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## **Chinese-background Students' Learning Approaches**

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### **Abstract**

Chinese students first started to venture into overseas education in the late nineteenth century. Since then, thousands have launched their journeys abroad in the pursuit of western knowledge. Statistics from IDP Education Australia Limited (IDP) say that in 2005 64% of international students in Australia were of Chinese nationalities or ethnicities, or from countries that share a common Confucian culture. Although numerous studies have examined Chinese background student approaches to learning or learning experience in western educational settings, very few comparative studies have shed light on the identification of differences in learning approaches between Chinese background students with different nationalities or ethnicities, i.e. from mainland China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The vast majority of research carried out on the learning approaches of students with Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). However, there is a tendency to treat them as a homogeneous group and to disregard the different ethnicities that are present among them. This paper discusses a research framework dealing with Chinese-background students' learning approaches in tertiary education discourse.

### **Introduction**

Chinese students' interest in overseas education started in the late nineteenth century (Stafford, 2004). From then on, thousands have embarked upon journeys abroad in the pursuit of Western knowledge. In 2005, IDP Education Australia Limited (IDP) statistics show that 64% of international students in Australia were of Chinese nationality or ethnicity, or from countries that share a common Confucian culture (Barron, 2005). What are their educational aims and approaches to teaching and learning? Are they primarily the same or is their diversity underestimated? This paper attempts to examine these issues.

### **Chinese learners: Are they the same?**

Although numerous studies have examined Chinese background student approaches to learning or learning experience in Western educational settings (Back, 2001; Liang, 2004; Stafford, 2004; Zhang & Watkins, 2001; Zhang, 2005), very few comparative studies have shed light on the identification of differences in learning approaches between Chinese background students with different nationalities or ethnicities, i.e.

from mainland China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The vast majority of research carried out on the learning approaches of students with Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) has regarded them as a homogeneous group and has not acknowledged the different ethnicities that are present among them. For example Snider (2005) identified as Chinese various international students from People's Republic of China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Barron (2005) also grouped Chinese background students with CHC students from China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as an integrated parameter to measure. In Barker's PhD thesis (1993), a comparative study was conducted about Australian and ethnic Chinese university students in Australia, also treating students from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore as a unit. The literature seems to indicate that there are only two comparative studies in this area. One was carried out by Duan (1997) focusing on what factors influenced international students from Hong Kong and Malaysia in selecting Australian universities, and it did not deal with approaches to learning. The other study conducted by Smith (2001), and using an empirical paradigm, analysed the differences in learning approaches between different Chinese subgroups of Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. This study was based on Entwistle and Ramsden's *Approaches to Studies* (1973).

What are the linguistic and sociological backgrounds of these students? Do they all speak Chinese or do they speak different languages due to their geographic diversity? The mother tongue for approximately 96% of Hong Kong people is Cantonese (Biggs, 1990b). Unlike students from Hong Kong and Singapore where most students speak two languages (English and Chinese), the Malaysian Chinese students typically speak at least three languages – Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and English. In contrast, it is quite a simple case in mainland China where Chinese is the only language of instruction and also the sole official language. As has been indicated, mainland Chinese, Malaysian-Chinese, Singaporean and Hong Kong students differ in their language experiences.

Back and Barker (2002) state that 'students from Confucian background cultures feature a wealth of subtle and pervasive thinking, derived from socialisation patterns...'. It is commonly agreed that these students have some commonalities in learning. In the counselling of Chinese students, it is also realised that while a core of 'Chineseness' seems to unite them, historical and socio-political differences, especially educational disparities, do exist between students from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and mainland China ( p. 64).' Consequently, these differences will be embodied by different values and belief systems, and they in turn are reflected in the ways of learning employed by these students. Back and Barker emphasised that 'even if students from Confucian-background cultures reveal impatience with some traditional concepts, certain key issues are not dismissed as easily ( p. 64).'

There is sufficient evidence from the literature on learning approaches to suggest that different approaches are a result of different social and educational experiences (Riding & Sadler-Smith, 1997; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Vermunt, 1996). Chinese background students from different educational and social environments can also be expected to show differences in their approaches to learning. It is useful to note Rizvi and Walsh's (1998) warning against fixed conceptualisation of cultural characteristics that may also apply within the Chinese background groups. Nevertheless, it is a fact that there has been little research comparing student learning approaches among different Chinese national groups. It was only the study by Smith (2001) which focused on the Chinese background students, drawing samples from a number of countries. However, his research also presented some limitations that need to be clarified by further research.

Firstly, mainland Chinese students, as a major component of Chinese background students, were not covered. Secondly, in terms of methodology, a lack of qualitative methods in this study led to weak interpretations of human behaviour. Lastly, Smith's research was based on the Approaches to Studying Inventory (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983c) and the Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987b) which has dominated the research area of learning approaches for many years. Another widely-accredited measure for student approaches to learning recently adopted by OECD countries has never been extended to Chinese background students.

