

The Relationship Between the Learning Styles of Chinese Students and the Needs of Chinese Society

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Abstract: This paper aims to provide a new aspect to explore the learning styles of Chinese students. After reading through previous research about the characteristics or learning styles of Chinese students, this paper found that most Western researchers considered Chinese students' learning styles as a kind of negative, passive, rote-learning, and isolated learning style from the Western perspective. However, to truly understand Chinese education and students, we must look back at its history and cultural roots. This paper includes three main parts. The first part analyzed the three salient characteristics of Chinese students, and the second part described Chinese society and people's behavior in Chinese culture. The last part examined how those characteristics formed through the learning process help Chinese students get used to Chinese society. This paper argued that the learning styles of the Chinese students seemed passive and negative at first glance; however, this learning style was formed based on the Chinese culture and enabled its students with a smooth path to their future society.

Keywords: Chinese education, characteristics of Chinese students, Chinese society, education system, Chinese culture, harmony, silent learning, self-study, rote learning

1. Introduction

Many western researchers have observed and studied Chinese students' learning styles, and most consider this learning method harmful. There is a stereotype among western researchers that Chinese students seldom react to the teachers, and they rarely express their point of view either. It seems that the Chinese students know to recite what their teachers tell them and to keep studying as a very personal thing, which means they do not react with their teachers or classmates. It is usual for western researchers to regard those characteristics as passive and hostile as they are the very opposite of the learning methods praised by western educators, like teamwork, critical thinking, and group learning. However, this paper argues those qualities are essential for Chinese students to adapt to Chinese society. As Chinese society is always influenced by traditional culture, there is a significant difference between the Chinese and western social environments. Chinese community celebrates harmony, not only in spirit but also in form. To reach this form of connection, respecting the authorities, and keeping silent are some essential qualities required by society. By following the Chinese education process, Chinese students acquire those qualities, then become capable of learning knowledge and tradition along with how they can survive in Chinese society. From this perspective, Chinese

education is thriving. And this paper can bring a new perspective to view Chinese education and students.

2. The Learning Styles of Chinese Students

According to many Western studies, Chinese students are hardworking and have great regard for their professors. Observers of courses may be struck by the student's discipline and concentration, as well as the fast pace and intensity of the teacher-centered interaction [1]. At the same time, some of their typical learning characteristics are described negatively, such as rote, silent, and passive learning styles [2].

2.1. Rote Learning

During the learning process in China, the students constantly use those learning methods such as memorizing, surface rote learning, etc. This phenomenon can be seen throughout the learning process from K12 education to university.

According to Jin, even at the university level, the importance of the teacher, the book, modeling, mimicking, and memorizing is still evident in the ways that students learn long lists of items or good textbook paragraphs in preparation for every crucial examination. And it is not hard to figure out the reason as most of these exams require students to master the contents in the textbooks. Those exams can decide if the students can graduate successfully, so the students work hard to recite every word in the book [3]. However, he explained a little about why Chinese students hold this rote learning method even in university, where the students are expected to be more creative and develop a more flexible learning method. The main tune was to criticize this kind of rigidity.

Many experts believe that the features of Chinese cultures, such as exerting focused effort and remembering texts, have their roots in Confucian tradition [3]. The Confucian tradition characterized practical learning methods as a rigorous study of a canon of literature mixed with the practice of moral self-cultivation [4]. Chinese education has been regarded as a cultural transmission for a long time. In this context, teachers are authoritative while they hold the consensus, which is to cherish and respect the works done by their predecessors. At the same time, they have the responsibility to transmit this spirit and culture to the younger generation. They must demand their students to recite the text to achieve this mission.

Moreover, according to McDaniel, the 3R(Read-Recite-Review) study strategy is practical and portable, in which reciting the materials may promote such deep learning [5]. This kind of learning strategy helps students to understand elusive terms. It encourages them to connect the knowledge of the past and the contemporary world they live in, thereby making students practice the quiescence of Chinese culture, which is to respect and obey.

2.2. Silent Learning

In a typical Chinese classroom, students seldom ask questions during the class, and observers have little chance to view the interruption. Just as Ballard illustrates, "... an extraordinary feeling at first...All those watching silent faces, I suppose...they certainly do work hard...I've got no complaints about that. They do all the assignments and any extra work I suggest...they are good students, but you don't get much reaction out of them..." [6]

From many perspectives, the silent classroom can be an outcome or a symbol of the rote learning style. To some degree, those two characteristics are interconnected. The Chinese educational system is strongly centralized, with less space for teachers and students to improvise. For instance, when the teacher asks a question, there will usually be no volunteers, as the students know to answer beautifully is not to express their critical thoughts but to recite the textbook. If one cannot repeat all the materials,

the situation could turn quite embarrassing, on the other hand. However, if the student has the confidence to cover all the “knowledge points,” the rest of the classroom would not be surprised; they may probably just be impressed by that student’s good memory, and that’s all, as students will not be able (and they are not required either) to make anything new. From this perspective, keeping silent seems to be the best strategy. And from the teachers' perspective, as Vygotskian ideas largely influence Chinese teachers nowadays, talk in the class is in rapid sequence, and the principles of the course are teacher-controlled, learner-trained learning, and listener-oriented. All those elements form this silent learning characteristic.

