The Chinese learner

Cultural orientations for language learning

PHYLLIS WACHOB, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

This paper questions the concept of a ‘traditional Chinese learner’ by interpreting data from a study of mature language learners in Taiwan. Analysis has suggested three strands of learners, here called the ‘practical student’, the ‘deep thinker’ and the ‘Confucian scholar’. Each strand has roots in Chinese history, traditions and culture. As well, Chinese students may also have had extensive exposure to western modes of thought and this affects how they view concepts of learning. Complicating the picture still further is the Chinese notion of ‘face’, which may be misunderstood by western teachers and researchers. Teachers may misunderstand students in the classroom because these notions operate differently in the two cultural traditions. The dilemma of the Western-oriented researcher is how to interpret the views of Chinese students in the context of their orientation to learning and views on social relations within the classroom.

Note: Citations from interviews are labeled ‘I’. Male participants are ‘1’, females ‘2’. Teachers are identified by ‘T’. The lines in the text are given after a colon.

Assumptions about concepts, beliefs and methods of learning may cause problems when westerners interact with students from Confucian-heritage areas. The purpose of this paper is to show how assumptions about learning and the Chinese concept of ‘face’ may impact on teaching and researching cross-culturally. Research undertaken on the subject of mature language learners brought to light these problematic areas. It was while analysing the data collected that the issues arose. Conflicting ideas about what a good student and learner is as well as the frequent mentions of face by teachers, while students rarely mentioned it, gave rise to further research and analysis on these topics. The ideas expressed by the participants did not seem to fit into predetermined categories, and this prompted the research into other fields of psychology and learning styles of Chinese.

This paper addresses both of these issues by looking at research from various fields and giving examples from the field research. The purpose here is not to propose solutions, but only to raise issues and heighten awareness about the impact on teaching and research. The structure of the paper is to first identify three types of Chinese learners, giving examples of each. Next, a discussion of face is followed by examples of how it has
been perceived by students and teachers. Finally, there is a short discussion of how these two areas can impact on teaching and the interpretation of research results.

CHINESE LEARNERS

The literature on the Chinese learner has introduced a wide range of viewpoints and problems. First, where does the Chinese learner live? Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, the US, Canada and other diaspora communities have Chinese learners. The learning culture in Confucian-heritage areas also includes Korea and Japan as well as influencing culture in other places in South-East Asia to some extent. Whose point of view one examines, whether it be educators’, psychologists’ or philosophers’, can lead to different perspectives. Finally, individual differences such as age, sex, education, social status, personality and other experiences affect how an individual views learning.

As a way of attempting to identify various orientations to learning, three strands of Chinese learners have been described, which may be termed the practical student, the deep thinker and the Confucian scholar. The practical student is characterised by the reproductive approach to learning; he or she emphasises tests and correctness and has great respect for the teacher and acceptance of the teacher’s role. The deep thinker is characterised by an emphasis on understanding, frequently through memorising. The Confucian scholar is characterised by extensive reading and love of deep thinking (as opposed to just understanding). His or her emphasis is on the Chinese classics as a base which can then be used to extend understanding. Another area of influence is from the West. The three orientations to learning share a history of common Chinese attitudes.

CHINESE EDUCATION

Confucius lived about 500BC and is the most famous, although not the only, ancient Chinese philosopher and teacher. Confucius, above all, taught morality as a basis of social structure within relationships of mutual dependency. Whereas western social structures are based on the rule of law, Confucian social structure is based on ‘relationship’. But Confucius also had much to say about education. He acknowledged differences in natural talent and believed in encouraging, or pushing, talented students, regardless of wealth or family status (Cleverley 1985; Lee 1996). Meritocracy and egalitarianism were encouraged, as well as thinking. Confucianism cross-fertilised with the Daoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi and other philosophies. Laozi’s writings in an extended poem (‘The Way of Virtue’) is philosophical in nature and encouraged questioning, looking at problems in fresh ways, and guiding students to become honest and upright (Dong 1996).