Approaches to learning have received attention from researchers dealing with cross-culture studies. Approaches adopted by students reflect their educational purposes. 'Education systems aim to enable students not just to acquire knowledge but also to become capable, confident and enthusiastic learners.' (OECD, 2003, p. 8). According to the OECD, the purpose of education is to develop self-regulated learners. Based on a broad literature on the effects of self-regulated learning including experimental research by Willoughby and Wood (1994), research training by Roseshine and Meister (1994), and systematic observation of students (Artelt, 2000), self-regulated learners are more likely to achieve specific learning goals.

However, how is self-regulated learning defined? Although definitions may vary slightly, it is generally understood as the way in which students may be involved in:

- *setting appropriate learning goals which guide the learning process;*
- *using appropriate knowledge and skills to direct learning;*
- *consciously selecting learning strategies appropriate to the task at hand; and*
- *being motivated to learn.* (OECD, 2003 p. 10).

.It is important to examine some underlying factors of effective approaches to learning, which ultimately lead to self-regulated learning. The significance of self-regulated learning can then be identified at different levels; for instance at school, students who have positive approaches to learning tend to enjoy good learning outcomes. Beyond school, people who have developed the ability and motivation to learn using their own initiative are well-placed to become lifelong learners. But how have previous studies actually identified the varied components of learning approaches?

Studies of international students, including Chinese-background students, are based on the dichotomy of a surface approach and a deep approach to learning accepted by many researchers (Marton, 1988; Marton & Saljo, 1984; Claire. E. Weinstein, 1988). Marton (1988) describes learning approaches as the way in which knowledge is learned. In particular, he emphasises the relational nature of learning aspects between 'what is learned (the outcome or the result) and how it is learned (the act or the process)'. Marton takes into account the two levels of learning processing: a surface approach, and a deep approach. The former leads to a learning outcome that is essentially a literal reproduction of the original knowledge. The surface approach does not deal with information with any perception of the holistic structure, but instead deconstructs it into disconnected bits and pieces that are memorised by repetition. The latter, deep approach, produces an outcome that represents the 'communicative intent' of the author, including perception of the holistic organisation of material studied by which the components of the learning outcome are systematically nested rather than simply being strung together sequentially. Marton further suggests that students taking a surface approach fail to derive full meaning, including implications and connections

from information, because they fail to perceive the structure of information in the first place. One can state that Chinese-background students are orientated towards the surface approach as their educational discourses are heavily teacher-centred. However, one would expect some degree of variation among these students according to their own educational and political discourses.

Biggs (1988) extends Marton's perspectives using his Student Process Questionnaire. He presents an approach to learning as the interaction between learning strategies and learning styles. The former in his words are 'stable ways of approaching tasks that are characteristic of individuals ( p185)', while the latter are 'ways of handling particular tasks ( p185)'. He further stresses that learning approaches 'refer to the learning processes that emerge from students' perceptions of the academic task, as influenced by their personal characteristics ( p185)'. He then postulates three major approaches to learning: surface, deep, and achieving. The first two approaches are identical to Marton's conceptions on them. Students adopting a surface approach are instrumentally or pragmatically motivated; for example, they are at university only to obtain a degree with minimal effort. These students tend to reproduce what are taught to be essentials as accurately as possible. However, students with a deep approach hold an intrinsic interest in learning and are likely to adopt strategies to help satisfy their curiosity by searching for the meaning inherent in the task. An achieving approach to learning built on this prior relevant research posits that a student adopting an achieving approach to learning tends to manifest his excellence compared to other students, especially by obtaining as high grades as possible. However, this distinction was challenged by Kember and Gow (1990) and Kember, Wong and Leung (1999) in terms of a blurred difference between the deep approach and the achieving approach. Subsequently Biggs devised a shortened version of the Student Process Questionnaire based on two factors (surface and deep), (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). A current study on Chinese-background students conducted at the University of Tasmania incorporates some features of Biggs' approach.

In 2000, the OECD instigated a wide range of surveys on approaches to learning (the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]) among 22 OECD countries and four non-OECD countries (Brazil, Latvia, Liechtenstein and the Russian Federation). The surveys looked at the learning strategies that students adopt, at their motivation, at their confidence in their own learning abilities, and their learning preferences. PISA is the product of a concerted effort by experts from the OECD and the four other countries, jointly steered by their governments, in the field of international comparative assessment of educational outcomes. Its framework and assessment instruments are the product of a multi-year development process and were adopted by OECD member countries. PISA focuses on four aspects of approaches to learning, i.e. students' motivation, self-belief, use of various learning strategies, and their learning preferences that together make it more likely that a student will become a confident and self-regulated learner ( p.3). The PISA results confirm strong links between student approaches to learning and measurable student outcomes. For example, there are:

... strong links between students' tendency to control their own learning, by consciously monitoring progress towards personal goals, and their motivation and self-belief. This suggests that effective learning cannot simply be taught as a skill but also depends heavily on developing positive attitude. (OECD, 2003 p. 3)

The PISA results highlight the fact that students who have positive approaches to learning tend to enjoy more successful learning outcomes. As stated, some features of Biggs' view on approaches to learning are adopted by the current study on Chinese-background students at the University of Tasmania. However, the OECD model is the primary source of this study.

