To supplement the Power Point presentation and the Fact Sheets we are including the following report on Chinese cultural dimensions, Chinese learning styles and how incoming faculty should approach their teaching of Chinese students considering the cultural differences that exist.

- Afeefa Abdur-Rahman
- Jill Hubbard
- Lexy Lambert
- Rupali Limaye
- Michael Stein
Learning & Teaching in China:

A Guide to the Cultural and Educational Nuances of China
The question that arises when looking at two cultures, such as those of China and America is: does national culture predispose people within one nation toward one or another teaching strategy? Culture is the undercurrent for strategy, it affects communication elements, and it influences relationships (Ross).

As one of the world’s largest and oldest civilizations, China possesses one of the most complex culture(s) and history. In this guide, it would be impossible to describe the full breadth of Chinese history and culture, however, a brief overview can help to provide context for discussing methods to maximize the effectiveness of culturally appropriate teaching styles. China’s rich history has been defined by multiple social, political and economic experiences which have affected the educational system. For example, imperial dynastic administrative structures evaluated the merit and education of new officials through written exams. In the early communist era, work and vocational training was emphasized in education and more recently science and technology are seen as crucial to help advance economic modernization. Confucianism provided Chinese society an “ideological reference point” for proper conduct based on submission to authority. The existence of 11 major ethnic groups alongside various minor ones and four major religions (Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity) also lend to the challenges of teaching in different geographical areas in China.

**Trompenaars’ Dimensions**

Trompenaars and Turners’ cultural dimensions are useful concepts to employ when advising American professors on how to teach Chinese students in China. Specifically, four dimensions should be given emphasis when teaching Chinese students: individualism vs.
communitarianism, achievement vs. ascription, specific vs. diffuse, and affective vs. neutral. These cultural classifications of attributes, preferences, and characteristics each lay along a spectrum or continuum that proceeds from the extreme of one classification (i.e. individualism) to the extreme of its opposite (i.e. communitarianism). Placing different cultures at different points on the spectrum helps to reveal the cultural differences among them. Although no culture is purely one classification of a dimension or another, cultures tend to gravitate towards either achievement or ascription, specific or diffuse, individualism or communitarianism, and affective or neutral.

One of the biggest barriers that teachers must address before working in China is the lack of awareness of one’s own cultural attributes, preferences and characteristics. Without at first being aware of and understanding one’s own preferences, the preferences of others might seem different, confusing and incomprehensible. These differences change how leadership in the classroom is perceived (Bing).

*Individualism vs. Communitarianism*

The concept of a communitarian society entails the leaving of a legacy to the community, and for community members to have a larger purpose than their individual selves. Cultures that are communitarian tend to have high levels of productivity and people are likely to bind together for common goals that are better for the overall society (Handy). Generally speaking, China is one of the most communitarian nations in the world. In a classroom, Chinese students expect professors to achieve harmony with students in the classroom on which long-term relationships are built. What a professor says to the student is less important than how it is said (context-based). Therefore, relationships of all types are more highly valued in Chinese education than in American education, because of this communitarianism concept (Huijser).
Achievement vs. Ascription

The educational structure in China has roots in the cultural and historical emphasis on examinations, as a precursor for any promotion or advancement. Chinese students traditionally concentrate on memorizing material without asking questions or discussing the content (Huijser). The country is on the high end of ascription (Luthans). There is utmost respect for age and hierarchy, which is based on the Confucian concept of *li*, wherein everyone in society has a specific position in society. The government, elders, and hierarchies within society are traditionally respected. In Chinese culture, the ideal educator can be seen as a benevolent autocrat. Chinese students expect to be told what to do, and it is not rare for a Chinese professor to lecture right out of the textbook (Williamson).

Specific vs. Diffuse

The dimension of specific vs. diffuse refers to the degree of intimacy people feel comfortable with when dealing with others. There is an important distinction between the public and private person in regards to the amount of space that is allowed for other individuals. Those in a culture that gravitate towards specificity are outgoing and allow a lot of public space, but guard their private space. Those in a diffuse culture are detached except when outsiders enter their private lives, where they tend to be more receptive. The Chinese tend to gravitate towards diffuseness unlike their American counterparts (Luthans).