However, to investigate this phenomenon even more profoundly, the effort to delve into its cultural root is necessary. Hu illustrated that "face" stands for the kind of prestige emphasized in this country: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, success, and ostentation. This prestige is accumulated using personal effort or clever maneuvering [7]. The mentality mentioned before is closely related to this “face” culture. A rigid hierarchy has always been rooted in Chinese society, and school is no exception. Comparing is a valued and inherent part of the Chinese students’ character, which means the classroom is not only a place to study but also a crucial social place where people form a specific hierarchy spontaneously. Under this circumstance, students are reluctant to show their strength or their weakness, as each maneuver they make may be evaluated by their classmates and teachers; on the other hand, choosing to stay quiet save them from those possible troubles and show their moderation which accords with the Golden mean invited by Confucius.

2.3. Self-study

Chinese students are used to self-study. People often spot students sitting alone in the library or standing on their own in the corner with a book in their hands. In this way, they memorize, internalize, and understand the knowledge. Like Jin illustrated, when people showed photographs of this Chinese practice of learning to students in Lebanon, they were amazed, ‘We could never do that here. It is impossible for us. We try to learn from others through discussion in groups. We need to learn through talking, not through reading, through talking to classmates and friends.’ [3] Compared to Western students, Chinese students have a more isolated learning style.

It has long been known that one of the most critical aspects of Chinese culture is its emphasis on a harmonious society and the proper structuring of interpersonal interactions [8]. This cultural history necessitates that people maintain a "unit" connection with one another, in which they see each other as role occupants rather than as individuals [9]. That could be why Chinese students tend to avoid learning by talking, as talking in public places sometimes can be seen as impolite as the sound may intrude on the others, and speaking in private groups also has the risk of piquing one another and eventually breaking the harmony. Chinese students and Western students learn to form their social circles at school; the difference is that Chinese students acquire and sharpen this skill through sensing and observing rather than interacting with each other directly.

3. The Formation of Chinese Society

To value an education system, one must understand its cultural and social background. Education has many functions as an inalienable part of society, including cultivating people to self-develop and adapt to a particular social environment. In some cultures, education is biased toward self-development. However, in China, education is more pragmatism oriented. To be more precise, this paper mainly argues that the primary purpose of the Chinese education system is to help people to adapt to society. And before discussing how the Chinese education system helps the young Chinese acclimatize themselves to the community, it is indispensable to have a general idea about the Chinese social environment and its core culture.

3.1. Citizenship Behavior

By studying the relationship between citizenship behavior and organizational justice, people could have a general idea of Chinese social structure and how Chinese education cultivates its students to cope with this peculiar structure.

Organizational justice appears to be a key determinant of citizenship behavior and related outcomes such as satisfaction and commitment [10]. However, persons from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds may regard organizational fairness differently [11]. In this context, organizational justice, particularly one based on an equitable allocation of goods, predicts citizen behavior. Distributive justice based on an equality standard promotes a person's impression of being treated relatively [12]. However, in civilizations stressing expressive or covenantal bonds among individuals, for example, in Chinese society, the transaction is generally based on a particularistic concept of need or social status distribution rather than a universalistic premise of equal distribution of outcomes [13]. For instance, the Duke of She once said to Confucius, "In my land, there is an upright man. His father stole a sheep, and the man turned him in to the authorities." Confucius replied, "The upright men of my land are different. The father will shelter the son, and the son will shelter the father. Righteousness lies precisely in this." This story illustrated that in traditional Chinese society, people have specific roles to apply, and the righteous or justice is built on those relationships; when. People in this social context examine social justice through moral rules. Still, country laws and ethical regulations result from the outward expression of human nature or, in other words, the progress of civilization. The outcome of society could be very different, which leads to various social beliefs. For western countries, social opinion is primarily shaped by henotheism and maritime culture.

On the contrary, the Chinese social idea is based on the agricultural culture where most people spend their lifetime in the same place and share a close relationship with their neighbors who are also their relatives. Though Chinese society has experienced an enormous change, the core of its culture remains the same. This core is primarily based on Confucianism's five essential interactions (called wu-lun). And these are not societal qualities; instead, they reveal how people relate to one another within their social order [13]. To put it another way, in a culture dominated by role-based relationships, for example, in Chinese society, trust and confidence in one's superiors are built into the social structure of organizations. In this case, people would not expect any link between justice and citizenship behavior because their acts would not need to be driven by increased trust [14,15].

