

Memorization or Discussion: Chinese students' struggle at American academic setting

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Using cultural frameworks, and based on the author's personal experience and conversations with fellow Chinese and American graduate students, this essay analyzes the struggle for Chinese students who have to strike a balance between the American style of learning which is characterized by class discussion and the Chinese style of learning which encourages rote learning and memorization. To memorize or to discuss, that is the question, the question faced by nearly all Chinese university students who are displaced from their Chinese educational background into an American academic setting. It is much more than an issue of memorization or discussion; it is a matter of how one explores and interprets the world. An appropriate combination of the two will make an effective way of learning.

Key words: international students, classroom climate, China, United States, cultural difference

The history of Chinese students studying in the United States may be traced back to the 19th century. Yung Wing (容闳 also spelled as Rong Hong sometimes), who is considered a pioneer of overseas Chinese students, came to the United States in 1847 when he was eighteen years old. He graduated from Yale University in 1954 and returned to China. While studying at Yale, he realized that "the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantage that I had enjoyed; that through western education China may be regenerated" (Chu, 2004). Thanks to his efforts, the Qing court sent its first dispatch of thirty teenage students to the United States in 1872. This marks the beginning of overseas Chinese students studying the United States on a relatively large scale.

Over the next one hundred years or so, China and the US had been engaged in intermittent educational exchanges. During the first half of the 20th century, educational exchanges between the two countries expanded rapidly: "By the end of the 1940s, China had sent more students and scholars to the United States than to any other country for higher education and advanced training" (Li, 2008, p. 1). However, this exchange was put to a full stop in the early 1950s due to the breakout of the Korean War. It was not until after 1978, when China opened its door to the outside world after almost three decades of closure, that educational

exchange between the two countries was resumed. On December 26, 1978, the first dispatch of fifty Chinese scholars and scientists, funded by the Chinese government, left for the United States, thus marking the beginning of an increasingly active exchange relationship between the United States and China for years to come. Interestingly, this first group of government-sponsored Chinese scholars arrived in the US a few days before the two countries formally established diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979.

Since China opened its door and started sending students overseas in the late 1970s, the United States has been the most popular destination for those students. With the deepening of the internationalization process of higher education, the rapid expansion of the Chinese higher education system starting in the late 1990s, as well as the decline of American dollar against the Chinese yuan during the past few years, an increasingly large number of students and scholars have chosen to study abroad, and the United States remains the top choice for them. In 2009, the number of students enrolled outside their country of citizenship reached 3.7 million world wide, a dramatic increase from 0.8 million in 1975 (OECD, 2011). Currently, China is the largest sending countries of international students, and between 1978 and 2010 China sent out a total of 1.9 million students to study abroad. Further, the average

age of Chinese students studying abroad has been decreasing. Between 2006 and 2010 while the majority of them are registered as

undergraduate students, the percentage of high school students has continued to rise (China National Radio, 2011).

Table 1. Number of Chinese students in the United States (2000-2010)

year	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Number	59,939	63,211	64,757	61,765	62,523	62,582	67,723	81,127	98,235	127,628	157,558
(rank)	(1)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(1)	(1)
% of all international students	10.9	10.8	11.0	10.8	11.1	11.1	11.6	13.0	14.6	18.5	21.8
% change over previous year	10.0	5.5	2.4	-4.6	1.2	0.1	8.2	19.8	21.1	29.9	23.3

Source: Institute of International Education. *Open doors* (2000-2011)

Table 2. Top places of origin of international students in US (2010-2011)

Rank	Place of origin	2010/11	% of total	% of change
1	China	57,558	21.8	23.3
2	India	103,895	14.4	-1.0
3	South Korea	73,351	10.1	1.7
4	Canada	27,546	3.8	-2.1

Source: Institute of International Education (2011). *Open doors 2011*.

Table 3. Top five destinations for Chinese higher education students studying abroad (2009)

	# of students from China	# of all international	Chinese students as a % of all international students
US	127,628	690,923	18.8%
Japan	80,320	133,200	60.3%
Australia	70,707	259,000	27.3%
UK	47,253	366,300	2.9%
Canada	41,174	192,400	21.4%

Source: Institute of International Education (2010). *Open doors 2010*¹. OECD (2011). *Education at a Glance*²

¹ Information on the US came from *Open doors 2010*.

