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978-0-521-76829-0 - Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West

Jin Li

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CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING

Western and East Asian people hold fundamentally different beliefs about learning that influence how they approach childrearing and education. Reviewing decades of research, Dr. Jin Li presents an important conceptual distinction between the Western mind model and the East Asian virtue model of learning. The former aims to cultivate the mind to understand the world, whereas the latter prioritizes the self to be perfected morally and socially. Tracing the cultural origins of the two large intellectual traditions, Li details how each model manifests itself in the psychology of the learning process, learning affect, regard of one's learning peers, expression of what one knows, and parents' guiding efforts. Despite today's accelerated cultural exchange, these learning models do not diminish but endure.

Dr. Jin Li is associate professor of Education and Human Development at Brown University. Her research examines different cultural learning models and how such culturally based models shape children's learning beliefs and achievement. She collaborates with researchers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, Germany, Israel, and the United States. Dr. Li has published in leading journals such as *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Developmental Psychology*, *Ethos*, and *Cognition and Emotion*, among others.

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*To my late mother Rongzhi Lu and father Duosheng Li who, despite
tumultuous times, nurtured in me an insatiable desire to learn*

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PREFACE

“Grinding a sword for ten years, but the blade is yet to be tried.” These two poetic lines by the Chinese poet Jia Dao (779–843) have come to signify working on something for a long time, hoping the time and labor produce good results. For me, writing this book took not ten years in preparation but much longer. But I did not mind grinding it out slowly, even if what came out was not always to my liking. As the pages of the book will explain, the grinding itself gave me much joy and meaning.

The idea of writing a book like this came to me at the end of my doctoral dissertation in the late 1990s. The original book title had in it the phrase “a heart and mind for wanting to learn” (*hao-xue-xin*, 好學心), as it was the research topic of my dissertation. The phrase is a native Chinese learning concept that my mother suggested to me. When I was exploring a dissertation topic, I asked my mother first, as I always did, to share my learning with her, to brainstorm learning concepts upon hearing the translated term *achievement motivation* (成就動機) from Western psychology. She was puzzled about the Western concept, could not produce a single association in Chinese, and sat there speechless quite some time. Finally, she muttered, “What does learning have to do with motivation?! I only know a motive to murder” (in Chinese, *motivation* and *motive* are translated as the same term 動機). Upon reflection on these two English terms, I, too, failed to discern really meaningful differences!). I knew that if my college-educated mother – who had, in effect, also received a secondhand doctoral education through me – could not make sense of *achievement motivation*, chances are that the people I was going to study in China would not either. I then asked her what Chinese concept captures people’s desire to learn. Without any hesitation, she said *hao-xue-xin*. “Yes, you are right! Why didn’t I think of it?” I exclaimed and felt that I had just hit the jackpot. When I consulted my Chinese peers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education,

they unanimously embraced this concept, to my delight. My peers and I racked our brains to come up with a good translation but failed. We decided to stick to the somewhat awkward English translation, for we felt that the translation is accurate in meaning and feeling and speaks to us: a heart and mind for wanting to learn. Subsequently, this native concept came to stand for the Chinese learning model in my research and writing.

That the Chinese learning model reflects their native ideas, attitudes, passions, and approaches did not surprise me, given that I grew up with them. However, my follow-up comparative research with European-American elite college students, chosen as exemplary learners from the West, did. I was struck by the very fact that both cultures value learning, have a comparably long intellectual history, possess a similarly large repertoire of learning concepts, run the same education system of kindergarten, elementary, secondary, and college education, and above all teach much of the same content (math, science, and also English in Chinese-speaking regions). Yet, the meanings of the found learning concepts differ so markedly that there is very little overlap. I did not know that research could produce such surprising results and wondered how such cultural differences escaped previous researchers' attention. But I must admit that by the time I saw the research results, I had been engaged in learning from the West for more than fifteen years. It was not until I conducted my doctoral dissertation research that I fully realized how large the difference is. My later research on children's developing beliefs also confirmed the shaping power of culture. I reasoned that if I, as a cognizant learner of both Chinese and Western orientations, did not fully grasp the profundity of cultural learning models, then others may not either. Hence, they may appreciate an opportunity to learn about the differences beyond the technical realm of journal articles and specialized academic circles. This realization solidified my decision to embark on this book project. I wanted to piece scattered research together to answer two fundamental questions: (1) What are the two different cultural learning models that produce different learners? (2) Why are the models so different?

