

## The Complexities and Moral Conflicts of Chinese Students' Adaption for Overseas Classes

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### Abstract

China is now considered the world's largest exporter of international students; however, with more Chinese students receiving an education in Western higher education institutions (HEIs), more complications have occurred. The main conflicts manifested through the differences in educational design and thinking patterns regarding engagement within the classroom, testing, and homework evaluation. This paper explores how Chinese learning styles shape the mindset of students in education and how it differs from that of the Western education settings. Contrasting teachers' and students' roles in traditionally structured Chinese and Western education styles aims to understand Chinese students' behaviors or learning strategies within the classroom and the moral dilemmas experienced in-class participation, homework, and test-taking. Recommendations on participation, homework and test-taking are provided to achieve a win-win situation for three parties: students, teachers, and institutions. To ensure students' involvement in class and improve their academic success on homework and test-taking, students need to adapt to fit into the Western educational system; Educators need to understand and respect the right of Chinese students being quiet; HEIs need to be aware of the conflicts and provide training for students to build up their academic critical thinking and instructors to better understand Chinese students' learning styles and characteristics. In implementing one or more suggestions, HEIs can enhance their educational competitiveness and improve the enrollment of students. It also helps Chinese students better adjust themselves to engage in classes effectively to reduce psychological stress in a different educational design and attain academic success.

**Keywords:** *Classroom Engagement, Moral Conflicts, Confucius, Western Multicultural Classes*

### 1. Introduction

With the continuous development of the internationalization of higher education in China and the support of the national policies, more and more students in higher education institutions (HEIs) have opportunities to go abroad to experience Western education. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in the year 2000, only 39,000 Chinese students were studying overseas; however,

the number grew rapidly to 339,700 by 2011. China is now considered the world's largest exporter of international students. The most popular countries for Chinese students to study in are the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (Huang et al., 2013). Chinese students contribute to financial development in host countries; thus, many countries have launched alluring policies to attract more Chinese students. For example, the British government (British Embassy Beijing, 2019) announced a 2-year post-study work visa for international students as a meaningful way to boost Chinese students' enrollment. Australia (IDP Australia, 2021) has implemented a new visa policy named SSVF (Streamlined Student Visa Framework) for international students, officially reducing the previous eight types of student visa into two types (students visa and guardian visa), which substantially reduces the time length and the procedures for applying for a student visa. Evidence shows that students studying in Western countries effectively advanced their comprehensive abilities, expanded their international awareness, and enhanced their employment competitiveness (Ren, 2018). However, with more Chinese students receiving an education in Western HEIs, more complications have occurred. More specifically, some students cannot cope with language barriers, cultural conflicts, academic pressure, socialization issues, and unknown challenges in their daily lives, leading some to have difficulties with graduating on schedule or even drop out of school (Ren, 2018).

The main conflicts manifested through the differences in educational design and thinking patterns regarding engagement within the classroom, testing, and homework evaluation. Western educators often consider Chinese students to be quiet or not engaged in class discussions because they do not understand the content of the course or are perceived to be uninterested. While Chinese students are quiet within the classroom, it stems from cultural respect for teachers formed through a Confucius education design commonly used in Chinese schools (Zhang, 2015); however, teachers in Western HEIs are unaware of this ideology. As a result, teachers and students misunderstand each other in many ways, putting more pressure on Chinese students in their academic achievement and teachers to achieve an effective learning environment (Wang, 2015).

This paper seeks to explore and understand how traditional Chinese learning structures shape the mindset of Chinese students in education and how it differs from Western education settings. The aim of contrasting the roles of teachers and students in Confucius and Western education styles is to understand Chinese students' behaviors or learning strategies within the classroom and the moral dilemmas experienced in-class participation, homework, and test-taking. Recommendations will be provided to help Chinese students better adjust themselves to engage in Western multicultural classes effectively to reduce the psychological stress in a different educational design and attain academic success.

## **2. Confucius Education Philosophy**

Human culture can be divided into various activities, which take different routes to achieve specific purposes (Liu, 2019). Individual learning behavior is essentially a cultural practice; Chinese and Western cultures are two different cultures that shape

different learning behaviors or styles. Chinese and Western countries both attach equal importance to learning, have the same long learning tradition, have abundant learning concepts and theories, and have established a similar systematic education system. However, they have derived completely different learning patterns because of socio-cultural influences. The Chinese learning model is virtue-oriented, while the Western is skill-oriented. Comparing two different traditional cultures is an excellent way to understand the current learning characteristics in Chinese and Western education, specifically to understand the differences in learning concepts under the respective cultural traditions and the impact of culture on learning.

