

# Many Chinese Cultures, Many Learning Styles

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## Abstract

This paper examines some features of Chinese culture of mainland Chinese culture, Hong Kong Chinese culture, Singaporean Chinese culture and Malaysian Chinese culture with a particular focus on educational aspects and issues. Since the 1950s, Chinese culture is fragmented to a variety of cultural derivatives. From the literatures on learning approaches to suggest that different approaches result from different social and educational experiences. Although a similar culture is shared by Chinese from mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore but each has different sociological settings. This paper examines the social and educational backgrounds in which these Chinese culture background students and focuses on the learning style preference of mainland Chinese students in Australian universities.

**Keywords:** Chinese culture, learning styles, Chinese students, international students, educational experiences

## Introduction

The aim of this paper was to examine some features of Chinese culture of mainland Chinese culture, Hong Kong Chinese culture, Singaporean Chinese culture and Malaysian Chinese culture with a particular focus on educational aspects and issues. The study examined the social and educational backgrounds of four Confucius Heritage Culture countries of Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and mainland China.

The number of international students studying overseas has increase rapidly over the past few years. In 2008, it was reported that the number of international students studying in Australia jumped 21 per cent., the biggest rise since 2002. A record 543,898 international students attended Australian institutions in 2008, the first time the figure exceeded 500,000 in a calendar year, Education Minister Julia Gillard says. Higher education enrolments made up 34% of all international student enrolments in 2008, down from 39% in 2007 (AEI, 2007, 2009). New Australian Education International data reveals enrolments by Asian students was up 21.5 per cent, with China providing the greatest overall figure of 127,276 enrolments in 2008 (AEI, 2009). Most of these students come from Asia and Chinese-background students are a major force.

Traditionally, more than 90% of international students have enrolled in institutions in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the main destinations (the US, the UK, Germany, France and Australia) recruiting over 70% of them (OECD, 2006). In recent years, demand is greatest for English language speaking countries with the USA, the UK and Australia as significant education providers. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) trade data for 2008 confirms that education is the nation's third largest export industry, behind coal and iron and well ahead of the next service industry, tourism. According to the ABS figures, Australia's education exports increased from \$12.2 billion in 2007 to \$15.5 billion in 2008, up 23.4% from the previous calendar year, Over the 10 years to 2008, and education exports have grown at an average annual rate of 15%, compared with an average annual rate of 6% across all services exports. (ABS, 2008).

While the international education industry is growing, competition is becoming more intense and even fierce in certain marketplaces. The Australian tertiary education system is increasingly viewed as a competitive market (Russell, 2005). In such a competitive environment, host countries and educational providers face significant completion globally, and are expected to develop niches in the marketplace, and to seek actively to influence student choice by intensifying their marketing strategies. (Kim, Guo, Wang, & Agrusa, 2007; Labi, 2006; Palmer, 2007).

Since 2002, mainland Chinese students have made a significant contribution to the Australian economy in Australian education exports and this growth has been maintained (AVCC, 2005; Gatfield & Larmar, 2008; Hyde & Lindgren-Gatfield, 2005). With China's rapid economic growth in recent years, the China market remains very much a mystery to western business and limited research has been conducted about them (Kim et al., 2007; Kyna, 2007). Despite the large number of Chinese students enrolled at overseas universities, limited research has been conducted about them (Kim et al., 2007; Kyna, 2007). This lack of understanding in research would further disadvantage Australia from the fierce competition in the world higher education industry with higher growth rate in market share from the USA and UK (Prugsamatz, Pentecost, & Ofstad, 2006).

Due to the rapid increase of Asian students in Australian tertiary education, it is important that intercultural awareness should be promoted to ensure better understanding of the cultures and the backgrounds that these students bring to Australia (Gareth, 2005; Shen, 2005; Zhiwen, 2009). This paper attempts to provide some insights about Chinese-background students and their different Chinese discourses. This paper examines the social and educational backgrounds in which these Chinese-background students were brought up and focuses on the following similar but distinctive Chinese background discourses: mainland, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

## **Existing studies**

Although numerous studies have examined Chinese students learning styles and learning experience in Western educational settings, but very few studies have examined differences between Chinese background students with different nationalities or ethnicities (Li & Thao, 2006). The majority of study carried out on the learning styles of students with Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) has regarded them as a homogeneous group and has not acknowledged the different ethnicities. For example, one study conducted by Snider (2005) identified Chinese students from mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Barron (2005) grouped Chinese background students with CHC students from China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam as a unit, as well as in Barker's study 1993, he identified students from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore as a group. There are few comparative

studies on learning styles between different Chinese groups with CHC. One was conducted by Smith (2001) by using an empirical paradigm, analysed the differences in learning approaches between different Chinese subgroups of Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. This study was the only study focused on the Chinese background students, drawing samples from number of counties. The other study carried out by Thao and Li (2006) focusing on the differences in learning styles between Chinese groups of Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and mainland China.

Although numerous studies have examined the learning approaches of Chinese students, very few comparative studies have been carried out with Chinese students from different nations. The term Chinese students can create some confusion among Australian students and academics, particularly for those who lack intercultural awareness. The following discussion will explain the major Chinese discourses according to the regions in which students with Chinese backgrounds live.

