Educational Norms and Expectations

Part of the pressure Chinese students face is that their performance at school is believed to reflect their filial piety and respect for the teacher. Good performance and good marks mean they’ve done their duty to their parents and avoided bringing shame on themselves, their communities, and their families. Less desirable marks suggest less diligent care for parents and the family, and this is believed to reflect badly on student, parents, community, and country. When studying abroad, Chinese students may regard themselves as representatives of their whole culture, and may feel a great deal of pressure to avoid bringing shame on their country. In fact, students in one study noted that they often avoided answering questions whose answers they were certain of because they felt that their grasp of the English language was too poor and that their answering in front of the class would bring shame on the Chinese school system. Others noted that they wouldn’t answer unless they were certain that the answer was completely correct. This might be baffling to American teachers used to teaching mostly domestic students. My domestic students, by and large, will offer any answer that is in the ballpark rather than remain silent. The American system tends to offer social support for those who are willing to try and try again.

In the Chinese system, on the other hand, incorrect answers shame both student and teacher: the student has revealed a lack of respect for the teacher’s knowledge by failing to learn the required information, and the teacher has been revealed not to inspire the proper amount of respect. Students may feel they are showing respect for the teacher and the school when they avoid offering up partial, incorrect, garbled, or off-the-cuff answers to questions. As you might imagine, this approach makes many typical American classroom practices quite a
stretch for many Chinese students, who must set their desire for high grades against their sense of the morally correct action in light of the community’s needs. What’s a student to do when speaking would jeopardize his community’s and family’s standing but not speaking would jeopardize his grades? Students may remain completely silent even after being warned that they must speak in order to get points for the course.

The issue of the types of questions and expectations about answers comes up here, too. Chinese education tends to emphasize correctness, but American teachers may ask questions that have multiple answers or emphasize one’s personal reaction. Chinese students expect teachers to model propriety (see Hui, 2005), so they may wait to hear the modeled answer before feeling comfortable enough to speak. In addition, they may have a reaction but feel that their language skills or fear of shame holds them back. As one student said, “Quote about thinking out problem in private here” (cited in ….) Because students feel they have brought shame on their whole communities when their performance isn’t perfect, they may refrain from answering questions whose answers are nebulous to avoid bringing shame on themselves and their communities.

- Responsibilities of teacher & student

Teachers have high social status in China and are held in high regard as both holders of knowledge and models of propriety. They are also expected to “burn themselves like a candle in giving light to others” (cited in Hui, 2005). In China, educators are not merely dispensers of subject-area knowledge, nor are they tasked with helping students achieve autonomy; in fact, they are believed to be responsible for cultivating the whole person. In fact, as Hui (2005) notes, Chinese proverbs associate education with soul cultivation as much as with knowledge acquisition (p. 1). As such, educators are
expected to be moral models as well as experts in their fields. More importantly, the student-teacher bond is believed to mimic the child-parent bond, so students read academic failure differently than American professors may expect. Several of my own Chinese International students have written papers about teachers who were just like parents to them, describing a level of stewardship and trust in teacher and school that goes far beyond my own experience in some of the best local public schools and colleges.

Americans’ belief in learner autonomy may make it hard for college instructors to understand why Chinese students frequently expect extra help. In the American system, students’ achievements are regarded as the fruit of their labor, but Chinese teachers view their students’ achievements as their own. This is not to say that Chinese students don’t believe they must work hard; on the contrary, a person’s hard work is the key to bringing her up to the teacher’s standard. Students who work hard and do well on exams prove that they’ve had great teachers who have instilled the correct value for education and hard work in them. Teachers, who are expected to lead by example, teach their students diligence and perseverance by working hard to help them.

Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that Chinese teachers tend to react positively to students who seek extra lessons with them. The Chinese system is teacher-centered, and students look to teachers to anticipate their skills deficits or other needs and help them fill the gaps. Teachers often offer advice and help without being asked, and such offers are seen to demonstrate caring. Meanwhile, an American instructor, steeped in student-centered learning and learner autonomy, might think offering unsolicited extra help is officious at best and damaging to a students’ sense of herself as an autonomous learner at worst. This cross-cultural confusion is compounded by the fact that Chinese students hesitate to ask openly for extra help because doing so might make it seem as though the teacher hasn’t done a good enough job and result in loss of face. Students may ask for advice before and after class and hope that teachers will respond by offering comprehensive help. As described in several academic papers,
students feel rebuffed when Western teachers don’t read their requests this way, and their frustration may build into desperation before they approach a teacher. The teacher, then, might be shocked by a confrontation with a student who is tearful and accusatory.

This terrain only gets more challenging for teachers and students when we add the tortuous schedules of adjuncts and some full-time instructors into the mix. To a Chinese student, a teacher too busy to help may be seen as almost a neglectful parent, and students are often quite surprised to learn that their teachers can’t meet with them because they are teaching at other campuses or have other responsibilities.

Hui (2005) wrote:

The essence of Chinese teaching is...not confined to professionalism, that is to the professional knowledge requested by industries, but hinges on the notion that moral cultivation is the paramount means to shape students to become appropriate members of the established society. The Chinese Education schema functions like a blueprint, governing nationwide educational activities and organising individual teacher’s teaching agendas. It is likely that in most Chinese schools, the goal of ‘cultivating’ takes precedence over the goal of imparting knowledge.

American college instructors’ behavior might be puzzling to students who adhere to Chinese notions of instructors’ conduct.