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## Components Of Chinese Culture And Education

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# COMPONENTS OF CHINESE CULTURE AND EDUCATION

by

Brandon Fike

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

July 2020

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"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

Confucius

"Studying culture without experiencing culture shock is like practicing swimming without water."

Geert Hofstede

"If a ruler desires to transform the people [and] perfect [their] customs, [the ruler] can only do so through education!"

Xue ji I

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The research focus of this paper will discuss some of the fundamental differences between Chinese and American culture, with an emphasis on China, and how they relate to and influence their educational systems. This topic interests me because I have lived and taught in Mainland China for several years. The first chapter will describe many of my personal experiences in the country. My research question is, *What are three of the most important components of Chinese culture and how do they influence their education system?* The focus will remain primarily on three characteristics of Chinese society: Confucianism, the concept of “Face” and Collectivism. In addition, comparisons between China and the USA will be included and differences that emerge will be discussed. The bulk of this research has been conducted online and will be based on written sources such as books, articles and journals. I will also include personal observations and recollections based on my own experiences living and working in Mainland China. The second chapter is a literature review. The third chapter is a project description and the fourth and final chapter will provide a reflection on the entire process of my research and the creation of my capstone project.

#### **Curiosity About the Far East**

I can recall being curious about the Far East as far back as the mid to late 1980s. Whenever I watched a television program about life in countries such as Japan or China I was intrigued and often confused the two. On the surface there are many similarities

between China and Japan, but the more one becomes familiar with each country the more one realizes how different they are.

Popular movies from my childhood included *Gremlins*, *Big Trouble in Little China* and *The Karate Kid* films. In fact, in the second *Karate Kid* film the main character, Daniel, travels to Japan. The Far Eastern themes, aesthetics and Asian characters aroused my young curiosity. Kung-Fu, chopsticks, calligraphy, the written and spoken languages of Japan and China and the traditional clothes often featured in films about Asia were attractive to me because they were so different from my own American culture. I was also aware as a child that many products sold in America were “Made in Japan” and “Made in China.” In high school I discovered Jackie Chan films and Japanese animation and was fond of both. I declared that I would someday visit both China and Japan and walk on the Great Wall of China. I was not sure how or when I would achieve these goals but I was confident that I would find a way.

### **First Year in China**

The first time I entered China was in August 2003. This was the first time I had ever left the United States and entered a foreign country. I graduated from an American university that same month, received my degree, and through a recruitment agency, was placed at The Zhongnan University of Economics and Law in Wuhan, China. At the time, I had never heard of Wuhan but, now in 2020, everyone in the world seems to be aware of this city’s existence as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak. Prior to my entry I knew very little about Chinese history, language, or culture, but I was immensely curious about the country and eager to learn about it. Like many who enter a foreign country for the



first time I experienced a tremendous culture shock and was intrigued by the differences between China and the United States. In a sense, I began an unofficial investigation and engaged in independent research nearly 17 years ago. Originally I had only intended to spend one year in China, but between 2003 and 2009 I spent more than 3 years living and working in different parts of the country. In addition to living and working in Wuhan I also spent time working in Tangshan, near Beijing, as well as Changsha in Hunan Province. The cities and people all seemed very similar to me. China is much more of a homogeneous society than the United States. During these years, I taught at Universities and language centers, familiarized myself with the basics of the language, read books by and about Confucius, Sun Zi (Sun-Tzu) and Lao Zi and visited many parts of the country such as Beijing and Xi'an. I also learned more about Mao Zedong, The Great Leap Forward and The Cultural Revolution. I walked on the Great Wall of China for the first time in 2004, fulfilling a goal I had set for myself as a high school student. I've been back twice since then.

### **Observations During My First Year**

During my first year I realized the dynamics of the Chinese classroom were quite different from what I was accustomed to in the United States. For instance, students were reluctant to speak up or volunteer when I would ask the class a question. I would often describe getting students to volunteer and speak up in class as "pulling teeth" and I often had to resort to calling on students individually. Other times I might ask a question and the entire class would respond in unison which I found odd--it was more as if they were programmed to respond to certain questions and situations with memorized and approved

responses and slogans. Rarely did they seem to have original or spontaneous ideas. Creativity and critical thinking didn't appear to be of much importance to the students which I also found odd and totally foreign to my understanding of the purpose of education.

In general, the students seemed more intent on listening to me speak rather than speaking themselves. This was often frustrating as I was there to teach "Oral English" but many students remained silent and passive, as if they were attending a lecture. This was not what I had expected. In fact, many students would often approach me at the end of a lesson and would ask me, "Teacher, how can I improve my Oral English?" I was stunned at this because often the student asking had sat in the class completely silent, and I would tell them the best way to improve would be to practice speaking English and participate in class. Often they would nod and thank me but their behavior would remain the same during the next class.

It was also during my first year in China that I was introduced to the concept of "face." I heard a good deal about losing and gaining "face" from students and other foreign teachers during this time but had a hard time understanding the concept at first. Eventually, I came to the conclusion it had something to do with one's pride, ego and/or reputation. This was puzzling to me. Growing up in the United States I had been taught at an early age to "swallow my pride", "pride can kill a man" and "pride comes before a fall"; however, the inverse appeared to be the norm in Mainland China.

Another thing I noticed was a lack of difference in opinions among my Chinese students. It seemed that they all held nearly identical opinions and trying to engage them

in debates or discussion proved to be nearly impossible. On more than one occasion I would ask a student a question and listen to their answer. I would then ask a second student the same question and receive a very similar or, in some cases, an identical answer word for word. I would then ask a third student and again receive the same response. This lack of diversity in thought and opinions frustrated me. Most Chinese students are taught not to speak until they have formulated the “correct” answer and are confident it will make a positive contribution to the conversation” (Ma & Wang, 2014). Because I enjoy debates and discussions about different ideas and topics I chose Philosophy as one of my undergraduate majors. Much to my dismay, I was not able to find the same intellectual variety in China as I had back home. In the United States people argue and debate about anything and everything from movies to politics. This is not the case in China.

During my first year I also observed a lack of any public statues or portraits of ancient Chinese philosophers or artists in public places or private residences. Statues and portraits of Mao were common, however. In spite of this, unlike the West, it soon became obvious that the cultural and philosophical foundations of China had a basis in Confucianism. Western civilization has its roots in Greek Philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition, both of which are absent in China. I learned quite a bit during those early years and, even after exiting China in 2009, I continued to read about and think about the country and the culture.

**2011 to the Present**

From 2011 to 2015, I served in the US Navy and was stationed in Japan from 2012 to 2015, fulfilling another goal I had set for myself as a high school student. Even though I spent half of those three years deployed at sea aboard the USS George Washington, I was grateful to have an opportunity to live in and explore a different Far Eastern country. In many ways, Japan and China are polar opposites, yet both countries share similarities such as their written languages (Chinese Hanzi and Japanese Kanji), their use of chopsticks, and their hierarchical structures in society.

In September 2015, I was honorably discharged from the Navy and decided to return to China to resume teaching and traveling. I have been living and working there ever since. I have read more books about the country, learned more Mandarin, and visited many more places including the cities of Qingdao, Harbin, Kunming, Lijiang, Chengdu, Chongqing, Guilin, Datong and Pingyao, to name a few. In total, I estimate I have lived and worked in China for approximately eight years. I know much more about the country and culture now than when I first entered the country in 2003, but there is still much that I can learn about their culture and history as well as my own.

