts that the country should be ruled by wise and learned people (Lee, 1996, pp. 26-27). This conception has influenced the traditions of bureaucracy and officialdom, and it has carried implications for concepts of learning and leadership in contemporary China.

Educability for all and perfectibility for all

The high status of education in the Confucian tradition rests upon the presumption that everyone is educable. Confucius himself set an example by never refusing to teach whosoever came with a nominal ceremonial tutorial fee (*Analects*, VII. 7). One of his most famous sayings refers to education without class distinction (Zhu, 1992). Confucius was aware of social inequality, "By nature men are nearly alike, but through experience they grow wide apart" (*Analects*, XVII. 2). However, his practice was to use education to overcome socially generated differences. The concept that everyone is educable, everyone can become a sage, and everyone is perfectible forms the basic optimism and dynamism towards education in the Confucian tradition. And this explains why education is viewed to be wholly significant in such a tradition **(**Lee, 1996, pp. 28-30).

Learning, effort, will power, and human perfectibility

The concept of the attainability of human perfectibility is expressed in terms of sagehood in the Confucian tradition, and is closely related to education. To the Confucianist, education and learning are always associated with effort. Self-determination or will-power is the driving force of efforts. "If another man succeeds by one effort, he will use a thousand efforts. If another man succeeds by ten efforts, he will use a thousand. Let a man proceed in this way, and, though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong" (*The Mean*, XX. 20-21). It is clear that human perfectibility, learning, rationality, effort, and will power are discussed in the Confucian tradition in close relationship. They are

so closely interrelated that they are sometimes inseparable. This Confucian tradition illuminates how Chinese learners view education, and explains why effort is seen to be so important in the process of human perfectibility **(**Lee, 1996, p. 32).

Intrinsic motivation of learning: learning for self-realization

The notion of "learning for the sake of one's self" best signifies the individualistic orientation in education in Confucian tradition. Learning is considered to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end (Tu, 1985). It originates from Confucius' dictum in the *Analects* (XIV. 25), which was expanded to criticize the attitude of learning for the sake of pleasing others or showing off to others. This notion was seized upon by the Neo-Confucianists in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) who attacked bureaucratic scholarship and the vogue of learning for sitting civil examinations. Tu (1985, pp. 55-57) interprets "learning for the sake of the self" to mean self-cultivation. The purpose of learning is therefore to cultivate oneself as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous, and authentic being. The process of learning is therefore an inner-directed process. This ideal of learning is similar to Maslow's (1968) concept of the peak experience of learning, ultimately oriented towards self-actualization (Lee, 1996, p. 34).

The deep approach to learning: promoting reflection and enquiry

Confucian traditions of learning and teaching also emphasise deep as opposed to superficial knowledge. As education in the Confucian tradition is considered important for its intrinsic value, it is by nature inclined towards the deep approach rather than the surface approach to learning. There is strong stress on the significance of reflective thinking in the process of learning in the Confucian tradition. Apart from suggesting that seeking knowledge (learning) and thinking are two sides of the coin, Confucius' conception of learning was indeed a process of "studying extensively, enquiring carefully, pondering thoroughly, sifting clearly, and practicing earnestly" (*The Mean*, XX.19). The emphasis on reflective thinking in learning requires a spirit of enquiry and open-mindedness. It is worth mentioning that memorization is seen as a significant part of learning in the Confucian tradition, but should by no means be equated with rote learning. Memorization precedes understanding, and is for deeper understanding. It has never been regarded as an end in itself. Memorizing, understanding, reflecting and questioning are the basic components of learning. They are interrelated and integrated, and should be repeated for future and deeper learning (Lee, 1996, pp. 35-36).

