

# **The "Chinese Learner"**

*Elizabeth Li*

*Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

There are two main factors that have contributed to the emergence of a modern educational phenomenon known as the "Chinese Learner." The "Chinese learner" is described as, "...being obedient to authority, passive in class, lacking in critical thinking, and adopting inadequate learning strategies" (Clark & Gieve, 2006, p. 54). The concept of the "Chinese Learner" cannot be understood without understanding the historical and cultural roots that precede its emergence. This paper will address the cultural and sociopolitical influences that may underlie the descriptions commonly associated with Chinese students. Although culture is deeply embedded and influences individuals in their educational contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge that the "Chinese Learner" only exists when contrasted and applied to Westernized standards and ideals of education and learning. The "Chinese Learner" presents a paradox since many Chinese students rise above the stereotype of being superficial learners and perform quite well in their studies. This prompts one to use a more critical lens when evaluating whether or not being a "Chinese Learner" is at an advantage or disadvantage in the classroom. The paradox of the "Chinese Learner" leads to the realization that this construct is only possible in Western educational settings. Without the contrast between the two, there would be no such concept. Therefore, in order to understand the phenomenon of the "Chinese Learner," it is important to explore the cultural traditions, sociopolitical changes, and Western educational practices that are intertwined that allow for people to establish such a concept within a group of specific learners in the first place.

## **Introduction**

Culture is deeply rooted in individuals and has implications in the classroom that may not be apparent on the surface. There are two main factors that have contributed to a particular profile that is commonly associated with Chinese students. The first is Confucian-inspired moral philosophy, which has deeply influenced Chinese education for generations (Hawkins, 2000). Secondly, China underwent significant sociopolitical changes in the 20th century. The reorganization of society under the Communist Party of China (CPC) led to a shift in societal ideology in China. Furthermore, as Chinese students appeared overseas, it became apparent that these Chinese students had a different style of learning from their Western counterparts (Chan, 1999).

This paper will delve into these crucial aspects of Chinese history and culture that have paved the way for the emergence of a modern educational concept called the "Chinese learner." The "Chinese learner" is described as, "...being obedient to authority, passive in class, lacking in critical thinking, and adopting inadequate learning strategies" (Clark & Gieve, 2006, p. 54). The phenomenon, although used in colloquial dialogue and explored in scholarly literature, can only exist in a realm where Westernized standards of learning are applied, therefore, it would not be entirely accurate to judge a Chinese student who exhibits the above traits without this critical consideration. The "Chinese learner" is a very recent concept to education. However, the long-lasting traditions of the Chinese people and sociopolitical changes that preceded the 21st century have created the foundation for the emergence of the "Chinese learner" and is only possible when juxtaposed with Westernized educational philosophies and contexts.

## **Chinese Thought**

Chinese Thought is used to describe the forces that have shaped and reshaped Chinese civilization over the centuries. Chinese Thought is a culmination of the philosophies that shape Chinese tradition and values (Hucker, 1975). Chinese history is rich in tradition and spans across ancient timelines, but the important piece to highlight is the origins of Chinese Thought. The three main strains in Chinese Thought are Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism (Hawkins, 1974). However, Confucianism is the most dominant and influential Chinese Thought on learning (Chan, 1999).

## **Confucianism - Confucius, Mencius, and Hsun-tzu**

Over the centuries, Confucianism has remained a prominent influence in shaping the values of the Chinese people. The philosophical teachings of Confucianism provided concrete and practical guidelines that was complimentary to the general Chinese character. It provided a set of ethical and political doctrines without religious substance (Hucker, 1975). These ethical and political teachings served as a code of conduct, thus outlining how to be proper and good, thereby defining what it meant to have good Chinese character, (Hucker, 1975). Confucianism focuses on how to foster proper relationships as well as how to maintain harmony collectively and individually (Chan, 1999). The teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and Hsun-tzu form the philosophy of Confucianism (Hucker, 1975). The key principles of Confucianism are based on humaneness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, integrity, and filial piety (Chou,

2013). Everyone was to strive towards these virtues and to uphold proper relationships, especially with their elders. In addition, there were seven propositions that Confucians believed in. These involved the belief that the universe and mankind were governed by a heaven and that man was to act in accordance with cosmic harmony, that ethical and virtuous life were imperative to act in proper conduct, and that all individuals and society had the potential to be wise, harmonious, and fulfilling (Hucker, 1975).