**Benefits of Learning about Other Cultures**

I believe that learning about other cultures and traditions benefits the learner in at least two ways. The first and more obvious benefit it provides the learner is an awareness of a different culture and set of beliefs and traditions, which expands on one's understanding of the world. Many people have an ethnocentric view of the world and limited or superficial knowledge about other countries, their cultures, customs, and

history. The second benefit is that this process can lead one to compare the culture they are learning about with their own and generate more self-awareness of one's own civilization and how it has shaped one's outlook and beliefs. We often take our culture and worldview for granted and mistakenly assume what we consider to be "normal" to be universal when some of these "normal" behaviors may actually be considered abnormal in other cultures. For example, many people in the United States consider spitting loudly in public to be rude and unsanitary. In China, it is very common for Chinese people to spit frequently and loudly in public because they believe it is good for their health. This habit is one of the first things many foreigners notice when entering China for the first time.

### **Conclusion**

Seventeen years ago I knew very little about China but after having lived and worked there for several years my knowledge has grown through a combination of reading, research and real life experience. My hope is to share some of this knowledge through this project to serve as an introduction to the Western layperson who has little to no understanding of China, Chinese culture and how it differs from our Western society. I believe we have so much to gain and nothing to lose by learning more about the world and the different customs, traditions and beliefs of other nations. In chapter two, I review the literature on: 1. Face, 2. Collectivism, 3. Confucianism. My aim is to explore these components of Chinese culture and relate them to their educational system and some of my own personal experiences and observations. In Chapter three, I will describe my capstone project. Chapter four will be a reflection about the entire process and project.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

There is a tremendous amount of insightful research and literature that pertains to several aspects and elements of both traditional and modern China. This chapter will discuss and synthesize some of these sources. As stated in the introduction, my research question is, *What are three of the most important components of Chinese culture and how do they influence their education system?* What this study is designed to focus on are three major components of Chinese culture (Face, Collectivism and Confucianism) and how they influence and manifest in Mainland Chinese education. To start, we will provide a description of the idea of “culture.” Next, we will proceed to the three components this research will focus on and a selection of relevant literature. The concept of face is a crucial component of Chinese culture and influences much of their behavior. It can be argued that a similar concept exists in Western civilization but is ultimately less significant. Collectivism is another component that will be examined and contrasted with individualism that is more common in the West, particularly the United States. Following that, Confucianism and its influence on Chinese culture and education will be explored.

Finally, this chapter will compare and contrast these three components with their equivalents within the culture of the United States.

### **Culture Defined**

Culture will be defined here as (1) a construct that results from shared experiences such as a common history and geography--these are not culture themselves but antecedents that create a culture, (2) applies to a collective because it applies to groups of individuals, and (3) is multi-faceted which means that to describe a group's culture we need to examine more than one dimension (e.g., individualism-collectivism). To examine a group's relative position on only a single dimension does not adequately describe a group's culture. It should also be noted that when a group's relative position regarding a specific cultural dimension is described (e.g., individualism-collectivism), this is a generalization.

Culture is always a collective phenomenon that consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. The "collective programming of the mind", as he calls it, distinguishes members of one group or category of people from others. Culture is not innate, he argues, it is learned and derived from one's social environment and not from one's genes. It should also be noted that a distinction, in terms of culture, should be made between human nature and an individual's personality (Hofstede, 2010). Exactly where the borders lie between nature and culture, and between culture and personality, is unclear.

All humans belong to one single species, and it is becoming more common to say that we are one human race. Still, biologically speaking, there are various races in our

species that can be recognized through visual and genetic means. Genetic differences, however, are not the main basis for group boundaries. Genetic continuity exists but there is a discontinuity in our group affiliations. Millions of migrants live in other continents than their ancestors. Most people cannot correctly guess both the ethnic origin and adoptive nationality of somebody just by looking at them. For instance, a modern day caucasian person could be from a number of European countries, Australia, the United States or elsewhere but just by looking at them it might not be possible for most people to correctly identify both their ethnicity and nationality. In spite of this, recognizing group identity matters a lot. Religion, language, and other symbolic group boundaries are important to humans, and people spend much of their time establishing, negotiating, and changing them (Hofstede, 2010).

In the United States one can find much diversity and variety in nearly every aspect of life from food to fashion to ideology. As Hofstede suggests, most people cannot correctly guess the nationality and ethnicity of someone solely based on their appearance. In many parts of the world this is true. In many cases they are one in the same. However, in Mainland China, there is little diversity in ethnicity, nationality or ideology. Ethnic minorities do exist in China however they represent only a small percentage of the population and are difficult to distinguish from the dominant Han Chinese based on physical appearances. Over the years I have had “ethnic minorities” in my Chinese classrooms but I was unable to determine who based on their appearance. I would only know if a student told me. In the United States, teachers will often have no problem identifying students from different ethnic backgrounds such as European, African and



Asian. The demographics in the United States are broader and more diverse. China is even fond of using slogans such as “One China Policy” (in reference to Taiwan) and “One World, One Dream” (Slogan from the 2008 Olympics). There often tends to be an emphasis on unity and “oneness” in China where the vast majority of people are both Chinese in terms of their nationality and their ethnicity. This is quite different from what one encounters in the United States where people may have a shared nationality but different ethnicity and many people celebrate “diversity” rather than unity and uniformity. This paper is not designed to argue that unity is superior or inferior to diversity but simply to acknowledge that different cultures have different values and demographics. One of the significant values that differ between China and the United States is the Chinese concept of “Face”.

### **The Concept of Face in China**

The concept of face is extremely important in Chinese culture though many foreigners often have a difficult time explaining precisely what it is. It can be thought of as “prestige”, “reputation”, or “dignity” and one of the worst things that can happen to someone in Chinese culture is to “lose” face. A Chinese idiom goes, “Men can’t live without face, trees can’t live without bark”人要脸树要皮 – rén yào liǎn, shù yào pí. A traditional insult is to say that someone “has no face” 没有面子 – Méiyǒu miànzi. In order to better understand this concept I will now provide several descriptions and explanations of what “face” is. In his work, *Interaction Ritual – Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (1967), Erving Goffman defines “face” as the positive social value a person

effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. “Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). According to Christopher Earley, “face” is “the evaluation of self based on internal and external (to the individual) judgments concerning a person’s adherence to moral rules of conduct and position within a given social structure” (Earley, 1997, p. 43).

Lin Yutang explained in his work *My Country and My People* that face is psychological and not physiological, it “can be ‘granted’ and ‘lost’ and ‘fought for’ and ‘presented as a gift.’ ... Abstract and intangible, it is yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated” (Lin, 1935, p. 190).

Although “face” exists in several cultures all over the world, the concept in China has its own specific characteristics. “Face” in China is more pervasive and more nuanced than in other societies. The reason is that Chinese society values hierarchy, social roles and interpersonal relationships to a high degree. Much of this stems from Confucianism which will be explored later. As a result, “face” plays a key role in more social contexts than in other cultures. Although the desire for prestige exists in every human society, there is considerable variation between the value placed upon it and the means for attaining it (Hu, 1944).

After arriving at an understanding of what “face” in Chinese society is, one may wonder how people can gain and lose “face”. What follows are several examples of both.

**Some common ways to give face include:**

- Giving high compliments often and freely
- Praising someone in front of their elders or superiors
- Giving high marks on customer evaluation forms
- Giving an expensive gift
- Inviting someone for an expensive meal or banquet

From my own personal experience I can testify that public praise, gift giving and inviting people to banquets are common in China. These habits exist in Western countries as well but in China they appear to have more significance attached to them.

**The following are some face-losing situations:**

- Revealing someone's lack of knowledge or ability, e.g. that they have poor English skills
- Calling someone out on a lie
- Not showing the proper deference to one's elders or superiors
- Turning down an invitation outright. It's better to deflect with noncommittal phrases such as "Maybe" or "Let's talk about it later".
- Openly criticizing, challenging, or disagreeing with someone. This is especially embarrassing if the person's superiors are present.
- Being openly and publicly angry at someone. This actually causes you to lose face as well, because you are openly showing a strong emotion in public, instead of maintaining a calm outward demeanor, as is proper.

