

# *The Critical Reflections on Chinese Students' Stereotypes*

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the critical thinking of previous studies from various perspectives on the stereotypes of Chinese students. It focuses on three aspects: What are the earlier stereotypes of Chinese students from numerous international scholars? What do they regard as the reasons for these stereotypes, and what are their respective attitudes? What are the new in-depth views of scholars on these stereotypes, and what initiatives have been proposed to improve the stereotypes of Chinese students? These questions are answered in the following main body section. Through the analysis and summary of scholars' findings, it is found that stereotypes of Chinese students can be mainly related to learning styles and traditional Chinese cultural characteristics. The cause of stereotypes primarily comes from the influence of cultural differences between China and the West and the lack of understanding of Chinese education. The scholars' critical views on Chinese students' stereotypes are mainly about the internal and external environmental influences on Chinese students and the consequences of stereotypes. Therefore, this paper contributes to future research on improving Chinese students' stereotypes in the context of international education.

**Keywords:** Chinese students, stereotypes, Confucianism, critical reviewing

## 1. Introduction

Chinese students have received a great deal of attention in international education due to their large numbers, complex internal composition, and distinctive characteristics. As a result, a great deal of research has been conducted on the stereotypes of Chinese students. Many previous studies have established stereotypes of Chinese students, including passivity, silence, and lack of critical thinking. However, in the context of increasing global educational exchange and cooperation, Chinese students have been getting in touch with more opportunities to communicate with foreign scholars. In the meantime, more and more researchers are taking a critical view of previous stereotypes of Chinese students as they learn more about Chinese students, Chinese culture, and educational philosophy. This article will analyze and summarize the critical perspectives on the stereotypical intentions of Chinese students presented by some scholars from different perspectives.

## 2. The Previous Stereotypes of Chinese Students

In several previous studies, the stereotypes of Chinese students are given similarly, which can be divided into two main aspects: students' learning styles and characteristics from the traditional culture [1-5]. In the following sessions, the author will review these two aspects respectively.

## 2.1. Learning Style

Numerous scholars have criticized Chinese students' learning methods, learning habits, and learning effects. Many scholars have summarized and elaborated on this content, including Chinese students' learning methods, attitudes, and learning outcomes quality [1-3].

In Give and Clark's article, many participating lecturers in the U.K. pointed out that Chinese students lack autonomy and critical thinking ability [1]. These students tend to acquire inherent knowledge and rely heavily on tutors. Besides, they are passive and silent in teacher-centered classes, manifested in not actively participating in activities and raising questions. Suppose the dependent and passive learning method is used consistently. In that case, Chinese students may lose opportunities to communicate and learn from peers, and tutors, which is not conducive to developing their communication ability, higher academic level, and creativity. Mathias, Bruce, and Newton note that Chinese students are often thought to be inclined to learn by rote and rely heavily on memory [2]. More importantly, Sit claims that this kind of learning is regarded as a surface approach to learning, that is, it only focuses on the knowledge itself, which is considered to achieve poor learning effect compared with a deep approach to learning, exploring the deeper meaning of knowledge [3]. For example, in Chinese exams, knowledge from textbooks is often used, but students mainly memorize it and write it down during the exam. It is partly true that this learning method focuses on the solid mastery of knowledge, but it does not mean that it is less effective than Western students' deep learning approach.

## 2.2. Characteristics Gathered from Chinese Traditional Culture

Scholars generally agree that the learning characteristics of Chinese students are greatly influenced by their traditional culture, of which Confucian culture is the most mentioned, as well as some unique local cultures, such as the "kiasu" example in the following section [3-5].