My effort in writing this book is descriptive and interpretive rather than prescriptive. My goal is to lay out the basic cultural models by tracing their respective intellectual traditions and by showing how cultural learning models influence children's beliefs and how these beliefs manifest themselves in the learning process. By describing the patterns of cultural learning models and children's learning beliefs, I hope to highlight the idea that cultural models serve as permeating light under which adults guide and children develop. But different cultures have different lights and ways of

responding to them. The task of research is to let the lights illuminate and then document their influence.

Years ago when I was still a student of German literature, a Chinese literary critic of German drama lamented that the Chinese have plenty of lived experiences and great art, yet they are poor at turning their experiences and art forms into theories. This provocative claim came from his knowledge that the celebrated German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) had an epiphany for his “alienation effect” from watching a performance by the Peking Opera singer Mei Lanfang in Moscow. The fact that Brecht was able to see the abstract but common technique in Peking Opera and then “discovered” the unique effect made this Chinese literary critic realize that Chinese could and should have come up with the theory of their own art. Instead, they had to depend on a Westerner to help “elevate” their art form. In a similar way, researchers do what Brecht did: provide understanding of lived cultural experiences at a theoretical level. This theoretical perspective does not replace thoughts and feelings at the gut level, but it helps us appreciate our own culture in ways lived experiences alone (without reflection) cannot. I hope that this book will stimulate readers in thinking about learning and development under the theorized cultural light.

I wish to make clear that this book focuses on the general cultural orientations of learning instead of on individual differences within East Asia and the West. It is not my intention to generalize the cultural orientations to every individual in these cultures. Even with empirical research that claims to be based on culturally representative samples, the power of generalization is limited. Nevertheless, researchers generally agree that if the same phenomenon has been studied by many from many a different angle and with different methods over a long time, and if similar conclusions are drawn, then chances are that the phenomenon exists. No culturally minded social scientist is seeking across-the-board generalization to all individuals. My own research and that of others are subject to the same inherent limitations. Neither does this book attempt to cover inconsistencies and counterforces that work against the basic cultural orientations. To be sure, these forces abound. Individuals who disagree with or are not served well in either cultural system deserve to be researched and understood, but they are not the focus of this book. I chose to look at the general cultural orientations, instead of the atypical tendencies or discord within each culture, because I am interested in the workings, not anomalies or failures, of culture.

Finally, the slow process of writing this book has enabled me to contemplate freely, broadly, and deeply the various topics written about in this book. This slow grinding afforded me the opportunity to change from a

swallow-whole learner of anything that came her way to one that is more observant and questioning, from being an incessant critic of her own culture to one who has discovered its strengths. This transformed intellectual stance has helped me learn from Western masters but also to relearn what I had learned from my own culture. This type of cross-cultural learning and its benefits lie in the process of making the strange familiar (Western) and the familiar strange (Chinese) first, then absorbing both into myself, but at the same time also holding both as objects of continuous contemplation.

I am very grateful to the William T. Grant Foundation for funding my collaboration with Janine Bemperchat and Susan Holloway on Chinese adolescents from immigrant families along with peers from other ethnic groups; to the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) for funding my research on preschool children from Chinese immigrant families; to the Chiang-ching Kuo Foundation for supporting my collaboration with Dr. Heidi Fung; and finally for the Spencer Foundation's support for my early research on preschool children's learning beliefs as well as for the continuation of my longitudinal project started with FCD's funding. Any statements that may appear to be unorthodox and unusual or any failures in this book are not theirs but mine.

To the many research assistants I have had the good fortune to work with at Brown University, in China, and in Taiwan, I owe much gratitude. I thank the hundreds of children, college students, and families in these countries for their participation in my research. It was their permission that allowed me a chance to peek inside cultural learning models and their individual learning beliefs. It was their generous sharing of their thoughts, feelings, upbringing, and their parents' sharing of their childrearing that enabled me to "uncover" what has been flowing for millennia. Reading each parent's interview, each child's story, and each college student's description of learning made me realize what a privilege it is to be a researcher. All the work day and night that I embarked on was, without regret, totally worth it.

