

# Chinese students more organized, less imaginative than American counterparts

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Chinese children want to learn practical knowledge in an organized environment, while their American counterparts prefer a more imaginative school environment, a University of Florida study suggests.

The study offers a small glimpse of education in China – a country of strong regional differences, where urban life is markedly different from rural life – but the results could shed light on China’s increasing competitiveness in technological fields and the hard sciences, the study’s lead author said.

“If our findings in China are borne out by further study, they could have some interesting implications for higher education, particularly in the sciences,” said Thomas Oakland, a professor of educational psychology at UF’s College of Education. “Children who prefer a practical and organized learning style tend to do well in the sciences, and children generally choose career paths that complement their temperament.”

Oakland is the creator of the Student Style Questionnaire, a psychological test that measures students’ learning styles and preferred learning environments. His test – loosely based on the Myers-Briggs personality test familiar to many Americans – has been given to thousands of students in the United States, as well as groups in 24 other countries. While the primary purpose of the test is to help teachers choose teaching methods, Oakland has used his cross-national data to analyze the differences between students from different cultures.

Oakland's co-author, Professor Li Lu of Shanxi Medical University, recently tested 400 students of various ages and income levels in Taiyuan, a large industrial city in northern China. The researchers compared their results to tests given to nearly 8,000 American students.

Here's what they found:

- 86 percent of Chinese students preferred an “organized” learning style, which means they preferred orderly classrooms, a set routine and firm standards of behavior – as opposed to a “flexible” style based on variety and study that feels like play. In most countries, a majority of children prefer the organized style, but the researchers describe the Chinese preference as “remarkably high.”

- Six out of 10 Chinese children preferred a “practical” learning style, showing more interest in material that has real-world applications, preferring to learn by experience and seeking hard facts. Of their American counterparts, six out of 10 preferred an “imaginative” style, which stresses discussion of ideas and possibilities.

- Chinese girls were evenly split between a “thinking” style — with an emphasis on debate, competition, and logics – and a “feeling” style, which emphasizes harmony and cooperation in the classroom. In most countries, girls overwhelmingly prefer the “feeling” style.

The results could have interesting implications in the sciences in both countries, Oakland said.

“The combination of ‘organized’ and ‘thinking’ styles is particularly good for people who hope to become researchers,” said Oakland. “Compared to Chinese students, American students seem to be much more interested in the use of imagination and in flexible work routines, traits that are typically conducive to creative work.”

It is too early to say why these groups show such marked personality differences, Oakland said. The individualist culture of the United States and the comparatively collectivist culture of China probably influence learning styles, he said. Chinese classrooms tend to be more structured and authoritarian than classrooms in the West, while American schools try to encourage critical thinking skills and student interaction with teachers. Still, Oakland doubts various students' learning styles are picked up entirely in school.

“Earlier studies seem to indicate that temperament is formed even before a child hits school age, through early influences and biology,” he said.

In his two decades of international research on student temperament, Oakland has usually found only shades of difference between students in different cultures. “Organized” learners are in the majority almost everywhere, for instance, and extroverted children outnumber introverts in almost every country. Perhaps not surprisingly, students from countries with close cultural ties tend to show similar results on tests. The closest match to the American student population, for instance, came from tests in the Australian school system.

Source: University of Florida

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