According to Sit, influenced by the Confucian tradition, in which the authority of the teacher underpins high-quality classroom management and teaching activities organization, Chinese students tend to respect their teachers to a great extent in their studies and thus rarely challenge them in the classroom [3]. Similarly, Hodkinson and Poropat argue that the traditional Confucian teaching model is didactic, which means that Chinese students should not easily express their ideas in class, but focus on mastering enough knowledge first [4]. Suppose students blindly raise objections and question teachers before fully acquiring knowledge in a particular field. In that case, it will reduce teaching efficiency to a large extent and is also a waste of teaching resources. In addition, the characteristics contained in the specific local culture were summarized by Hodkinson and Poropat as the stereotype of Chinese students. For example, the "kiasu" phenomenon proposed by the two researchers is derived from the Hokkien dialect, meaning "fear of being left behind," which is characterized by diligence and overwork in Chinese students [4].

Generally, stereotypes of Chinese students mainly come from researchers' observation of Chinese students' learning process and analysis of some traditional Chinese cultural characteristics. However, as Heng advocated, "Different is not deficient" [5]. The simplification of viewing angles and the differences in educational concepts in various countries may exaggerate and magnify the stereotypes of Chinese students. Therefore, an increasing number of researchers have gradually begun to think critically about the images given to Chinese students.

## 3. The Reason That Chinese Students' Stereotypes Arise

In a comprehensive understanding of the relevant literature, the reasons why Chinese students develop stereotypes (e.g., passivity, silence, and reliance on rote memorization) can be divided into

two main aspects: the influence of cultural differences between China and the West and the limitations of some scholars' understanding of Chinese education [6-11].

### 3.1. Chinese and Western Cultural Differences

The influence of cultural differences between China and the West on the formation of stereotypes of Chinese students is mainly reflected in the differences in communication styles, education systems, and ideologies.

In 2013, Ruble and Zhang studied how Americans formed stereotypes of Chinese students and concluded that Americans tend to be individualistic in their communication style, while Chinese tend to be collectivistic [6]. Specifically, Chinese social activities are more dependent on the environment, and such differences make it possible for Chinese and American students to misunderstand each other during interactions, thus creating a fixed stereotype of Chinese students [6]. It is admitted that individualism in the West enables students to have more flexible and frequent interactions. In contrast, Chinese students are used to taking care of the collective, thereby becoming very cautious and even reticent in their interactions. Therefore, the difference between Chinese and Western communicative habits can easily cause this characteristic of Chinese students to be perceived as passive or even rigid.

The Chinese educational system and related institutions (e.g., the ministry of education) profoundly influence the stylistic characteristics of Chinese students in the learning process, resulting in some similar features of Chinese students. In O'Sullivan and Guo's comparative study about the critical thinking skills of Chinese and Australian students, they found that some Chinese students themselves, as well as some Chinese academic elites, have become aware of the drawbacks of the passive transmission of knowledge in the Chinese education system and the damage this does to Chinese students' critical thinking ability. For example, China's existing college entrance examination system has forced teachers and students to aim for test-taking, making it difficult to choose the right direction for students' development [7]. In contrast, Western education is more inclined to inspire students and encourage them to think independently and express their opinions [8]. Such differences can easily lead to the image that Chinese students are given a weaker critical thinking ability than their Western counterparts.

Confucianism, as one of the dominant traditional Chinese cultures, has a significant degree of influence on Chinese students' learning styles. Besides, the differences between some of its concepts and Western learning styles have created stereotypes of Chinese students. According to Gram and others, Confucian culture focuses on the study of classical texts and advocates that learners develop their understanding and resonate with the content of the texts in the process of "memorizing" them; In contrast, "Western modes of engaging philosophical texts" is different from Confucian culture, especially in the criticality [9]. Moreover, these researchers argue that the learning styles and content promoted by Confucianism are incompatible with the practices and values of Western higher education. Hence, a significant number of Western scholars portray Chinese students as preferring "rote memorization" and "passive learning" [9].

