



# Confucian Educational Thoughts to International Learners of Chinese: Perceptions and Attribution

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# 1. Introduction



# Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) and Confucian education

- Confucianism has had a lasting and pervasive influence on the development and characteristics of Chinese education system.
- CHC learner phenomenon has aroused the interest of sociologists, educators and psychologists (e.g., Bond, 1996; Coopamah & Khan, 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Gao, et al., 2012; Ho & Hau, 2010; Jong, 2012; Li & Wegerif, 2014).

# Traditional teaching and learning approach under CHC

- Asian students are considered hardworking and quiet (Yang 2008).
- Individual responsibility for learning is not valued as much as rote learning and collective effort (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).
- Memorizing and rote learning is the main learning method (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Harris, 1997).
- Critical thinking is not valued as much as rote learning and collective effort (Waston 2001).

- Teaching was traditionally dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered method (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Li & Wegerif, 2014).
- Students tend to follow and obey their teachers without doubt, questions or challenges (e.g., Chan, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Turner & Acker, 2002).
- Education is summarized as a process of accumulating knowledge rather than constructing and using knowledge for immediate purpose (Hu, 2002).

# Concerns about CHC teaching and learning

- Teacher-centered class (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991),
- Little learner participation (Li & Wegerif, 2014),
- Too much rote learning (Liu & Littlewood, 1997),
- Mimetic methods (Mok, et al., 2008),
- Lack of criticality and creativity among Chinese students (Wingrove, 1993).

- To a large extent, learning and teaching traditions in CHC contexts are negatively stereotyped as authoritarian teaching, bird-cage teaching and an examination culture (Yang, 2004)

# Re-interpretation of CHC teaching and learning

- The “**Chinese Learner Paradox**” challenges of the western perception (e.g., Dahlin & Watkins, 2000; Starr, 2012; Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001).
- New understandings of “**Confucian confusions**” (e.g., Biggs, 1991; Kennedy, 2002), **a teacher-student family relationship** (e.g., Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Pratt et al., 1999), and **a mixture of authoritarianism and student-centeredness** (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Kember et al., 2001).

# New understandings of CHC learners

- **Varied perceptions and practice** for Asian students in the Western higher institutions (e.g., Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).
- **Rote learning**: a combination of memorization with inner reflection (Starr, 2012).
- **Overtime changes** for Confucian traditions of learning (Hyun, 2011; Yang, 2008).
- **More reproductive academic writing** based on memorizing and rote learning strategy (Waston, 2001).

# Studies on teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language

- Teachers' inadequate preparation for teaching (Wang et al., 2013).
- Students' adaptation to teacher-centeredness (Xu, 2012).
- Students' misbehavior and teachers' complaints (Liu, 2012).
- Cultural adaptation: a crucial part of the teaching and learning of Chinese (Zhou & Li, 2015).
- Teacher-student communication: necessary (Hu & Tian, 2012).

# Studies on international learners of Chinese

## Most frequently used strategies

- Rote learning
- Repeated writing
- Graphic and context cues (e.g., McGinnis, 1999; Shen, 2005)

## Successful learners

- Stronger motivation
- More metacognitive strategies (Wang et al., 2009)

# Limitations of previous studies

- Most on students in other settings than Chinese.
- Mostly qualitative in nature.
- Mostly a small sample.
- Few on the international students from diverse cultural background.
- Quantitative features of the students remain largely unknown.
- Little attention on international students of Chinese in China.

# Research Questions

- (1) How well do international learners of Chinese receive Chinese traditional educational thought?
- (2) How do they perceive Chinese traditional concepts of learning, attitudes towards learning, methods of learning, aims of learning, modes of teaching, and roles for the teacher?
- (3) What factors influence their perceptions of Chinese traditional educational philosophy?



