

## Learning in culture and culture of learning: Socio-psychology of Chinese students' learning behaviours.

Kosheleva E.Yu. [1], Pak I.Ya. [2], Chernobylsky E. [3]

### ABSTRACT

Chinese education model has two basic components. First, it is Confucian beliefs about society that allow for the formation of such character traits as respect for a teacher, hierarchy of societal structure, importance of keeping face. Second, it is specifics of Chinese education system, which focuses on rote memorization and aims at teaching to the test. These specifics must be taken into consideration when working with students from China. The current paper focuses on the analysis of learning behaviors of Chinese students as well as historical, political, economic and cultural aspects that influence these behaviors. Recommendations for teaching practice when teaching foreign languages to Chinese students are provided.

**Keywords:** Learning behaviours; student migration; Chinese students

[1] National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, 634013, Tomsk, 30 Lenin Ave., Russia

[2] Tianjin University, 300072, Tianjin 92 Weijin Road, Nankai District, PRC

[3] Caldwell College, 120 Bloomfield Ave, Caldwell, NJ, 07006, USA

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of The Association of Science, Education and Technology-TASET, Sakarya Universitesi, Turkey.

Shift in economic and political paradigm in China that occurred in the last three decades resulted in the increased value of higher education. To prepare high quality specialists for the quickest development of "information society", the Chinese government aims to improve the quality of higher education, as well as supports education abroad and stimulates the return of former immigrants to homeland. This led to the realization that quality study of foreign languages is a necessity: the departments of foreign languages prepare specialists-interpreters; joint programs with partner institutions from abroad allow students to get program completion diplomas from two educational establishments; certificates confirming a certain level of foreign language proficiency provide a serious competitive edge when seeking employment. Invitation of foreign instructors who are native speakers of foreign languages is very popular in higher education institutions in China.

At present, in Russia, students from China make up a majority of all foreign students studying in the country. Educating foreign students from East Asia has economic and political values for the Russian Federation. Working with this category of students it is necessary to take into account specific cultural and psychological features of such students as well as to understand educational models they have experienced during their schooling.

The purpose of this article is to describe learning styles of Chinese students because knowing these styles enables instructors to develop effective models of teaching when working with this student population. The current work is based on a wide array of literature published on this issue. This article is also based on the experiences of the authors, who have all taught either Russian or English to the students in the universities of China (Jiling University and Wuhan University) and Russia (Tomsk Polytechnic University) in 2008-2012. In preparation of this manuscript, data collected and analyzed from surveys, interviews and field observations were used.

Chinese teaching model has two basic components. The first component is the Confucian principles of collectivist society that education in mainland China embraces, even when the teachers and students are absolutely unaware of it (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998). These principles include such components as the high value of education for society; a belief that zeal and hard work can compensate the lack of talent and/or ability; attitude that a teacher is a carrier of undeniable knowledge and is an example to emulate; industriousness in studies which is considered to be the moral obligation of every student not only to oneself, but also to the family.

The second component is the Chinese educational system that is aimed at taking and passing high stakes tests and preparation for the university entrance exams. As such, school is perceived as a place, where structural knowledge is provided and where a student simply has to learn the given information by rote memorization without analysis. School is a place where a teacher decides what is important, and what is not; and students do not have an opportunity to exhibit any initiatives.

The combination of these two factors results in school related behaviors and strategies that Chinese students exhibit, namely preference for passive methods of obtaining knowledge, preference to copy ready-made solutions,

shyness in communications.

Much attention is paid to the learning behaviors that Chinese students exhibit when attending institutions of higher education in the USA, Europe and Australia since these countries are the most popular among Chinese students who choose to study abroad. To illustrate, Gieve and Clark (2005), examine how the attitude towards education change when influenced by the change in educational environment. These researchers note such features of educational behaviors of the Chinese, as:

1. Dependence on external guidance (i.e. expectation of help from an instructor and administration);
2. In-class communication behaviors such as rare participation in discussions, absence of questions, absence of indicators of understanding (or not understanding) of educational material;
3. In writing the essays of Chinese students usually only reproduce the published literature without critical analysis (Gieve and Clark, 2005).

Hu (2002) distinguishes the following characteristics of the Chinese education model:

1. Education requires much effort. Confucian tradition predetermines attitude of teachers and students toward education as a very serious business that requires responsibility and fervor. Success is dependent on effort and not talent or ability. This attitude is in agreement with the Confucian tradition and perception where a persistence and perseverance are considered to be high individual moral values.
2. Education process is centered on a textbook. Chinese education is traditionally assumed to be a process of knowledge accumulation, not its construction or use through direct experiences.
3. Student-teacher relationship is hierarchical but harmonious. Teachers are given respect similar to that given to parents.
4. The goal of teaching is to pass the knowledge from a teacher to students. Since the teacher knows the material and is passing it along, the teacher is a dominant force in the classroom.

