



Briefing Note

REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE IN CHINESE ACADEMIC CONTEXTS

Cultural ways of learning within Chinese higher education contexts are markedly different from those emphasised in Australia. In China, 'rehearsal and performance' are intrinsic to enacting learning and demonstrating knowledge.

Historical influences on 'rehearsal and performance'

The origin of this particular focus extends far back into China's history. It is also linked to other valued concepts:

- Memorisation
- Speaking out
- Hierarchy and 'persuading up' (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012, p.29)

Jung Chang in her 2013 biography of the Empress Dowager Cixi highlights how these factors can come together. She reports (2013, p.97) on Grand Tutor Weng's disappointment with the young Emperor Tongzhi's lack of academic achievement. Tongzhi, who reigned from 1861 to 1875, was educated using culturally rooted practices of Chinese literacy education that aligned with China's ancient system of imperial examination. Grand Tutor Weng lamented the emperor's lack of concentration on memorising the classics, as well as his inability to read texts out loud with fluency. 'Memorisation' and 'speaking out' are valued ways of learning within Chinese literacy education. These combine within the processes of rehearsal and performance.

Tongzhi's failure to attend to his education in the appropriate ways also highlights important relational and rhetorical aspects of Chinese education, and these can also be seen in rehearsal and performance. Tongzhi's situation provided a conundrum for the Grand Tutor. On the one hand, there was the expectation that as the emperor's teacher, he had responsibility for guiding the learning

journey from hell to heaven (Yuan & Xie, 2013, p.27). On the other, Grand Tutor Weng had to persuade the emperor of the need to attend to his studies. Such persuasion could be perceived as a disturbance to the natural hierarchical order of things. Persuasion from below to above, or from an inferior to a superior, is acknowledged in Chinese rhetorical tradition as requiring special effort (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012, p.21). Such effort requires diligent rehearsal and carefully scripted persuasion in performance.

This brief historical account serves to identify the nature and importance of the concepts that underlie the enactment of rehearsal and performance within Chinese scholarship and academic contexts.

Note

It is interesting to note that Chinese students today tend to say 'speak out' rather than 'speak' or 'say'. In addition, students from mainland China almost always stand when they are required to provide any sort of oral response. In essence they 'perform' their response and it is usual that this is well practised or scripted.

Contemporary influences on 'rehearsal and performance' and what this means in the Chinese classroom

Within contemporary China, however, there are additional practices that support rehearsal and performance as the principal means through which students participate orally in class.

- Examinations are the main form of assessment (and students learn for these using their prodigious capacity to memorise), but formative assessment is now being advocated. To accommodate this requirement, classroom presentations are ubiquitous. They usually take the form of well-rehearsed, carefully scripted oral performances that are delivered in front of the lecturer and peers. The method of allocation of marks for these presentations is often difficult to discern and overall these marks count for little in unit and course assessment.
- The rehearsed and then performed characteristics of such presentations mitigate potential for loss of face. Face is also protected by the fact that formative assessment of these presentations often constitutes the offering of positive, verbal comments to students rather than critical appraisal.

- Language used in presentations is that of 'persuading up'. In the contemporary context this can mean producing content expected by the lecturer, and/or delivering a presentation using ornate or over-embellished language. Performance according to these norms is considered appealing to the one who is in a superior position (the lecturer).
- Chinese students are required to study English but there is very little attention, at any point in the learning process, to the communicative use of English. There is even less attention to speaking. Because of this, English oral language use in classroom contexts is rare and almost always confined to language that is rehearsed and then performed. There is little interaction and little spontaneity in language use. (For more information about English language learning in China, see the Briefing Note: **Why Chinese postgraduate students struggle with listening, speaking, reading and writing in English.**)

Implications for Chinese students in Australia

Spontaneous oral interaction and unrehearsed argument is an expectation within Australian classrooms. Chinese students are often very confronted and threatened by this. Such 'disrespectful' argumentation contravenes their assumptions and experiences of speaking in class. Not having an opportunity to prepare and rehearse for conversations in class is problematic. Not having a pre-planned script to be performed, without contestation, is massively confronting. Very often the outcome of this clash with respect to different ways of learning results in Chinese students withdrawing from any form of oral engagement in class.

Implications for lecturers teaching Chinese students in Australia

This document is designed to give Australian lecturers an appreciation of what lies behind the Chinese penchant for rehearsal and performance in learning and teaching. Time-honoured beliefs and practices do not sit comfortably in the Australian classroom. They must not, however, be construed from a deficit perspective. It is hoped that an understanding of the 'why' of these practices will allow lecturers to develop strategies to support Chinese students. Here are some suggestions:

- Acknowledge and express your understanding of the roots of such practices and the values inherent in them. This will enable your students to feel more comfortable and their contributions valued.

- In the initial weeks of a course, provide students with topics that they can prepare. Initially allow students to 'perform' their learned responses but gradually require them to be less reliant on the script (use dot points only for example, or give them limited time to view their script).
- Add variation to prepared topics that requires students to deviate from the script. Ensure, however, that students feel comfortable and supported as they do this.

Additional tips for lecturers can be found in the Briefing Notes entitled:

- **Participating in seminars**
- **Turn taking, discussion, and critical dialogue**

Reference list

Chang, J. (2013). *The Empress Dowager Cixi: The concubine who launched modern China*. London: Jonathon Cape Ltd.

Kirkpatrick, A. and Xu, Z. (2012). *Chinese Rhetoric and Writing: An introduction for language teachers*. South Carolina: Parlor Press.

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