Confucianism has been the foundation of China's education system for over two thousand years (Chen, 2021); where respect, morality, and education are among the core values. Due to Confucius living in a time of conflict, his goal was to bring harmony to the people. He classified people into two groups: peasants who were poor, always seeking external guidance and approval, and noblemen who were from upper-class families, looking for inside guidance and having strong self-discipline. There are more peasants than noble individuals in society. Confucius established an educational system where schools distribute exams to provide workers a chance to shed their social class (Bright Hub Education, 2015). By doing this, Confucius could accomplish his education goals to produce more men with capabilities to serve in government. A man who was born in the poorest of conditions could become a decision-maker through this process. As a result, scholars were encouraged to "study and be good." They spent their whole lives continuously studying and retaking the imperial exams in ancient China. Success in the exams meant not only personal reward but also prestige for the entire family. The Confucian education system remained the standard in China for over two thousand years; the knowledge learned is to pass the tests from early elementary to doctorate level programs. Therefore, test-taking is the most crucial way to determine talents.

Chinese students strive to attend the best school through intense studies and strong exam performance; with this strategy, the Chinese education system emphasizes a moral model of "the courage to contribute." The professional requirements to attain understanding are mainly limited to theoretical knowledge and specific scores. Therefore, Chinese students tend to be excellent at executing a plan but lack creativity and innovation (Yang & Yang, 2019). Education in modern China aims to cultivate students with the personality of "benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and trust." It requires respect for teachers and elders to improve one's morality. The Chinese education system is mainly based on textbooks, emphasizing three primary subjects (Chinese, English, and mathematics) while neglecting natural sciences, physical education, and art. The class is teacher-centered with imparting knowledge, emphasizing examination-oriented education and content memory such as elementary schools emphasizing recitation, junior high schools emphasizing syntactic methods, and high schools promoting immersion in books and practices.

In classroom teaching, teachers usually teach according to the textbook and department designed curriculum; students must identify core knowledge points, take

notes in class, and do the prescribed exercises after class. Teachers encourage students to absorb and digest the lesson's key points by repetitive rote-learning and by completing numerous worksheets. As a result, students often recite information repeatedly to provide the same answer from the textbook in verbatim; it is not essential to understand the teaching material. It is often the case that teachers ask students to memorize certain content in the textbooks before the class even starts, to cultivate students' respect for knowledge and authority, especially in Chinese and history classes. Because of these, Chinese students' learning methods are characterized by repetition or reproduction (Du, 2018).

### **3. Western Education Conception**

Americans can be seen as prominent representatives of Western education philosophy. American education focuses on critical inquiry, allowing students to use their imaginations and practicing through trial and error so as to allow for the cultivation of independent learning skills and courage. In the US, knowledge is no longer considered a linear process of transmitting information from the teacher (or textbook) to students. It is the transmission of information, experiences, ideology, and beliefs from a range of sources, enabling a diverse group of students to learn ever more complex material and develop a broader range of skills (Whitehead, 2003). Western education conveys knowledge (information) or research opportunities, creating the skills to imagine, engaging ideas, discussing alternative possibilities, challenging principles, and allowing reflection (both self and society). Universities are not to stifle discussion or discourage questioning but to strengthen arguments and provide opportunities for students to interact with peers and instructors. Western education is not a reinforcement of hierarchy or positions of authority but seeks an environment of inclusiveness where everyone is empowered to be both teacher and student.

In Western countries, the class size is generally small, usually with no more than 30 students, with courses student-centered, activity-focused, task-oriented, and teacher-led. The students are taught to follow their aptitude, developing personality, and cultivating abilities. In basic terms, it is people-oriented. The classroom atmosphere is relatively informal; students can challenge teachers without raising their hands (Hu, 2010). A Western teaching philosophy is quality-based heuristic teaching; their teaching aims are to improve the quality of students and their ability to analyze and solve problems. Contrary to the Chinese memory learning style, many Western countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, promote discussion-oriented methods that focus on student understanding. Generally speaking, education is more localized; the classroom is more like a discussion meeting place. Teachers would guide students to engage in the critical discussion, the communication between teachers and students develops students' independent thinking ability.