Affective vs. Neutral

Chinese culture is generally affective, so students will be more likely to express their emotions naturally. However, if they feel that expressing their emotions will cause them to “lose face” they will refrain from showing their true feelings or intentions. Reactions are usually immediate through the use of mimic and body signals. Affective cultures usually do not avoid
physical contact, but many Chinese often do not like to be touched by strangers. The Chinese may also use more intuition compared to those in neutral cultures. Cultures that are classified as affective may have the tendency to overreact to certain issues (Author Unknown).

Trompenaars’ dimensions can provide some important insight to American professors teaching Chinese students. They can give Americans who teach in China essential guidance in teaching Chinese students, while at the same time providing a starting point for understanding their own cross-cultural interactions (Huijser).

**Chinese Learning Styles**

Once a person has started to learn, their learning process is pretty much set. Learning styles are most often fixed as time goes by and are hard to change. It is easier for the teacher or professor to adapt their teaching style to fit their students, rather than try to get their students to change learning styles. It is important to note that the learning style that a particular student uses has no effect on or basis in determining their level of intelligence. A learning style is simply “ingrained habits to organizing and representing information” (Ouellette). If a teacher ignores the fact that students learn in different ways and does not adjust how they teach, the students will perform poorly (Ouellette). The professor should be able to adapt his/her lesson plan more easily to fit the styles of students than the students adapting their learning styles to the teaching style of the teacher (Ouellette). It may seem difficult to adjust to a lesson plan to an alternate learning style, but teachers who have received instruction on learning styles say it can be done with relatively minor adjustments (Adamus). With this in mind, one can see that there are vast differences between the American and Chinese educational systems. Chinese students learn differently than their western counterparts and, thus, professors teaching Chinese students should be mindful of these differences and alter their teaching style accordingly.
Chinese learning styles can generally be described as passive, content-based, obedient, analytic, and concrete-sequential. Since the learning process is an exchange between instructors and learners, it is important to describe the “traditional” method of Chinese teaching, which revolves around rote instruction, visual aids, and repetition. In order for American teachers to find acceptance and thrive in their role of educating Chinese students, it is important to understand the accepted learning styles of Chinese students. In addition it is important to gradually adjust teaching styles so as to create an amalgam of teaching techniques that incorporate the strengths of both American and Chinese learning styles.

Chinese learning styles originated in an education system that, for centuries, centered on strict and mechanical memorization of Confucian texts (Pierik). Education was viewed as both a national responsibility and a religious obligation. Additionally, for over a thousand years Chinese dynasties employed written examinations as a method for admission into civil service. Professional and social advancement in China is thus predicated on the ability to memorize and process ordered and clearly defined information that can then be recalled for examinations and other tests. This element persists in modern Chinese culture and is generally considered the “acceptable” method of learning for most students regardless of learning material or grade level.

This learning style has several important benefits for Chinese students. It imparts basic skills to a large number of students in an orderly and digestible fashion. These skills are then absorbed and organized mentally for quick and accurate recall. The learning style also makes important and beneficial use of visual aids in learning, as noted by several scholars studying Chinese learning methods (Zhenhui). In particular, Chinese students are especially adept at learning science and mathematics, since these concepts are largely based on memorization and concrete instruction.
Chinese students “display five characteristics which can be taken to summarize Chinese thinking and behavior:

- Emphasis on perception of the concrete
- Non-development of abstract thought
- Emphasis on particulars not universals
- Practicality as a central focus
- Concern for reconciliation, harmony and balance (Chan).”

Chinese learners have been raised to respect knowledge, the wisdom of their parents and teachers and have been socialized to not challenge authority. Thus, the participatory nature of American teaching styles may pose a challenge for Chinese learners (Chan).

**Comparison of American and Chinese Learning Styles**

The American learning style, having been influenced by Greek methods of questioning and probing, maintains a more investigative and critical thinking aspect that seeks to logically prove arguments and intellectual points. Testing consists of both essays and written answers that require students to expound and assume underlying concepts to prove an outright point. The Chinese learning style, on the other hand, requires students to recall answers from memorization. Testing often consists of extensive questions which stretch both mental organization and endurance. The challenge for students lies in the initial memorization and ability to store and reference potential answers. This “ordering” cements concepts into memory and sharpens the students’ ability to correctly produce answers, but not to challenge or prove the logic behind such answers (Chan). American students may be skilled at challenging questions or proving the justification behind their answers, but may not be able to accurately produce answers in terms of volume, accuracy, and quickness like their Chinese counterparts.
In order to impart meaningful lessons and concepts to their students, American teachers will need to reorder their teaching to fit the accepted method of Chinese learning. While this may seem counterintuitive for many American teachers, the method of instruction can only be successful when applied to the appropriate learning style and culture of communication of their students. While American teaching (more so in institutions of higher learning) highlights lectures, arguments, discussion, and group work, Chinese teaching utilizes visual aids, clear delineation of concepts, and reinforced repetitive practice with students. These two styles may seem like opposites, but they can in fact be integrated so as to optimize both the American method of teaching and the Chinese style of learning.