### **Confucius**

Confucius was born in 511 B.C.E. and died in 479 B.C.E. during the Zhou Dynasty (1050-256 B.C.E.). He had a humble upbringing in a lineage of low-ranking aristocrats, but grew up to become China's first professional teacher (Hucker, 1975). He taught people about life and government and has become a renowned Chinese philosopher who provided insights and teachings on many aspects of human life. His teachings became doctrine-like and since they were passed on from generation to generation, they have become deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Confucius' ideas are often grouped in discussions about Buddhism and Taoism but his teachings were not a religion. Rather, they were rules for daily life based on lessons of Chinese history (Chan, 1999), and more importantly, these rule set the standard that people should strive towards (Hucker, 1975).

Confucius created strong moral thought that is referred to as "the moral way." He also emphasized the importance of ritualistic etiquette or propriety. Confucius commonly spoke about propriety in terms of acting in accordance with "Tao," which referred to the cosmos. He emphasized the role of government in achieving happiness and welfare of the people and that those in power should lead by example rather than enforce laws. He believed that people would emulate a truly benevolent ruler without question, but if a ruler did not display the proper moral conduct, then people would not follow no matter what the laws were. Furthermore, Confucius greatly emphasized that one ought to know their proper place and to behave properly. Man was to work tirelessly for what was right, even if it meant sacrificing his life (Hucker, 1975).

### **Mencius**

Confucius' philosophy about propriety and benevolence were carried on through the centuries in large part due to Mencius. Mencius lived from 372 to 289 B.C.E. and like Confucius, was from an aristocratic family. He not only believed in Confucius' teachings on a benevolent government, but also enhanced the argument by saying that it was a matter of enlightened self-interest for a ruler to treat his people well. He believed that public morale should be the primary concern of every ruler and that all men were innately good and had the potential for goodness (Hucker, 1975).

### **Hsun-tzu**

Hsun-tzu was the last great Confucian thinker of ancient China and lived from 300 to 235 B.C.E., which was just before the Imperial Era. Eventually, Hsun-tzu's thought became pushed out by Mencius' thought because it seemed to align more with Chinese character (Hucker, 1975). Unlike Mencius, he did not believe that there was an innate goodness in man. On the contrary, Hsun-tzu believed that man's nature was dominated

by uncivilized impulses and that goodness must be learned. One must practice obedience and learn from a good teacher on how to become good. Hsun-tzu greatly emphasized the role of the teacher in society as being a moral role model and to guide the development of virtues (Hucker, 1975).

Leading up to Imperialism in China, the existence of a formal educational institution is absent. However, it is starting with Confucianism and these philosophers that certain values begin to be instilled in the Chinese people that will be passed on for generations. For example, the principle of filial piety indicates that there must be deference to one's elders, which could explain why Chinese students often follow their teachers unquestioningly (Chou, 2013). Under Confucian teaching, the role of a teacher is viewed as a highly respected elder, therefore, being disobedient or to question one's teacher would be considered a sign of disrespect (Chou, 2013).

### **From Imperialism to Communism**

For a long time, the Chinese saw themselves as the only important people on earth and had little contact with others outside neighbouring countries. Without significant influence from surrounding nations, the majority of the Chinese people only knew what was familiar and viewed their ways of life as superior (Creel, 1958). When the British defeated the Chinese in a war in 1842, it weakened this superiority perspective that dominated the Chinese nation. Consequently, this urged the Chinese to reluctantly explore Western principles and techniques as part of their social reformation. Some would describe the absence of a firm sociopolitical organization as the weaknesses of the Chinese empire during the British defeat (Creel, 1958). As a result of these weaknesses, it was inevitable that China would undergo change that deviated from their traditional ways of life, which meant adopting some Westernized practices and incorporating these in areas such as political structures in government and education systems (Creel, 1958). =The imperial based system of government began to lose traction and eventually came to an end in 1911 AD. In the hundred years that elapsed between the mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century, China endured more change than in the previous two thousand years (Creel, 1953).

