

# The Learning Virtues

Jin Li grew up in China during the Cultural Revolution. When the madness was over, the Chinese awoke to discover that far from overleaping the West, they were “economically destitute and culturally barren.” This inspired an arduous catch-up campaign. Students were recruited to learn what the West had to offer.

Li was one of the students. In university, she abandoned Confucian values, which were then blamed for Chinese backwardness, and embraced German culture. In her book, “Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West,” she writes that Chinese students at that time were aflame — excited by the sudden openness and the desire to catch up.

Li wound up marrying an American, moved to the States and became a teacher. She was stunned. American high school students had great facilities but didn't seem much interested in learning. They giggled in class and goofed around.

This contrast between the Chinese superstudent and the American slacker could be described with the usual tired stereotypes. The Chinese are robots who unimaginatively memorize facts to score well on tests. The Americans are spoiled brats who love TV but don't know how to work. But Li wasn't satisfied with those clichés. She has spent her career, first at Harvard and now at Brown, trying to understand how Asians and Westerners think about learning.

The simplest way to summarize her findings is that Westerners tend to define learning cognitively while Asians tend to define it morally. West-

erners tend to see learning as something people do in order to understand and master the external world. Asians tend to see learning as an arduous process they undertake in order to cultivate virtues inside the self.

You can look at the slogans on university crests to get a glimpse of the difference. Western mottos emphasize knowledge acquisition. Harvard's motto is "Truth." Yale's is "Light and truth." The University of Chicago's is "Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched."

Chinese universities usually take Confucian sayings that emphasize personal elevation. Tsinghua's motto is "Strengthen self ceaselessly and cultivate virtue to nurture the world." Nanjing's motto is "Be sincere and hold high aspirations, learn diligently and practice earnestly."

When Li asked Americans to randomly talk about learning they used words like: thinking, school, brain, discovery, understand and information. Chinese, on the other hand, tended to use phrases common in their culture: learn assiduously, study as if thirsting or hungering, be diligent in one's learning.

In the Western understanding, students come to school with levels of innate intelligence and curiosity. Teachers try to further arouse that curiosity in specific subjects. There's a lot of active learning — going on field trips, building things. There's great emphasis on questioning authority, critical inquiry and sharing ideas in classroom discussion.

In the Chinese understanding, there's less emphasis on innate curiosity

or even on specific subject matter. Instead, the learning process itself is the crucial thing. The idea is to perfect the learning virtues in order to become, ultimately, a sage, which is equally a moral and intellectual state. These virtues include: sincerity (an authentic commitment to the task) as well as diligence, perseverance, concentration and respect for teachers.

In Chinese culture, the heroic scholar may possess less innate intelligence but triumphs over hardship. Li cites the story of the scholar who tied his hair to a ceiling beam so he could study through the night. Every time his head dropped from fatigue, the yank of his hair kept him awake.

Li argues that Westerners emphasize the Aha moment of sudden insight, while Chinese are more likely to emphasize the arduous accumulation of understanding. American high school students tease nerds, while there is no such concept in the Chinese vocabulary. Western schools want students to be proud of their achievements, while the Chinese emphasize that humility enables self-examination. Western students often work harder after you praise them, while Asian students sometimes work harder after you criticize them.

These cultures are surprisingly enduring, Li notes, even with all the cross-pollination that goes on in the world today. Each has its advantages. I'm mostly struck by the way the intellectual and moral impulses are fused in the Chinese culture and separated in the West.

It's easy to see historically why this came about. Hellenic culture emphasized skeptical scientific inquiry. With us, religion and science have

often been at odds. We're a diverse society, so it's easier to teach our common academic standards in the classroom and relegate our diverse moralities to the privacy of the home.

I'd just note that cultures that do fuse the academic and the moral, like Confucianism or Jewish Torah study, produce these awesome motivation explosions. It might be possible to champion other moral/academic codes to boost motivation in places where it is absent.