In the classroom, students are encouraged by teachers to be critical and challenge concepts with questions. The discussion can stimulate students' curiosity, making students learn to listen to others' opinions, express their explanations during discussions, understand the problem, and master conceptual ideas, while improving their

problem-solving abilities. Students are the main body; the relationship between students and teachers can be described as “equal” partners. The whole classroom atmosphere is harmonious, and the students are relaxed, which is more conducive to knowledge learning and absorption. In the overall teaching process, teachers fully respect students’ independent innovation capacity, encourage them to discover problems, raise and solve questions independently. Western education puts more emphasis on understanding and mastering knowledge not only in textbooks but also in society, focusing on practicality and hands-on ability. Using theoretical knowledge serve others to achieve the integration of knowledge in theory and practice.

As described by Chinese scholar Yuan (1999), the main difference between Chinese and Western education features, the standard for measuring the success of education in China is to educate students through problems, as they experience issues they can overcome more in the future. Therefore, as students get older and pass through the educational process, there are fewer learning expectations. At the same time, Western education standard is to educate students to engage in critical thinking progressively with the teacher asking thought-provoking questions to test their understanding of the program's critical tenets. Therefore, the higher the grade, the more creative students must become to overcome the increasingly complex situational problems (Yan, 2011).

#### **4. Moral Conflicts**

More and more Chinese students are heading overseas to study. China continues to be one of the leading countries sending students to study abroad, and this demand for overseas education remains strong. The main reasons why Chinese students are choosing to head overseas for their university education are to obtain a stronger global mindset and enhance their job prospects and career development. A competitive institution environment has led to HEIs in western countries to recruit increasing numbers of Chinese students in order to increase financial stability. However, contrasting education designs create moral dilemmas for students and institutions (especially teachers). Teachers need to select a path of action, knowing the outcome will ultimately result in both positive and negative consequences (Johnston, 2003). For international students, moral dilemma refers to mental conflicts where students must choose what they desire or believe is right and what society (or school) ordains as correct (Qu, 2010).

This paper would discuss two moral dilemmas; the first is the moral dilemma of class participation and engagement. In Western countries, students are expected to be highly engaged in class discussions, ask questions, or perform critical thinking. Students are encouraged to challenge teachers; arguing and debating is expected in class. However, for Chinese students, because of Confucius's concept embedded in learning expectations, they are more reluctant to speak their thoughts because Confucianism emphasizes the importance of collectivism; people would conceal their thoughts and limit assertive behavior. The demand for engaging in the class stirs a moral conflict for Chinese international students. Chinese students do not feel comfortable speaking aloud; they regard teachers as a knowledge resource, authoritarians; there should be no doubt that what teachers state is right and the truth. Challenging teachers seems to be a fruitless

endeavor because no matter what, students will not win an academic argument. Due to the gap in language understanding and skills, Chinese students are afraid to make mistakes and embarrass themselves in front of their classmates and teachers, so they will usually not actively engage or remain quiet during in-class activities or discussions. Problems related to the assumption of participation also impose a moral conflict on the teachers. Chinese students not engaging in the class makes it difficult for teachers to assess their understanding. It is harder to plan discussion topics, especially when most students are Chinese.

The second moral dilemma is related to critical thinking vs. rote learning; more specifically, the conflicts on course assessments and evaluation methods of homework and tests. Regarding homework assignments, the scope of questions in China generally stems from textbooks, exam papers, and tutorial books, which provide standard answers. Students are told by their teachers to remember or practice what materials they learned in that class to complete their required homework to keep consistent with the standard answer offered in exams to get a high score (Zhang, 2020). Although homework in the west is time-intense, there is a degree of flexibility in how questions are answered or how learned information could be applied. The most prominent feature is a large amount of reading and numerous questions that do not have a standard answer. Homework in liberal arts courses is extremely difficult because teachers will only show the questions, leaving the students having to use their conceptual understanding to answer the question, especially when completing writing reports, projects, and giving speeches. Sometimes, it is difficult for students to complete some homework by themselves, requiring several students to work together, sharing different ideas.