Achievement motivation in learning

Confucian tradition not only places emphasis on the intrinsic significance of education but also on the dimension of external manifestation and utility of education. The fact that a person should seek perfection (pursue sagehood) and a government office has thereby become an ideal of the Confucian tradition, which is typified in the notion of "sage within and king without" (*Neisheng waiwang)* (Chang, 1976, p. 293). It is said in *The Great Learning* that a person[1] should "cultivate himself, then regulate the family, then govern the state, and finally lead the world into peace" (*The Great Learning*, IV). This can be interpreted in two ways: if a person wants to govern the state, he should first cultivate himself; on the other hand, if there is a person who has cultivated himself sufficiently well, he should seek to influence the

[1] A person here refers to a man or a woman. However, he is used afterwards, indicating a strong patriarchal culture in ancient China.

outside world. Hence for Confucius, a scholar should ultimately seek the opportunity to obtain a government office, in order to extend his good influence. Paradoxically, the aspiration for extrinsic rewards coexists with the ideal of external manifestation of a person's internal establishment in the Confucian tradition (Lee, 1996, pp. 37-38). The concepts of learning are part of a political order, which also suggests a utilitarian end of learning and a quest for officialdom and self-cultivation.

Some Commonly Held Opinions

The influence of the basic tenets of Confucian conceptions of learning has been pervasive over the centuries and can still be felt in contemporary Chinese education (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Wong, 2001). It is a complex tradition which embraces various goals for learning, but it has been reduced to a simple stereotype by some Western observers. The following accounts describe some commonly held opinions about learning and teaching in China.

Rote learning and examination culture

The Confucian tradition has influenced Chinese education for more than 2000 years. Some researchers argue that the emphasis was on rote-learning for centuries and the whole process of learning was geared to the memorization of ideas of antiquity, by way of the *Four Books* and *Five Classics*. This made up the content of education which had to be mastered for the Civil Service Examination. This national-run public examination for selecting government officers, called *Ke Ju*, started in China more than 1000 years ago. If candidates could recite the texts correctly during the Examination, they would obtain an official position in a government organisation. The examination tradition therefore promoted rote-learning as the preeminent method of teaching and learning (Wang & Mao, 1996).

Nine decades have passed since the Civil Service Examination was abolished in 1905, but the method of memorization is still prevalent among Chinese learners. It is still thought that people should memorize as much knowledge as possible and that one cannot produce or create until one has accumulated enough basic knowledge (Guo, 1996). Many commentators on contemporary Chinese education suggest that learning for exams still relies heavily on memorization. Such exams, they argue, promote surface learning—the ability merely to repeat information without a real understanding of meaning or of how the new information relates to previous knowledge (Kennedy, 2002). A strong focus on examinations has been recognized as a weakness of the basic education in China (Gao & Watkins, 2002). The exam culture acts as a barrier to creative expression, critical thinking and problem-solving in education and subsequently in work. Chinese students are frequently characterized as hard-working and diligent but lacking in creativity and originality: for example, "even though Chinese students do better than Western students in mathematics and sciences, they are not known for their creativity and original thinking" (Salili, 1996, p. 100).

The Civil Service Examination was viewed as an effective method of selecting "excellent" intellectuals. Every candidate had the opportunity to reach the top status in society and consequently become rich if they could succeed in the *Ke Ju*. Schooling was considered a way of educating government officials, the so called *Xue Er You Ze Shi*[2] (Gao & Watkins, 2002). This phenomenon is reflected in the following idioms: "although studying anonymously for

[2] This is a quotation of Zi Xia, one of the followers of Confucius. It means that when a scholar is able to cope beyond studies, he should take office in the government.

ten years, once you are successful, you will become well-known in the world" and "there are golden houses in books and there are beautiful girls in books" (see also Lee 1996).

From the thirteenth century onwards, success in Civil Service Examinations could lead to great wealth and high status (Lee, 1996, p. 37). Even today, in contemporary China, academic success still remains the route to a good job and high social status. Schooling in China is often considered an important and effective way of raising one's social and economic status. Success in public examinations, for instance, the National University Entrance Examination, means that one can expect a better career with security and high income after graduation from university. Parents are therefore very concerned about their children's performance in examinations. Most reward their children for higher marks in examinations or punish them for poor performance. Student records in public examinations are treated as the most important indicator of the quality of schools by the community (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Simon, 2000).