² In this table, for Japan, Australia, UK and Canada, only the numbers in the last column (Chinese as a % of all international students) came directly from *Education at a glance 2011*, and the other numbers were derived based on the information from the same report. For example, the numbers in the third column (# of all international) were derived using Chart C3.2 Distribution of foreign students in tertiary education, by country of destination 2009 on page 322 of the report, as well as the information given on page 320 of the report that the total number of international students around the world is 3.7 million. The numbers in the second column (# of students from China) were derived using information from the third column and the information from Table C3.2 Distribution of international and foreign students in tertiary education, by country of origin (2009) on pp. 334-35 of the report.

As shown in Table 1, the number of Chinese students studying in the United States rose from 59,939 in 2000 to 157,558 in 2010, representing an increase of over 160 percent. The increase has accelerated since 2007, and in 2010-11 the number of Chinese students studying in the US increased by 21.8 percent over the previous year, which marks the fourth consecutive year of double-digit growth. In the 2009-10 academic year, China overtook India and became the largest sending country of international students in the US. As one can see in Table 2, among the top four places of origin of international students in the US, China seems to have the greatest potential to grow. South Korea, the third largest sending country, while accounting for 10.4

percent of all international students in the US, only had an increase of 1.7 percent in 2009 over the previous year. India and Canada, the second and fourth largest sending countries respectively, actually declined in their numbers of students studying in the US by 1.0 percent and 2.1 percent respectively in 2009, compared to the previous year. This great potential can also be seen in Table 3: In 2009, 127,628 Chinese students studied in the US, which is far more than 80,320, the number of Chinese students who studied in Japan, the second popular destination for overseas Chinese students, followed by Australia, UK and Canada.

Table 4. Change in international graduate students' enrollment at American universities, 2007 to 2008 through 2010 to 2011

Country of origin	2007 to 2008 graduate enrollment		2008 to 2009 graduate enrollment		2009 to 2010 graduate enrollment		2010 to 2011 graduate enrollment	
	First-time	Total	First-time	Total	First-time	Total	First-time	Total
All countries of origin	3%	3%	0%	2%	3%	1%	8%	2%
China	14%	10%	16%	12%	20%	13%	21%	15%
India	-2%	3%	-16%	-4%	-3%	-6%	2%	-6%
South Korea	-4%	-2%	-13%	-5%	-3%	-6%	0%	-5%

Source: Council of Graduate Schools (2011). *Findings from the 2011 CGS International Graduate Admissions Survey: Phase III: Final offers of admission and enrollment.*

Among the 127,628 Chinese students enrolled in American colleges and universities in 2009, about 66,000 were enrolled in graduate programs (McMurtrie, 2011). As shown in Table 4, while the numbers of international first-time graduate enrollment and international total graduate enrollment at American higher education institutions have witnessed no or little increase since 2007, the number of Chinese graduate students continued to experience double-digit growth. In fact, the increase of 21 percent from 2010 to 2011 in first-time graduate

enrollment of students from China marks the sixth consecutive year of double-digit gains, and the increase of 15 percent from 2010 to 2011 in total graduate enrollment of Chinese students marks the fifth consecutive year of double-digit gains (Council of Graduate Schools, 2011). By comparison, India and South Korea, the second and third largest sending countries of international students in the US, have mostly experienced negative growth in graduate enrollment since 2007.

Table 5. Number of US students studying in China between 1999-2009

year	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Number	2,949	2,942	3,911	2,493	4,737	6,389	8,830	11,064	13,165	13,674	13,910
(rank)	(11)	(10)	(9)	(12)	(9)	(8)	(7)	(5)	(5)	(5)	(5)
% of all study-abroad students	2.1	1.9	2.4	1.4	2.5	3.1	4.0	4.6	5.0	5.3	5.1
% change over pervious year	29.5	-0.2	32.9	-36.3	90.0	34.9	38.2	25.3	19.0	3.9	1.7

Source: Institute of International Education. *Open doors* (2000-2010)

Worth mentioning is that while the number of Chinese students rapidly increased during the past decades, the flow is by no means one-way. As shown in Table 5, in 2009, China was the 5th most popular destination for American students while in 1999, it was only the 11th most popular destination. The number of U.S. students studying in China reached 13,910 in 2009, which is 4.7 times as much as the number in 1999.