Memorizing is a minor element in Western classes; mostly, teachers would require students to read textbooks, novels, or watch movies then require students to summarize ideas for a report or book review. Chinese students from a traditional Chinese education structure are overwhelmed with the non-formal student-oriented style, requiring in-depth understanding rather than memorizing terms or dates. First, because of the language barriers, even though most Chinese students pass the required TOEFL or IELTS exams to be qualified, the high score does not mean students have the ability to do the homework in Western multicultural classes. Chinese students are only engaged in the material to pass a test or national exam; rarely do they have to perform tasks that are not directly linked to either of these functions. The pressure to conform to tasks and classroom designs that focus on discussion and participation is extremely difficult for Chinese students, as they are the opposite of the rote-learning methodology that has been forced on them since the start of school. Another similar conflict is test-taking; Chinese students are trained by doing lots of practice to get a higher score.

Chinese teachers often encourage students to recite the teaching content rather than understanding it; this is because Chinese teachers generally believe that by reciting the materials, students can remember them forever. It is assumed that if students keep studying for years, maybe one day, they would understand. However, in Western multicultural classes, teachers focus on students' understanding through exams, which

seriously puts Chinese students in a complex situation. Western universities focus on students' comprehensive abilities in the whole learning process, which generally assess students' abilities through diverse and multiple aspects. Course assessment in American universities is mainly composed of classroom participation, in-class quizzes, problems, cases, midterm exams, final exams, and programming assignments: essay, homework, and in-class writing, the evaluation of each section is different. In these situations, the central dilemma is whether Chinese students should adjust themselves to adapt to critical thinking patterns or still use traditional learning methods by memorizing. Without Western teachers' understanding of Chinese students' learning styles and education designs, it is frustrating. Teachers expect that all students should have a similar background of critical learning and thinking patterns, but often the situation is the opposite. On tests, students have a hard time understanding the language, and their writing ability may be full of grammar and writing mistakes. The ideas they are presenting on the exam are not clear because of Chinese speaking patterns, resulting in lower grades.

The conflicts for Chinese students on doing the homework and test-taking could affect teachers too. Teachers want students to provide their ideas in their homework and tests in order to check their understanding. However, scaffolding is standard for Chinese students trying to provide the best answer, which puts the teacher in a moral dilemma. In Chinese students' eyes, mimicking the same answers on the homework and tests is appropriate and encouraged by Chinese teachers in the Chinese education system. Western teachers might have to assess them differently, but it will create more dilemmas by doing so. If teachers give Chinese students a high score by copying and pasting their homework or tests, it is unfair for other classmates who are putting effort into their independent thinking.

## 5. Recommendations

For Chinese students studying in English-speaking countries, various factors affect their academic success, such as language, learning strategies, and class engagement. Therefore, they should take initiatives to overcome and quickly adapt to different teaching designs at schools. Even though schools provide support and assistance, if students refuse to aggressively and willingly transform their mindset of their study strategies and learning attitude to meet the demands in the Western multicultural education system, then they will still experience the same conflicts. Here are some recommendations for students, teachers, and institutions as follows.

**On Participation:** Chinese students need to understand that a Western education system is different from that of the Chinese education system. Chinese learning styles focusing on silence and taking notes in the class will not work in Western multicultural classes. Chinese students need to push themselves to be more engaged in the class. They need to understand the expectations of the teachers. There is no doubt that language is one of the main barriers for them when studying overseas, but this should not be the main reason for them not being engaged in the classes. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly good for Chinese students to respect teachers in the class. However, since the learning

settings are different from those in China, students should be more active to engage and be more critical in the class, and students can try to improve by practicing outside of the classroom; for example, they can build learning circles or groups to study together, to encourage each other, to formulate critical opinions. It might take a long time to work, but it is unquestionably a good start.

Since language ability plays a critical role in students' educational adaptation, Chinese students need to develop their language skills beyond IELTS or test-oriented exams. Getting a high score does not mean that they can communicate with people with a proficient English level or guarantee high grades in their future academic studies. Therefore, students should not be satisfied with the existing learning results. Educators need to understand different cultures and the right of students to be quiet. Being quiet does not mean that students are not actively engaging in thinking or class activities. Teachers need to respect students' right to be silent in the class even though many teachers put class participation as one of the grading parts. For schools, administrators need to be aware of the conflicts; they should provide training for instructors to better understand Chinese students' learning styles and characteristics, providing clear expectations to Chinese students, and improve teaching effectiveness.