## **Chinese learners**

This term is not limited only to students from mainland China. It refers to international students coming from Chinese Confucian heritage cultures. Therefore, international students with at least one parent from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, or Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, are included as “Chinese students” in a broader context. Biggs (1996), in Watkins and Biggs, (eds) used the term to refer to students from countries or regions such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Korea, where Confucian heritage was shared historically.

Together with Chinese ethnic students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese background students represent a majority of international students in Australia. Chinese background students at times have been treated as a single group who has a tendency to take surface approaches to study (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Devos, 2003; Matthews, 2001; Smith, 2001). Although Hong Kong Chinese, Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian Chinese, Taiwan Chinese, and mainland Chinese still called Chinese and shared a similar culture, each

has its own distinctive form. mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have developed their own economic, political, cultural and educational systems. Differences between these four countries are explored. Though there are fundamental common features among these Chinese-background students, they differ considerably from one another in such cultural aspects as behavioural approach, thinking mode, mental attitude and vocabulary (Chen, 2005). Guibemau & Goldblatt (2000) stated that although a similar culture is shared by these Chinese background students, any common culture cannot be authentically understood detachedly from its sociological settings. Therefore, mainland Chinese students specifically, constitute a separate student community with different needs to other students and their study choices need to be explored separately from other East Asian Chinese culture background countries.

## **Linguistic and Social backgrounds**

Previous studies suggested that different learning approaches are a result of different social and educational experiences (Riding & Sadler-Smith, 1997; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 1997; Vermunt, 1996 ). Different educational and social environments influence students' approaches to learning. Renshaw and Volet (1995) tested Singaporean students and pointed out that 96% of students reported English as their first language, and English is commonly spoken in everyday life. In Hong Kong, as in Singapore English is the official medium of instruction, although 'Chinglish' is more often the norm and in many circumstances the language used in Hong Kong often switches between English and Cantonese. This, together with the fact that English is hardly ever spoken outside school, restricts Hong Kong students' experience in the use of English (Biggs, 1990b) The mother tongue for approximately 96% of Hong Kong people is Cantonese (Biggs, 1990a).

Chinese students from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and mainland China may share a similar culture but each has its own distinctive linguistic and sociological setting. Students from these countries speak different languages due to their geographic diversity. The mother tongue for approximately 96% of Hong Kong people is Cantonese. Unlike students from Hong Kong and Singapore where most students speak two languages (English and Chinese), the Malaysian Chinese students typically speak at least three languages – Bahasa Malaysia,

Chinese and English. In contrast, it is quite a simple case in mainland China where Chinese is the only language, and the sole official language. These students from Confucian background cultures have some commonalities in learning, such as a wealth of subtle and pervasive thinking, derived from socialisation patterns (Back & Barker, 2002).

With respect to politics, the differences between these countries and regions are clear in that mainland China features a one-party socialism, however, Singapore and Malaysia have parliamentary capitalism, as does Hong Kong, although with limited suffrage. Political environments determine the nature of what national cultures are advocated and promoted in their respective countries. Since the '50s, the once highly unified Chinese culture is now fragmented, leading to a variety of cultural derivatives, such as mainland Chinese culture, Hong Kong Chinese culture, Singaporean Chinese culture and Malaysian Chinese culture. Although still called Chinese culture, they have their distinctive discourses.

A core of 'Chineseness' seems to unite students, but historical and socio-political differences especially educational disparities, do exist between students from Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and mainland China (Back & Barker, 2002) . Consequently, these differences will be embodied by different values and belief systems, and they in turn are reflected in the ways of learning employed by these students.

## Learning styles

Thao and Li (2007) studied the differences in study approach of Chinese cultural background students drawn from Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. They studied the sample consisted of 192 Chinese students with 89 students from Malaysia, 65 students from Hong Kong, and 38 students from Singapore. The results found that, in comparison with their respective counterparts, Malaysian Chinese students would identify themselves as being more dependent in their learning, Singaporean students as being more adept in presenting ideas/concepts in a clear and systematic fashion, and Hong Kong students as being more anxious in their learning approach, were all supported. However, the findings indicate the following issues:

- Chinese-background students, regardless of the areas from which they come to Australia, consider 'achievement' is their main educational aim;
- Expectations and pressure from the students' families play an essential role in their studies in terms of choice of subjects and learning approaches;
- Learning and academic achievement are treated as two separate issues:
- Academic results are most important;
- Collaborative learning is valued in a pragmatic way, and it is treated as a tool for academic achievement;
- The concept of 'independent learning' is perceived and valued differently;
- Linguistic factors dictate the orientation towards certain learning approaches.

## Conclusion

International students have made a significant contribution to the Australian economy. Most of them come from Asia and Chinese-background students are a major force. Due to the rapid increase of Asian students in Australian tertiary education, it is important that intercultural awareness should be promoted to ensure better understanding of the cultures and the backgrounds that these students bring to Australia. This paper attempts to provide some insights about Chinese-background students and their different Chinese discourses. As discussed, mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia have developed their own economic, political, cultural and educational systems. Differences between these four countries are explored. Though there are fundamental common features among these Chinese-background students, they differ considerably from one another in such cultural aspects as behavioural approach, thinking mode, mental attitude and vocabulary.

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