As indicated earlier, self-belief, motivation and learning strategies have been the subject of policy discussion and practical operation for many years now. However, as far as the PISA research is concerned, one needs to raise the following questions:

- To what extent are these findings related to Asian students (except South Korea which was the only Asian country in PISA)?
- What are some implications for dealing with Chinese background students who represent a majority of the international students in Australia?.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, some studies on Chinese background students have been made but the focus is on individual groups or regions, not on a comparative basis. For instance, Matthews (2001) dealt with a strong link between Confucian values and the learning behaviour of Chinese background students; Liang (2004), a Chinese PhD scholar, examined the academic adaptation of Chinese background students in Canada; in 2005, Barron conducted an evaluation of Chinese background students' learning styles and other learning issues and problems; in the same year Skyrme shed an important light on Chinese background students' use of strategies, and Zhang (2005) focused on Chinese students' experience of learning in Australia.

Despite a great deal of research related to Chinese background students, as yet there has been no comparative study among all of the major Chinese student subgroups, for example: from mainland China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Smith's study (2001) has shown that differences between the three national groups of Chinese learners can be identified, such that considerable care needs to be taken to ensure results from one group are not necessarily generalised to others. Based on the differences in learning approaches noted among the different Chinese subgroups, caution must therefore be taken against forming fixed conceptualisations of cultural characteristics and considerable care must be given to sample definition and selection in cross-cultural research. Only one study conducted in the area related to diversity between Chinese background students from different nations.

### **3. Where from here?**

One needs to test a conventional Australian view on Asian approaches to learning that portrays Asian students as adopting surface, rote learning strategies in their approaches to study (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; J. Biggs, 1987). What is more, the Jones et al (Jones, Chen, & Li, 2004) study found that the prior learning of Chinese students is of little use to them and they need to 'unlearn' it. The conventional Australian concept of Chinese students is derived from: Biggs' and Kember's investigations of student approaches to learning (Biggs, 1987; Biggs et al., 2001; Kember & Gow, 1990) and Ballard and Clanchy's (1991; 1997) investigation of the study approaches of international students in which Asian students (including Chinese students) are presumed to bring with them learning experiences that favour 'rote, reproductive, surface, teacher-centred and dependent approaches to learning' (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Devos, 2003; Gribble & Ziguras, 2003; Ninnes et al., 1999). This stereotype of

Asian international student approaches to study has been challenged on the grounds that it fails to recognise differences by country (Burns, 1991; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Ninnes et al., 1999) and on the grounds that it involves a misunderstanding of Asian student approaches to study (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).

As mentioned previously Chinese-background students have become a major source of Australian international students. However, there is a lack of understanding of their cultural backgrounds and educational discourses. It is argued that research on educational and cultural awareness of Chinese-background students is an important step in the discourse of internationalisation in Australian institutions. The current research project, using qualitative and quantitative methods conducted with approximately 200 Chinese-background students at the University of Tasmania attempts to examine the following questions or issues:

- What are the generic situations of different Chinese ethnic students' (mainland Chinese, Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Singaporean, Hong Kong Chinese) learning approaches in Australian tertiary education, with regards to motivation, self-related belief, learning strategies, and learning preferences? In other words, how do the discourses of motivation, self-related belief, learning strategies, and learning preferences construct and affect these different Chinese nationals?
- What are the differences and similarities in the learning approaches among these Chinese background students and within these countries and regions?
- What are the differences and similarities in the learning approaches of male and female students among and within these countries and regions?
- What suggestions can be made for these student subgroups in terms of approaches to learning?
- What recommendations on teaching approaches can be made for university staff who are teaching and will be teaching Chinese background students?
- How are national identities defined by these Chinese background students?
- What national identities of these Chinese students with different national backgrounds are interpreted by the Australian government?

The limited initial findings indicate the following aspects and raise further issues for consideration:

- Chinese-background students, regardless of the areas from which they come to Australia, consider 'achievement' is their main educational aim.
- Expectations and pressure from the students' families play an essential role in their studies in terms of choice of subjects and learning approaches.
- Learning and academic achievement are treated as two separate issues: Academic results are most important.
- Collaborative learning is valued in a pragmatic way, and it is treated as a tool for academic achievement.
- The concept of 'independent learning' is perceived and valued differently.
- Linguistic factors dictate the orientation towards certain learning approaches.

As this study is still an on-going project, it has not provided comprehensive findings at this stage. Only some features have been identified and some issues have started to emerge from the study. It is expected that solid findings will be presented at the next AARE conference.

## Conclusion

Statistics of the Chinese government show that in 2004 only 3% of overseas Chinese international students were sponsored by the nation, and 6% of them were sponsored by corporations; therefore 91% were full-fee paying students, which is totally different from previous generations who were mostly funded by the Chinese government. Apart from mainland China, many international students who study in Australia come from different parts of Asia and most of them share some common Chinese cultural backgrounds. However, they bring with them their distinctive Chinese features and backgrounds which needs to be acknowledged and recognised by those institutions who accept them into their educational discourse.

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