Learning is therefore considered as utilitarian, and knowledge as useful information or objective truth to be mastered by students. Students know their academic success, and eventual economic and social status, hinge upon achievement, which is linked to examinations. This linkage from authorized knowledge, to testing, to achievement, and eventually to privilege, is apparent from elementary school through university in China (Pratt *et al.*, 1999). Kvale (1996) points out the cyclical nature of this relationship and problematises the nature of the examination process in China.

Authoritarian teacher and obedient student

There are generally two conceptions of teaching and learning (Cortazzi, 1990). One perception views them as hierarchical, positioning the teacher as all knowing and his/her knowledge as being transmitted directly to learners. Another perception views the relationship between the teacher and students as more egalitarian. This latter perception views learners as creatively building up knowledge and concepts through activity, participation and independent thinking (McClure, 2003). The first perception has been often associated with Asian or high-context cultures, like Chinese culture, that stress "continuity, stability, and group identity" (Cortazzi, 1990, p. 58). The second is linked to Western or low-context cultures that emphasise individual development, innovation and an egalitarian ambiance. Cortazzi (1990) stresses that both perceptions "are present in most of cultures but receive very different emphasis, with the result that varied expectations come about, affecting presuppositions about learning and teaching". Cortazzi and Jin (1997) argue that Chinese academic culture tends to put an emphasis on the first perception.

This academic culture can be traced back to the Chinese traditions of respecting authority and rank. According to the Confucian code of social conduct, *Wu Lun* (five cardinal relationships), children are taught to have respect for age and rank—for parents, elders and ancestors (Bond, 1996). Teachers were traditionally listed among the five categories of those most respected by Chinese society: the God of Heaven, the God of the Earth, the emperor, parents and teachers (Zhou, 1988). Proper respect is to be given to teachers, whose wisdom and knowledge is taken for granted and not questioned (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Students are expected to "respect the teacher's authority without preconditions" (Wang & Mao, 1996, p. 148).

Besides their extensive knowledge and intelligence, teachers were and are regarded by their students as their "parents", people who would look after them with care and love. There is a saying in Chinese about the relationship between students and teacher: "If someone taught you as a teacher for one day, you should respect him as your father for the rest of your life" (Wan, 2001). In turn, students are expected to obey their teachers just as they do their parents. A traditional feudal parent-child relationship is therefore reflected in the teacher-student

relationship (Guo, 1996). Chinese learners have been brought up to respect wisdom, knowledge and expertise of parents and teachers. They have been socialized to respect those who provide the knowledge and to avoid challenging those in authority (Chan, 1999).

It is frequently contended that socio-cultural attitudes such as emphasis on authority and *face* promote conformity and reinforce passive, compliant roles in class (Kennedy, 2002). The concept of *face* (*mian zi*)—having status in front of others—is important. It is argued that it is Chinese tradition that people are afraid of making mistakes, for *losing face*. This traditional doctrine, which advised people to take a neutral stance, is still observable in China today. Pratt (1992, p. 303) notes that Chinese proverbs, such as "the bird that stands out will be shot first" and "the taller tree will catch the wind first", warn people not to take risks but "to play it safe". It is considered selfish and shameful to cause someone to "lose face" (Bond, 1996). Students are not encouraged to speak out, to question or to criticize, and are unwilling to commit themselves for fear of being wrong and thus losing face (Tsui, 1996). Being modest and self-effacing, not "blowing your own trumpet" is praiseworthy, while wasting other students' class time by expressing independent judgments is egotistical and selfish. Traditional teachers may regard students as impolite if they ask questions and interrupt the class. They may think that students want to challenge them and such challenges are disrespectful and may cause them to lose face (Chang & Holt, 1994; Hwang, 1987).

