Understanding Your International Students

AN EDUCATIONAL, CULTURAL, AND LINGUISTIC GUIDE

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People's Republic of China

Focus on People's Republic of China

Capital: Beijing
Population: 1,261,832,482
Size: 3,715,392 sq. mi. (9,596,960 sq. km.)
Location: East Asia, south of Russia and Mongolia; bounded on the east by the China Sea
Climate: temperate with some desert; semiarid and tropical
Monetary Unit: yuan
Urban/Rural Life: 75% rural/agricultural
Religion: officially none; Taoism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity practiced and tolerated within limits
Languages: Mandarin Chinese (official), Mongolian, Tibetan, Miao, Tai, Uyghur, Kazak, other dialects
Ethnicity: 92% ethnic Han, 55 minorities
Government: socialist republic

Personal Snapshot

Once while teaching a culturally mixed group of graduate students, I invited one young female student from the United States to come to the front of the room, as her classmates had before her, to give a brief oral report that she had prepared for the course. She bounced up to the head of the classroom, perched herself cross-legged on the desk, and began to speak with confidence and ease, as if she were surrounded by friends sitting with her on the floor of her apartment. I must admit that at first I wanted to roll my eyes when I realized that she apparently made little distinction between the casual setting of home and the more formal environment of the classroom, but I soon became engrossed in her report and joined her classmates in giving her a round of applause when she finished. At the conclusion of class, though, one of my Chinese students stayed behind. First, he insisted on erasing the blackboard for me, which surprised and delighted me, but then he made an even
- Respect for the elderly is paramount, as is respect for authority, be it manifested in an individual or a text. Older teachers are more likely to enjoy the unfettered reverence of their students than are younger teachers.

- The Chinese are a gregarious, hospitable, and curious people. They enjoy light interpersonal interaction, mildly competitive games, jokes, plays, songs, cartoons, puns, and so forth. Most Chinese are fascinated by cross-cultural differences and are eager to discuss their own cultural traditions as well as those of others. Nonetheless, they are also a people who value personal modesty. It is unusual to hear a Chinese person boast about his or her accomplishments and abilities.

A Closer Look

Policy

- In China, education functions as both a right and an obligation. With such a large population, much of it rural, the challenge of educating the country’s young is formidable, but it is absolutely necessary if China is to maintain its powerful presence on the world stage. Education also serves the state by promoting a socialist worldview and ensuring adherence to concepts particularly relevant to labor and production.

- While schooling is compulsory in China until the age of 15, it is difficult to guarantee, especially in rural areas. The government is particularly concerned about the country’s low literacy rates in comparison with those of developed nations and has launched efforts to develop and expand the delivery of adult literacy education. Its goal is to completely eliminate illiteracy, regardless of age.

- To support the educational interests and aspirations of adults who have already entered the workforce, China makes it easier for them to pursue degrees in higher education. The government’s expectation is that by doing so, work-related performance will improve. The country’s goal is to enroll in higher education programs 700 out of every 100,000 adults.

Teaching Style

- Classes of children stay together in cohorts for the first six years of school. Each class is assigned a master teacher, who is usually also the Chinese language arts teacher.

- Classes in almost all schools in China are large, with perhaps 60 or more students to a class. Given the size of the typical class, teaching tends to be formal and teacher-fronted.

- Teachers are figures whose authority is highly respected, and many students try to emulate their teachers. Teachers direct every classroom activity, generally giving very structured lectures that lead the students to produce a set of complete, detailed, and accurate notes. The model teacher is one
who effectively critiques student performance, corrects students, and drills them. A teacher who does not measure up to these expectations may be considered delinquent. Games with a pedagogical focus, therefore, may be viewed as a waste of time.

- Teachers are expected to be strict, well prepared for class, knowledgeable, creative, stimulating, and accountable for students’ success.
- In general, most teachers do not expect a great deal of participation and discussion, if any, from their students. In fact, teachers who demand the expression of opinions may be regarded as insensitive by their students.
- It is common for a teacher to teach from a seated position at his or her desk, which is often set on a small platform at the front of the classroom.

**Learning Style**

- Students sit up straight. They are expected to sit and listen, and they read or write only when instructed to do so by the teacher. They raise their hands and wait until the teacher calls on them.
- Chinese students pass through their various educational levels as an intact group and spend a significant amount of time helping one another with whatever work is to be done.
- Students expect to work hard and will accept as much work as the teacher is ready to assign.
- Grueling exams are an integral part of the Chinese student’s school experience. Cramming is a necessary and normal by-product of such a situation, and students generally have finely honed study skills.
- In China, most students are loath to proffer an opinion or reaction to issues that are addressed in class. This is partly due to the widely shared belief that young people are far too inexperienced to generate responses that would be sound, interesting, or worthy of attention.
- Given the group-oriented nature of the Chinese people, group problem solving or planning comes naturally to most students. They are skilled at participatory activities such as these and understand the roles and tasks that must be played to arrive at a mutually satisfactory conclusion.
- Contrary to what many people believe, Chinese students often greatly enjoy competition in the classroom, perhaps because it is largely absent in the other parts of their lives. They may particularly appreciate being allowed to elect classmates for certain roles or to declare a particular student a winner.
- Most students will turn away from and possibly resent being singled out for praise, but they tend to enjoy being on stage. Performing is a routine and enjoyable part of school life, and students are usually not embarrassed to sing or recite poetry in front of their peers.
• Some teachers develop close—almost parental—relationships with students and become very involved in the more personal and private aspects of the students’ lives. Nevertheless, the formality of the teacher-student relationship is unlikely to diminish as a result of this closeness.