However, the Imperial Civil Service Examination System, established in the Han Dynasty and only abandoned in the twentieth century, shifted the emphasis of education away from this questioning direction (Cleverley 1985). This exam system still has profound effects today. Established to recruit able men for high official positions, it was characterised by a rigid hierarchy of exams and extreme centralisation (Hayhoe 1984). The exam was based on memorisation of the classics and was an institutionalised way to
rise above one’s station, to where the benefits of success were enormous. However, success in the exams was expensive, time-consuming and physically and psychologically demanding. Much cheating took place and crib notes and essays from previous exams were sold. Creativity in the western sense was discouraged; only approved conventions counted (Cleverley 1985). Even though it was finally accepted in 1905 that the emphasis on the memorisation of the Chinese classics was an insufficient basis for choosing modern bureaucrats, ‘the validity of the idea of a national public examination persisted’ (Cleverley 1985, p.21).

Many have argued that the role of the Chinese language in learning is important because the nature of a character-based, rather than an alphabet-based, language encourages attention to detail, memorisation and relating visual parts to the whole. It creates a learner who is good at mathematics and visual performance (Bond 1991). Students learn that ‘practice makes perfect’.

The role of the teacher in modern Chinese societies owes its influence to Confucian ideals. ‘Teachers’ Day’ is celebrated on Confucius’s birthday and was for many years a national holiday in Taiwan. Teachers are respected, not challenged or questioned and are seen as surrogate parents (or as the emperor) (Bond 1991; Cleverley 1985; Ballard and Clanchy 1991a, 1991b; Gow et al 1996).

To contrast western assumptions about learning and education with Chinese ideals (Jin and Cortazzi 1998), western society has been described as being influenced by Judeo-Christian notions of individuality, progress and thinking creatively. There is an assumption that many things are unknown, especially in the field of science. Argumentation is one of the basic ways of furthering knowledge, tolerance for ambiguity is a fertilising field for creativity, and education is a process rather than a product. There are no ‘right’ answers. Teachers are given much less respect and are seen as facilitators of learning (Bond 1991; Ballard and Clanchy 1991a, 1991b; Gow et al 1996). The assumption that ability plays a larger role in academic achievement than working hard underlies much activity in and out of the classroom (Leung 1996). ‘Chinese simply do more homework than Americans – who have an almost magical belief in natural ability’ (Bond 1991, p.30).

STUDY OF MATURE LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN TAIWAN

The examples given below as illustrations were taken from a larger study on mature (40 to 50-year-old) language learners in Taiwan carried out in 1998. Thirty-two participants (31 Taiwanese and one Japanese) were interviewed about foreign language learning. They were asked questions about their jobs, education, family, previous languages studied, motivation, anxiety, learning strategy preferences and personality. Twelve males and 20 females were interviewed and two males and five females also kept language learner journals. Seven teachers from the same language school were also interviewed regarding their experiences with older learners. Analysis of data was done using Grounded Theory, in which the researcher attempts to ‘listen’ to the participants and adopts categories suggested by the data rather than imposing categories. The two topics, learning orientations and face, were the result of participant-inspired categories, and were not the result of
directly asked questions. No doubt further research would reveal more on these topics and may lead to further refinement of analysis.

THE THREE CHINESE LEARNERS

Although the following definitions/orientations are discussed separately, a similar taxonomy has been seen as a continuum or in a developmental manner. Ballard and Clanchy (1991b) have used a chart called ‘Influence of cultural attitudes to knowledge on teaching and learning strategies’ (p.13) that attempts to illustrate some of these differences in a visual way. They viewed these three kinds of learners and types of learning styles in a developmental manner, broadly defining them as being used in primary, secondary and tertiary study respectively. Another way of viewing these three types of learning is to see them in a specific context, as many participants did. If they viewed their behaviour in a class they were the practical student, and if they analysed their understanding of grammar they became a deep thinker. When they stepped back and talked of their reasons for studying a language they became Confucian scholars, viewing the enterprise of studying within a holistic context of their lives. For the teacher and researcher, it becomes important to understand and interpret various orientations in order to comprehend students and their different reactions both in and out of the classroom.