## 2. Method



# Participants

- The participants for the survey were **458** international students from a comprehensive and national key university in Shandong Province, China.
- Coming from **80 countries**, the sample was composed of **36** graduate students and **422** undergraduates; **195** were male and **263** female.
- **Ten** students were the interviewees, among whom **three** were graduate students, **seven** were undergraduates; **four** females and **six** males.

**Table 1 Profiles of the participants in the study**

<b>Grade</b>				<b>Major</b>			
Postgraduates		Undergraduates		Postgraduates		Undergraduates	
MA-1	7	Year-1	184	Chinese	18	Medicine	231
MA-2	9	Year-2	137	International trade	6	Chinese	105
MA-3	14	Year-3	34	Chinese	2	International trade	47
MBA	2	Year-4	64	Economics	3	Economics	14
PHD	4	Year-5	3	Others	7	Others	25

Note: Others include education, politics, marketing, finance, business, management and history.

# Sources of Data

- The questionnaire developed by Wang (2010)
  - ✓ Section 1 elicited students' personal information.
  - ✓ Section 2 included 40 structured items in six categories with Likert scales ranging from "1" for "strongly disagree" to "5" for "strongly agree".
    - A. concepts of learning
    - B. attitudes towards learning
    - C. aims of learning
    - D. methods of learning
    - E. roles for the teacher
    - F. modes of teaching

Reliability:  $\alpha = .891$ ; standardized item  $\alpha = .921$ .

- **Semi-structured interviews**, guided by some questions prepared beforehand, were used to elicit information for the sources of students' conceptualization and possible reasons for their perceptions.

# Data Collection

- The questionnaire was administered in October 2014, distributed to 490 students, 458 found valid
- Interviews were in English for nine interviewees except one who has a good command of Chinese. They were **digitally-recorded** and **checked twice** to yield useful information.

# Data Analysis

- Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS 13.0 for
  - the tendencies of students' responses in general and by category,
  - ascertain the most and least received educational thought
  - the relationship between different categories of educational thought
  - contributory factors to students' judgment such as age, gender, major, nation and the time of learning Chinese
- T-test was to find gender differences in students' perceptions, if any.

- All relevant interview comments were selectively **transcribed** and **checked** for twice.
- Then they were **analyzed** in accordance with the research questions.
- The quoted excerpts in Chinese were **translated** into English.



## **3. Results and Findings**



# General Tendency of Students' Perceptions

- The educational thought embedded in Confucianism was **well received**.
- The grand mean was **4.0032** (4.4934~3.2336).
- Of the items, **23 (57.5%)** mean values larger than 4.000.
- This strongly suggests the **acknowledgment** of the value of most educational thought.
- In general, students had **positive attitudes** towards the traditional Chinese educational philosophy.

## Table 2 Descriptive results of students' responses

Category	Item	Mean	Std Dev.	Category	Item	Mean	Std Dev.
A	1	4.4934	0.9148	F	4	4.0306	0.8895
D	12	4.4782	0.797	A	16	4.0262	2.1095
E	23	4.4738	0.734	B	24	4.0000	1.0184
D	10	4.4148	0.8538	D	22	3.9891	0.9202
A	6	4.3166	2.0705	E	31	3.9629	2.5105
B	19	4.2489	0.909	D	32	3.9192	0.8726
C	25	4.1965	0.8346	D	37	3.8908	1.0339
C	27	4.1965	0.8977	F	3	3.845	0.8801
F	11	4.1921	0.9132	C	30	3.8362	1.032
C	20	4.1878	0.8874	B	33	3.8275	1.0844
E	29	4.1659	0.9442	E	8	3.8144	1.068
A	38	4.1594	2.0558	C	15	3.7948	0.9798
B	17	4.1419	0.9212	F	28	3.7598	0.9397
D	36	4.1201	0.8503	F	9	3.7511	1.1046
F	35	4.1114	0.8515	D	7	3.6878	0.9313
D	5	4.1092	0.8375	C	13	3.6463	0.948
B	26	4.0983	0.9173	F	21	3.6376	1.0225
A	34	4.0939	0.9666	E	39	3.6354	1.079
A	18	4.0349	0.9557	D	40	3.5699	1.0187
B	14	4.0349	0.8967	E	2	3.2336	1.1853
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>4.0032</b>		

# Students' Perceptions by Category

- Concepts of learning: **best received** by international students.
- Learning attitudes: much **in consistency** with the Chinese traditional thought.
- Learning methods and aims of learning: **partially agreed**.
- Modes of teaching and roles for the teachers: **not accepted so well**.