**On Homework and Test-Taking:** Chinese students need to understand the differences between rote learning or memorizing and critical thinking. Additionally, they need to be aware of China and the host countries' educational system differences. It will not work by providing the same content from the textbooks or websites as the answer for their homework to teachers, as students might fail a course because of "cheating or plagiarism." Teachers need to be aware that Chinese students' learning strategies may be slow to adjust initially; some may even take years. Respecting Chinese students' right to be silent for the beginning in the class helps them build up their confidence to mimic Westerners' thinking patterns or speaking styles. In this case, schools can provide writing programs to teach Chinese students how to cite and engage material that they will use for their academic papers. Also, schools need to provide training for teachers on how to identify purposeful cheating compared to academic scaffolding. In this way, teachers can provide appropriate instructions and feedback to Chinese students to correct them. On the test-taking, Chinese students need to practice and learn to be concise to provide their ideas on the paper in a limited time. There is no excuse for them to use other people's ideas as their own. Teachers need to understand that students need time to translate their Chinese ideas into English because of second language acquisition characteristics; it is like doing translation homework. It takes time to build Chinese ideas, and it will take even more time to convert these ideas into English during a stressful exam.

## 6. Conclusion

The appeal of international education has grown rapidly over the past couple of decades in China, with increasing numbers of students attracted to the benefits of language skills, international awareness, and overall employability associated with Western education. However, international education demands vary from those taught in the traditional Chinese classroom where a Confucius ideology dictates classroom

interaction and study strategies. This paper discussed the contrasting educational paradigms between Western and Chinese HEIs, which routinely causes academic difficulties in the classroom and moral dilemmas stemming from ingrained educational roles.

The traditional Confucius oriented education structure in China employs a principle of examination, testing theoretical knowledge espoused by experts (instructors) and memorized by students. Classrooms are lecture-intensive, and the teacher-student relationship is based on trust, blind faith that the information distilled and parted is correct and intensely valuable. There is virtually no debate or questioning of content, as the power-structure is void of students' criticism. Creativity is not encouraged as academic performance is directly tied to rote learning and examination that provides almost no flexibility in responses. Standardization is the Chinese system's principal focus, aligned with the Confucius belief of upward mobility for those driven to learn the knowledge parted in the classroom.

Western educational models are of stark contrast to the Confucius belief of examination and rote learning. Creativity, debate, and discussion are at the forefront of most pedagogical approaches, departing from a one-size-fits-all approach to a flexible strategy governed by the situation. Students are expected to examine the content, determine the appropriateness, and reflect upon its applicability. Classrooms are still based on trust, but the instructor's role often maintains a facilitator role, and discussions are student-focused. Critical discussions assist with students' problem-solving ability, preparing them for future employment situations requiring independent skills.

Chinese students entering Western institutions are often ill-prepared for the demands expected in the classroom. These issues raise numerous questions about the roles of students, instructors, and institutions in the development of Chinese students learning capacities in these new environments. As schools strive to recruit additional Chinese students to improve their institutional position and economic standing, their responsibility increases in creating a constructive learning environment that produces success and mitigates moral stress and difficulties currently proliferating. This paper has recommended the following to reduce current hardships:

- 1) Chinese students must develop language capabilities beyond IELTS requirements and strong communication abilities to better prepare them for classroom discussion demands through out-of-class training and learning circles.
- 2) Instructors need to undergo cultural sensitivity training, explaining learning differences between cultures and re-enforcing the student's right to remain silent. Pushing unreasonable communication demands in the classroom further isolates Chinese students and increases insecurities.
- 3) Institutions need to increase and promote academic writing and strategy workshops for Chinese students. Pre-session training and ongoing support programs are necessary for students to build confidence in their writing skills as they make a transition from Chinese educational structures to Western demands.

- 4) Building a better understanding of all parties' expectations, communication between each group is essential to reduce conflicts and improve success opportunities. Open channels for students to reach and contact faculty and departmental support will improve understanding by all involved.

As Western HEIs continue to recruit Chinese students, the pre-existing conceptualization that all students are responsible for adapting their learning strategies must change. Students are still obligated to engage their learning needs proactively to reduce potential learning issues, but educators and institutions need to assist in many areas to reduce the burden and stress experienced by a growing number of students. With active engagement by all parties, students will benefit through learning opportunities, educators will benefit from more robust classroom engagement, and institutions from increased economic growth.

## 7. The Author

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