Drawing from my own personal observations and experiences I have witnessed, first-hand, just how important “face” is among Chinese people. Often students are reluctant to speak during class if they lack complete certainty to provide the teacher with the “right” answer. Making a mistake in public could cause one to “lose face” among one’s peers and consequently many are discouraged from taking chances for fear of failure. Praising a student in front of his or her peers will give them “face” while correcting them or providing constructive criticism may be interpreted as a loss of face and act of humiliation. I believe that the reluctance many Chinese students display to take risks in a classroom setting for fear of losing face is not conducive to intellectual growth or improvement of skills such as spoken English.

In the United States many people are taught at an early age that they will make mistakes in school and in life but this should not prohibit nor discourage them from learning from these mistakes and continuing to work towards eventual success. There is a quote from a 1987 Nike shoe commercial by NBA Legend Michael Jordan that comes to mind:

“I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed”.

One could reasonably argue this statement by a very successful individual represents the spirit of the American people. Americans, in general, do not fear failure

and are often eager and willing to learn from their mistakes. There is rarely a fear of “losing face” and even people who might be considered shy or timid are often encouraged to overcome this and try until they succeed. Making mistakes is often viewed as an inevitable part of the learning process. Mastery of a skill or a subject does not come fast or easy. Chinese, by contrast, are much more risk averse and fearful of being perceived as being foolish or a failure. In *Learner's Privilege and Responsibility: A Critical Examination of the Experiences and Perspectives of Learners from Chinese Backgrounds in the United States* by Wen Ma and Chuang Wang writing about Asian students studying in the US notes that many Asian youth are afraid of asking for help because to admit one is having difficulties can be perceived as an admission of failure and a loss of face for oneself and one’s family. These expectations are internalized and not easily shaken off once in a new location. Many of these students display an inability, “to deal with anything short of perfection... Withdrawals and incompletes in too many courses indicate to universities that the student is not willing to be challenged and take risks, an essential part of an American education” (Wen & Wang, 2014, p. 25). The text continues by stating,

“Often, what inhibits the willingness to speak English openly is not so much their lack of fluency or knowledge of the language as much as the fear of making a mistake, standing out, being laughed at and “losing face”... Similar to the issue of perfection, most Chinese are taught not to speak until they have formulated the right answer and are confident it will

make a worthwhile contribution to the conversation ” (Wen & Wang, 2014, p. 26).

Based on my experiences as a student in the United States and a teacher in China I find that Americans focus on the journey as much as the destination. Making mistakes, having discussions, considering various points of view, analyzing arguments and a trial and error approach to learning are part of the process or journey. In China, by contrast, the thinking appears to be much more black and white or true and false. There is one correct or optimal answer to every question and the goal is to determine what that is usually on the basis of an authoritative figure. The student should accept whatever is presented to them as true from an authoritative figure based on their authority rather than through reason, evidence or discussion. Often it seems that the “journey” is discarded in China and the destination itself is the goal.

Being well-educated gives a person prestige and “Face” in China. For this and other reasons, education is extremely important in their society. In *Learner's Privilege and Responsibility: A Critical Examination of the Experiences and Perspectives of Learners from Chinese Backgrounds in the United States* by Wen Ma and Chuang Wang we read, “For most Chinese, education equals status; it does not mean, as is so often repeated by the Confucian myth, self-cultivation and moral character” (Wen & Wang, 2014, p. 23). Based on my observations and experiences in Mainland China I tend to agree that many Chinese pursue education for status, wealth and material comfort rather than self-cultivation and moral character.

As Chinese culture is based on group identity and collectivism, there also exists “shared face”. This means if one person loses face, this causes the entire wider group, be it a family, company, or entire nation, to also lose face. Conversely, if one person gains face through academic success it can give face to one’s family and enhance their reputation.

### **Collectivism in Chinese Culture**

China has been identified as a collectivistic society (Triandis, 1995). A collectivistic society is one in which the individuals define themselves as part of one or more collectives such as family, tribe, nation, and are primarily motivated by the norms and duties imposed on them from these collectives. Individuals in collectivistic societies are willing to give priority to the goals of the collective over their own personal goals, and emphasize their connection to the members of these collectives. In contrast, the U.S. is considered an individualistic society (Hofstede, 1980). An individualistic society is one in which the members see themselves as independent of collectives and are motivated by their own preferences, needs, and contracts established with others (Triandis, 1995). Within the context of Chinese culture, individualism is seen in a negative light (Triandis, 1995). According to the Chinese, individualism implies selfishness and a lack of concern for others, whereas collectivism is believed to affirm the solidarity of the group (Ho & Chiu, 1994). Cultural groups like the Chinese, who espouse collectivistic values, focus their trust and solidarity toward the norms of the members of their collectives, also called ingroups, and are often distrustful of outgroups. In short, the collectivistic Chinese

society shows more dissociation from outgroups and more subordination to ingroups than members of individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995).

As a collectivist culture China promotes conformity and the protection of the status quo often referred to as “stability” and “social harmony”. The classroom dynamics in China reflect this emphasis on social harmony. Students typically will not challenge one another or the teacher. Rather than debate and discuss ideas Chinese students will accept ideas and beliefs provided to them from a combination of tradition and authority. Conformity and social harmony are prioritized over creativity, originality and individuality. A traditional Chinese classroom consists of an authoritarian instructor and students who are silent, passive and diligent listeners. Students are not encouraged to ask questions or challenge the authority of the teacher. Once again, this demonstrates that the education system promotes stability and conformity above change and innovation (Walter, 2014). It is unsurprising that China, in my opinion, has made few, if any, major contributions to global technology or innovation in recent history. The internet, the automobile, the television, the airplane and other world changing inventions did not originate in China, for example. Many Chinese take pride in the “Four Great Inventions of China 四大发明” which are (1) The Compass (2) Gunpowder (3) Papermaking (4) Printing. These are admirable inventions but they are certainly not recent and when one considers the “5000 years of Chinese history” it is tempting to wonder why so few innovations occurred over the course of such a long history.

It can and has been argued that, in China, collectivism leads to ideological conformity and an absence of critical thought, originality and innovation. By contrast, in



the United States, students are more likely to be encouraged to formulate their own unique ideas and opinions whereas in China, based on my personal observations and experiences, students are conditioned to conform to ideals and values prescribed by a combination of tradition and the state. 枪打出头鸟 qiāng dǎ chū tóu niǎo is a Chinese proverb which states, “The bird that sticks its head out gets shot” meaning that nonconformity gets punished. Openly criticizing, challenging, or disagreeing with someone, as mentioned earlier, is one way a person can lose face and so this is often avoided. Not only can it result in a loss of face it can also disrupt social harmony. Both my research and personal experiences reveal that losing face and disrupting social harmony are to be avoided at all costs. The book, *Learner's Privilege and Responsibility: A Critical Examination of the Experiences and Perspectives of Learners from Chinese Backgrounds in the United States* states,

“In China, success in the classroom is equated with reproducing what the student thinks the teacher wants to hear. The challenge becomes one of finding out what this is and providing it. Some have called China a country that imitates or mimics what has gone on before and therefore is handicapped in its ability to produce creative, thoughtful work” (Wen & Wang, 2014, p. 24).

Telling an authoritative figure what they want to hear, rather than the truth, is strongly ingrained in the Chinese psyche. Unfortunately, this mindset has resulted in historical disasters such as the famine that resulted during The Great Leap Forward. Due to the laws passed during the period and the Great Leap Forward during 1958–1962,

about 36 million people died of starvation in this period, according to an analysis by journalist Yang Jisheng. (Huang, 2016).

According to journalist Yang Jisheng, The Communist Party's official account of the Great Famine blamed both government policies as well as nature. Official figures falsely claimed that areas in China affected by drought or flood reached 28 million hectares—more than the total area of France—in 1961. The previous year also recorded the lowest grain output in more than a decade. Yang's reporting indicates both figures are fiction. During his research, he uncovered a document written by Xue Muqiao, former head of the national statistics bureau, in 1958 that said “we give whatever figures the upper-level wants,” to overstate disasters and relieve official responsibility for deaths due to starvation (Huang, 2016). Many suspect China has been doing the same in 2020 by underreporting the number of deaths resulting from the COVID-19 Coronavirus in order to both save face and tell those in high positions of authority what they want to hear rather than what is true.