### 3.2. Limitations to the Perception of Chinese Education

The formation of stereotypes of Chinese students is partly because some scholars do not have a complete or objective enough understanding of Chinese students and Chinese education in conducting relevant studies. For example, in Paton's study, some Western scholars believe that "critical thinking" is a uniquely Western product because there is a complete system for training students to think scientifically in Western education. Yet, they ignore the negative impact of the relatively complicated environment in East Asian educational settings on students' criticality of students [10]. Similarly, Wu argues that the evaluation of Chinese students' learning effectiveness should be more comprehensive

and the main factors affecting Chinese students' learning situation should be continuously and dynamically examined to enhance the accuracy of the assessment. In addition, Wu also evaluates the framework of Confucian culture from the perspective of essentialism and constructivism, respectively, and it is found that opinions under the two theories differed significantly [11]. The author argues that this strongly suggests that scholars should comprehensively analyze Chinese education and the image of Chinese students from multiple perspectives in the research process to achieve more accurate and convincing results.

#### **4. Analysing the Critical Views of Chinese Students' Stereotypes**

From the above, Chinese students' stereotypes have been extensively researched in related academic fields, and these impressions have been summarized universally. However, besides briefly describing the characteristics of these stereotypes, many scholars have analyzed them in detail and put forward different views on the inner manifestations of stereotypes themselves, various factors in the external formation of stereotypes, and the effects of stereotypes on Chinese students themselves, as well as put forward corresponding suggestions for the resulting problems [3,7,11-15]. In this section, the authors will present the reflections and analysis of various researchers on the stereotypes of Chinese students comprehensively, and the content presentation will follow the general logical order of issues. These include: firstly, the views on the appropriate behaviors contained in the internal stereotypes; secondly, the formation process of stereotypes influenced by external factors; then, the consequences of Chinese students affected by stereotypes; and finally, the suggestions for solutions to improve the adverse effects of stereotypes.

##### **4.1. Internal Factors of Chinese Students' Stereotypes**

Chinese students' learning style is considered to be passive and highly reliant on memorization. Sit believes this style of Chinese students is influenced by the Confucian concept of "respect for the teachers" and obedience to strict classroom discipline. On the other hand, the exam-oriented educational environment in China [3]. Because of Confucianism's high demands on classroom discipline, as mentioned above, and the high authority of teachers in the eyes of students, Chinese students influenced by Confucianism naturally tend to be very cautious about their performance in the classroom and to raise ideas or questions after careful consideration. In addition, Chinese exam-oriented education requires a high level of student knowledge. The teacher's lecture, coupled with the student's memory, is one of the convenient ways to effectively convey a large amount of systematic knowledge in a relatively short period, which also results in students not having many opportunities to express their personal opinions in class. Therefore, the authors argue that Chinese students' learning characteristics. However, they are influenced by various factors and have in-depth reasons, which are generally an accurate description of Chinese students' learning characteristics. However, what is unreasonable is that some people associate these learning characteristics with superficial learning, which means more inefficient learning outcomes. Sit mentions in his article that Chinese students can better explore the nature of knowledge through repeated memorization and understanding, which is a type of learning strategy [3]. It is admitted that "memorizing knowledge" is necessary for a deep learning approach. It is a one-sided view that the "memorization learning method" is matched with "lower learning effects."

In addition, Wu suggests that the differences between different groups of students within the large group of Chinese students are inaccurate because the characteristics of students in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan differ significantly due to their respective histories, social policies, educational systems, concept values, and beliefs [11]. For historical reasons, Hong Kong local

students are more adapted to the British culture and education style. They, therefore, show a better understanding in the face of the British style of teaching and learning.

#### **4.2. External Factors of Chinese Students' Stereotypes**

Some scholars believe that the formation of stereotypes of Chinese students is because the study ignores the changes in the external environment in which the students live. Chinese students' behavioral traits are not only influenced by their personalities but also by the external environment. Xie et al. suggested that students are shaped by their surroundings, including the settings of their institutions and even the economic climate [12]. This means students have different behavioral traits at other times, implying that Chinese students' characteristics change accordingly over time and space rather than being constantly fixed [12]. Similarly, Wu mentioned that the evaluation of Chinese students' learning effectiveness should always take their environment into account and that their performance should be continuously assessed to maintain the accuracy of the findings [11].