### **Chinese Turmoil**

The first official leader after the fall of imperialism was Sun Yat-sen, who was the leader of the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalistic Party. Under the leadership of Sun, Chinese education began to adopt Western pedagogy and practices. In particular, the KMT pushed for nationalistic and military aspects in the curriculum and used the German education system as a model (Hawkins, 1974). Beginning in 1917, Chinese books, articles and essentially anything in writing was changed from literary form to a form of speech. Consequently, textbooks in elementary and secondary schools became available in colloquial language. Although students were able to understand their textbook material better, this also meant that they had more difficulties with understanding traditional Chinese text, nor were they inclined to put in the effort to try to understand them because it was already in a form they could understand (Creel, 1958). Furthermore, a downfall in the education system at this time was that education was still concentrated in urban areas and neglected the highly populated rural areas of China (Hawkins, 1974).

During the 1930's and 1940's, it appeared that obtaining an education in China was to further one's own career rather than to help develop economic or social stability, which was evident in the lack of societal organization (Hawkins, 1974). However, this would all begin to change with the succession of the communist party and their leader Mao Zedong. Chinese urban societies in particular were in constant turmoil for decades after the fall of imperialistic rule. After World War II, there was finally an opportunity for a social revolution. A profound result of the social revolution in China was the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party, which is known as the Communist Party of China (CPC). The CPC aspired to lead the country in all aspects of life, including education. The distress and lack of structure in Chinese society caused many people to search for new leadership and direction. This created an ideal platform for the communists to gain support of the Chinese people. The communists shared an ideology that expressed the values of sociopolitical goals that resonated with the Chinese and gave them hope during a time when societies were not thriving. Mao Zedong, who had already been actively working in rural areas of China to promote communist ideals and organization, became the person who people turned to for change (Cohen, 1964). It is interesting to note that during Sun Yat-Sun's term of power, there wasn't great focus on education in rural areas (Hawkins, 1974), which is the opposite of what Mao Zedong focused on before he rose to power.

### **Mao Zedong Thought**

The communist beliefs and values adopted by the Chinese government originated from Marxism, which was further enhanced by Marxist advocate Mao Zedong. This led to the development of Mao Zedong Thought (Jianwu & Wenge, 2001) or also known as Maoism. Mao Zedong Thought referred to Mao's theories on socialist construction that combined Marxism with Chinese revolutionary practice. He wanted China to find its own way for revolution such that parts of Chinese traditions and culture could be maintained. Mao was determined to foster socialism in accordance with Chinese characteristics (Weiguang, 2014). After becoming the chairman of the CPC in 1935, he continued to make significant changes and by 1949, Mao was in the position of leading a nation of over 600 million people (Hawkins, 1974). What has become known as Mao Zedong Thought was once simply Mao's ideas of how to facilitate social, political, and cultural change. Ultimately, what entailed were two cultural revolutions (Weiguang, 2014).

### **Mao Zedong's Socialistic China**

Mao's influence and advocacy for social reformation began to develop long before his ascension to being the chairman of the CPC (Hawkins, 1974). With the momentum of Mao Zedong Thought, Mao led the reformation towards a socialist society in China in the 20th century. The obstacles that faced Mao during the 1950's were great. China's economy was under immense inflation, the political structure was dysfunctional, and the educational system had deteriorated (Hawkins, 1974). Mao was determined to successfully transform Chinese society and to infuse it with a socialist framework combined with Chinese characteristics. Under his leadership, both economic and political aspects of society began to be restored. He formed a socialist political system

that was distinct from the Soviet systems, and was promoted as a system that best suited the needs of the Chinese people (Weiguang, 2014).

Under Mao's leadership, many components of society, such as industrialization, agriculture, science and technology, and education began to flourish. Many industries became active and the productivity of China's economy began to increase. In the late 1950's, Mao sought to bring education to both rural and urban areas. He was dedicated to improving education so that it could allow everyone to receive an education that would help them develop morally, ideologically, physically, and ultimately become a worker who had cultural and socialist values. By the end of 1965, there were clear educational establishments across all levels of educational institutions (Weiguang, 2014).

