



## Teaching in China: A Personal View

I first came to China in 2010 at the invitation of Yang Qun, who happened to be a fellow graduate student from my days as a PhD student in Texas. By then Dr. Yang had risen to be the Head of the Nanjing Institute for Geology, Paleontology and Stratigraphy (NIGPAS) and was interested in forming a strategic partnership with The Natural History Museum (NHM) where I was the Keeper of Palaeontology. Quite unexpectedly, that first week-long visit to NIGPAS turned into an annual – on occasion a multi-annual – commute to Nanjing, and from there to other Chinese cities (e.g., Beijing, Wuhan, Shanghai, Chengdu) where I was often asked to provide presentations in research seminars and special-topic short courses at various universities and research institutes. As any classroom teacher will know, however, it's one thing to step behind the lectern for a one-off presentation, but quite another to take on responsibility for delivery of a semester-long course as a regular faculty member. I was offered the opportunity to step up to the latter when I joined the faculty of Nanjing University's School of Earth Sciences and Engineering in 2019.

Earlier in my academic career I had been a faculty member, and taught courses to US undergraduate and graduate students, at the University of Michigan and Princeton University as well as having taught extensive modules to UK MSc students as part of a collaborative NHM-Imperial College program in London. So, following my appointment, I looked forward eagerly to the teaching experience I'd have in China. What would the students be like? How would they compare to those I had taught in the US and UK? Were the language and/or cultural barriers going to be a problem?<sup>1</sup> Would I be able to find a way to engage the students with the material? Would I get good student reviews? Would the stereotypes about Chinese students I had heard throughout my career, and read about in the academic media, accurate or exaggerated? All these were prominent questions for me in the run-up to my arrival at NJU, with uncertain answers.

### *What are Chinese students like?*

In my previous US/UK experience I'd been struck by how similar students are at different institutions. I had taught classes at both middle-level and elite universities and, by and large, had found my classes to contain similar ranges of personality types, interests, degrees of motivation and levels of maturity. With certain exceptions, this observation held true for my NJU students as well. There were always a few who distinguished themselves who engaged with the information on offer seriously, and others who seemed either uninterested or overwhelmed by it; a few who were eager – or at least unafraid – to share their opinions and insights with the class, and others whose voices were never heard; some who give the impression of being bored by what was going on in class and others who seem fully absorbed. In this sense the Chinese students in my classes seemed just like students anywhere. But several intriguing differences also existed.

For example, compared to US students (certainly) and UK students (mostly) Chinese students appeared to have little experience of life outside the classroom. They'd never had an after-school or summer job, never lived on their own, away from their families, outside an *in loco parentis* university dormitory, never made a

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<sup>1</sup> I spoke very little Chinese in 2019 and, even now, after 3 years of diligent, daily study, gauge my skills in this area as similar to that of a rather dull Chinese elementary-school student.

significant, long-term, financial purchase (e.g., bought a car, rented an apartment). In short, they hadn't had much opportunity to develop many away-from-academics life skills relative to their western counterparts.

To a large extent this is a matter of cultural differences between western and Chinese societies. In western cultures (to varying degrees) students are expected to pursue extra-curricular activities as part of their strategy for gaining entry into elite educational institutions. In addition, many are forced to have held either part-time or full-time jobs during the school year by their economic circumstances. Through these experiences western students gain both the experience of operating in those capacities and the self-confidence that comes from having met those challenges successfully. In China, the only way to gain entry into a top university is to do well on the 高考 (gāo kǎo), which is the highly academic national college entrance examination. Accordingly, Chinese students spend virtually all their time preparing for this exam, which is very challenging. Preparation involves not only attending, and paying attention in, their regular classes, but also attending many after-school tutorial sessions designed specifically to ensure 高考 success. China has a long history – and by “long” I mean thousands of years – of relying on standardized examinations to identify students of outstanding potential. Throughout that history, those who have succeeded in meeting this formidable challenge can expect to receive opportunities that were not offered to others. Thus, the pressure on Chinese students, exerted by themselves as well as their parents, to do well is immense. For most Chinese students, little or no time is left to experience life outside a highly organized academic environment. Of course, Chinese students do acquire non-academic experiences and life skills in due course. But this aspect of their education is delayed, for the most part (it seems) until after they have left their formal educational programs rather than being acquired, at least in part, during those programs.

This lack of the same level of life experience on the part of Chinese students manifests itself in a variety of ways in Chinese classrooms. On the whole Chinese students seem less self-directed in their studies than western students. They need more direction in, and appear less comfortable taking personal responsibility for, their own training; preferring to be somewhat passive recipients of education, relying on their teachers to determine what's best for them.