The practical student

The major goal of the practical student is to pass the examination in order to obtain entrance to a good university, then enter a respected profession, make money, marry well and bring respect to his family (Ballard and Clanchy 1985, 1991a; Bond 1991, Gow et al 1996). In order to do this, the practical student emphasises memorisation of material in long hours of study, and assumes that attendance in class is of the utmost importance. The payoff for the diligence of the student is passing the exams. Parental socialisation of the child means pushing and punishing, and, these days, promises of rewards. The family emphasised more than the individual (Ballard and Clanchy 1991a, 1991b).

The practical student is reliant on the teacher, who transmits the information the student needs to learn. Teachers must be able to prepare students for their tests with authority. It is the teacher’s or supervisor’s responsibility to present the material, the student’s responsibility to memorise it. The consequence is that if the student fails to pass the exam or the thesis is rejected, the ‘fault’ lies with either the student who did not study hard enough or the teacher who did not present the material clearly enough (Ballard and Clanchy 1991a, 1991b; Gow et al 1996).

Examples of the practical student orientation can be found in these responses. ‘I think I’m a good student because I never absent and give my homework every time’ (I 20A: 116-7). In this example, the participant is defining himself as a good student because he sees his behaviour as conforming to ideals that bring successful rewards. ‘Q: Did you do well in the tests? In class? A: I don’t do well in class, but on the test, I can get well, because I study very hard. But it’s very boring. I just repeat the word and mirror. And everywhere I bring my book and say the word again and again, once, twice. My parents
say to me, “English is very important”’ (I 20B: 37-40). The following participant describes her life in and out of the classroom and the methods of study 25 to 30 years ago. She also acknowledges the role of family in emphasising the importance of the subject of English. There is a hint here of family pressure to push hard, even though the subject is boring. ‘We Chinese are focus the grammar because we have to take the examination. Examination is always focus the grammar, not emphasise the conversation or speaking, so I think the Taiwanese are not good at speaking’ (I 10A: 20-22). The following participant speaks directly of the examination pressure and how it affects the classroom study. ‘When I was in school, I think we have no any way for study English, just follow the teacher. I think teacher is very important’ (I 10B: 22-23). This view of the importance of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge is repeated many times in other interviews.

The deep thinker

If the practical student is a rote learner with an eye on the goal of passing the exam, the deep thinker is the student who, with an eye on the completion of the task, chooses the method which does that best. The emphasis is on understanding the material (Gow et al 1996; Biggs 1996). The method of learning is memorisation with understanding. This memorisation is entwined with understanding in two ways: memorising what is understood and understanding through memorising. The reliance is on the self, not the teacher, and persistence and self-management are highlighted. This is not to say that this is a solitary activity; interaction with teachers and fellow students enhances the higher cognitive processes.

Although outwardly students appear to be memorising and doing group work with repetition, in fact they are digging much deeper in order to understand. The learning environment is the main catalyst for the selection of learning strategies. If an exam demands simple rote memorisation, the deep thinker can easily switch strategies to memorise without understanding. If the subject matter or the particular exam demands understanding, the deep thinker can switch strategies to cope (Tang and Biggs 1996; Gow et al 1996).

Here are some examples of deep thinking. ‘Q: How did you learn English when you were young, just study in school? A: Yeah, just for the examination, but my English grammar is very poor ... So I don’t understand grammar right now ... Q: ... So, you were not a good student? A: In English? No, I always 100 point’ (I 20H: 80-88). This student obviously did well, she said she always got perfect scores (100 points) in examinations, but she still did not understand. She thought she should understand grammar, rather than simply memorising examples or rules. She knows it is important in English and feels her grammar is poor because her understanding of grammar is not sufficiently deep. ‘Q: When you go to class, are you a good student, do you learn? A: Basically, I think because I have some little interest in language learning. That why I study so many languages. Still I’m not so master in it. But I think I’m quite a good student. But a good student doesn’t mean that you will have a good result. Right?’ (I 20M: 73-77). Here is an example of a deep thinker who knows there is more to learning (a good result) than
going to class, memorising, doing homework. Even though she is a ‘good’ student, that does not always mean she will achieve the results that she wants and has come increasingly to expect. She is interested in languages and, as well as being bilingual from childhood in Taiwanese and Mandarin, she has studied English, German, French and Japanese.