**Table 3 Results of students' perceptions by category**

Category	Mean	Rank
Concepts of learning (A)	4.1874	1
Attitudes towards learning (B)	4.0586	2
Methods of learning (D)	4.0199	3
Aims of learning (C)	3.9763	4
Modes of teaching (F)	3.9039	5
Roles for the teacher (E)	3.8810	6

## In addition,

- Strong and significant correlation among the six categories.
- Mutually interactive within an entire system.
- Any change in perceptions of one category will lead to perceptual changes of the others.
- This confirms how **the integrity of educational philosophy**, both Chinese and foreign, is strengthened by interwoven ideas of different kinds and why these students perceived educational philosophy as **a holistic system**.

**Table 4 Results of correlation analysis by category**

		A	B	C	D	E	F
A	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.555	.525	.571	.365	.519
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
B	Pearson Correlation	.555	1.000	.717	.720	.489	.671
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
C	Pearson Correlation	.525	.717	1.000	.708	.520	.655
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
D	Pearson Correlation	.571	.720	.708	1.000	.552	.737
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
E	Pearson Correlation	.365	.489	.520	.552	1.000	.515
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
F	Pearson Correlation	.519	.671	.655	.737	.515	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.

# The Best Recognized

- In the list of the highest received items,
  - ✓ “conception of learning” (3);
  - ✓ “attitudes towards learning”(3);
  - ✓ “aims of learning”(3);
  - ✓ “methods of learning”(3);
  - ✓ “modes of teaching”(1);
  - ✓ “roles for the teacher”(2).
- Such results mean that these international students are broadly in agreement with traditional Chinese concepts of learning and highly value the methods of learning promoted by Confucius.

**Table 5** The best received educational thoughts

Category	Item	Content	Mean	Std. Dev.
A	1	There is no end to learning.	4.493	0.914
D	12	Skillfulness comes from practice.	4.478	0.797
E	23	Teachers should set good examples for students.	4.473	0.734
D	10	Learning is done step by step.	4.414	0.853
A	6	Learning makes wisdom obtainable.	4.316	2.070
B	19	It's wise to pursue life-long learning.	4.248	0.909
C	25	The gentleman keeps learning, to the betterment of his future endeavors.	4.197	0.834
C	27	Learning without thinking leads to confusion; thinking without learning ends in danger.	4.196	0.897
F	11	To provide enlightenment and guidance in teaching.	4.192	0.913
C	20	Learning is aimed at broad knowledge, deep questioning, careful thinking, clear clarification, and faithful action.	4.187	0.887
E	29	Teachers and elders are those who deserve due respect.	4.165	0.944
A	38	There is no royal road to learning.	4.159	2.055
B	17	Diligence is the path through the mountains of books; hard work is the ship for sailing through the endless ocean of learning.	4.141	0.921
D	36	To inquire knowledge with earnestness and reflect on it with self-practice.	4.120	0.850

- Despite their diversified cultural backgrounds, these international students unanimously
  - ✓ expect teachers to be **role models** both academically and morally,
  - ✓ teachers deserve students' **due respect**
  - ✓ learning can bring about **fundamental changes** in one's life role and future career.