Moreover, teachers are expected to act as role models, and relate students' intellectual development to their moral and personal development (Gao & Watkins, 2002). A good teacher should not only perform well in teaching and learning, but also perform well in other aspects of life, the so-called *Wei Ren Shi Biao (*a set phrase in Chinese which means teaching as well as cultivating good persons). Chinese students expect teachers to have deep knowledge, be able to answer questions, and be good moral models (Cortazzi & Jin, 2001). This might be another powerful legacy of Chinese educators. Han Yu, one of the most widely recognized scholars and educators in the Tang Dynasty, summarised three different roles of a teacher in his book *Shi Shuo* (On Teachers):

> *What is a teacher? A teacher is the one who shows you the way of being human, teaches you knowledge and enlightens you when you are confused (Liu, 1973, p. 754).*

Transmissive teaching and passive learning

The learning traditions in China have been a process of transmission of information and skills from teacher to learner (Guo, 1996). Pratt (1992), a Canadian who has examined teaching and learning in China, explains that one of the concepts of Chinese teaching is the delivery of content. Pratt (1992, p. 313) states that, in China, the teacher's responsibility is to deliver content; the learner's responsibility is to absorb it—teachers give and learners receive. In other words, teachers take responsibility and the learner remains a passive recipient. Students, the learners, are considered as empty containers or sponges of authoritative knowledge (Gu & Meng, 2001; Guo, 1996). Ginsberg (1992, p. 6) commented that a teacher in China is an authority figure, "a respected elder transmitting to a subordinate junior". Teaching is largely didactic and text-bound, with little time allowed for discussion.

Some scholars speculate that the over-reliance on the teacher and the set textbook may retard the development of ideas in students. They believe that students' creativity is hindered from childhood, and although students can get high scores in their exams, they may not be very competent at solving practical problems. The saying "High scores but low abilities" is used to describe this common phenomenon in Chinese education. Many commentators have lamented that critical thinking and originality of students are woefully ignored (Gu & Meng, 2001;

Kennedy, 2002; Salili, 1996).

Such teaching and learning traditions lead teachers to be very formal and serious—the unquestionable authorities in the classroom (Su & Su, 1994; Zhu, 1999). They encourage students to accept and conform to the established principles and procedures. Chinese students also expect classes to be formal. They expect the teacher to control the class, and "cram knowledge". If the teacher does not, the students will judge them to know little, or not to have adequately prepared the lessons in advance. The teacher will be suspected of avoiding responsibility and will not be regarded as a good teacher. Those teachers who have tried to change teacher-centred instruction may have sometimes been labelled as "lazy teachers" because they let their students explore and solve problems before presenting the correct answer to them (Su & Su, 1994; Zhu, 2002).

Both Chinese students and teachers pay particular attention to establishing a systematic structure of knowledge and illustrating fully the relationship among key concepts and theories (Pratt et al., 1999). Many teachers prefer deductive rather than inductive reasoning as the major method of teaching. Teachers first present theories or concepts step by step, and then proceed in an orderly way with specific examples to explain the concepts. It is very important for teachers to be "correct" and "detailed" in teaching basic theories and concepts. Whether the lectures are lively and interesting is of secondary importance (Su & Su, 1994). It is widely believed that mastering foundational knowledge and basic skills is the prelude to ability development and creativity (Pratt et al., 1999).

Some researchers speculate that the emphasis on systematic knowledge transmission and interrelationship among theories may be related to the cognitive style of Chinese learners. Oxford and Anderson (1995) describe Chinese learners as adopting a *concrete-sequential* cognitive style as opposed to *an intuitive-random* one. Chinese learners are more *reflective* than *impulsive*, that is, they prefer a slow, accurate, systematic approach and are less comfortable with guessing or predicting. They feel the need for rapid and constant correction and have a low level of tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.