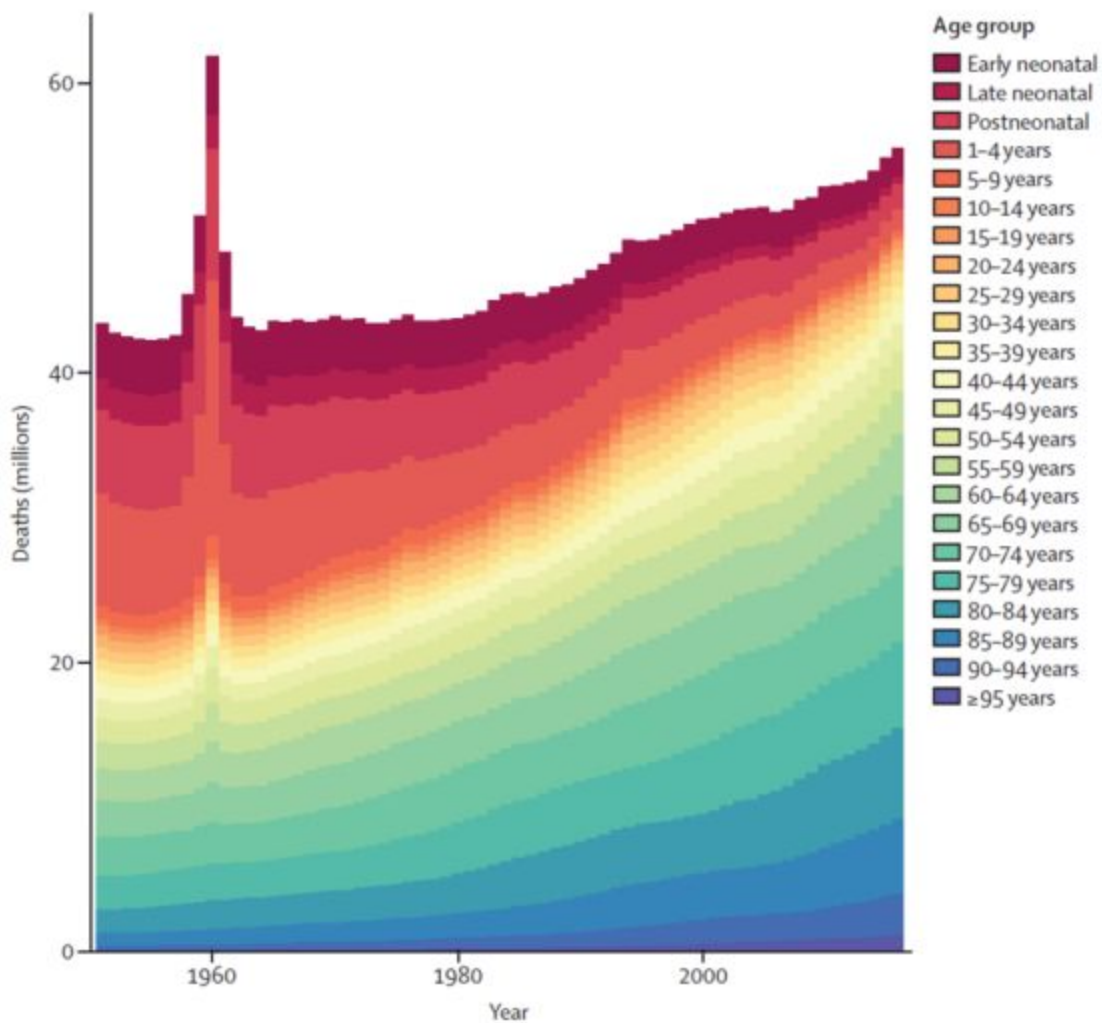


Chart A - Global Number of Deaths (1950-2017) (Dicker, 2018)

The Great Leap Forward produced a significant spike in the global number of deaths first for their families, then for their community, next for their clan, and ultimately for the nation at large.

According to the book *Chinese Mind : Understanding Traditional Chinese Beliefs and Their Influence on Contemporary Culture*, the vast majority of all Chinese did not have the political or social freedom to make decisions on their own for more than three thousand years.

“They were culturally conditioned to suppress their own personal needs and ambitions and to think and behave in terms of collective responsibility— This mindset was, in fact, the foundation of the teachings of Confucius, the most influential of all Chinese sages, and was based on the already old Chinese idea that social stability was far more important than allowing people to make decisions on their own. Within a few generations this Confucian philosophy was adopted as the official creed of the Imperial Court and was mandated as the law of the land— an action that was to have a profound impact on the values and attitudes of Chinese that is still visible in modern-day China” (De Mente 2009, p. 81).

The Confucius Institute at the University of Delaware explains that Chinese culture places more value on unity and conformity than the West does. Rather than reflect on their own personal views Chinese will defer to the views of their leaders and ancient traditions. Americans, by contrast, tend to seek independence and the pursuit of personal goals above society’s goals. Therefore, China can be described as a collectivist society while the U.S. is more individualist. As a result of these cultural differences Chinese and Americans treat social relationships differently. Chinese prefer a more structured hierarchy when interacting with others. For instance, ancient tradition dictates that

Chinese elders and males are given more respect within the family. Americans prefer a more informal structure. In the United States, in modern times, men and women are regarded as equal and social rankings are minimized.

Even friendships are affected by the collectivist mindset of the Chinese. Chinese prefer to have a small number of lifelong friends who can be completely trusted and relied on. Americans, by contrast, prefer to have many friends and acquaintances that are often limited to mutual obligations. The independent mindset one finds in the United States strays from relationships that require them to be reliant on other people. The Chinese feel obligated to help their close friends, and take care of their family and relatives. This obligation is not as strong in the United States.

In summary, the Chinese collectivist mindset creates a society that supports and protects its members but sacrifices personal independence. The individual mindset in American society focuses more on freedom of choice, but does not seek to provide the level of interdependent support that exists in Chinese society.

### **Confucianism**

In order to understand China it is useful to have some familiarity with Confucius and his influence on the nation's culture and psychology. The name Confucius is a Latinized combination of the surname Kong 孔 with an honorific suffix "Master" (fuzi 夫子) and was coined in the late 16th century by the early Jesuit missionaries to China. It is believed that Confucius was born in 551 BC in China's Shandong Province. He was born into the class of shi (士), between the aristocracy and the common people. His father,

Kong He, died when he was three years old, and Confucius was raised by his mother Yan Zhengzai who died before she was 40 years old. Confucius began teaching after he turned 30, and taught more than 3,000 students in his life, about 70 of whom were considered outstanding. His disciples and the early Confucian community they formed became the most influential intellectual force in the Warring States period.

Confucius approached the purpose of human life from a different perspective than the Ancient Greeks. He taught that the purpose of human life was based on self-perfection or self-cultivation both socially and morally. This is a pillar of traditional Chinese thought. It is the person's self, not the external world, that is the object of his or her intellectual attention, contemplation, practice and living. The self is the project for the person to work on, to improve, to refine, and to accomplish. Because no one is born with this approach to life, one must learn to self-perfect. The sum total of one's lifelong self-perfection constitutes the core meaning of learning. This outline of life's purpose and its process through learning is deeply inspiring to the Chinese and other East Asians (Li, 2012).

