



Briefing Note

WHY DO CHINESE STUDENTS OFTEN APPEAR PASSIVE

Chinese students are often described as being passive and this is sometimes interpreted negatively and as indicating that they are not capable students. This is, of course, nonsense but because this thinking is quite widespread it is important to critique it.

Reference to the passivity of Chinese students is not confined to Western literature. Chinese scholars also discuss it – both positively and negatively. Let's look at what some Chinese scholars have had to say:

Chinese students have been trained to respect and obey the teacher, conform to the collective benefits at the cost of individual interest. After some years they have got used to listening quietly in class and accepting what is said by teachers and in books.

(Tan, 2007, p.97)

Those who are passive in class and just do what the teacher asks them to do are regarded as excellent students with good behaviour.

(Li, 2012, p.109)

... the students are confined to remain in their seats listening passively for decades.

(Gao, 2010, p.34)

Societal norms

It is clear that historically, within Chinese traditions of scholarship, that the student is positioned as the passive recipient of knowledge from the teacher. There are other dimensions, however, that also need to be considered within the context of traditional beliefs and practices. Socio-cultural and familial norms and obligations also need to be acknowledged. In the Chinese family, children are taught to respect elders (and teachers have long been regarded as elders) but more than this, keeping silent and listening to others signifies respect for others. This is important as the Chinese pay great attention to politeness. Being passive or silent should therefore not be interpreted negatively but rather as an adherence to societal norms.

Face

Not surprisingly, the concept of 'face' also impacts on perceived passivity. Face is tied intimately to relationships and to hierarchy and dictates who is able to speak to whom, and when, particularly in public spaces. (See Briefing Note on **Understanding the concept of face and how this impacts on the interactions of Chinese students within the Australian University Context**).

Rehearsal and performance

Another dimension that needs to be considered here is the place of rehearsal and performance in class interactions. Rehearsal and performance (sometimes collective performance is seen with chorused responses in class) are traditional aspects of learning in China. Time for preparation and rehearsal (including memorisation of what it is to be produced or performed) is usually provided within class. Students are then exhorted to 'open their mouths'. Spontaneous individual response, particularly the expression of opinion is, however, less frequent. Classroom interaction patterns in China are changing and becoming more fluid but interactions involving spontaneity, particularly with respect to the expression of personal viewpoints and opinions, are not commonplace.

Argumentation and critical debate

Following on then, it comes as no surprise that argumentation and critical debate, as commonly enacted in Australian seminar and workshop contexts, will be unfamiliar (and often uncomfortable) for many Chinese students. Chinese students often comment on the propensity of Australian students to 'open their mouths and speak out'. Chinese students find this difficult because of societal and educational norms.

They are inexperienced in this area and need to be taught the conventions of how exchanges in seminars are undertaken and managed.

Knowing the appropriate conventions, however, will often still not be enough. Critical debate requires knowledge of relevant English academic discourses and the capacity to voice them spontaneously and interactively and boldly. The approaches to English language learning and the habits and orientations of English language use that constitute the experience of Chinese postgraduate students very often do not mesh well with the demands of seminar discussion.

English language proficiency

Perceived passivity within the Australian classroom cannot be separated from issues associated with the teaching and learning of English in China. English is taught with:

- “Great enthusiasm for grammar” (Wen & Clement, 2003. p.23).
- Little attention to the use of English for communicative purposes.
- Limited interactional opportunities, particularly for the spontaneous use of the English language.
- Only limited access to authentic English texts.
- Little reference to English speaking cultures and contexts.

As a result, students have little concept of English language use as socially negotiated interactions (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). This impacts on their capacity to be ‘active’ and vocal participants within Australian learning contexts.

Norton (2000) talks about students for whom English is a second or additional language obtaining the ‘right to speak’, of being able to see themselves as legitimate speakers of the language, and of being able to assert the right to communicate on an equal basis. The experience that Chinese students have of learning English makes this difficult to do. The consequence is that they can feel disempowered. Their views are silenced because of an inability to express them in the vernacular and style that is the currency of the Australian university learning context (particularly in seminars). **These are not passive learners – they are marginalised learners.**

Whilst it is easy to argue that university staff need to provide better and more inclusive environments to enable Chinese students to flourish and be able to communicate on an equal basis, this is often hard to do. Some simple actions can, however, help:

- Let them know that you have an understanding of the differences between study in China and study here. (NB: Avoid value judgements about the systems).
- Show your Chinese students that you are sensitive to their language issues by:
 - recasting key ideas using relatively formal language as they will be more attuned to this;
 - reducing the use of Australian English idioms / slang;
 - being conscious of the impact of speed of speech on ability to make meaning; and
 - being aware that sound / accent may be problematic.
- Help other students appreciate the issues confronted by Chinese students so that they can be more tolerant and empathetic.
- Make it clear to your students that their responses don't have to be grammatically correct – that it is what they are saying that is important not how accurately they express it.
- Honour the silence of Chinese students until they feel comfortable about 'having a go'.
- Initially, allow students to prepare responses to questions prior to seminars and then present their rehearsed responses in seminars.

Because for language maybe I have my idea but I don't know how to express it correctly or properly. But I mean sometimes it is kind of habitude. I know that. And when the lecturers ask something I know that but I don't want to say. Yeah, I know the answer but I just keep silent.

(Chinese postgraduate student)

The information presented here demonstrates that the often-expressed stereotypical view of Chinese as passive learners is grossly oversimplified and needs to be contested at all levels within the university system.

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Produced by Dr Lindy Norris for the project
'Collaborating for Success: Enhancing the Transition of
Chinese students into Australian postgraduate education'

Additional materials and resources are available from
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Support for the production of this publication has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.



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2014