Money may not be the sole reason for recruiting Chinese students for many institutions, as Patrick T. Harker, the president of the University of Delaware says, “for us it really is about diversity” (Barlett & Fischer, 2011). Sir Richard Sykes, a former rector of Imperial College London which specializes in science, technology and medicine, and which has a third of undergraduates and about half of postgraduates who come from outside Britain, readily credited the presence of large numbers of hard-working Chinese students with making their classmates more diligent. “The Chinese work bloody hard and drive up the standards,” he says. Other students see that, and they have to compete” (The Economist, 2010). However, there is no denying that money is an important factor; as American higher education institutions face increasingly restrained budget situation, many of them turn to the tremendous Chinese market for a solution. Recently, Zinch China, a consulting company that provide service to American colleges and universities regarding China, was asked by the provost of a large American university to help with recruiting 250 Chinese students in order to fill its institution’s budget deficit (Barlett & Fischer, 2011). At the University of Delaware, the majority of international students are from China, and in the 2011-12 academic year, the number of Chinese

students at this institution reached 517, compared to 8 in 2007. At Oklahoma Christian University, which just started recruiting international students in 2007, has a quarter of the 250 international students coming from China. It is reported that higher education has become an important export product for the United States and ranks No. 5 in the service industry. International students’ expenditure on tuition and everyday goods generates revenues as high as \$ 20 billion per year in the US (Li & Zhang, 2011).

As one can easily imagine, international students in the United States may face difficulties that are caused by cultural, social, economic and political differences, and that Chinese students might encounter even more challenges than other international students due to the larger differences between China and the United States in their cultural environment and educational system. Jiang Xueqin, a curriculum director in two prestigious public high schools in Beijing, who has had rich experience working in and studying Chinese education, thinks that even graduates of his schools who are considered among the brightest in the country “have struggled to adapt to the Western classroom as much as their peers from less elite schools” (Jiang, 2011). Research has recorded various challenges faced by Chinese students studying in North American (i.e. American and Canadian) colleges and universities (Huang & Klinger, 2006; Myles, Qian & Cheng, 2002). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* told such a story (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011):

Last fall, Kent E. St. Pierre [at the University of Delaware] was teaching an intermediate accounting class with 35 students, 17 of them from China. Within a couple of weeks, all but three of the non-

Chinese students had dropped the course. Why did the American students flee? "They said the class was very quiet," recalls Mr. St. Pierre, who considers himself a 1960s-style liberal and says he's all for on-campus diversity. But, he agrees, "it was pretty deadly."

This story vividly illustrates the kind of difficulties faced by Chinese students studying in the United States. While larger socioeconomic factors may cause difficulties and confusions among Chinese students in their everyday lives, one of the biggest challenges in the academic setting is different teaching styles in classroom (Huang & Brown, 2009). It has been reported that Professors at American universities complain about their Chinese students' ability to participate in class (Hathaway, 2011). Some of them had to make changes to their curriculum because of the increasing presence of Chinese students. For example, Professor Kent E. St. Pierre from the University of Delaware, in order to accommodate Chinese students, decided to weigh less on class participation so that their final grades would not be pulled down too much (Bartlett & Fischer, 2011).

Obviously, language barrier is part of the reason why Chinese students tend to have difficulty participating in class, but the issue goes deeper than that. As more and more Chinese students come to the United States to study, it is essential for American institutions to know more about the deeper reasons in order to better facilitate Chinese students' adjustments to the new environments. In the meantime, it will be helpful for Chinese students who are experiencing or are about to experience similar struggles to know about how other students feel and have gone through the process. This essay focuses on this particular aspect of the different teaching styles that present challenges to Chinese students studying in the United States, namely, how to be an active participant in American classrooms while remaining relatively comfortable with their own learning style. Using cultural frameworks, and based on the author's personal experience and conversations with fellow Chinese and American graduate students, this essay looks into the struggle of Chinese students who have to strike a balance between the American style of learning which is

characterized by class discussion and the Chinese style of learning which encourages memorization. Worth pointing out is that this essay by no means provides a definitive answer, but rather, it is an attempt to explore and interpret the kind of challenge Chinese students face in American academic settings.