The Confucian scholar

Although this type of learner has been named after Confucius, it is being used here only as a term generally understandable by westerners for a scholar in the classical Chinese tradition. This is not to say that other scholars had no influence or had only the same ideas as Confucius. The major goal of a scholar in ancient times was applied politics. Imperial exams led to government posts. Criticism (within guidelines) was expected from knowledgeable, reflective scholars (Hayhoe 1984). Another goal of the scholar was the applied sciences, indeed ancient and medieval Chinese technology was once on the cutting edge. It was aided by the Daoist world view of non-action, doing nothing, following the natural order (wu wei). The inner space created by doing nothing (wu wei) can be used for questioning and looking at problems in a new way (Dong 1996).

The Confucian scholar relies on extensive reading, grounded in the classics. The application of this thinking and reflection is done in a community of scholars that comment and critique one another’s thoughts. Contrary to the notion of childhood learning and memorisation for exams, this mature scholar emphasises inner needs and self-improvement as well as ways to make a contribution to society (Dong 1996).

Although the mature students in the study were interested in studying for work-related reasons (67% of men and 40% of women), the single most important reason was for self-enhancement (75%). ‘Q: Why are you studying? ... so, for interest, not for your job ...? A: No, not at all. Maybe for future personal use for sightseeing or maybe to increase your knowledge or accepting information’ (I 20M: 95-97). ‘Q: When you studied [in the US] how did you feel? A: Not bad, I always work hard, I love to study all kinds of languages. It’s a very important part of my life, to make myself progress’ (I 20U: 31-33). ‘Q: Why do you want to study English? A: I see TV, movies, television and book. I think I want to listen original the meaning. Because it is my interest’ (I 20W: 40-43). ‘Q: Why are you studying English? A: First reason is my children grow up ... So I think maybe keep moving is important, I like to study everything if I don’t know’ (I 10B: 53-64). These participants see the acquisition of a foreign language as something that will enhance the quality of their lives by increasing knowledge, progress, personal interest or to keep moving. They are interested in the world around them as well as the world within. ‘Q: Why are you studying English, ... for yourself? A: Maybe I am a rich man, but I have no time to study’ (I 10M: 75-76). This rich man has spent his entire life in an attempt to accumulate money (action), so that he has no time for study, for inner reflection, for non-action (wu wei).
WACHOB

WESTERN INFLUENCES

Chinese education began to feel the influence of the West in the early twentieth century. The end of the Imperial Examination (although not the end of the concept of exams for purposes of advancement) led to a reorganisation of educational institutions to follow western forms of education more closely (Hayhoe 1984; Cleverley 1985). The goal became preparation for professions and jobs. Universal education was encouraged, as even peasants needed literacy and numeracy. Chiang Kai Shek's Confucian-oriented admonition to students - propriety, righteousness, incorruptibility and self-consciousness and self-respect (li, yi, lian, chi) (Cleverley 1985, p.12) - vied with other values of the Guomindang's, such as the three principles of the people, nationalism, and economic growth (Hayhoe 1984, p.40).

Western influences, especially in Taiwan, are like icing dripped over a cake - some stays on top, some drips though, mixing inextricably with the cake. Western ideas have been borrowed in whole or in part and western ideals of individuality have become more valued, but not totally (Hird 1997). In answer to the puzzling question of whether traditional and modern attitudes could co-exist, Yang reported that although such values as authoritarianism, conservatim and male dominance will gradually give way to egalitarianism and sexual equality, other traditional values, such as filial piety and fatalism can coexist with self-reliance and optimism. 'Thus, Yang's research empirically demonstrates that some of the Chinese people's most important traditional attitudes, beliefs and values need not be replaced by modern ones as some would have expected' (Yang 1996, p.491).