# The Least Acknowledged

- roles for the teacher
- methods of learning
- modes of teaching
- aims of learning

Table 6 The least acknowledged educational thoughts

Category	Item	Content	Mean	Std. Dev.
D	7	Learning by analogy and inferring other things from one fact.	3.687	0.931
C	13	Officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars.	3.646	0.948
F	21	Instruct only when someone bursts with eagerness to learn; enlighten only when someone bubbles to speak but fails to express themselves.	3.637	1.022
E	39	He who teaches me for one day is my father for life.	3.635	1.079
D	40	Learn by rote.	3.569	1.018
E	2	Teachers are the superiors whereas students are inferiors.	3.233	1.185

## More specifically,

- Dislike teacher's absolute authority
- Do not expect a very close relationship with their teacher.
- That is in consistency with the education mode under lots of non-Confucian heritage cultures, in which the teacher is in the position to be challenged and teacher-student relationship is not as intimate as what is advocated in Confucian culture.

- Not in favor of rote-learning and repetitive memorization.
- For many international students, learning is not always individual behavior and should have **individual objectives**.
- To them, the methods employed in learning are **not static or fixed**,
- Teaching should be **proactive** and with **initiative** while displaying **passion and enthusiasm**, not as what is advocated in Confucian culture.

# Contributing Factors

Positively correlated with

- Home country ( $r=.593$   $p=.000$ ),
- Major ( $r=.380$ ,  $p=.000$ )
- Grade ( $r=0.152$ ,  $p=.001$ )

Not time of learning Chinese ( $r=.003$ ;  $p=.945$ )

● This may suggest a **move towards** the recognition of the traditional **Chinese educational philosophy**.

Table 7 Results of correlation analysis for contributing factors

Category		Major	Grade	Country	Time of Learning Chinese
A	Pearson Correlation	.243	.125	.363	.042
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.007	.000	.367
B	Pearson Correlation	.327	.100	.515	.032
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.033	.000	.489
C	Pearson Correlation	.356	.139	.553	-.050
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.003	.000	.286
D	Pearson Correlation	.343	.121	.500	.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.010	.000	.904
E	Pearson Correlation	.235	.113	.500	-.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.016	.000	.742
F	Pearson Correlation	.354	.141	.475	-.011
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.003	.000	.807
Perceptions in General	Pearson Correlation	.380	.152	.593	.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.945

- For the influence of learning time of Chinese, a very slight positive correlation can be detected as to A and B, whereas, a negative correlation can be seen from C.

Category		Learning Time (Mon)
A	Pearson Correlation	.042
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.367
B	Pearson Correlation	.032
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.489
C	Pearson Correlation	-.050
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.286
D	Pearson Correlation	.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.904
E	Pearson Correlation	-.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.742
F	Pearson Correlation	-.011
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.807
Perceptions in General	Pearson Correlation	.003
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.945

- That means the time for learning Chinese exerts a slight influence on the Chinese-as-a-foreign-language learner's perceptions of traditional Chinese learning concepts and attitudes.
- The longer they have learned Chinese, they will have a more **positive** attitude towards the **Chinese learning concept**, but a more **negative** viewpoint on traditional **Chinese thought about learning attitudes**.

## Strong gender difference

- For all six categories, the mean values of male students' perceptions were consistently smaller, suggesting that gender plays a role in students' perceptions both in general and by category.
- It seems that female students are more ready to accept the traditional educational philosophy embedded in Confucianism.

Table 8 Effects of gender on students' perceptions

Category	Mean		Std. Deviation		F	Sig.	t	Sig.
	Male	Female	Male	Female				
A	4.104	4.249	0.773	0.791	0.166	0.684	-1.954	0.051
B	3.980	4.116	0.606	0.593	0.980	0.323	-2.406	0.017
C	3.909	4.026	0.611	0.561	0.833	0.362	-2.115	0.035
D	3.969	4.057	0.560	0.528	0.413	0.521	-1.703	0.089
E	3.852	3.902	0.579	0.716	0.000	1.000	-0.804	0.422
F	3.844	3.948	0.545	0.530	0.040	0.842	-2.060	0.040



## 4. Discussion



# Students' Overall Positive Perceptions

- This study indicated that these international students hold positive attitudes towards the Chinese traditional educational thought, particularly those of concepts of learning, attitudes towards learning and methods of learning.