### **Mao and Education**

Mao was a teacher before he took on the role of a politician. It was evident in his modes of thought that education had much significance (Hawkins, 1974). He once said, "Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually, and become physically and well-educated working with socialist consciousness" (as cited in Hawkins, 1974, p. 51). Mao helped to bring equity to the lower class citizens of China and provided opportunities for these people economically and in education. Although Mao had great intentions for building a socialist society, he was also invested in executing control over the people. With regard to schools and education, students were subjected to constant propaganda of the superiority of the Communist party. In addition, there was explicit language of the purpose of education in that it was to prepare students to be potential members of the political party. The role of education in society, according to Mao, was to facilitate the eventual integration of political consciousness and dedication to socialism (Hawkins, 1974).

### **Overseas Education**

With the development of a more socialistic education system in China under Mao Zedong, education continued to have an utmost importance in China but more importantly, in the latter half of the 19th century, it became increasingly common for Chinese students to be studying in Western educational institutions (Chan, 1999). This was the ripple effect of Christian missionaries coming from the west and introducing a novel form of education to the Chinese. Consequently, the Chinese began to view this Westernized education as a better form of education, thus resulting in a trend of overseas education. This was rooted in the belief that better education would equate to a better life, hence parents had the high expectation to ensure quality education for their children. Although Chinese parents wanted a better education, namely a Westernized education, they also wanted to maintain their Chinese cultural identity. Ultimately, the goal was to foster cultural values whilst improving skills (Chan, 1999). When asking Chinese-American parents about their beliefs, values, and attitudes, they responded similarly to their Chinese counterparts in Chinese societies, and the same could be said about the Chinese-American students. This reinforcing the notion that Chinese cultural values have been passed on from parents to children and continue to do so today (Chan & Rao, 2010). These cultural values influence Chinese students in contemporary

education, and henceforth, the emergence of the "Chinese learner" because these contrasting styles of learning were being applied in a new educational contexts.

### **The "Chinese Learner"**

Recall that the "Chinese learner" is described as a passive student who relies on surface level, rote learning (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Watkins and Biggs (1996) coined the term to refer to Chinese students in Confucian-heritage culture (CHC). Classrooms that are infused with CHC typically emphasize academic achievement, the belief that all children can do well through exertion of effort, and the significance of education for personal improvement and moral self-cultivation (Chan & Rao, 2010). Although these values can be associated with non-CHC classrooms, Chinese students are commonly stereotyped as being high academic achievers because of these characteristics. The Confucian influence may underlie such assumptions and stereotypes of Chinese students. Confucianism built many traditions in Chinese culture, but it was Confucius specifically that had the greatest influence on Chinese learning (Chan, 1999). Confucius' philosophy is closely linked to traditional teaching methods and has direct influence on the behaviour of Chinese students. Confucius preached filial piety and emphasized the importance of discipline and proper behaviour (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Confucius taught that propriety or proper human conduct was essential and as a student, being obedient was the proper conduct to uphold. In addition, the teacher is held in great respect so to ask questions about what the teacher is saying or doing could be regarded as disrespectful (Chan, 1999). These long lasting values have remained for generations and could account for many descriptions of the "Chinese learner." Learning virtues, such as the ones taught by Confucius, rather than context has long been a traditional Chinese value (Biggs, 2010).

### **Paradox of the Chinese learner**

As more Chinese people were appearing overseas, there was an interest in how these foreigners were able to achieve high levels of success in school (Chan, 1999). The "paradox of the Chinese learner" represents the conflicting phenomenon of how Chinese students can be both rote learners and high achievers (Watkin & Biggs, 1996). It is evident that many of these learners display methods of rote learning, which conflicts with many teaching pedagogies of the 21st century (Stankov, 2010). It is interesting that even with the label as rote learners, Chinese learners often excel in their studies when compared to their Western peers (Cooper, 2011). The study performed by Cooper (2011) provides evidence that the use of memorization through repetition can actually lead to deeper understanding and high levels of academic achievement. This argument is reiterated by the work performed by Stankov (2010). Furthermore, studies have shown that Chinese learners use memorization to increase understanding, and in turn, understanding the material helps students to memorize. In this case, memorization can be viewed as a meaningful process that is connected to understanding (Marton et al., 1996).