Travel or living abroad can influence attitudes and behaviour. 'Q: You travelled in Egypt all by yourself? A: Yeah. Q: For how long? A: 28 days. Q: And Australia? A: Australia, 45 days. Q: Where else have you travelled? A: About 20 countries' (I 10E: 92-99). 'Q: Have you ever studied English? A: Yes, I lived in America ten years' (I 20Q: 13-14). This participant's command of English was still poor, even after having lived in the US for years. She mentioned her close contact with a Christian community and she also talked of her estrangement from her child and husband who had wholeheartedly adopted the English language and American ways. She wanted to study English to close this perceived gap in her relationships. 'Q: Why are you studying English? A: ... I want to change my lifestyle. I think the most important to contact with young people ... I feel younger than before. In Taiwan most of the people to learn English is very young. So I try to keep young' (I 10A: 45-59). Keeping young is a western concept and Confucius might have been startled to think that one would envy the young. But there is also the concept of English as an up-to-date fashionable accessory or as a means of advancement in the business world.

The following participant reveals his ambivalence between two cultures, two ways of looking at the world. 'Q: Tian xia wu nan shi, zhi pa you xin ren. A very Chinese way of looking at things, isn't it? Do you believe that? A: Sometimes I believe, but sometimes I don't. Because intelligent is different. I think I'm a lower IQ, so I must study more, more study than the other person' (I 10E: 579-585). 'Tian xia wu nan shi, zhi pa you xin ren' is a
Chinese expression that translates as ‘Where there is a will, there is a way’. This idea, that you can make it as long as you try hard enough, is a Chinese way of approaching the learning task. This participant says that he believes and he does not believe. Then he talks about his IQ. IQ is a western concept. He says that he has a low IQ (which is obviously not true), but he also says it in a self-deprecating, humble manner, much as he was taught to do as a child (Flowerdew 1998). The depth of influence from the West varies from individual to individual and also from context to context. But this influence is felt in all Chinese communities and the impact can be as profound as it is confusing. Outwardly students may behave like western students in a classroom, but reveal their Chinese cultural orientations in other circumstances.

In the classroom

These orientations to learning are not rigid, but fluid and changeable, varying with circumstances and over an individual’s lifetime. From the data it can be seen that any particular participant revealed different orientations depending on to which time frame they were referring. Misunderstandings can arise, for example, when students expect their ‘practical student’ behaviour to be rewarded, but their western teachers, operating in another cultural paradigm, determine the students have not met ‘standards’. For the practical student, the reward of attending class and turning in homework is a high mark, or at least passing the course. As well, failure to live up to these expectations results in failure in the class. However, western teachers may determine success or failure in performance on standardised tests or other ‘objective’ standards of competence. If a Chinese student who has ‘tried really hard’ and has been ‘a good student’ is faced with ‘failure to meet standards’, conflicts may arise. Failure, in this case, may lead to loss of face.

FACE

The concept of face, or self-image, is universal, but is particularly important in Chinese culture. Relationship (guanxi) is the centrepiece of interpersonal relationships. All relationships can be divided into one of three categories. Outsiders (sheng, literally ‘strange’), are those with whom one has contact but no lasting relationship, such as taxi drivers and store clerks. Insiders (shu, ‘familiar’), are those with whom one has close repeated relations with, such as classmates and co-workers. Family (jiu) includes those in an extended family, not just the nuclear family, and can occasionally be extended to include very close friends. The social relationships with family and insiders create a lifelong, complex system of giving and accepting favours (Gabrenya and Hwang 1996). Playing the games of face strengthens the ties of relationship, especially with insiders with whom one has long-standing ties (Bond 1986).

There are two types of face in Chinese, prestige (mianzi) and status in society (lian) (Gabrenya and Hwang 1996). Prestige (mianzi) face is known to westerners. There is prestige in business, doing well in school, making a name for oneself and, by extension, one’s family. The Chinese use relationship (guanxi) to give and get face (mianzi). Preserving face is an interactive activity in social and business spheres. Face (lian) refers to a
moral, social face. Losing face (diu lian) means not being able to function in society (Bond 1986; Gabrenya and Hwang 1996). Reactions to losing face (diu lian) can range from compensatory behaviour such as avoidance, apologising, reinterpreting the situation, even suicide, to retaliatory behaviour against the person responsible for the face loss, and self-defensive measures such as pretending nothing has happened (Bond 1986). Preserving one’s face, gaining face as well as preserving others’ face depend upon disharmony being avoided at all costs. Exposing others’ mistakes can cause disharmony and is therefore to be avoided, lest someone lose face (Bond 1991; Jin and Cortazzi 1998). The problem with interpreting face cross-culturally is that westerners have the concept of prestige (mianzi) but have no connotations of social status face (lian) (Gabrenya and Hwang 1996).