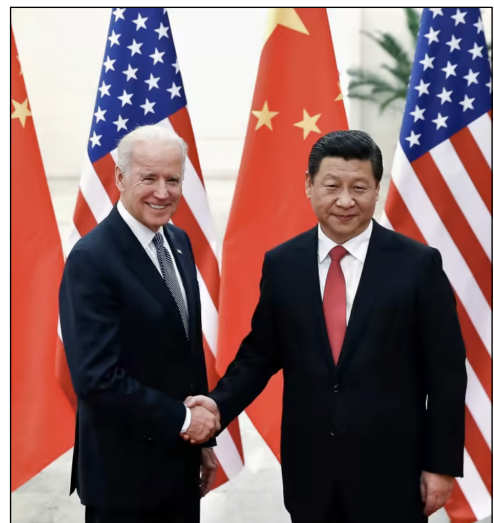
#### *What about language and cultural barriers?*

Contrary to my initial expectations, the fact that I give all my lectures in 英文 (English) appears to pose little problem for my Chinese students. I always try to remember to speak slowly and clearly in my lectures and encourage any student who doesn't understand what I've said to let me know they are having difficulty. Very rarely has any student requested clarification. Indeed, I have been told many NJU students are attracted to my courses specifically because my lectures are given in 英文.

Students in China are taught English from a very young age (instruction begins in primary school) and, while different students have different levels of comfort conversing with a native English speaker, my impression is that any reticence has more to do with the student's confidence in their 英文 skills than with the actual skill level itself. Whereas it's common to encounter (usually older) individuals in the various shops, cafés and cafeterias on campus, and certainly off campus, who are either unable, or unwilling, to communicate in English, I have yet to encounter any NJU student whom I could not talk to in 英文 and many who have developed a very high level of 英文 fluency.

Cultural matters, however, are more subtle. The differences between western and Chinese cultures are as distinct and, in many cases, unexpected as they are profound. But in my experience rather than being a source of confusion, apprehension or misunderstanding, they are far more often a source of insight and amusement; on all sides. For example, Chinese culture takes much more note of symbols than western cultures: red means “good luck”, yellow “prestige”, and white “mourning”; the number 4 (四) is unlucky; bats and clouds are symbols of longevity and happiness, fish of wealth and abundance. But cultural differences go well beyond these simple and, in some senses, inconsequential associations.

Take, for example, the issue hair-color symbology. If you've seen pictures of members of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party you probably overlooked the fact that five of the seven current members have dark hair. Moreover, the two with various proportions of grey (Cai Qi, 68 and Li Xi, 61) are



Joe Biden and Xi Jinping (© Reuters).

among the youngest members of that group. Chinese males go grey over the same range of ages as western males. Among the male members of the current US Cabinet 12 out of 14 sport some degree of grey hair. A chance difference? Hardly!

In fact, many Chinese academic faculty members dye their hair to remove any trace of grey. The reason? In Chinese culture grey or white hair is a symbol of deterioration and diminished capacity rather than experience or wisdom, as it is in the west. Based on the Confucian precept of filial piety, older people are considered as deserving of respect and care by those younger than themselves. Thus, few Chinese politicians, or those in any position of authority, would consider it consistent with their standing in their communities to advertise the fact they have reached the age where, according to custom, they should consider stepping back from their responsibilities rather than getting on with the job at hand.

Does retention of a rich and complex symbology make Chinese culture more hidebound or less progressive? I think not. Personally, I find the symbology of Chinese culture fascinating. But even those impatient for China to become “more like the west” must appreciate that, just as western cultural practices and symbols offer a deep source of solace and pride for western societies, so too does 中文 (Chinese culture) for the 中国人 (Chinese people).

### *Are Chinese student stereotypes correct?*

With so many Chinese students enrolled at many western colleges and universities, recently a number of empirical investigations have been published that focus on the way Chinese students are stereotyped by their peers and by faculty in university environments, as well as the effect this stereotyping has on their university experience (e.g., Ruble & Zhang, 2013; Chen & Wen, 2021). Naturally, stereotypical attitudes about Chinese students fall into two categories, positive and negative. On the positive side, from a western perspective, Chinese students are regarded typically as being smart/intelligent, studious/hardworking, polite/nice, kind, fashionable and particularly good at science and math. On the negative side, they are regarded as being cliquish/exclusive, shy, loners, socially awkward, lacking assertiveness, discomfited by disagreement, having little practical experience, and exhibiting insufficiently developed critical-thinking skills. In particular, Chinese students are often criticized, and in some cases stigmatized, for desiring to share the community of other Chinese, often to the (apparent) exclusion of non-Chinese students. Are these stereotypes accurate reflections of Chinese students as a group? If so, where do these traits come from? If not, why have they become stereotypes?