• Chinese students show respect and affection for their teachers by erasing the blackboard after class; helping the teacher move, sort, or distribute materials; and staying after school to assist with a variety of tasks.

• Given the Chinese culture’s emphasis on community rather than individualism, Chinese students tend to expect a great deal of involvement and supervision from their teachers. Self-reliance and independence are not assets that are actively promoted. Teachers often find that presenting students with models helps them complete tasks more efficiently and with more confidence.

**Student-Student Relationship**

• Over the first six years of schooling, all spent with the same classmates, Chinese students form strong bonds with each other, which may last a lifetime.

• Students pass through middle school, high school, and college in tight-knit groups that are not only academic but social. Student leaders are elected, and their role is often to provide personal advice and guidance.

• In college, social groups are usually made up of roommates or classmates pursuing the same major. A strong sense of identity, pride, and loyalty quickly grows out of these associations.

**Protocol**

**Nonverbal Behavior**

• Students do not maintain eye contact with the teacher while he or she is lecturing. They tend to keep their eyes down and to concentrate on the lecture. In general, eye contact is considered another form of communication. The eyes are averted to convey respect for certain people.

• Contrary to what many Westerners believe, the Chinese do not bow when greeted or introduced. A handshake is always appropriate.

• Nonverbal insults are decidedly few in Chinese culture, and they tend to be relatively mild in intent. For example, one gesture that aims to convey contempt is raising the little finger in the air. An adult may suggest that a child feel shame by rubbing the index finger up and down several times under the eye.
FORMS OF ADDRESS

- In Chinese names, a person’s family name comes first and is followed by a given name that is often very descriptive, with such meanings as “Golden Morning” or “Little Flower.” Common family names include Wu, Han, Chen, Zhao, and Wang.

- All Chinese teachers may be addressed as laoshi, which is not a rank but a form of address of considerable respect, even more so than is professor in English. Chinese students of English will frequently address a teacher as “Teacher Jones” or “Teacher Mike,” for example, or just “Teacher.” Students refer to a teacher by last name (e.g., “Jones”) as they often do each other.

- The Chinese prefer formality in their forms of address, even on the job. Titles, such as those for plumber, engineer, postal worker, and so on, are simply appended to the person’s family name.

DRESS

- In some schools, students wear uniforms all the time. In others, uniforms are only required once a week, due to expense. Both boys and girls wear a white shirt with some kind of kerchief around the neck. Girls wear dark skirts; boys wear dark pants. Both may wear canvas shoes with rubber soles.

- From the revolution until recently, Chinese of all ages and positions and of either gender have worn what some Westerners call the Mao suit, a simple cotton ensemble consisting of loose-fitting pants and a matching, long-sleeved, collarless jacket, often complemented by a cap of matching color. Today, many young people are moving more toward Western dress. In some colleges, students wear casual Western-style dress to class, as do their teachers. Nevertheless, the Mao suit is the preferred mode of dress for older people; older women are never seen wearing skirts or dresses.

- For funerals, it is important for the principal mourners to wear new clothes, although there is no special costume. The deceased is dressed in new clothing that is quilted, because it is assumed the afterlife is cold.

- Red, not white, is the color for weddings. For example, a bride may wear a new, bright red silk jacket on her wedding day.

POLITE/IMPOLITE TOPICS AND BEHAVIORS

- Death, sex, homosexuality, religious beliefs, and pro-democracy ideas are among the most obvious examples of topics to be avoided in public. Governmental policies are not openly discussed unless one intends to praise them. It is acceptable to address the differences between China and other countries, but not for the purpose of advocating adoption of other countries’ policies, activities, or values.

- The topic of Taiwan, or the Republic of China, is very sensitive. The mainland Chinese believe that Taiwan rightfully belongs to China, and they are expecting the two to be reunited in the future.
PROBLEM

My Chinese students take voluminous notes, and they do well on tests, but I have a hard time trying to get them to participate in class. How can I increase their level of participation?

SOLUTION

Chinese students are accustomed to a formal, structured environment in which the teacher provides all information, which the students copy verbatim. The responses or opinions of the students carry little value in the Chinese culture, and your students may feel that the major issues of the times have already been addressed and judged on the public stage. A lesson on teaching styles and learning styles around the world, with emphasis on appropriate behavior in the host culture’s classroom, may help them to feel more comfortable with responding and contributing.

PROBLEM

I recently discovered that my Chinese students were copying right out of the encyclopedia for their assignments, without attribution. How can I stop this?

SOLUTION

There is no such thing as plagiarism in China. Using the words of experts is an acceptable way of completing an assignment and getting a good grade. Students feel that there is no better source than the author. You might explain how the opinions and findings of experts is acknowledged in the English-speaking world, giving particular emphasis to methods of quoting, paraphrasing, and citing.