Some Recent Reinterpretations

The preceding account might run the risk of generalizing stereotypes which are too superficial. Some of the descriptions may hold certain truth. However, the reality is actually more complex than the portrait drawn above. This portrait is hereby introduced as a "general consensus" amongst commentators, which should be subsequently modified and reinterpreted. As suggested in the preceding section, Chinese learners are generally considered as passive receivers of established knowledge and seldom challenge the validity of knowledge and authority of teachers. It is widely believed that knowledge transmission and achieving orientation are emphasised in Chinese education. According to some Western scholars, large size classes with teacher-centred approach may lead to poor learning outcome and academic performance. However, the superior performance of Chinese students in the international tests of mathematics and science has prompted some researchers to investigate the paradox of Chinese learners and Chinese teachers (Biggs, 1996; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Watkins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Recent years have also seen some reinterpretations and new understandings of Chinese learning and teaching.

Confucian confusions

Recently, Kennedy (2002) indicated some existing "Confucian confusions". Although the "Confucian values" of collectivism and conformity are often stressed in the research literature on "the Chinese learner", it should be noted that Confucius also emphasised individuality in

learning, “learning for the sake of the self”. Education is only meaningful if it leads to the perfection of the self; “the purpose of learning is therefore to cultivate oneself as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous, and an authentic being”. Confucius also “promoted reflection and inquiry” in the learning process (see Lee, 1996, pp. 25-41). Cheng (2000, p. 441) concurs, pointing out that the Chinese term “knowledge” is made up of two characters: “One is *‘xue’* (to learn) and the other is ‘*wen*’ (to ask). This means that the action of enquiring and questioning is central to the quest for knowledge.” Biggs (1991) shares a similar view, and comments that the Confucian tradition, in fact, emphasises a deep approach to learning.

> *Confucius himself saw learning as deep: “seeing knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous [Analects II. 15]”, his methods were individual and Socratic, not expository; his aim was to shape social and familial values in order to conserve a particular political structure. These do not appear particularly conducive to surface learning. However, Confucius did inspire several themes and variations (Biggs, 1991, p. 30).*

Memorising and understanding

A particular aspect of the “paradox of the Chinese learner” is the relationship between memorising and understanding. Chinese students are perceived as passive rote learners, yet show high levels of understanding (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Contrary to the commonly held opinion that Confucianism emphasises rote-learning, memorization is considered as a significant part of learning in the Confucian tradition. But memorization should not be equated with rote learning (Lee, 1996). In other words, memorization has never been seen as an end in itself but as a prelude to deeper understanding. In situations such as preparing for an examination or a performance, “memorizing lines or already understood facts may be required to ensure success and is considered to be a deep approach” (Ho *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). Research shows that many of the teachers and better students do not see memorizing and understanding as separate but rather as interlocking processes, and high quality learning outcomes usually require both processes (Biggs, 1996; Kember, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1996; Marton *et al.*, 1997; Watkins, 1996). This theme was taken up by Dahlin and Watkins (2000). Their study on Chinese learners has sought to draw a clearer distinction between the rote learning process (mechanical learning without meaning) and repetition for “deep memorizing” of content. Whereas Western students saw understanding as usually a process of sudden insight, Chinese students typically thought of understanding as a long process that required considerable mental effort.

A family relationship between student and teacher

The relationship between student and teacher also seems to take on a somewhat different character in collectivist Chinese cultures. This is an area where Western observers often see only part of the picture. The teacher-student relationships may be not as cold or authoritarian as they at first appear (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). The typical method of teaching is not simply transmission of superior knowledge but utilizes considerable interaction in a mutually accepting social context (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). In class, a teacher’s manner might appear to be formal and distant, but out of class, they are expected to be more informal. The relationship between students and teachers is not limited to the classroom and the academic work of that arena. There is a feeling that teachers and students should think of each other as members of an extended family. Responsibility, authority, and morality (heart) are all part of the relationships (Pratt et al., 1999). Some studies show that Chinese teachers usually establish more casual and personal relationship with their students beyond the classroom. Although this personal relationship with teacher is not familiar to Western students, most feel “affection and respect for the dedicated and hardworking Chinese

instructors"(Thurston *et al.*, 1994, p.137).