Confucius was not a speculative philosopher like many in the Western tradition which have strong influences from Ancient Athens as well as the Judeo-Christian religion. Rather, Confucius was more of a practical philosopher concerned with daily mundane affairs. He did not demonstrate any interest in the abstractions such as truth, reason and nature which are at the heart of Western philosophy (Flanagan, 2011). There are no records that indicate that he had any theories or teachings about the origin of the world, the origin of humanity, or about any other world or celestial being. He did not

engage in scientific or metaphysical discussion or contemplation. His teachings were limited to ethics, devotion of soul, truthfulness, history, poetry, and so on. Self-realization and social harmony were the two objectives of Confucius' approach to education. Human relationships were his primary focus as well as the improvement of the self. The philosophy of Confucius was not focused on a set of doctrines or theories about the world but rather behaviour and interpersonal living (Flanagan, 2011).

From my own experiences in China, both inside and outside of the classroom, I do find that students and ordinary Chinese citizens have a very materialistic view of the world and do not engage in abstract or metaphysical thought as people in the West are more prone to do. Social harmony and conformity both inside and outside of the classroom are the social norms that the Chinese abide by. Human relationships in China or "guan xi" are also an important part of the country's social fabric (explain guan xi). In the West, there is a saying, "It's not what you know, it's who you know" and this is often true, especially in China. According to Confucius, there are five constant relationships (五伦): those between ruler and subject (duty), father and son (love), elder brother and younger brother (precedence of the old over the young), husband and wife (distinction), and friend and friend (faith). Each member in any relationship has certain responsibilities. Each relationship implies a hierarchy between the two parties. This is an important teaching that has persisted in modern Chinese culture: rank and hierarchy. Even though Chinese society has become more egalitarian in modern centuries, much reverence is still given to superiors and the elderly (Elstein, 2012).

For example, in Chinese culture, it would still be very uncommon for an employee to call his or her boss by their first name. Chinese people will act in a way befitting their rank or role much like the military. In fact, in Chinese Universities incoming freshmen have to undergo a sort of military training and many times in the past I have walked around a campus in China and seen the freshmen in military uniforms marching in formation.

For centuries, Chinese education and learning traditions have been influenced by Confucianism. Within many schools of thought in Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism has been the most important influence. The great teacher philosopher Confucius' (551 BC) notion of education as changing people for the better remains at the heart of the purpose of education even in the early years of the third millennium (Bush & Qiang, 2000). The development and characteristics of the system of Chinese education have been greatly influenced by Confucianism and this traditional culture (Wang & Mao, 1996). Cleverley (1991) argues that traditionally the Chinese have placed a high value on education (Cleverley, 1991). Some scholars believe that all education in mainland China is based on Confucian principles even though the teachers and students are often unaware of the source (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Confucian principles include the high value placed on education by society (Watkins & Biggs, 2001):

- beliefs that learning involves reflection and application
- hard work can compensate for lack of ability
- the teacher is a model both of knowledge and morality



- learning is a moral duty and studying hard is a responsibility to the family

### **Comparison with Western Culture**

Several of the resources I have reviewed compared and contrasted China with Western culture and traditions. For instance, while China is a very collectivist society, the United States is more individualistic. The concept of the “self” and its relation to the world is perceived differently. Eastern philosophy is drawn more into groups, society or people’s actions. In order to find meaning in life as they try to remove the false “me” concept and find meaning in discovering the true “me” in relation to everything around them. Western civilization, by contrast, is more individualistic, trying to find the meaning of life here and now with self at the center as it is. (Li, 2012).

Americans are often described as being self-reliant, independent and assertive. “Rugged individualism” is a phrase often associated with a popular mindset or lifestyle in the United States. Dictionary.com defines the term individualism as, “The belief that all individuals, or nearly all individuals, can succeed on their own and that government help for people should be minimal.” At the same time, not everyone in America shares the same views and beliefs. For instance, different people follow different religious traditions or none at all. The same could be said of the American political system. Instead of having a one-party system like China the United States has two major parties as well as several smaller third parties. Many Americans consider themselves Republicans or Democrats but, at the same time, there are many Libertarians and Independent voters. There exists a diversity of thought, opinions and ideologies in the United States and people are often not

reluctant to express their views or support one political party over another. Americans often enjoy public discourse and debate and are more concerned with the comparison of ideas and beliefs than maintaining social harmony. The priorities are different. From my experience in China I have often found that many people express similar opinions especially in the realm of politics, at least in public. There are those who do hold views contrary to the masses but these are often shared only in private. In a typical American high school or college classroom, for instance, if I were to ask students if they support the current President some would say yes and some would say no. Of course, students' responses may be affected by which school, county and state the school is located in. Some states and schools might be more supportive of the current President or a certain ideology or learning, whether now or in the future, while others have less support. The point is that one will encounter variety and different views and opinions and many students in the U.S. would not be hesitant to express themselves. In China, this is not the case. It would be a very rare thing indeed to find a Chinese student in a school in any part of China who would openly criticize the President of China regardless of who the President is. They will simply support him because of the fact that he is the leader. Of course, there may be a minority of students and citizens who are critical of the Chinese Communist Party but they dare not speak out for fear of disrupting social harmony and possible being socially ostracized or possibly something worse. In general, many students and citizens in China will profess to have the same beliefs. To what extent this reflects their true feelings one can only speculate.

Another example that comes to mind is food. Often in China when one asks students what kind of food they like they may enthusiastically say, “Chinese food!!” or name a specific Chinese dish such as “Hot Pot”. In the United States, the same question is much more likely to provide a variety of responses. One person might say Mexican food is their favorite, another might say Italian, Thai or even Soul Food. There may be some overlap and some types of cuisine may be more popular than others but there will be much more variety in the United States than China. It may be unfair to attribute this entirely to collectivism as China has been a closed society for much of its history and has had less immigration and overall exposure to different cuisines. As a result many Chinese have not had the same experience with food as many Americans. Naturally, exceptions might arise and a well-traveled cosmopolitan Chinese individual living in a city like Shanghai might be more familiar with other national cuisines. However, in general, I think it is more than safe to say that a majority of Chinese citizens would express a preference for Chinese food if asked.

A third example that contrasts American individualism with Chinese collectivism could be hobbies. Americans enjoy many hobbies, including but not limited to, many types of sports, photography, music, reading, knitting, drawing and so on. However, in China, it has been my experience that whenever I ask students what their hobbies are, the typical range of literal responses is often limited to (1) “eating” (2) “sleeping” (3) “play game” and (4) “play basketball”. Basketball is probably the most popular sport in the country. Other sports exist and joining gyms is becoming more popular but basketball appears to be the most common and most popular form of exercise among students.

Many foreigners in China have made the observation that “Chinese people don’t have hobbies” and “eating and sleeping are not hobbies”. Again, it may be unfair to attribute this entirely to collectivism as many Chinese may not have as many options and opportunities as Americans but I do think that collectivism has a powerful influence on Chinese habits and behaviors.

Further insight into Western civilization’s preference for individualism above collectivism can be found in the work of several influential philosophers, academics and economists such as Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, Karl Popper and Ludwig Von Mises. The theme of Ayn Rand’s novel *The Fountainhead* is individualism vs collectivism, not in politics, but in one’s soul. The story presents the career of architect and innovator Howard Roark. In the novel, Roark breaks with tradition. He recognizes no authority but that of his own independent judgement. Already one can note the difference between the typical Western mindset and typical Chinese mindset. Chinese are more prone to defer to authority than Westerners who, in general, are more prone to think for themselves. In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark struggles for the integrity of his work against various forms of social oppression and emerges victorious. Roark’s archenemy of the novel, Ellsworth M. Toohey, is an architectural critic and sociologist who devotes his life to planning the future establishment of a collectivist society. He is Rand's personification of evil—the most active and self-aware villain in any of her novels. In the previous chapter of the book one character, Katie, is unhappy and asks Ellsworth for advice; he tells her that if she is thinking of her own unhappiness, she is being selfish and egotistical.

"We are poisoned by the superstition of the ego. We cannot know what will be right or wrong in a selfless society, nor what we'll feel, nor in what manner. We must destroy the ego first. That is why the mind is so unreliable. We must not think. We must believe." (Rand, 1971, pg. 365).