Personal experience

Born, raised and educated in China, I am a product of the Chinese culture and education, and the Chinese way of thinking and behaving had been molded into my character. I was a so-called "good student" all my life in China, accepting the teacher's suggestions and requests without much questioning or contradicting, reciting and memorizing textbooks under the great pressure of examinations, sensitive and responsive to the reactions of my peer students toward my behavior, and listening quietly and attentively in class. After 18 years of formal education in China—5 years of elementary school, 3 years of junior middle school, 3 years in high school, four years in college and three years in graduate school, I came to the United States to pursue my doctoral degree in 1999. From the moment I entered American classroom, I had been subject to "culture shock" of all sorts, among which the open, free and lively discussions in class gave me the most challenge in the academic setting.

In American university classrooms, students usually sit in separate and movable chairs, which enable them to arrange the chairs freely—in a circle or in line. They are allowed to eat and drink in the face of the professor who is giving the lecture. The professor is usually found among students, either sitting with them in circle or standing among them, getting ready for any untimely interruption by the students who have questions or comments. Individual questions are welcomed and respected. Students are active participants in class, and they put forward their own opinions by raising hands or simply cutting into the professor's talk. Class discussion takes a large proportion of the class time. In the beginning, it seemed to me that most of the time the discussions were not fruitful because no correct answers resulted from them. But American students' enthusiasm and liveliness in discussions did not seem to dwindle because of that. Instead, the more diverse their opinions

were, the happier they seemed to be. I gradually realized that discussions seemed to be more like the means to bringing about different perspectives, rather than a way to come to a unanimous conclusion. As long as they could express themselves and know others' perspectives, American students did not seem to care about the answers. Or maybe they did not think there would be THE correct answer.

Thinking back on the Chinese classroom I had experienced in college, I could see a sharp contrast: The seats and tables were usually fixed and arranged in rows. No one was allowed to eat or drink in class, and eating and drinking in the face of the professor was considered impolite and offensive. The professor was usually found standing in the front of the classroom lecturing. There was a clear and unseen line between the professor's space and students' space, and they seemed to have a tacit agreement on not violating it. Students were usually quiet in class, listening to the professor attentively, taking notes and memorizing what the professor instructed.

When I studied as an English major at Wuhan University in China, I would form a certain opinion of the authors and their works after each class. The textbooks had set a key tone for all the authors and their works, and the professors would tell us how to interpret Hamlet's hesitancy in killing his uncle, for example. We students would write them down in our notes, and write the notes down in exams. There was a pattern to each class that I was familiar with: a subject stated at the beginning, an insightful analysis made in the middle and an authoritative interpretation offered at the end. Each time after the class, I could feel that I had added something to my accumulation of knowledge, such as the three periods of Shakespeare's literary career or the list of representative works by Charles Dickens. I had a sense of achievement since I seemed to have obtained a clearer vision of the phenomenon we were examining and had decided my position on the topic. Most of the time, I would feel certain of myself and the knowledge I had learned. In examinations, I would fill in the blanks and choose the correct answers according to my memory. Everything seemed to be tangible and orderly.

Memorization, however, did not seem to work in the American classroom. In class I was always busy following the unpredictable directions of the discussions and overwhelmed by the different perspectives. A sense of uncertainty puzzled me. At the same time, however, I was excited by the freedom to choose among all the perspectives, and to explore the possibility of forming a system of my own thoughts. It felt as if my view had been broadened and I had more space. I started exploring the differences I had experienced from a cultural perspective and through talking to other students who had similar experiences.

Hieroglyphic Culture vs. Alphabetical Culture

Language is an integral part of culture and it determines, to a certain degree, the way people think and act. Li (as cited in Russell, 1966) divides the world civilizations into two categories, namely, hieroglyphic and alphabetical ones. The former is characterized by solidarity while the latter by fluidity.

[W]ith all respects to alphabetical civilization, it must be frankly stated that it has a grave and inherent defect in its lack of solidity. The most civilized portion under the alphabetical culture is also inhabited by the most fickle people. ... Certainly this phenomenon can be partially explained by the extra-fluidity of the alphabetical language which cannot be depended upon as a suitable organ to conserve any solid idea. Intellectual contents of these people may be likened to waterfalls and cataracts, rather than seas and oceans. No other people is richer in ideas than they; but no people would give up their valuable ideas as quickly as they do...

The Chinese language is by all means the counterpart of the alphabetic stock. It lacks most of the virtues that are found in the alphabetic language; but as an embodiment of simple and final truth, it is invulnerable to storm and stress. It has already protected the

Chinese civilization for more than forty centuries. It is solid, square, and beautiful, exactly as the spirit of it represents (p. 37).