To support the argument that the concept of the "Chinese learner" is culturally constructed, Biggs and Watkins (1996) explain that teaching and learning are culturally embedded and using Western theories to explain Chinese students' performance can lead to misconceptions. It is also important to highlight the emphasis on examinations

in Chinese culture. There is a long tradition of using public examinations in the selection of candidates for social and political advancements, hence examinations continue to play an important role in schooling (Chan, 2010). Chinese teachers tend to focus on teaching with the purpose of preparing for examinations and for moral guidance. Public examinations remain to occupy a significant part of learning and teaching in CHC classrooms, however, the "paradox of the Chinese learner" reveals that these students are learning in a way that can extend beyond rote learning to prepare for examinations (Law et al., 2010).

### **Critical Considerations**

Although the characterization of a Chinese student is often associated with the descriptions of the "Chinese learner," it is imperative to acknowledge the application of this concept. This conceptualization is only possible when Westernized contexts are applied to a Chinese learner or if a Chinese learner is learning in a Western classroom. The existence of the "Chinese learner" is only possible because Chinese students began to appear in schools outside Chinese educational settings, otherwise the differences in learning profiles would not be apparent. These students are learning in contexts that differ from the original settings that their learning styles were constructed in, thus creating an evident contrast (Clark & Gieve, 2006).

### **Memorization and Rote Learning**

The perception of many Western teachers remains that Chinese students are rote learners. This classifies them in a shallower level of learning that is considered less favourable by Westernized schooling (Chan & Rao, 2009). It is within Westernized pedagogy that rote learning, being passive, and blatantly accepting of what the teacher says is characterized as poor learning. The inadequacy of a Chinese learners' ability to use deeper learning strategies is based on a comparison to Westernized education. Educational research tends to adopt research models that are based on Westernized notions of learning and achievement and apply them to other cultures (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Clark and Gieve (2006) reiterate that the characteristics associated with the "Chinese learner" are contrasted with a Western image of what good learning is. It would be inaccurate or even unfair to label Chinese students as superficial learners solely based on the fact that many of these learners use memorization while learning. Lee (1996) argues that rote learning is merely part of the process rather than the end. Studies conducted by Nield (2004) also indicate that memorization is used as an attempt to understand material better rather than committing everything to memory. Watkins (2000) notes that it is common for Western educators to assume that a Chinese learner who is attempting to memorize material is engaging in rote learning. His research reveals that both the teachers and students in Chinese contexts view memorization and learning as interlocking processes that complement each other to produce high quality learning (Watkins, 2000).

### **Ability vs. Effort**

Dichotomies such as ability vs. effort are commonly applied to other cultures even though they are derived from Westernized research and contexts (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Chinese students are more likely to attribute achievement to effort, unlike their Western



counterparts who see achievement as a product of ability and effort. To many Chinese students, teachers, and parents, knowledge isn't fixed and can be improved by hard work (Watkin & Biggs, 1996). The importance of hard work leads back to Confucius and how he viewed academic succession as a result of the students' effort (Chan & Rao, 2010).

### **The "Chinese Teacher"**

Similarly to how Chinese students have particular cultural values that have been instilled in them by their parents, Chinese teachers have also been exposed to these values that have been passed on for generations, yet the concept of a "Chinese teacher" hasn't been examined as extensively as the "Chinese Learner. As much as the concept of how Chinese students learn is rooted in history and culture, their teachers have been subject to these factors as well. To say that a "Chinese learner" is one that engages in rote learning or is a passive student would imply that their Chinese teachers enable such learning and behaviour. As Nield (2004) describes, the role of the teacher is held at a very high regard. Chinese learners are raised to view the role of a teacher as one that is highly respected. The teacher is there to teach and set rules and the student is expected to follow these rules. As a result, as much as students are expected to conduct themselves in a particular manner, the teacher is also expecting to be treated in ways that align with the virtues of filial piety and propriety.