- Students' responses in interviews confirmed the above finding. According to one student,

*I think the traditional Chinese educational thoughts are **wonderful**. They represent Confucius' thoughts which are well known not only in China, but also around the world ... The saying I like best is that "Among any three people walking, one will find something to learn for sure." I absolutely agree with this point. You can always find a person who can be your teacher around you. In that way, you will never stop making progress. (A.H., Mongolia)*

- Another student explained why **she likes the concept “There is no end to learning”**:

*I think this idea is great. This is especially true for medical students. Everything is changing and I have to learn what is new. You have to concede to learning, and concede to knowledge. Learning can be tiring and hard. However, if you have passion, if you are interested in it, you won't feel tired. You sit down and read and enjoy it a lot.  
(P.B., South Africa)*

- The above comments illustrate the extensive involvement in the target cultural context on the part of international students who learn Chinese as a foreign language.
- It is verified that Confucian teaching has been widely endorsed by people in CHC countries (Stankov, 2010) and that Confucianism has a lasting and pervasive impact on students' conception of Chinese education (Wang, 2013).
- It can be suggested that learning a language in the target context is both **about learning the language** itself and an **adaptation to the learning culture**.

# Differing Views of the Teacher-Student Relationship

- Not every international student in this study supports the Chinese-style teacher-student relationship.
- Traditional Chinese teacher-student relationship: like **family members in a dominance-obedience hierarchy** (Liu 1998)
  - The teacher in class: a superior and dominant role
  - The teacher after class: the role of an easy-going consultant

- Students from non-CHC countries **prefer equal and mutual communication with teachers.**

One student from Europe commented:

*Yeah, well, he (the teacher) is superior in sense of his knowledge but he's not superior in the sense of rights or other things. ... There should be some kind of exchange. Students and teachers should learn from each other. It's not something inferior or superior. (S.K., Germany)*

- Another student regarded the Chinese-style teacher-student relationship as very **unique**:

*In Europe, you can discuss with your teacher, to express your point of view.... But here, Chinese teachers are so enthusiastic and know so many things about the Chinese language that we are like children, listening wide-eyed and open-mouthed. (T.W., Russia)*

- In contrast, one student from Asia made a **very positive comment about the teacher-student relationship** in China.

*One thing I think which is impressive is that, **every Wednesday, my Chinese teacher invites three students to have lunch together.** Over the lunch, he talks about our life in here and asking “Do you have problems in your study or your life in Jinan?” This makes us feel closer to the teacher. (K.D., Korea)*

- Chinese teachers demonstrate better control of the classroom, but after class they are encouraged to have personal relationships with students (Wang, 2010).

This helps to explain

- Why Chinese classes are more teacher-centered (Haley & Ferro, 2011),
- Why Chinese students are obedient in class (Li & Wegerif, 2014), and
- Why Chinese teachers are compared to a gardener, a lighthouse or a circus director (Poom-Valickis, 2012).

# Negative Opinions on Rote Learning

- Although rote learning has been noted as the main learning method in Confucian heritage culture (Flowerdew, 1998), most students in this study **did not agree to the extensive use of such a method.**
- Rather, they are more likely to use **problem-oriented** and **analytical approaches** (Coopamah & Khan, 2011).

- One student from South Africa had **critical views** of rote learning:

*I don't think rote learning is applicable for me. Back in South Africa, we have problem-based learning, where you learn a concept and you are given a situation, and then from that you use what you've just learned and apply it to the situation. (P.B., South Africa)*

- Another student, who used to learn things by rote, had an even more negative opinion:

*For “learning by rote”, in the past, I or we used to do that a lot... I guess such kind of memorization is a waste of time... it is a sign of a lazy or uninspired approach on the part of the educators ... For a teacher this is really one of the easiest ways to get the work done. And I do not think this is ever effective. (K.R., Estonia)*

- Inconsistent with what Shen (2005), McGinnis (1999) and Yang (2008) found, i.e. that non-native learners of Chinese take rote memorization as the first major strategy in learning Chinese characters.
- Since cultural backgrounds, learning environments, and personal experiences all have an impact on students' preference in learning styles (Zebian & Denny, 2001), methods of learning, such as the execution of learning styles, are due to alter in different cultures (Coopamah & Khan, 2011).