This kind of cultural framework runs the risk of being stereotypical, and one does not have to embrace it whole-heartedly. But it does provide an interesting lens. Using this framework, the Chinese civilization belongs to the hieroglyphic category, as the Chinese language does not have an alphabetical system and it does not depend on the combination of letters to form a word. Each Chinese character is self-contained and suggests an idea or conception. There is no other way rather than memorization for children to master the hundreds of characters. Therefore, the first step of learning for most Chinese students is to memorize, which may exert significant influence on their later study.

The conceptions of hieroglyphic culture and alphabetical culture can partly explain why Chinese students would memorize to learn while American students learn by discussions. An alphabetical culture, like its way of forming a word by juxtaposing the letters, is a flowing and mobile culture. Lacking solidity and stability, it can be compared to flowing water. People of this kind of culture are likely to let their opinions and ideas flow. Whereas, hieroglyphic cultures, like their self-contained characters, are solid and stable. People of hieroglyphic cultures admire the deep and profound seas and oceans which symbolize the stores and accumulations of resources. Therefore, as people of alphabetical culture, American students are ready to give away their opinions by discussions while Chinese students, as people of hieroglyphic culture, are more likely to accumulate their knowledge by memorization. As a result, American students are stereotyped by their original but fluid ideas, like the flowing water, as compared with the well-known image of Chinese students who have tremendous stores of knowledge, like the seas and oceans.

It might be inferred that people of alphabetical cultures, like flowing waters of waterfalls and cataracts, are more likely to be shallow since they are busy giving away, and might not have the time to store up. As the

saying goes: Some people speak because they have something to say and other people speak because they have to say something. This inference might not necessarily stand, however, as people of alphabetical cultures can also become deep and profound, and even rich and resourceful through exchanges of ideas. N³, an American doctoral student in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland, believes she benefits a lot from discussion:

B⁴: Do you think it might make you seem superficial if you keep giving your ideas away without making them complete and well-formed?

N: I would say: I've just thought of this, let me say it to you and tell me what you think. We would call that brainstorming, and we do that a lot. ... It's saying: here's part of an idea, tell me what you think. If you agree, maybe you can help me form it, and make it a profound idea. And together we would collaborate, and make it a profound idea. It's like bringing somebody into your thinking: we are together, you'll make it; I'll give you half of my thinking, this is all I can think right now, can you add to it? It's asking somebody to use his mind with you.

B: Is it possible that you might be pulled out of your own track of thinking by discussions and drawn to a different direction without deepening your thinking at all?

N: You might not be able to go deep enough. But then you can do it on your own. That's like the group saying: well, I can't add to your idea. I can see your question, but I would take it another way. Now in my mind, I would say: no, no, no. I really wanted your help with it this way. So I'll do that on my own. ... After you've asked for a sort of assistance or asked for collaboration, ... and if you find you can't get what you had in mind,

³ All the names in this paper are pseudonyms.

⁴ B represents the author in all the conversations in this essay.

then you do the other, you go back on your own. Or you look for another mind to share with. Maybe you need to talk to somebody else to collaborate with.

In N's description one can feel the dynamic process of learning. There is a constant flow of information, and students can choose from the resources to deepen or broaden their points of view. The process of discussion is the process of choosing collaborators in thinking. To D, another American student who is in the same program as N, discussions could help to structure her ideas:

... [B]y stating out loud what I'm thinking, it helps me to hear it, to hear it loud, helps me to articulate it better, you know. When it's up here [in the mind], it's all kind of scrambled around, it's vague and it doesn't have any real structure. But if I have to say it loud and explain it to somebody, I have to put a structure to it, so that someone else can understand. ... And usually it takes more than one time. You know, whenever I'm working on it, a new idea or trying to understand a concept, after I talk to several people about it, they really take some substance, and I really start to have an ownership of it. ... It just gets structured, you know, and I can really understand what I'm talking about. It's not so nebulous any more, all of a sudden; it gets much more concrete.

As N and D describe, one of the main benefits American students can get from discussion is facilitating thinking. The ultimate aim of discussions is to formulate an idea of one's own.