In addition, O'Sullivan and Guo have found that Western-guided values propagate one of the external factors in the formation of stereotypes of Chinese students, and the Western educational community has a high degree of confidence in its connotations of "critical thinking," even "neo-colonial conceit" [7]. Specifically, Western scholars demand that Chinese students' "critical thinking" skills be assessed according to Western standards, a manifestation of colonialism at the educational and ideological levels. When Chinese students do not meet the assessment criteria set by the West but still maintain critical thinking with Chinese characteristics, then these students should not be considered less capable of critical thinking than Western students. For example, in Confucian culture, students rarely interrupt their teachers in class because they respect them. This is a unique way for Chinese students to think about the relationship between teachers and students, but it has been criticized for not conforming to Western habits. It is also necessary because instead of teaching from a critical perspective, they are taught from the perspective of the dominant ideology of our society. Such an approach implicitly suggests that this is a model that China should emulate. This is more of a colonialist imprint than a teaching of critical thinking. If specific schools of critical thinking are imposed on students, then critical thinking can be seen as colonizing students' minds by setting an "alternative package" of ideas.

In 2015, Zhang found that with China's rapid economic development, the United States sees China as a potential threat to economic growth, which is reflected in the news media's information about China [13]. Under the influence of a large number of similar media propaganda, Americans, lacking knowledge of China's background culture and reality, shape the image of Chinese students in their minds through the collected media information, which leads to the formation of stereotypes. Chen and Wen make a similar argument that prejudice or discrimination against a group is not necessarily based on the individual bias but rather on continuous exposure to the relevant images portrayed in the mass media [14]. The process of displaying relevant images, such as depictions of other cultures, reflects the perceptions and beliefs of society as a whole. When people do not know enough about the group's social, cultural, economic, and political aspects, they are biased to believe the views conveyed by the media, and stereotypes are created.

#### **4.3. Consequences and Recommendations**

Haft, Mauss, and Zhou explored the effects of stereotypes on Chinese students from a combination of humanistic and physiological perspectives and found that Chinese students experience psychological stress when faced with external stimuli brought by stereotypes. The accumulation of this psychological stress can cause stress patterns in the physiological system to a certain extent [15]. Xie et al. also agreed that stereotypes and discrimination could have harmful effects on psychological

health and cross-cultural communication, and their proposed solution to these problems is to raise the standards for Chinese students enrolling in American schools to discourage poorly performing Chinese students from exacerbating the formation of negative stereotypes [12]. However, the author agrees with Chen and Wen's suggestion that educational institutions achieve greater cultural inclusiveness by optimizing their curricula and staff management practices while providing adequate care for Chinese students. For example, schools can promote the cultural traditions of different countries to staff and students to enhance their understanding of other cultures.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined the critical views and new viewpoints of international scholars, including Chinese scholars, on the stereotypes of Chinese students. The process involved the knowledge of cultural differences, the education system, ideological colonialism, mental health, and other fields, which is a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis of the stereotype formation of Chinese students. The results show that Chinese students have been widely believed to use passive learning methods, engage in interaction unwillingly, prefer to learn by rote, and rely heavily on memory. In terms of the reasons for the formation of stereotypes, the cultural differences between China and the West, including the differences in communication styles, education systems, and ideology, as well as the lack of understanding of Chinese students and Chinese education, are essential factors for the formation of Chinese students' stereotypes. The researchers' suggestion for improving stereotypes is to optimize the system of educational institutions and make them more culturally inclusive. The findings of this paper can be helpful for scholars to conduct in-depth research on stereotypes and improve the stereotypes of Chinese students.

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