In Russian literature problems of adaptation of students from China to the Russian education system are examined by Ivanova (2001), Petrovsky and Guzarova (2010), Kravtsov (2008), Balykhina and Zhao Yu Jiang (2009), Kosheleva and Pak (2011), Kalmykov (2009) and others. Ivanova (2001) distinguishes the following characteristics that are typical for students from East and South-East Asia – high morals and good behavior, high level of self-control and discipline, being reserved and not communicable, quiet attitude towards change, control of emotions, taking care of one's reputation (pp.139-152).

Balykhina and Zhao Yu Jiang (2009) express an opinion that basic descriptions of the Chinese students are emotional restraint; observance of hierarchy (inviolable authority of teacher); "keeping face"; independence. Chinese students usually play passive role in knowledge acquisition. The system of education does not help develop such skills as text predictions based on the title, key words at the beginning of a passage. Majority of Chinese prefer noncommunicative (rational) style of learning, they easily complete the set up exercises, but have a hard time mastering speaking skills and have difficulty in overcoming psychological barrier in the process of communication (p. 21).

Successes of the education system of Peoples Republic of China at the end of the XX and the beginning of the XXI century are believed to be the most impressive since the Second World War. On absolute scale, the system of higher education of PRC is the largest in the world. The acceptance to the institutions of higher learning increased from 7.2 % of number of young people of corresponding age in 1995 to 21% in 2005. According to the forecast for 2020, if the speed of growth of higher education will be 3%, then rates of acceptance will be 38%, if the growth speed will be 4, 5 or 6 percent, then the rate of acceptance to Colleges and Universities will reach 45-52-61% respectively [6, 144]. Despite such success, the percentage of persons with higher education in PRC's labor force remains insignificant. In 2005 there were only approximately 70 million people who received post-secondary education.

The results of school graduation examinations determine the choice of the University as well as the choice of the profession. Entrance exam to the Universities and Colleges of China is Gaokao. It is believed to be the most stressful examination in the world. At present the schools are using the 3+X system which means students take three required subjects (Chinese language, English language and mathematics) plus one choice subject, depending on the University a student is trying to enter.

Paradoxically, only those students who were unable to enter state-sponsored higher education institutions study in private colleges in China. That puts the notion of prestigious quality private education in China to rest. Subsequently, employers do not perceive the graduates of such schools as good candidates for a job in their companies. Such system compels parents to send their children to study abroad.

Prestigious college majors are considered to be those of technical orientation. However, many times students are interested not in the profession they are pursuing but in the status of the University: its rating and percentage of

graduates who land a job.

When questioned about the choice of higher education institution, students of Jilin University (Jilin, Changchun province), who chose the 2+2 program (the joint program of Jilin University and Tomsk Polytechnic University in Russia), responded with such typical answers as "This was a parental choice", "This University is well known in Northeastern China", "I was not accepted to a different program". Out of 34 participating second year students who majored in physics in Jilin University in 2010 only 7 students (20%) dreamed to become physicists while at school; others named professions distant from their current major.

One hundred and thirty students whose major at Jilin University was Russian language studies participated in questionnaire research between 2008 and 2010. Majority of those students responded that they chose their profession based on the results of Gaokao, they had a choice of entering a non-prestigious University for a technical degree or major in non-technical field but in a prestigious University. They preferred the second option.

A majority of 30 polled second-year students of Wuhan University, who attended special summer English program in 2012, entered this university because they earned highest scoring on Gaokao. Results of the survey allowed to distinguish three principal reasons for a choice of a University major:

1. The high scores on the state examination that allowed the entrance to Wuhan University. Students who have high mathematics score could choose among such majors as Engineering, Information Systems and Urban Planning.
2. A prospect of employment in a large city. This is why many students chose such professions as urban planning, civic engineering, and biology, among others.
3. Parents offered their choice of suitable profession and a student had to agree.

Parents indeed determine the future of their children fairly often, and children completely trust them.

Most of the surveyed students in all three cities note that modern young people experiences daily pressures from parents and from society in general. This is due to a huge competition in all spheres of life and heightened parental expectations.