# High Expectations from Teachers

- Similar to Wang's (2010) finding, international students in this study have **high expectations from the teacher**.
- To them, teachers should
  - ✓ Be knowledgeable in specialized areas
  - ✓ Provide enlightenment and guidance for students

- One interviewee emphasized the importance of teachers' good knowledge:

*I expect them to know well their own field and how to communicate with students. Because back in my home, all the lecturers are evaluated according to how well they do in the field of their study. **So I think teachers need at least two things: communicative skills and sufficient knowledge.** (M.R., South Africa)*

- Another student considered teaching methods of great importance:

*... I don't like teachers who just read things in class without elaboration. In that case, the students will lose interest in the course and would not like to ask questions either. I don't think those who teach that way are good teachers. (A.H., Mongolia)*

- “To give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense”.
- Despite their disagreement with teachers’ absolute authority in class, international students prefer
  - ✓ teaching without reservation,
  - ✓ teaching to students’ ability,
  - ✓ making entertainment a part of teaching, and
  - ✓ never becoming tired of teaching (Wang, 2010).
- Teachers are expected to take the responsibility of knowledge transmission, to share their life experiences and to provide emotional support for the students (Lauermann, 2014).

# Individualized Aims of Learning

- When asked of his aim of learning, one interviewee responded:

*I **strongly disagree** with many **aims of learning** here in the list, particularly the idea **that “Officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars.”** ... I would hypothesize that this cult of officialdom has taken over China for so long, and that was one of the reasons why Europe eventually outpaced China in science and technology in the modern era. (N.A., United States)*

- Several other students described their life goals as follows:

*My life goal is to live a life in which I don't feel like I am working. (S.B., New Zealand)*

*I just want to learn as much as I can. (O.S.Y., Malaysia)*

*It has always been about helping others. To teach people what I learned especially about nutrition. That is what I want to do. (M.M., Zambia)*

- The **collective mentality** is **weaker** among the international students and their individuality is more evident.
- Individual learners approach learning events **with different goals and conceptions** (DeCaro et al., 2015).
- It can be concluded that cultural differences were rooted deeply in students' mind beforehand, and that the goal of learning is reflected in the basic human needs for **capacity, challenge and control** (Jovanovic & Matejevic, 2014).
- As a result, aims of learning are **not prone to change** even in varied learning contexts or external environments.



## 5. Conclusion



- This study has explored how well Chinese-as-a-foreign-language learners accept traditional Chinese educational thought.
- It has been found that learners uphold key traditional concepts of learning, attitudes towards learning and methods of learning.
- Gender, major, grade, and time spent on learning Chinese are found contributory to students' perceptions.

- Students' Perceptions of traditional Chinese educational thoughts should be understood from **cultural, contextual** and **individual perspectives**.
- By implication, international students in China will have to get accustomed to **new modes of teaching** and a **different teacher-student relationship**.
- There is also a need for teachers to learn about the **learning aims of the students and the methods employed by them**, to which they can adjust their practical teaching accordingly.

## Limitations:

- ✓ Confined to learners of Chinese as a foreign language in the Chinese context.
- ✓ Lack of classroom observations and longitudinal studies.

## Suggestions:

- ✓ Further research could focus on learners in other CHC countries or non-CHC environments.
- ✓ Observations and longitudinal studies can triangulate the validity of students' attitudes and perceptions and strengthen the reliability of the results found so far.

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**Thank you!**