It was while analysing the data from this research that the importance of this idea and its misconceptions were brought to light. Of the teachers, four mentioned face in the context of ‘losing face’ or ‘the face thing’. Of the four who mentioned face, T01 used the word twice, T02 used the word six times and indicated the biggest problem of mature learners was face. T03 used the term seven times and also indicated that face was the biggest problem. T06 also mentioned face seven times and said the biggest problem was anxiety.

But of the 32 learners, only one mentioned loss of face and this was in reference to others. Why did the teachers mention face and the students not? One obvious answer is that participants who talk about this topic may lose face. A more likely answer is that the teachers, six out of seven of whom were North Americans or Europeans, do not truly understand the concept of face. Classroom anxiety and losing face are related, but not the same.

The one mention by a student was given in the context of a conversation about competition and self-encouragement to study harder. ‘Many of my friends give up. Q: Why? A: Lose face. In Taiwan my age is very easy age. You know we have money, we have time, the health is still well. So we can travel, read the novels. You can live very easy going, comfortable. You don’t need like... So they always laugh at me, “Why you always make yourself so hard?” I just want learning, but they don’t want, they want to watch the movies, watch TV and travelling and easygoing life. So they give up. They don’t want to study again’ (I 20H: 262-269). What kind of face loss if this? Obviously to participate in a class is to ‘make yourself hard’, so they do not want to make life hard for themselves as they see this participant doing. But why not ‘have a go’, at least try to study a little? If they do not study hard, they will be in danger of failing, that is, losing face (diu lian). It is better to take the easy way out.

But when the teachers talked of face loss, what were they talking about? Was it embarrassment or classroom anxiety – in Chinese ‘no face’ (mei mianzi) or losing face (shì mianzi)? Or was it losing social status (diu lian)? ‘... the older woman, she still, even I’m talking and asking her simple questions, she’s still going through these non-verbal hand gestures. Q: Do you think that’s anxiety? A: Probably. Because she doesn’t like you to look directly at her. Probably anxiety. And you know if I had to guess, some strict student-teacher relationships she had when she was younger, but she seems to like me very well. She often brings me gifts, so it doesn’t seem like she doesn’t like me or my personality. But I think she does feel anxiety and maybe it’s not losing face in front of younger
students’ (I T01: 93-101). ‘The greatest problem is that they worry. They walk into one of these mixed classrooms and they think, “Everybody looks very young. I hope they don’t think I’m old.” They’re more worried about what other people think of them ... They’re more worried about what other people will think if they make a mistake’ (I T06: 362-370). ‘I think they do more [work than younger students] but in class, they tend to listen and they speak when they’re spoken to and I think older people, maybe it’s this losing face thing, do a lot more at home’ (I T06: 350-356). ‘But I’m aware that the older students seem to be much more aware of ... are afraid of losing face and not know how to answer and being a scary, terrible thing for them, not knowing how to answer’ (I T02: 99-102). ‘So if older people are self-confident and they don’t have anything to lose, they have a goal in mind, then they’re more willing to try, that’s what I’ve seen’ (I T03: 392-394). ‘I think the biggest problem in learning in this society is loss of face’ (I T03: 404).

But is making a mistake in class losing face (diu lian)? After all, even if the mature learners have been out of the classroom for many years, they do know what being a student means: it means you do not know and you have come to learn. Losing face (diu lian) implies being unable to function in a social role, disgrace. These statements seem to be more in the nature of anxiety, the kind of anxiety seen in language classrooms throughout the world (Gardner, Tremblay and Masgoret 1997). Making a mistake in front of classmates may be embarrassing, but it does not cause you to lose the ability to function socially. Especially when one looks at the nature of language classes in this language centre or at any private school in a large city, it is obvious that most, if not all, of one’s classmates will be strangers. ‘Sometimes compare, but ... I don’t want to compare the better than me. We just study together about one months or two months and then we will say, “Bye-bye”. So I think we can just study by ourselves’ (I 10E: 267-269). It is not that easy to lose face (diu lian) in front of strangers (sheng ren).