The phrase, "We must not think. We must believe" sounds like the mindset I have encountered in China in my time there. At the same time, I believe it is worth noting that I observed a very similar mindset when I served in the US Navy from 2011-2015.

According to Ayn Rand in an article titled, *The Only Path to Tomorrow*, and published in Reader's Digest, Collectivism is a means of subjugating the individual to a group—whether to a race, class or state, it makes no difference. Collectivism maintains that people must be chained to collective action and collective thought for the sake of what is referred to as "the common good" (Rand, 1944). She also wrote in *The Virtue of Selfishness* that,

"Collectivism holds that the individual has no rights, that his life and work belong to the group . . . and that the group may sacrifice him at its own whim to its own interests. The only way to implement a doctrine of that kind is by means of brute force—and statism has always been the political corollary of collectivism". (Rand, 1964, page 128).

Much of modern China's political philosophy and system have been borrowed and modified from the Soviet Union. Rand's critique of collectivism sounds very much like a critique of Communist China which is infamous for its numerous human rights violations and suppression of free thought. This is not surprising however when one realizes she

fled the Soviet Union and immigrated to the United States. Leonard Peikoff, who was writing about collectivism in Nazi Germany, rather than China, stated,

“The philosophy of collectivism upholds the existence of a mystic (and unperceivable) social organism, while denying the reality of perceived individuals—a view which implies that man’s senses are not a valid instrument for perceiving reality. Collectivism maintains that an elite endowed with special mystic insight should rule men—which implies the existence of an elite source of knowledge, a fund of revelations inaccessible to logic and transcending the mind” (Peikoff, 1969, p.1).

He goes on to explain that collectivism denies people the opportunity to deal with one another by voluntary means and settle their disputes through the use of rational persuasion. Collectivism declares that people should live under the reign of physical force (as wielded by the dictator of the omnipotent state)—this position abandons reason as the guide and arbiter of human relationships. He concludes collectivism and the advocacy of reason are “philosophically antithetical; it is one or the other” (Peikoff, 1969, p.1).

At the same time, it is worth noting that, according to Karl Popper, the Greek Philosopher Plato, who has undoubtedly had an enormous influence on Western Civilization, advocated for collectivism. Popper wrote, “Plato suggests, and all later collectivists followed him in this point, that if you cannot sacrifice your self-interest for the sake of the whole, then you are a selfish person, and

morally depraved” (Popper, 2008, p.65). Popper’s critique of Plato, one could argue, reveals the modern rejection of the argument that individualism is selfish and collectivism is unselfish. Popper stated that,

“Collectivism is not opposed to egoism, nor is it identical with altruism or unselfishness. A collectivist can be a group-egoist. He can selfishly defend the interest of his own group, in contradistinction to all other groups. Collective egoism or group egoism (e.g. national egoism or class egoism) is a very common thing. That such a thing exists shows clearly enough that collectivism as such is not opposed to selfishness. On the other hand, the individualist or anti-collectivist can at the same time be an altruist. He can be ready to make sacrifices in order to help other individuals. (...) To be an individualist means to see in every human individual an end in itself, and not merely a means to further other interests, for example, those of the state. It does not mean to take one's own individuality particularly seriously, or to lay more stress (or even as much) on one's own interests than on the interests of others” (Popper, 2008, p.65).

Former Congressman Ron Paul has claimed that racism, a social issue commonly discussed in the United States but not in China, is itself a form of collectivism and is contrary to the American spirit. In a 2007 campaign statement he called racism, “an ugly form of collectivism, the mindset that views humans strictly as members of groups rather than as individuals. Racists believe that all individuals who share superficial physical

characteristics are alike: as collectivists, racists think only in terms of groups". According to Paul,

“encouraging Americans to adopt a group mentality, the advocates of so-called "diversity" actually perpetuate racism. The true antidote to racism is liberty. Liberty means having a limited, constitutional government devoted to the protection of individual rights rather than group claims. Liberty means free-market capitalism, which rewards individual achievement and competence - not skin color, gender, or ethnicity” (Paul, 2007).

While the teachings of Confucius have had a strong influence on the East (China in particular) the West has been more influenced by the likes of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition and many theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. Athens is considered the birthplace of democracy and the foundation of Western civilization. Greek philosophy has influenced much of Western culture since its inception. Alfred North Whitehead once noted: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato" (Whitehead, 1979, p. 39). Ironically, Plato himself may have been a collectivist, rather than a proponent of individualism—if one agrees with Popper’s analysis. In spite of Plato’s greatness and influence one could easily argue most would agree that Western cultures are more properly categorized as individualist than collectivist.



Regarding the concept of “face”, one could argue that some version(s) of “face” such as “prestige” and “reputation” do exist in the United States and many European nations but are ultimately of less significance and importance in these Western nations. For example, I believe that many young people in the United States are warned about the potential pitfalls of excessive pride. Young people in Western culture are often encouraged to “swallow our pride” and “get over themselves” and admit when they are at fault rather than try to maintain a sense of pride or face. This could be attributed to the impact of the Judeo-Christian influence on Western civilization. The following verses from the Bible illustrate this:

“The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled)” (Isaiah 2:12, NIV).

“But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (James 4:6, NIV).

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10, NIV).

“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2, NIV).

“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18, NIV).

Reputation and prestige are still desirable and sought after however, in the Western world. The fear of “losing face” or causing others to “lose face” is less of a social control on most people. Honesty and personal responsibility are considered more

virtuous in Western society than China. For instance, in the United States it is common for people to be taught that appearances can be deceptive and one should not judge a book by its cover but in China, based on my many years of personal experience and observation I have come to the conclusion that the inverse is true.

When we shift our focus to the traditional western approach to education, author and educator Jin Li states that this tradition emphasizes the following key themes:

1. Human curiosity about the external world is the inspiration for knowledge.
2. Relentless spirit of inquiry into the universe will lead to knowledge.
3. Mind is the highest human faculty that enables this inquiry.
4. Reason (not heart) is the process by which we know the world.
5. Learning privileges those who have superior ability.
6. The individual is the sole entity for inquiring, discovery, and ultimate triumph.

(Li, 2012, page 15).

Li has also established a set of themes for traditional Chinese education as follows:

1. Learning is the most important thing in life; it is the life's purpose.
2. Learning enables one to become a better, not just smarter, person. The ultimate purpose of learning is to self-perfect and to contribute to others at the same time.

3. Learning is a life-long process. It starts early in life and continues throughout one's life.

4. The kind of knowledge that sets one person apart from another does not come to one automatically. One must seek it. Seeking knowledge requires resolve, diligence, endurance of hardship, steadfastness, concentration and humility. One must have what the Chinese call "a heart and mind for wanting to learn", a passion for learning.

5. Learning does not privilege anyone, and neither does it discriminate against anyone. Everyone is capable of seeking and achieving knowledge regardless of one's inborn capacity and social circumstances.

6. One begins the learning process as a beneficiary from others' dedicated guidance. But one will become a benefactor to others' learning and self-cultivation as one matures, making harmony with the world (Li, 2012, p. 14).

After comparing Chinese Culture with the culture of the United States, it is obvious that there are many differences between them.