Shame Culture vs. Guilt Culture

Chinese students attach great importance to presenting themselves. W, a research scientist at the Institute for Physical Science and Technology at the University of Maryland, obtained his Ph.D. degree in China, and was widely recognized to be a talented student when he studied in China. But even for him, public

speaking in class was something to be nervous about:

B: Did you feel nervous when you spoke in class in China?

W: Quite a lot. Generally speaking, when the teacher questioned, I would wait a little bit, ... until I felt that I knew the answer for sure, and everyone would be happy with the answer.

In addressing the whole class, Chinese students feel a responsibility to be thorough and meaningful to most listeners, if not so inspiring or enlightening. Therefore, they are cautious and about presenting themselves. They would like to listen and keep the ideas to themselves before their thoughts turn complete and systematic. When they have doubts, they would probably mumble to themselves or share with a close friend. This is a quiet learning process. In contrast, the discussions in American universities are free and open, and every student is expected to participate. They are willing to share their opinions and feelings with the whole class. Sometimes they stumble and organize their thoughts while speaking, and sometimes they cut short their talk by apologizing that they might need to give it a second thought. Everything seems to be spontaneous and extemporaneous.

From one point of view, Chinese students' cautiousness in presenting themselves may be attributed to their sense of responsibility. From the perspective of a shame-socialized culture, however, this will be quite another story. According to Martin Schoenhals, shame is "the feeling that results from awareness of failure, an awareness generated either from within the individual himself or deriving from the reactions, real or imagined, of others" (1993, p. 191). Ruth Benedict distinguishes a shame culture and a guilt culture in the following way:

True shame culture rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism. A man is shamed either by being openly

ridiculed and rejected or by fantasizing to himself that he has been made ridiculous. In either case it is a potent sanction. But it requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not. In a nation where honor means living up to one's own picture of oneself, a man may suffer from guilt though no man knows of his misdeed and a man's feeling of guilt may actually be relieved by confessing his sin. (as quoted in Schoenhals, 1993, p. 191).

Chinese culture is undoubtedly a shame culture, as the conception of "face" is at the core of its culture. According to Martin Schoenhals: "The concept of face is probably the feature of Chinese culture most familiar to Westerners. That most Westerners have heard about the Chinese concept of face is not accidental. Face is central to Chinese culture, and anyone who has contact with Chinese society cannot help encountering the manifestations of its importance" (1993, p.66).

It is a widely-recognized fact that Chinese culture values unity and harmony, therefore, it might follow that Chinese people would be more tolerant of one another for their mistakes and shortcomings, since criticisms and conflicts do not seem to be compatible with unity and harmony. But it turns out to be quite the opposite. Chinese people are critical and particular of one another in public settings, which may be determined by the hierarchical and evaluative nature of Chinese culture.

According to Tu Wei-Ming, "a defining characteristic of East Asian thought is the widely accepted proposition that human beings are perfectible through self-effort in ordinary daily existence" (1985, p. 19). Chinese culture, Confucianism in particular, believes that human beings are born with good nature and a tremendous potential for improvement and perfection. As Confucius says in the *Analects*: "By nature men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart" (性相近也，习相远也 17.2). Accordingly, there is no defective human being and all human beings have the potential to be virtuous model people, which

should be the object of people's behavior. A person who realizes this potential is called *junzi* (君子), and everyone should strive to emulate this ideal figure. Originally and literally, *junzi* means "princeling," but in Confucianism, *junzi* refers to any morally superior man regardless of his family origin (Wu, 1986, p. 20).

Deeply influenced by Confucianism, Chinese people tend to have an image of a perfect and flawless person in their minds. Once a successful man is recognized and accepted by the public, he/she is likely to be depicted as an ideal paragon and pacesetter to be followed. He/she is not allowed to commit mistakes because he/she is supposed to be perfect. This kind of mentality results in the performative nature of social life in China. Once a person stands up and addresses the rest of the group, he/she has given himself/herself up to the close scrutiny of the audience. The listeners would examine him/her critically, from his/her dress, manners to the quality of the speech. Therefore, a public figure in China, or anyone who stands above the crowd is susceptible to a critical evaluation by the rest.

The same is true with Chinese university classrooms. W was somewhat different from most Chinese students and he paid price for this difference:

W: Some teachers didn't like me.

B: Why?

W: ... It's like, perhaps they thought I didn't respect them as I was supposed to. I asked too many questions. Perhaps I was making the situations hard for the teacher. ...