The able and professional staff at Cambridge University Press helped craft this book. I would like to thank Simina Calin, the editor of Cambridge's psychology list, for her willingness to consider my book proposal and for her patience with my slow writing. Her successor, Emily Spangler, helped me with the submission of my manuscript. My gratitude is extended to Adina Berk, current editor of Cambridge's psychology and cognitive science list, editorial assistant Amanda O'Connor, and production controller Joshua Penney, as well as many other team members behind the scenes for making this book possible. Jayashree Prabhu, project manager of Newgen Knowledge Works in India, managed all versions of the manuscript skillfully

and efficiently. Finally, I would like to thank the professional team at PETT Fox, Inc., in New York, who provided excellent copyediting. Without any doubt, this book is much better as a result of their work.

Thinking back, I would feel that something is amiss if I skipped a number of special people who played a decisive role in shaping this book. These were all of my German teachers, first Herr and Frau Bieg for opening my mind to the German language and culture, to Elizabeth Kurz for her interest in Chinese culture, to Ursula Müller for teaching German literature and Western art history, and to Reneta Bürner-Kotzam and Susanne Günthner for their encouragement and support of my further learning.

I thank Professors Donald Mushalko and Barbara Fredette at the University of Pittsburgh for teaching how to foster children's creativity and their support for my application to Harvard Graduate School of Education. I was very lucky to study with my mentor, Kurt Fischer, who encouraged me to study self-conscious emotions, particularly shame and its significant variations across cultures. This intellectual adventure enabled me to write much of the chapter on learning affect.

To Howard Gardner, also my mentor, I am indebted for life. He took a risk by admitting me as a doctoral student in fear that I might not have sufficient English proficiency to last through the program. He was quite right, given that I studied German rather than English in college. Mentioning this beginning of a cherished mentor–student relationship is to emphasize how much more a European-American doctoral mentor had to do to transform a learning-thirsty but confused foreign student to one who can channel her passion into productivity. There is not enough space for me to enumerate the many and unforgettable ways that Howard mentored me as a student from a different culture and a difficult environment. Suffice it to say that for me Howard served and continues to serve as an exemplar of Western learning. His writing was inspirational to me and his teaching in and out of class was mind-opening. Howard continues to mentor me beyond his call of duty in ways only few match. His insights into research, scholarship, and our world and his wisdom about life continue to amaze me and are among the things I treasure most. I am sure that this book would not have been written if I had not lucked out with Howard.

I would like to thank my dear friend, Heidi Fung, for her moving and beautiful work on Chinese shame as a moral concept and for her willingness to collaborate with me on Taiwanese children's learning beliefs and their parents' guidance. The way she does her work and writes about the people she studies sets an unparalleled example for how a researcher can truly get under the skin of her research subjects. No utterance and no

expression could escape her attention. Her research report is so authentic that it speaks to the people whose cultures she studies, and yet at the same time her writing is artful and profound. It was Heidi's example that heartened me to attempt discourse analysis of how mothers talk to their children about learning in both cultures. Heidi was also tremendously encouraging and generous in supplying references from first-rate Taiwanese scholars and writers and for granting me her permission to use a photo that shows how a grandfather demonstrates to his grandson what concentration means in learning for the Chinese.

My admiration also goes to my son, Kylee Hench, who would read drafts of my chapters and offer comments and sonly appreciation, and dutifully and unflaggingly point out awkward expressions and incorrect grammar. His love and help invariably resulted in better thinking and writing on my part. Finally, my gratitude goes to my husband, Michael Hench, my life-long companion and tireless editor of my writing. His love for theater and spontaneous recitations of great Western writing and poetry permeate my life. But he also appreciates Asian writers and poets, frequently more deeply than I do. It would have been a lot harder for me to make progress in writing, let alone this book, if it were not for Michael's lasting love, support, and literary fondness. My work owes much to him.