## **Conclusion**

As the literature reveals, much research has been conducted on various components of Chinese culture and how they differ from the United States and, more broadly, Western civilization. The concept of "Face", or some version of it exists in many countries, however China has a very unique and distinctive understanding of this concept and places more importance on it than other cultures. Collectivism is another important

part of the culture which distinguishes China from the United States which is an individualistic culture. Several Western academics, philosophers, politicians and economists, including Ayn Rand, Ludwig Von Mises, Ron Paul and Karl Popper have argued against Collectivism and in favor of Individualism. Plato, an important figure in the history of Western thought is something of an anomaly. This is an important distinction between countries like China and the United States as one can observe that collectivist societies tend towards totalitarianism rather than democracy. Understanding Confucianism is also essential to understanding the traditional Chinese culture and worldview as well as how it distinguishes itself from Western philosophy and tradition which has its ideological foundation in Athens and Jerusalem. The next chapter will provide a description of the capstone project which will accompany this text.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

In the previous chapters I shared my personal and professional experiences, as well as literature and research, associated with my research question, *What are three of the most important components of Chinese culture and how do they influence their education system?* In this chapter I will provide a description of the project I intend to create to share the information presented in the previous chapters, particularly chapter two. This chapter will include an explanation of the research paradigm, the chosen method used to develop the project, the intended audience of this resource and the timeline of this project.

#### Project Overview

The main idea of my project is to better inform those in the West about a few basics regarding (1) Chinese Culture (2) Chinese Education (3) Differences between China and the Western world. The target audience is anyone who is interested in learning about these three points. The information presented could be useful to teachers who may themselves be planning to teach in China for the first time, teachers in Western countries, such as the United States, who may be working with Chinese students or anyone who has a general curiosity. In order to deliver this information in a way that may be interesting and engaging to the audience I have decided to create a video presentation. This

presentation will summarize some of the main points discussed in this paper, particularly chapter 2, and be explained by myself. However, in order to make the presentation more dynamic and interesting I have decided that I will conduct video and/or audio interviews with four (or more) Western teachers who have lived and taught in China for one year or longer. Initially, I anticipated that each interview would be 30-60 minutes in length. However, 4 out of 5 of the interviews were closer to 2 hours in length. Each person interviewed provided some background information about himself and responded to a set of questions I provided them ahead of time. The questions I provided them were as follows:

- (1) Tell us a little bit about yourself and your background
- (2) When and why did you first go to China and how long did you teach there?
- (3) What were some of the first things that surprised you about Chinese culture and Chinese education?
- (4) What is your understanding of the following components of Chinese culture: Face, Collectivism and Confucianism? How do you think they manifest in Chinese schools and influence the education system there? Can you compare and contrast these cultural components with your own country?
- (5) What were some obstacles you encountered as a teacher in China and how did you overcome them?
- (6) What do you believe are some of the major differences between a typical Chinese classroom and a Western classroom?
- (7) What were some useful strategies you developed while teaching in China?

(8) What advice would you give to someone going to China to teach for the first time? What should they know and how can they prepare?

(9) What are some pros and cons of living and working in China?

### **Research Paradigm/Framework/Theories**

Since the intended audience is most likely to be composed of, but not limited to, current and future teachers, or anyone working in education, it seems logical to apply adult learning theories to my “research paradigm/framework/theories. I reviewed multiple websites and chose the one which I thought was the best: ispringsolutions.

Adult learning theories are based on the premise that adults learn differently than children. The following chart and explanations have been drawn from the ispringsolutions blog. Here are some basic differences between how children and adults learn according to ispringsolutions:

Children	Adults
Child-oriented learning provides a basic foundation of knowledge and helps develop critical thinking skills.	Adults have an existing base of knowledge and life experience. They seek out continuous learning based on personal interests, wants and needs.
Children typically have no choice but to study and may lose enthusiasm if they are not engaged in what is happening around	Adults understand why they’re learning, so their motivational levels are naturally high.

them	
It's necessary to be in charge of the classroom.	It's beneficial to let adults work things out for themselves and organize themselves.
Teachers play a central role in delivering knowledge and guiding learning activities.	The role of "teacher" may be effectively filled by a mentor, coach, peer, or expert.

Over the last century, several adult learning theories have gained prominence. There isn't a single theory that explains how and why adults learn best; however, each one sheds light on a particular aspect of adult learning. By studying each theory one may gain insight into what motivates adults to learn. What follows is a list and description of six of the most popular adult learning theories to see how each can be used to support overall learning needs (ispringsolutions, 2020).

- (1) **Andragogy** - andragogy is described by its creator as the art and science of helping adults learn.
- (2) **Transformational Learning** - transformative learning theory posits that all learners use different assumptions, expectations, and beliefs to make sense of the world around them.
- (3) **Experiential Learning** - experiential learning requires a hands-on approach that puts the learner at the center of the learning experience.



- (4) **Self-Directed Learning** - SDL is rooted in Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning; in 1997, D.R. Garrison added elements of self-management to the model.
- (5) **Project Based Learning** - Developed by John Dewey in 1897, project based learning theory holds that learners acquire deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world problems. Dewey called this principle "learning by doing."
- (6) **Action Learning** - Developed by Reg Revans in 1982, action learning is an approach to problem solving that involves taking action and reflecting on the results.

**Learning Theory Comparison Chart adapted from ispring solutions**

<b>THEORY</b>	<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>BEST SUITED FOR</b>
Andragogy	<p>Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed, and seek out learning based on personal needs.</p> <p>Adult learners must be able to apply what they learn in a practical way.</p>	<p>Problem solving</p> <p>Structured formal learning</p> <p>Learners with a defined need to know</p>
Transformational Learning	<p>A person's beliefs and expectations shape their view of the world.</p> <p>Through a rational analytical process, a person can consciously change their old beliefs and implement new</p>	<p>Complex analytical processes</p> <p>Evaluation and analysis</p> <p>Long-term personal growth</p>

	ones.	
Experiential Learning	<p>A hands-on approach where individuals learn by doing.</p> <p>Puts the learner at the center of the learning process.</p> <p>Learning happens through an active process of doing and reflection.</p>	<p>Mechanical skills</p> <p>Leadership skills</p> <p>Process improvement</p> <p>Systematic thinking</p>
Self-Directed Learning	<p>Process where individuals take complete ownership of the learning process to diagnose learning needs, identify resources, implement learning, and assess their results.</p>	<p>Process updates</p> <p>Self-motivated learners</p> <p>Technology and software skills</p>
Project Based Learning	<p>Learners engage in active investigation of a real-world problem.</p> <p>Gives learners a voice in the overall process through a process of inquiry, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and communication.</p>	<p>Project management</p> <p>Process improvement</p> <p>Manufacturing</p>
Action Learning	<p>Learning is the result of programming and questioning.</p> <p>Learners take action on a problem and reflect upon the results.</p>	<p>Team building</p> <p>Fill in knowledge gaps</p> <p>Uncover areas of learning need</p>

**Intended Audience**

The intended audience is for any adult in a Western country, such as the United States, the UK, Canada or Australia, who has any interest in China and Chinese culture. This is a very broad group. However, the content may be of particular interest to teachers who may be planning to teach in China in the future or teachers working in their own countries who are currently working, or in the future will work with, Chinese students.

**Timeline**

My timeline for developing the capstone project was summer 2020. I shared my ideas and drafts with my instructor and content expert from June through August. The first step was to complete a polished draft of Chapters 1-3. Following that, I completed a series of interview/discussion questions and arranged audio interviews with Western teachers who have lived and taught in China and were willing and able to share their own unique experiences with myself and a future online audience. Upon completing the interviews, I revised chapter 3, assembled the interviews in an orderly sequence and edited them together to complete a video presentation that is slightly over three hours in length. I then reflected on my research and work as a whole and wrote chapter 4.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I introduced the project description which included the rationale, audience, timeline, and description of the project development. In the next chapter I will

reflect on the project learnings, address limitations, recognize the impact, and consider next steps.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

#### Introduction

The research question guiding this project is, *What are three of the most important components of Chinese culture and how do they influence their education system?* I have lived and worked in education in China, off and on over the years, from 2003 to the present. I have also read many books about China, Chinese culture and history and had numerous conversations about these subjects with other foreign teachers over the years. Therefore, I decided it would be appropriate to formally select and research three important components of Chinese culture and how they influence education in China. The three components I chose to research were Face, Collectivism and Confucianism. I also included this in my Capstone project which consisted of me conducting interviews, which might even be considered more conversational in tone, with five individuals who have experience working, living, and teaching in Mainland China which is very distinct and different from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Most, if not all, of the research I conducted validated beliefs I already hold which was unsurprising. For example, every researcher I encountered described China as a collectivist country. I have never come across anyone who considers China an individualistic country. The importance of saving face was also described in my research as I anticipated it would be. There were very few, if any, surprises that I came across during the course of my

research. At the same time, I did encounter some interesting authors and researchers who I was previously unaware of such as G.H. Hofstede who is well known for his pioneering research on cross-cultural groups and organizations. Jin Li, author of *Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West*, was another author, academic and researcher who I was unaware of prior to the start of my research for this project. Both Hofstede and Li's insights were extremely valuable to my research.