In modern CHC classrooms, the role of the teacher is still held with utmost respect. However, as Law et al. (2010) describe, rather than having a teacher dominate the instruction, Chinese students from varying grade levels have expressed the desire for the teacher to provide a more collaborative or guiding approach instead of being an authoritative knowledge provider. Some teachers have also expressed the desire for a more collaborative relationship with their colleagues and their students. These changes appear to be more in sync with 21st century educational goals than one would expect from Chinese teachers and students (Law et al., 2010). However, there is literature that contrasts this dichotomy of teacher-centered vs. student-centered. Chinese teachers are considered to be more content-oriented but this is once again compared to Western teachers. In CHC context, this issue doesn't necessarily exist for Chinese teachers because the idea is that teaching and learning occurs simultaneously (Marton and EDB Chinese Language Research Team, 2010).

### **Changing contexts**

There have been many developments and shifts in educational pedagogies in the 21st century (Rao & Chan, 2010). The stereotypical image of the "Chinese learner" is focused on rote learning and extreme emphasis on examinations. However, as Law et al. (2010) argue, when given new opportunities, the "Chinese learner" can value new ways of learning and understanding. Changes to education are not exclusive to the west. Not only are the roles of teacher and student changing, the goals of education are constantly changing, thus requiring Chinese learners to learn to adapt to such changes. In the ever changing socioeconomic, technological, and educational contexts, the "Chinese learner" appears to be a slowly changing concept as well. There is evidence to demonstrate that

these students are able to change their ways of learning when exposed to new learning contexts (Law et al., 2010).

Pedagogical approaches that are developed in the west, such as inquiry-based learning, are becoming increasingly used in CHC classrooms. In addition, educational reforms are urging the need to develop problem-solving skills, teamwork, and learning how to learn (Chan, 2008). Rather than simply adding or rejecting Western approaches, one should consider the cultural and contextual factors when designing instruction for teaching and learning. By considering these changes in education and the fusion of Westernized approaches with Chinese learners, the possibility of the "21st century Chinese learner" comes into the picture. This modern version of "Chinese learners" are those that have grown up in CHC classrooms or have been raised by parents with CHC education. On the other hand, there is the other possibility that as these adaptive Chinese learners change with the transforming contexts, the contrast between "Chinese learners" and their Western counterparts will be less apparent and therefore, the concept of "Chinese learners" will be less relevant.

## **Conclusion**

The construction of the "Chinese learner" is young concept that appeared in the late 1980's. An increasing number of Chinese people in Western educational settings allowed for people to establish this concept within a group of specific learners. Although this concept is young, the foundation of its existence is ancient. Many principles in education are derived from Confucianism and are so deeply ingrained that teachers and students are often unaware of their source (Hawkins, 2000). To be constituted as a "Chinese Learner" in the context of Westernized education is comparative to equating one to be a superficial learner. Despite this description, Chinese students have been able to counteract the negative connotations of being rote learners through their high academic achievements. This paradox leads to the realization that the concept of the "Chinese learner" is only possible in Western educational settings. Without the contrast between the two, there would be no such concept. The "paradox of the Chinese learner" urges one to consider the Westernized biases in the conceptualization of the "Chinese learner" and to acknowledge the importance of sociocultural and contextual perspectives for interpreting learning and teaching in the Chinese context (Chan, 2010). The new wave of "21st century Chinese learners" that are adopting more Western methods on teaching and learning makes one question where the concept of the "Chinese learner" will stand in the near future. The existence of the "Chinese learner" is infused with many Western biases. However, these biases wouldn't apply if it weren't for Chinese traditions and values that have been passed on for generations. In addition, the sociopolitical changes that China faced in the 20th century under Communist rule paved the way for Chinese tradition and Western pedagogy to encounter each other head on. By the late 20th century, the "Chinese learner" had become established and has continued to be a topic of interest in the 21st century. All in all, since the "Chinese learner" is the product of ancient Chinese traditions, sociopolitical changes, and Western educational influences, and not merely an archetype of stereotypical Chinese students, in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of this construct, these factors need to be explored.

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