American learning styles take great advantage of group learning, believing that students in smaller groups utilize brainstorming, critiquing, and other communicative learning methods to sharpen skill sets and increase intellectual socialization between peers. Studies indicate that Chinese students dislike being divided into groups and feel uncomfortable challenging and critiquing one another (Kennedy). However, this can be overcome by clearly expressing the purpose behind group work as a way to learn additional information in a method that cannot be taught by the teacher. Encouraging students to communicate amongst themselves enables the instructor to create dialogue between students and create a more egalitarian and participatory atmosphere for learning while still making room for time-honored values, such as respect for authority. With memorization of concepts and a clear focus on technical information, group learning can build upon such information and expand the reaches of concepts already committed to memory. Once Chinese students experience an expansion of already memorized concepts, they will see the benefits of peer learning, and incorporate it into their current learning style.

To better illustrate the differences between Western (American) and Eastern (Chinese)
learning styles Sally Chan developed the following table:

### Eastern versus Western Educational System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>East Asia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Focus on Individual</td>
<td>Focus on loyal citizenry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop individual’s full potential</td>
<td>Develop literate citizenry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transmitter of cultural heritage</td>
<td>Transmitter of past cultural heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helps select future leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction Mode</strong></td>
<td>Learner centered</td>
<td>Teacher centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stresses understanding, application and ability</td>
<td>Stresses recall of facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of educational psychology</td>
<td>Use of rote learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learner active</td>
<td>Examinations as motivator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learner passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curricular Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Present-future oriented</td>
<td>Past-present oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of whole person</td>
<td>Strict exams to develop academic knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concepts first then skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social interaction promoted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table illustrates clearly the differences between the two educational systems and how the cultural differences influence the approach to education.

**Adapting**

In order to maximize the potential of the Chinese student, American faculty should alter their current teaching styles to accommodate the Chinese learning styles. Thus, the following should be considered by American faculty when preparing to teach in China:

- ‘Group Discussion’
  - Issues of status, saving face and shame may limit the openness of discussion thus faculty should be aware of the hidden messages behind what is disclosed by students and be sensitive to such “constraints” on Chinese behavior.
  - Moving group discussions out of the classroom and away from an environment
where students may lose face in front of an authority figure may prove fruitful for encouraging group interaction, debate, brainstorming and dialogue among students. Students can be assigned questions for discussion outside the classroom setting and be required to report on findings from the group discussion in class. This technique can augment the responsibility of the group over the individual to produce acceptable answers to the questions/concepts/issues to be discussed.

- **Use of case studies, role-play games, etc**

  - Such approaches are heavily reliant on abstract thinking and could pose hazards for students not use to open discussions and public expressions of opinions. To be effective, such methods have to be introduced gradually with clear instructions and guidelines, as well as adequate preparation time.

- **Student participation in classroom**

  - To facilitate participation, it is important to allow students the opportunity to define their roles at the outset, provide unambiguous instructions, as well as allow students more time to think about the topics under discussion. Long silences in the classroom may not simply be indications that students are refusing to participate, but that they may be thinking about the answers and require more probing and encouragement.

  - Provision of extra credit may also be utilized as a motivating factor for student participation. The knowledge that one’s grade can be affected positively by participating in class may provide incentive to do so and encourage other students to do the same.
- The applicability of Western concepts to China

  • Care must be taken in producing supporting materials with Chinese examples instead of Western ones. Also care should be taken when translating English into Chinese, as mere translation may not have the same cultural reference as it does in America (Chan).

Conclusion

This report was prepared to provide background information on the cultural and educational nuances American faculty may encounter when teaching in China. Incoming faculty members of the Wuhan University HOPE School of Nursing should be prepared to offer students the best learning environment in which they can maximize their potential. By familiarizing oneself with the learning styles prevalent in China and becoming educated in basic Chinese culture, faculty will be better prepared to teach/mentor their students. For further information on the topics covered in this guide, please consult the references at the end of this document.
References