One point that was raised during both the peer review process as well as my research is that collectivism is not entirely exclusive to the East and completely foreign to the West. A colleague of mine who reviewed a draft of my second chapter made the point that the Nazis in World War 2 were collectivistic. This is an important point. Leonard Peikoff, who I quoted in Chapter 2, also described collectivism but in reference to Nazi Germany rather than Modern China. Even though I think it is accurate to describe Western nations, like the United States, as individualistic and China as collectivistic, it is important to remember that there are historical examples of collectivism and collective behavior in Western culture.

Also worth noting, is that during my interviews and conversations with others I found that we all seemed to agree that both individualism and collectivism have advantages and disadvantages. One isn't necessarily better than the other in every situation one may encounter in life. There are times when a collective approach or mindset may be superior to an individualistic approach and vice versa. In a social sense, collectivism can provide many benefits when people are looking out for one another. At the same time, some economists might argue, the so-called "selfish" nature of capitalism,

driven by the profit motive, can benefit society. As Adam Smith famously wrote, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest” (Smith, 1776).

When one compares the automobile industry in the United States to that of the Soviet Union’s, during the cold war, one can understand why some systems are more productive than others. During the cold war, the Soviet Union, which has influenced modern China in many ways, was collective and communist. The United States, by contrast, was individualistic and capitalistic. It’s little surprise that Ayn Rand, who grew up in the Soviet Union, favored Western free market capitalism over a Soviet styled centrally planned economy.

This chapter will discuss the possible implications of my research, the limitations, future research and recommendations, the communication of the results and, lastly, how I believe this project benefits the profession.

### **Possible Implications**

What might be some possible implications of my research and my project? Perhaps the most obvious is that the cultures of China and the United States are incredibly different. It’s little surprise that many people who go to China to teach for one year can’t last more than six months. In many cases, I believe people arrive in China unprepared and unaware of the differences in culture. For many, the culture shock is too strong and, rather than adapt, some people choose to return to the comfort zone of their home country. If teachers coming to China were more familiar with the material covered

in this research, as well as my video project, they might be more mentally prepared to deal with some of the challenges living in China can present.

Another possible implication is that Chinese culture is not necessarily inferior or superior to Western culture, particularly the culture of the United States, but some elements of Western culture may be more conducive to generating critical thinking skills and creative thinking which many of us believe are integral to the purpose of education. Does this reflect our own cultural bias? Perhaps, but one could very well argue that one of the primary goals of education is teaching students how to think rather than what to think. This may be the fundamental difference between education and indoctrination. It's not difficult to make the case that what Chinese schools focused more on conformity and memorization resemble the latter rather than the former.

### **Limitations**

China is a country that boasts of having 5,000 years of continuous history. To become an expert on China, its history, its culture and its language is no easy task. By virtue of the length of Chinese history and complexity of its language even Chinese history/language/culture experts will face limitations. It could very well be impossible, or highly unlikely, for anyone to read everything ever written about China given its long history. All knowledge is limited and the best one can do is keep an open mind and be willing to increase one's knowledge and be willing to modify it as more information becomes available.



For my capstone project, I conducted 5 total interviews but only included portions of the first four interviews in my final video presentation. I had 9 hours of audio interviews recorded and trimmed it down to approximately 3 hours. While 3 hours might be a long time for a presentation, it is still extremely limited, especially when one is researching a subject as complex as China.

Furthermore, all of my interviewees were males who had lived and taught in China while in their 20s and/or 30s. Had I been able to interview people from different demographics, such as women and/or older people I would have received additional perspectives from different groups. At the same time, even if I had interviewed 10 people, 100 people or 1,000 people this would still be a limited sample because it would be impossible for me to interview every Western person who has lived and taught in China. In any case, I think many people who have lived and taught in China for one year or longer have reached similar conclusions to the ones discussed in this project.

### **Future Research and Recommendations**

I have been researching, reading about and learning about China for more than a decade and feel I have only scratched the surface. I do believe I understand many of the broad and general characteristics of Chinese culture but many of the details and nuances are still foreign to me. Therefore, I will most likely continue to research, read about and learn about Chinese history and culture.

My recommendation to anyone interested in teaching in Mainland China, whether short term or long term, is to not only watch my video presentation, but to read as many

books and articles about China and teaching in China as possible. Some of my reading recommendations for anyone interested in learning about Modern China that have not already been mentioned include *Riding the Iron Rooster* by Paul Theroux, *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* by Dr. Zhisui Li, *The Cultural Revolution* by Frank Dikotter and *Pretty Woman Spitting* by Leanna Adams. Other books I would recommend for anyone interested in, not only China, but the concepts of collectivism and totalitarianism include *1984* by George Orwell, *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand and *The Open Society and its Enemies* by Karl Popper.

I would also recommend to anyone considering teaching English as a Foreign Language in China, or any country for that matter, to complete a TEFL, TESOL or CELTA certificate.

### **Communication of Results**

My Capstone project is a three hour video consisting of interviews I conducted with four individuals who currently live and teach or have previously lived and taught in Mainland China. Technically, I conducted five interviews and obtained approximately nine hours of audio, however the fifth and final interview occurred after I had already started editing the other four interviews together into a cohesive three hour presentation. Ultimately, I decided not to include it in my final cut which will be uploaded to YouTube and accessible to anyone with the link. However, I will upload the fifth interview along with the other four interviews in their entirety unedited for anyone who might be interested in hearing one or more of the discussions in their entirety.

The individual interviews, in their entirety, are also available in a playlist on the same YouTube channel. In the event people enjoy the 3 hour presentation but want to hear more they can access one or more of the unedited interviews in full.

### **How this Project Benefits the Profession**

I think my research and project can both provide enormous benefit to those considering a short-term or long-term teaching job, or career, in Mainland China. Many people in Western countries are curious about China but have little knowledge of the country, culture or education system. Academic research and books do exist but can be intimidating to some people and possibly a bit too dry for others. These days many people enjoy receiving information in video and audio format which my project provides. Podcasts and YouTube videos are extremely popular these days. My video project could be enjoyed in either video or audio format and is more conversational than academic tone. It provides the viewer (or listener) with the opinions, experiences and observations from multiple participants, as well as myself, in a conversational format.

### **Conclusion**

In August 2003, two weeks after completing my undergraduate degree, I flew to Wuhan, China. It was my first time going overseas and my knowledge of China and Chinese culture was more limited than I realized. Initially, I had imagined I would only spend one year in the country and that would be sufficient. That was seventeen years ago yet I am still learning about China and my relationship with the country has lasted longer

than just one year. It is a fascinating country that I think is well worth becoming familiar with. My hope is that my research and capstone project can provide some insight into both the culture and the experiences, including the advantages and disadvantages, foreign teachers who have worked there have encountered. For teachers who are interested in possibly working in China in the future I hope this project could provide them with some benefit, advice and realistic expectations about what they will likely encounter in China. Overall, I believe that living and working in China, off and on over nearly two decades, has enriched my life and taught me not only about Chinese culture but my own as well. I also believe that many people who have not yet worked abroad would benefit enormously from doing so whether they decide to work in China or another foreign country.

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