A mixture of authoritarianism and student-centredness

The picture of passive, non-participative Chinese learners and a teacher-dominated, authoritarian classroom is common (Pierson, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 1994). However, as Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p.191) suggest, it may be that "students are not passive but reflective…Chinese students value thoughtful questions which they ask after sound reflection…less thoughtful questions may be laughed at by other students". After a few visits to China, Gardner (1989) realised that his first impressions of Chinese teaching as mimetic, highly directive and imitative were simplistic. Teaching is in fact accomplished "by holding the hand", not simply by directing. He explained different beliefs about the appropriate order of various learning-related activities. Westerners believe in exploring first, then in the development of skill; the Chinese believe in skill development first, which typically involves repetitive learning (as opposed to rote learning), after which there is something to be creative with. Gardner is not the only Westerner to make this point:

> *A common Western stereotype is that the Asian teacher is an authoritarian purveyor of information, one who expects students to listen and memorize correct answers and procedures rather than to construct knowledge themselves. This does not describe the dozens of elementary school teachers that we observed (Stigler & Stevenson, 1991).*

The teachers that Stigler and Stevenson (1991) observed, in China, Taiwan, and Japan, saw their task as posing provocative questions, allowing reflection time, and varying techniques to suit individual students: Confucius' "elicitation" mode is in full swing. Researchers use the term "constructivist" to describe the most common teaching approach they saw, an ideal espoused by progressive Western educators and in practice realised only by the expert few. This is not to say that Chinese teachers are non-authoritarian but there is an apparently curious mixture of authoritarianism and student-centredness in the Chinese classroom. Again, the reality is more complex than the stereotype.

It seems that Chinese teaching and learning are more subtle and complex than they appear to be in some (Western) representations of them. Relevant studies provide evidence that conceptions of teaching, learning, and knowing are deeply rooted in specific cultural antecedents and social structures (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Kember *et al.*, 2001; Pratt et al., 1999). Consequently, there arises the need to further investigate conceptions of learning from the experience of the actors in a specific cultural context. The next section reviews some research on conceptions of learning from the cross-cultural perspective.

Research on Chinese learners' conceptions of learning

Several studies over the past years have identified remarkably similar conceptions of learning which, perhaps unintentionally, have implied universality in how people experience it (Pillay & Boulton-Lewis, 2000). However, like most other human thought structures, many authors claim that conceptions of learning should be seen in terms of their social and cultural contexts (Marton & Booth, 1997). Conceptions and beliefs may influence an individual's perception and judgment about tasks in a specific learning context and help learners to determine what needs to be done to acquire certain types of knowledge.

Säljö (1979, p. 106) noted, " learning does not exist as a general phenomenon. To learn is to act within man-made institutions and to adapt to the particular definitions of learning that are valid in the educational environment in which one finds oneself." Furthermore, he states that

different environments will define learning according to “different socially and culturally established conventions with respect to what counts as learning” (p.104). These observations together with Marton and Booth’s (1997) acknowledgement of the complexity in understanding the variance in learners’ conceptions of learning suggests a need for further research (Pillay & Boulton-Lewis, 2000).

Some researchers argue that conceptions of learning are assumed to be context-dependent (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Marton & Booth, 1997). This implies that, while some aspects of learning conceptions may be consistent across contexts, others will vary with differences in contexts, such as differences in the stage of school, sector, discipline, evaluation system, and social and cultural background. Hence, it would be useful to investigate learning conceptions held by students from different cultural and educational contexts. While most such studies have been conducted in Western cultural contexts or in Hong Kong, it would be valuable to explore the learning conceptions of learners in Mainland China where the educational system and the social and cultural contexts are quite different from the West.