But there are two instances in which studying a language can be a face loss (diu lian). One is the situation of being in a class with one’s superiors who are in an insider relationship, such as your boss from work. ‘I think it depends on if they think it’s a loss of face to them. That’s my perception, especially in this society. That’s why I said it depends on their status, because if a student feels like they’re going to lose face by asking a question, then they won’t do it, they’ll just go on and not ever learn it’ (I T03: 148-152). At the end of a discussion about a student who was a teacher and was causing disruptions to the class, the participant teacher remarked: ‘So it depends on what their perception of who they are is and what they feel they have to lose within the class’ (I T03: 181-182). ‘I think because of the face thing, just seems to dictate so much of what happens here. Everything, spending money, who you marry, how you spend your time, your whole life is dictated by that’ (I T02: 392-394). The second instance of face loss is failing a class. This is more of a public act than a private one that takes place only within the class. ‘I often wonder if this was somebody, because the teacher’s reticence to fail an older person who would therefore feel bad and lose face, and that they are now in my class’ (I T02: 43-45).
Classroom anxiety or loss of face

It appears that western teachers, even those who have lived and worked for years in Confucian-heritage areas, are not always clear about prestige (mianzi) or social status (lian) in the context of language learning. Losing face is a term often used, and as westerners can readily understand the feelings of embarrassment and loss of prestige, it can easily be understood to be the same thing as our own expression to 'lose face'. Nervousness because of potential face loss in front of your boss or inferiors might be seen by westerners in the same light as a more common type of embarrassment or fear of making a mistake. To label classroom anxiety as fear of losing face may cause teachers to overlook other factors, such as differences in learning styles, physical problems such as hearing loss or the perceptual and processing speed slow-downs that come with age. Failing a class is a social status face loss (diu lian) and is greatly feared – to be avoided at great cost to other goals of learning a foreign language.

Misunderstandings that come from face loss combined with misunderstandings that come from misinterpretations of Chinese learners’ orientations to learning can create potentially unhappy relationships in the classroom and in the administrator’s office. A teacher, thinking that Chinese students only know how to memorise lists of vocabulary words, chides a student in front of his boss for not speaking out in class. This may cause deep humiliation and force a student to drop out of a class, when the real problem is that the relationship (guanxi) does not allow the student to speak out. Another example is the teacher who fails to recognise the desire by some students simply to study for self-enhancement, and seemingly belittles the efforts of an older student in a misguided effort to encourage the student. The types of misunderstandings are seemingly endless. For the researcher, interpretations of data may be faulty if care is not taken to ask questions about participants’ assumptions.

DISCUSSION

The label of ‘traditional Chinese learner’ cannot be used in a simple manner. They can be practical students one moment and deep thinkers the next. Maturity and life changes may make them Confucian scholars. As well, the influence of western value systems has gradually seeped into the educational orientation of students young and old, in China and the diaspora. The concept of face is particularly complex. Although cross-cultural investigations are worthwhile, they are fraught with holes, dangerous pits that can catch the unwary. Cultural issues also arise when the researcher and participant are from different cultural traditions. Language contains cultural categories within it, and questions of legitimization arise when translations and interpretations are used in a qualitative type method where so much relies on interpretation. Living within the culture, being attentive to the participants’ beliefs and assumptions, researching the academic literature and consulting knowledgeable indigenous respondents are ways to maintain the rigorousness of the research (Barnes 1996). Although it may never be possible to translate or interpret exactly differing concepts, beliefs and methods of learning across cultures, there is, at the same
time, a need to investigate them (Bond 1996; Spack 1997; Govardhan, Nayar and Sheory 1999), both for teachers in the classroom and researchers in academic fields.

REFERENCES