B: Is that because they felt like their positions were threatened?

W: ... Maybe too many questions are a sign of disrespect.

B: Do you think it's really disrespect?

W: Because if it's too hard, and the teacher can't answer, there'll be trouble. The teacher loses face in that case, because he has trouble in making things clear.

B: Why does the teacher respond negatively when he or she can't make things clear?

W: [Because] The teacher will think: ah, you are just a student, but you don't pay respect to the order and rule.

In Chinese tradition, the teacher is the exemplary model for all students, and an erudite person endowed with knowledge which he is supposed to disseminate and impart while clarifying the doubts of the students. In class, the teacher is the public figure burdened with authority. To maintain this authority, the teacher has to stand the careful and endless examination of the quiet students. The teacher has to live up to his/her authoritative image by being able to answer all the questions students have and solve all the problems encountered in class. It is difficult to maintain this authority and quite easy to damage it. Consequently, teachers arduously maintain their image by keeping a distance from students and by coming up with an answer wherever students ask them for advice. Otherwise, there might be the issue of losing face. Therefore, a teacher in China is supposed to have a superior and powerful image to be awed by students. He/she stands high above the seated students and tells them what is right, what is wrong, what they should do, and what they should not do. The students tend to look up to their teachers and listen to them attentively. As a result, the relationship between the teacher and students is somewhat hierarchical, as Z, a Chinese doctoral student of Political Science at George Washington University, felt:

B: What do you think of the relationship between the teacher and the students in Chinese universities?

Z: The teacher has the absolute authority in class. Generally speaking, you can't contradict him. It's like the teacher teaches and the student learns.

B: If you had different opinions, would you express them?

Z: Eh ... except when the teacher encouraged.

To a certain degree, this hierarchical relationship between the teacher and students prevents the students from growing up, because the moment the teacher assumes authority, he/she assumes responsibility, too. Or he/she takes the responsibility away from the students. Without a sense of responsibility, students could not really grow up. S, an American doctoral student in Journalism at the University of Maryland, who taught both high school and college students in China, thus describes her Chinese high school students:

The class would be quiet if I controlled, if I'm very much in charge. They would never answer any question. They would laugh. They were very embarrassed. They were too embarrassed to answer. ... When I asked them to have group work. I said: ok, you four people and you four people, you work in groups together. The high school students couldn't handle it. They would just laugh, chat. They didn't feel comfortable with that. They wanted to have me to teach them. They wanted to listen to me, and they wanted me to tell them the answer. ... They were very young. My 13-year-old students in America are very independent, very critical thinking and have a lot of opinions. But in China, if I asked the students opinions, they'd just laugh. They are very uncomfortable. They don't really want to express their opinions. They seemed like children to me, the high school students. They seemed very young, very naïve.

As for myself, when growing up I never felt like an equal to any of my teachers, and invariably stood at attention when talking with them. Having nodded and said "yes" to my teachers for so many years, I am surprised to see how American students interrupt the professor by raising a hand or by simply saying "excuse me." They seem to be at liberty to request the professor for a clarification of a concept, while in my Chinese way of thinking it would be a

fault of my own if I am the only one in the dark. I consider it incumbent upon myself to figure it out, although it is often the case that whoever raises a question is not alone. Furthermore, American students may even express their disagreement openly and the professor values and addresses each student's questions. The disagreement does not seem to bother or embarrass a professor, even if he/she cannot give a satisfactory answer. They usually feel comfortable admitting that they do not know. In my eighteen years of formal schooling in China, among the many teachers who taught me, I only heard one teacher say to us: "I'm sorry, but I don't know." The irony is that his students were at a loss as to how to respond to his apology; they obviously had not expected such an answer.

If it is true to say that the fear of losing face creates the distance between the teacher and students in China, it will be equally true to say that the fear of losing face causes students' nervousness in public speaking. According to W, his fellow students would respond to his speaking in class with a mixed feeling of admiration and discomfort. They would constantly compare themselves with him. They might admire his talent if they did not know the answer, but this admiration would easily pass into concerns about themselves or an envy of him if they did know the answer. The evaluative nature of Chinese culture determines that Chinese students would judge other students, consciously or subconsciously, in the way they are judged and evaluated. As a result, Chinese students are very self-conscious and sensitive to others' opinions of them. Therefore, they are more likely to feel uneasy and nervous when facing an unknown or unfamiliar situation since they usually assume that they are supposed to know what other people already knew, and they are afraid of being ridiculed or evaluated negatively for not knowing. As Martin Schoenhals observes: "Such sensitivity to personal exposure characterizes many shame-socialized cultures since the exposed individual is one who is especially vulnerable to shame—vulnerable to negative judgements by others in society about his actions" (1993, p. 194). In Chinese classrooms, a student standing up and presenting himself/herself is closely watched, judged and evaluated. Anyone speaking in