An important area of cross-cultural research regarding students’ conceptions of learning has centred on understanding the conceptions held by students from Confucian-heritage cultures (CHC) (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). There has been a growing body of literature on learning and teaching in CHC from the students’ perspective (Kember et al., 2001; Kember & Wong, 2000; Kwan & Ng, 1999; Pratt et al., 1999). Of particular interest has been the so-called “Chinese Learner” paradox (Watkins & Biggs, 2001), as discussed in the previous section. It is now well known that Chinese students, compared with their Western counterparts, have continually shown high achievement in mathematics and science in international studies of educational achievement (Biggs, 1996; Chen *et al.*, 1996). Questions have been raised as to how Chinese students, often perceived by Western educators as passive learners, could perform so well on these international achievement tests, despite the crowded and unfavourable learning environment. Biggs (1996) claims that socio-cultural factors and socioeconomic structures may explain the performance differences. Another speculation is that Chinese students may simply be more intelligent on these dimensions than Western students. Yet there are few Nobel Chinese winners in these fields although many Chinese do well outside China, which seems to be a perplexing phenomenon (see Cao, 2004).

Recent years have seen a growing number of studies on Chinese learners’ conceptions of learning. Marton, Dall’alba, and Tse (1996) investigated conceptions of learning held by 20 teacher-educators from Mainland China who travelled to Hong Kong to participate in a course for English language teachers. The results shed light on the paradox of the Chinese learner. Two principal results that contribute to the solution of this paradox were: Chinese are similar to Europeans in that there is variation in their ways of understanding the phenomena investigated in this study; and Chinese differ from Europeans in their ways of understanding these phenomena. Referring to Chinese students’ conceptions of learning, Marton, Dall’alba, and Tse (1996) argued that the “memorization-understanding” relations observed among Chinese learners address this paradox. Their conclusion was that, whereas memorization in Western countries is associated with rote learning and a lack of understanding, memorization in Asian countries is seen as an integral component of understanding. These researchers argued that Chinese learners do not see memorization as rote learning: rather, they would use understanding to help them memorize the materials. Due to the emphasis in traditional Chinese education on recitation, students would also memorize the materials to help themselves understand. In other words, memorization can be used to deepen and develop understanding. In this study, Marton, et al. (1996, p. 82) emphasised “exercising caution when making assumptions about students’ learning methods from other cultures”.

In another recent study, Fung, Carr, and Chan (2001) explored the conceptions of learning

held by a group of in-service primary school teachers studying for a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree at the Open University of Hong Kong. The data were categorised into the six conceptions of learning identified by Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993): learning as increasing one's knowledge; as memorizing and reproduction; as applying; as understanding; as seeing something in a different way; and as changing a person. The most significant finding was the absence of any reference to memorization in the subjects' initial responses to the question: "What do you actually mean by learning?" This finding was similar to that reported by Dahlin and Regmi (1997) whose research also involved Asian learners (Nepalese). This result relates to the different conceptions of the meaning of memorization held in Chinese societies compared to the West, and thus highlights the dangers of cross-cultural generalisations about students' conceptions of learning. In particular, the study confirmed other Hong Kong researchers' emphasis on the different meaning of memorization within Chinese culture, which helps in part to explain the "paradox" of the Chinese learner. Findings from other recent studies also tend to support the claim that Chinese students, in contrast to Western students, view memorization as an integral component of understanding (Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Marton et al., 1997; Pratt et al., 1999).

Conclusion

As shown by the review of relevant studies on conceptions of learning, different national or institutional cultures and different sample types may have some influence on conceptions of learning. Hong Kong shares its Confucian heritage culture with Mainland China, but the strong influence of British colonisation makes its social, historical, and school cultures relatively different from those in Mainland China. Findings from previous studies conducted in the West or Hong Kong may not necessarily apply to the social cultural context in Mainland China. Further research is needed to examine the conceptions of Mainland Chinese learners in the contemporary context and further our understanding about the extent of influence of culture and different learning environments on conceptions of learning.

This paper examines Chinese learning in Confucius condition and presents some commonly held ideas and recent reinterpretations about Chinese learning. It is argued that Chinese learning and teaching are more subtle and complex than they appear to be in some representations of them. Relevant studies also provide evidence that conceptions of learning and knowing are deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts and social structures. There is therefore a need to reappraise some common assumptions and caution against any overstatement or generalisation of Chinese learning.

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