And there is no exception at school. Influenced by Chinese culture, Chinese students seldom question the "teacher-centered" education form and rarely think that teachers are equal to the students. Chinese students respect and obey their teachers; in general, they follow every instruction, which makes them used to reciting textbooks and notes.

3.2. The Value of Harmony

The core of the Chinese traditional culture is Confucianism, whose characteristic and essence are "harmony." Taoism and Confucianism both believe that the two opposing and complementary energies (chi) of yin and yang should be kept in balance no matter what level they are acting on, such as the cosmos, nature, society, or an individual [16]. And according to Confucius, internal harmony should be regarded as the highest value inside a family, just as it is necessary for the proper operation of any system at any other level [17].

As there is no henotheism in China, people must learn the value of forbearance to achieve this harmony. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of balance. When one disagrees with someone in one's social network, the first thing one must learn is "forbearance [18]. In those Chinese classrooms, the students follow this cultural code too. In the highly competitive environment, Chinese students need to save time and strength in every possible way. Thus, they tend to keep studying as a

personal business to avoid the risk of breaking the harmony among their classmates and, at the same time to avoid the awkward situation where they might need to forbear one another.

4. The Stability and Harmony Chinese Students' Learning Styles Provide

Like the other education systems worldwide, the Chinese system stands for two primary purposes. One is to promote self-development, and the other is to fulfill society's needs. In the Chinese social environment context, this need is mainly about stabilizing the social structure. Since China is a vast country with a massive population, stability is critical for keeping every part of the society working functionally and effectively. And to meet these relatively high demands, Chinese education always leans on its function to provide stability for the organization. When Chinese students go through this education process, they acquire not only knowledge but the culture and social creed, which help them adapt to society and find their position in this vast social structure. As most Chinese students can find jobs or social roles after graduation, the country can remain stable and united.

4.1. Transmit the Culture

One of the advantages Chinese education carries is to transmit the culture. Chinese education shares culture by using the instructor as a moral example and imparting cultural codes to its students. Culture, according to Hofstede, is the interacting collection of shared qualities that determines a human group's attitude to its environment [15]. Culture is a powerful tool to unite human behaviors and thoughts. People with the same cultural background tend to use the same strategy to cope with the situations they come across, and this homogeneity could be the bedrock of social stability. Chinese students acquire the traditional culture through the textbook and by modeling their teachers and getting along with competing and communicating with their classmates. They learn that Chinese culture hallowed ground and honored the dead; more importantly, their culture requires them to respect and even obey the authorities. From this process, the Chinese students developed the rote-learning method and used to keep silent as they needed to show respect to their superiors and ancestors in all ways. And this is the reason why Chinese classrooms are always in good order and offer a stable structure. From this perspective, every Chinese classroom is a shrunken version of Chinese society.

4.2. Maintain the Apparent Harmony

In general, the Chinese education system could be equal to a filter mechanism. As educational resources in China are relatively scarce, multiple entrances control examinations to decide how to allocate and allocate those valuable resources to whom. This is the main reason why there is a so severely competitive atmosphere among Chinese students. Those students must fight hard to get the resources to help them across the social gaps or at least provide them some chances to make a difference. And Chinese society is cruel, with scarce resources such as job supply and opportunities for further self-development. However, this structure of the Chinese education system enables Chinese students to start to feel this scarcity and understand the need to be competitive all the time from a relatively early age which provides them a long period to adapt to the society they are going to live in. Moreover, although China has a competitive league, its culture requires it to at least have a harmonious appearance. And the Chinese students develop the self-study learning style to avoid potential arguments and prevent open competition. This kind of learning style will transform into the wording style and contribute to the apparent harmony of society.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper argued that the characteristics of Chinese students, such as silence, passive learning, and self-study, considered harmful by most Western researchers, were the essential qualities that can help Chinese students adapt to Chinese society. This review presented the three main learning styles of Chinese students and analyzed the formation of Chinese culture, including how people behave and why they behave in this way. In the last part of the main body, this paper argues how those qualities respond to the requirements of the culture and social creed and are attributed to the stability and harmony of the country. As China is a vast country, its education system needs to serve not only the students' self-development but also the country's overall strategies. And due to the cultural factors and the need to unite so many people, most of the time, Chinese education favors its social function, which is to cultivate the students to respect and obey the authorities and learn to keep the apparent harmony which also means to understand the Chinese traditional culture. Future research should be devoted to analyzing the relationship between the characteristics of certain groups of students and the society where they live in. Further research in this sector may reveal the interaction force between culture and education and even interpret the future of one community or country.

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