public is supposed to do well, otherwise he/she is not entitled to or does not deserve others' attention. And since the listeners are giving their attention, they are entitled to evaluation. Anyone who does not live up to the audience's expectation is doomed to embarrassment at least, and shame most of the time.

In American university classrooms, students question among themselves, contradict the teacher, and the teacher and students together critique what they are studying. The teachers are respected because of their knowledge, but the ownership of knowledge certainly does not entitle them to be the authority in class. Instead, they are more like participants in an exploration. N thus describes the role of teachers in American university classrooms:

The relationship between the teacher and students at university level is collegial, like colleagues almost. I mean, you know they know more, you are respectful of their better knowledge, and I think that's clear. But you can have a discussion on an equal footing, on an equal level. Not that you know as much, but that what you do know is still valued to the professor, and they are going to help you like a mentor. ... I have never been asked to simply accept from a professor. No professor has just said to me: I know this, now you know it; accept it, I told you. They never give me the information in that way.

The free inquiry in American classrooms are best described by John Dewey as "a plea for casting off that intellectual timidity which hampers the wings of imagination, a plea for speculative audacity, for more faith in ideas, sloughing off cowardly reliance upon those partial ideas to which we are wont to give the name facts" (as cited in Greene, 1998, p. 126). John Passmore calls this "critico-creative thinking":

Critical thinking as it is exhibited in the great traditions conjoins imagination and criticism in a single form of thinking; in literature, science, history,

philosophy or technology, the free flow of the imagination is controlled by criticism and criticisms are transformed into a new way of looking at things. Not that either the free exercise of the imagination or the raising of objections is in itself to be despised; the first can be suggestive of new ideas, the second can show the need for them. But certainly education tries to develop the two in combination. The educator is interested in encouraging critical discussion as distinct from the mere raising of objections; and discussion is an exercise of the imagination (as cited in Greene, 1988, p.126).

In a shame culture like Chinese culture, learning is a matter of maintaining face by living up to others' expectations in performing, whereas in American classrooms, the desirable end of pedagogy is "a movement in the direction of a kind of rule-governed self-sufficiency and independence" (Greene, 1988, p. 119). Bearing this difference in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the Chinese learning process is characterized by memorization—it is the safest way of learning since there is much less risk of losing face involved in memorization.

Concluding Remarks

It has been more than ten years since I came to the United States; during these years I have obtained my doctoral degree and am now teaching at a state university in the United States. However, the memory of my struggle in getting accustomed to participating in class discussions is still fresh in my mind. Until today, I do not feel at home in such an environment. Further, I have long realized that I am not alone in this struggle as I have witnessed it in my fellow Chinese students at American graduate schools as well as Chinese students in classes I have taught.

Over time I have gradually realized that the learning styles of American and Chinese students are not as dichotomous as they appear to be. It is not that Chinese college students only memorize and never discuss, or that American

university students never memorize and only discuss. Both Chinese and American university students learn by memorization as well as discussion, but their favor for one or the other is obvious. From a thing one is least familiar with one learns most. I have benefited from formal education in China both in my moral cultivation and in my knowledge acquisition, yet I had always felt something was missing. I could feel it even more keenly when far away from my country, especially when confronted with another culture and ideology. The American learning style characterized by discussion offers me a new perspective on the Chinese learning style characterized by memorization. An exploration of the differences has undoubtedly shed light on my understanding of both cultures.

To memorize or to discuss, that is the question, the question faced by nearly all Chinese university students who are displaced from their own educational background into an American academic setting. It is much more than an issue of memorization or discussion; it is a matter of how one explores and interprets the world. An appropriate combination of the two will make an effective way of learning. As an American friend of mine said half jokingly: It would be the best for students to receive primary and secondary education in China where they can lay a sound knowledge base first by memorizing, and then go to a university in America to learn how to discuss and think critically.

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