Today's university students represent generation born in the 1990s. Many researchers believe that they differ greatly from the generation born in the 1980s. The generation of 1990s is believed to be a generation of rational hedonists. The Chinese youth are aligning themselves more and more with the two countries: United States and South Korea. The reason for the popularity of the United States is clear – today this country is a leader of the world that successfully propagates its values via mass media. South Korea is an example of a positive synthesis of global pop-culture with Confucian beliefs/traditions.

In contemporary China the demographic policy of "one family - one child" for the Hans is in place. This interferes with the tradition of families having many children. Therefore, the young generation of Chinese is often labeled the "generation of little emperors", because parents hover over their only child with excessive attention and care from early on. In China, the generation born in 1990s is often criticized for its childishness, and immaturity.

It might be that the explanation to this phenomenon is in the history of this country. For many generations, adults did not develop as an independent individual – through infantilism of adults it was easy to achieve absolute power. Even today, schooling on the whole in China is not aimed at the development of critical and creative thinking, its sole goal is to prepare students to take and pass the high stakes state tests, which test student's memory, not the ability to analyze information. Accordingly, contemporary Chinese students are not always able and willing to engage in critical or creative thinking and actively show their individuality.

Infantilism demonstrates itself at the University lectures as well. For example, when preparing serious technical presentations that deal with scientific problems, students often adorn such presentations with pictures of different Japanese anime characters, animals and plants.

Our experience working with Chinese students allows us to see the undoubted strengths of Chinese character in that students are really hard-working, responsible, persistent in achieving their goal, remain calm, hold traditional views on social, political, economic and spiritual aspects of life that correspond to the acceptable in China norms of morality.

Students in China do not have strong views on self-expression. They prefer to listen to the teacher rather than expressing their own views or participate in discussion because they are afraid to make a mistake. Such model is prevalent and is developed as a result of schooling in elementary and secondary schools.

Taking all aforementioned specifics into consideration, it is important to cogitate the cultural specifics and

learning strategies that these students prefer to use. Development and socialization of contemporary young people in China happens under severe competition due to high demographic pressures, uneven regional development, cultural and economic differences between urban and agrarian areas of the country, quick stratification of society. As a result, young Chinese are often driven by practical aims, gradually ousting such inherent to Confucian culture moral principles as mutual help, sympathy, and goodwill. Young people in modern China are very pragmatic when considering their future and the choices they face.

When working with students from China, it is recommended that teachers use such pedagogical strategies that aim to stimulate personal achievement, discussions of the discipline matters, individual work and so on. Foreign language teachers should implement communicative methodologies in order to activate learning and to give students a chance to use the language in specific authentic situations, where the learner must use the accumulated language knowledge independently. It is useful in our opinion, to use technology where possible, because this gives students a chance to use the language for communication but without direct connection to the textbook. Such methods imitate the use of language outside of the classroom, in real life and allow students to express personal opinions, teach to use the language knowledge in real-life situations where the language use is often spontaneous. At the same time, such methods allow to lower the affective filter and decrease anxiety while, at the same time, increasing motivation to master the material and the ability to remember the material not by rote memorization but by purposeful use of the material in learning.

### References

- Balykhina, T.M. & Zhao Yu Jiang. (2009). Who are they, Chinese? Ethnological aspects of teaching foreign language to Chinese students. *Higher Education Today*, 5, 16-22.
- Gieve S. & Clark R. (2005). The Chinese approach to learning: Cultural trait or situates response? The case of a self-directed learning program. *System*, 33(2), 261-276.
- Hu, G. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2), 93-105.
- Ivanova, M.A. (2001). *Socio-Psychological adaptation of foreign students in higher education in Russia*. Doctorate Dissertation. 353 pages.
- Jin, L. & Cortazzi, M. (1998). Dimensions of dialogue: Large classes in China. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 29, 739-761.
- Kalmykov, P.N. (2009). Chinese students in Moscow. *News of Russian State University for Humanities*, 2, 234-250.
- Kosheleva, E.Y., Pak, I.Y. (2011). Learning and behavioral strategies of Chinese students: sociocultural analysis: Portrait of educational migrant. *General aspects of academic, linguistic and cultural adaptation*, 140-152. Tomsk: Raush.
- Kravtsov, A.V. (2008). *Social-psychological adaptation of foreign students to higher education of Russia*. Dissertation. Moscow, 130 pages.
- Mashkina, O.A. (2009). Education as a development resource of China in the XXI Century. *History and Modernity*, 1, 13-153.
- Petrovskaya, T.S. & Guzarova, N.I. (2010). Development of the two-level education model of education of foreign students in Tomsk Polytechnic University from 1990s to 2010. Education and development of international students in the universities in Russian Federation: History and Modernity, 68-86. Potorak Publishing.