After teaching Chinese students in China for several years now, perhaps I can offer some perspective on these assertions. Based on my experience, Chinese students are definitely diligent, dutiful, and cooperative. They understand the surest path to their personal advancement is through education and are quite serious about maximizing their educational opportunities. Chinese students also have the advantage of being able to compare the lives they've been able to live, and the opportunities they've been offered, with those of their parents and grandparents, most of whose lives and opportunities were very different. In many cases the students I teach at NJU are the first in their families to have attended university, much less entered a PhD program. The motivation this comparison yields, in addition to the support Chinese students receive from their families, cannot and should not be discounted in understanding the manner in which they approach their education.

Similarly, the imprint the Chinese educational system, and Chinese culture generally, has had on Chinese students should also be taken into consideration. The purpose of education is not to turn out individuals who are clones of one another, be that a copy of an “ideal” western student or an “ideal” Chinese student. Western culture prizes the creative individual, the maverick and the iconoclast over the collective (family, community, nation state); indeed seemingly above all else. In this context, the economic concept of “creative destruction” comes to mind. Creative destruction is undeniably creative, but it is also undeniably destructive.

Chinese culture prizes the collective over the individual, the maverick and the iconoclast. Owing to its long and eventful history, Chinese culture fears the destruction that often accompanies creative revolutions; and rightly so given the scale of destructions that have occurred throughout its history. This existential preference for collective harmony is ingrained into the Chinese psyche just as deeply as prioritization of the individual is ingrained into the western psyche. To use a Chinese cultural metaphor the Chinese view of the roles of the individual and the collective represents the yang to the western view's yin. Given the success of western culture over the past 200 years it is perhaps inevitable that many in western societies regard their way as “right” and the Chinese way as “wrong”. But China can look back over its far longer history and regard the last 200 years, during which China was ill-served by many of its rulers, as being the exception rather than the rule. In the end, both approaches have their merits and demerits, both their successes and failures. What is needed generally is understanding and a commitment to embracing diversity. To cite a saying from one of Confucius' analects, 君子和而不同 (exemplary persons value harmony, but not conformity).

Coming back to the issue of Chinese student stereotypes, when I first began teaching Chinese students I too was concerned by their apparent reticence to share their personal views assertively, their obvious discomfort when I challenged some of their interpretations or disagreed with my fellow faculty members over the methods they had employed and/or interpretations they had offered, and with their (apparently) tendency to default to acceptance of whatever they read in a research report. I had been trained in the US and was used to a far more assertive and aggressive intellectual culture than I found at NJU (or in the UK for that matter). But over time both I, and my Paleo. Group colleagues, have seen progress in all these areas. In 2023 our students are, on the whole, more willing to express personal opinions; to be assertive, more willing to disagree with each other (and with us), more willing to question what they've read and less willing to turn to us for permission to follow their own ideas and try something new than they were in 2019. It's process and the process is ongoing. But that's what education always is.

So, are the Chinese student stereotypes correct? Yes and no, but mostly no in my view. The idea of a "type" refers to an essence that can't be changed. That's not been my experience. Through their interactions with myself, and with professors. Fan and Shi, our students are changing in ways that distinguish them from their Chinese counterparts. If this is the case, why has our experience been different from the experience of many western students who interact with, and professors who teach, Chinese students in western institutions (and who participated in the Chen & Wen and the Ruble and Zhang investigations)? I believe this is down to the fact that we teach Chinese students in China, their 家国 (home country). Here, they don't feel like an embattled minority, surrounded by a society whose media often regards them with suspicion, that knows next to nothing about their culture or its history, that doesn't understand their goals, their obligations, their lives, but that talks obsessively about itself as if it is the only culture that matters; a culture that often writes and speaks about them as being passive automations devoid of the capacity for free thought. It doesn't surprise me – nor should it surprise you – that Chinese students in the west tend to group together. Aside from the cost of living in the west (living in China is much less expensive) and the natural collectivist tendencies that have historically stood at the core of Chinese culture, there's safety in numbers, especially when the surrounding environment can seem so hostile. Accordingly, my working hypothesis is that the progress I and my colleagues have been able to make in getting our students to be more independent-minded, self-confident and open to exploring new ideas on their own is down us being able to do that in an environment where our students feel safe and supported; free to make the connection between what they were yesterday and what they might become tomorrow. When people feel safe and secure change comes much more easily.



Myself with Paleo. Group colleagues and students.

My recommendation for overcoming the stereotypes associated with Chinese students. It's simple really. Accept them. Don't try to make them into simulacra of your western students. Value their difference. Learn from it (you might be surprised). Treat it as a strength to be channeled into productive pathways, not a deviation that must be discarded. Don't make them feel like outsiders because of their backgrounds, preferences or appearance. Welcome them into your intellectual community and help them make the

transition successfully. Read a book about China so you can get a feel for where they are coming from.<sup>2</sup> Above all, nurture them as you would any student who comes to you with a desire to learn. Do this and your efforts will be repaid many times over. Mine certainly have.

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<sup>2</sup> I'd be happy to make recommendations.