

## Review 2

**Title:** Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West. By Jin Li.  
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The interplay between culture and socialization is at the heart of this volume. In her highly timely book, Jin Li reviews both historic and contemporary literature and reports a large body of her own empirical work to argue that the meaning that is attached to the concept of learning is strongly culturally embedded. Although learning as such is highly valued across cultural regions, Li's extensive and impressive body of primarily qualitative research reveals an important conceptual distinction between the Western and East Asian models of learning. In short, Li's describes the overarching framework that characterizes learning in the Western context as 'mind oriented'. In the East Asian context, learning is identified as having a 'virtue orientation'. The overarching orientations of mind and virtue emerge from her extensive studies with younger and older learners that spans two decades of her career. The mind and virtue orientation are described as persisting cultural forces that have developed over time and that underly and shape much of the thinking, feeling and behaving of contemporary learners, as well as the social context in which learning takes place.

Li starts her book with an autobiographical account in which the path that has lead her towards the development of her research agenda is described and in which she reflects upon her own extensive experiences as learner and teacher in China and the United States. The integration of philosophical considerations into the personal background of the development of her research clearly illustrates the relevance of the subject matter to the reader. Li goes on to elaborate on the intellectual traditions and the concepts of *learner* for both cultural contexts, before addressing the central question of the book: Do the respective learning traditions still influence present-day learners in the East and West? In light of current education practices that dramatically shape the learning practice of learners in both contexts as well, Li argues that socialization plays a crucial role in the development of culturally informed beliefs about the meaning of learning, since children's identity develops under the influence of parental socialization in the youngest years of life and later under the joint socialization of parents and school. The process of how cultural beliefs shape this socialization process differently in the two cultural regions at hand is reviewed and reveals the influence of cultural beliefs on students', teachers' and parents' beliefs about what good learning entails. Li's model captures the way in which overarch-

ing learning beliefs of mind and virtue orientation penetrate to subordinate belief levels to the same degree in both cultural contexts. Such subordinate levels for example include one's ideas about the purpose that learning is ought to serve, motivational processes for learning, how to best self-express oneself as a learner, the value of speech, and affective responses to academic successes and failures.

Li builds on the cultural learning models that emerged from her own and others' empirical studies in chapter 4 in which she describes how these cultural models influence the actual learning process. In short, the mind orientation, which represents the primary orientation towards learning in the western cultural region, focuses on the importance of the cognitive development of the individual. The learning processes that are commonly applied are therefore those of critically evaluating pre-existing knowledge, open communication between student and teacher and the belief that gaining knowledge is a valuable process, for its own sake. Li traces the origin of this belief system back to the philosophical traditions that also shaped Western civilization in the political realm; those of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Interestingly, Li however does not focus on the content of these philosophers' legacies, but places their intellectual processes in a cultural perspective. To illustrate, an influential element of the Socratic legacy includes the public displays of verbal questioning. A core principle of these open debates, in which authority figures as well as students participated, was that truth could only be established by both parties adhering to the rules of formal logic. Status or ascribed authority which might have evoked respectful restraint at other times and in other cultural contexts, were no reasons to be excused from being questioned here. Although it cannot be denied that Socrates and other ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato pursued logic with a deeper moral and social meaning in mind, the emphasis that was placed on the supremacy of the human mind and the laws of logic to uncover the world's mysteries is a key determinant of their lasting legacy that is still reflected in current academic practices as evidenced by the studies presented by Li.

In East Asia, the emphasis that is placed on the cognitive element of the learning process deviates from the Western perspective in the sense that the moral dimension is engrained in the concept of learning more strongly than it is in the West. In what is described as a 'virtue orientation', learning is perceived as the development of the person as a whole, including the moral and social domain. This implies that the learning process is not merely a process of developing one's thinking skills, but that by learning one also is to become a better person. Moreover, knowledge is not merely a powerful tool for its own sake, but ought to contribute to improving society as well. On the subordinate level, the virtue orientation leads students to dedicate themselves to the process of learning by showing diligence, persistence, silent contemplation of the material and having a respectful attitude towards both pre-existing knowledge and the ones who are transferring this knowledge, their teachers. Li acknowledges the lasting influence of Confucianism as the origin of this orientation to learning in East Asia. As a teacher himself, Confucius valued the virtues of endurance, diligence and respect in his students. He conceptualized a good student as any person that can be characterized by being dedicated to the learning process, and who possesses diligence and perseverance rather than one who relies on his or her inherent ability (i.e., intelligence) to acquire knowledge, since learning is primarily regarded as a life-long and effortful process.

In line with current perspectives in cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Kashima and Gelfand, 2011), Li clarifies that the mind and virtue orientation should not be seen as cultural truths that hold for every individual in each described cultural context. They are merely intended to describe cultural ‘mandates’ (Kitayama and Imada, 2010) that describe the culturally rooted beliefs on the aggregate level. This does not mean that each orientation can be applied to each individual within the culture, but merely that a qualitative difference can be identified on the cultural level.

Li goes on to describe how affect is involved in learning (chapter 5), the influence of students’ social and cultural environments in the form of their peers (chapter 6) and parents (chapter 7). In the last chapters, Li offers a valuable perspective on the meaning of the phenomenon of speech and its role in learning and education. She states that for all humans speaking is a representation of our mental world. However, the way a speaker is perceived and what it means to speak or be silent carries a strong cultural meaning. In Western political and legal domains in particular, speaking implies ownership of ideas and leadership and many masters of oration can be named that distinguished themselves as eloquent and thus powerful speakers (e.g., from Churchill, Roosevelt and even Hitler in the World War II era, to Marthin Luther King, Clinton and Obama). The art of debating is a highly regarded skill for not only attorneys or political leaders, but already for students from middle-school to graduate school in Western educational settings. In fact, Li observes that in light of the fundamental role of speech, it is unimaginable how Western-style democracy could function without its emphasis on verbal procedure and performance. Illustrative of this value is the fact that freedom of speech is a right that is guaranteed to every U.S. American citizen and is listed as one of core principles in every other Western nation’ constitution. In short, speaking – that is, voicing one’s political, social, and personal views – is integral to Western democracy and much of daily work, education and social life.

The high regard for verbal eloquence in the West is not replicated in East Asia. First of all, Li points out that none of the three major spiritual traditions – Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism – emphasizes speaking. Instead, Confucius saw the ultimate measure of a person as lying in what he *does*, not what he *says*. It is stated that human character is revealed in our worldly acts, not in the articulation of ideas and plans, which are susceptible to distrust. Whenever a person is confronted with and contemplates the choice to speak, he or she is likely to think about whether or not the idea about to be expressed, particularly when it includes criticisms and suggestions, can be backed up in action. In short, speaking in Chinese / East Asian contexts is regarded more as speaking up to voice a concern, to change the status quo, or to offer a promise. The virtue of speech thus leans more strongly towards silence, which is seen to play a significant role in human relationships. The Confucian *Analects* even offers a full discourse on how silence needs to be understood, valued, and practiced in service of one’s moral and virtuous development. As another example, it is observed that none of the current Asian political leaders are distinguished speakers. They are however more known for their cautious, slow, soft and hesitant style of speaking, as exemplified by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Lastly, the persisting relevance of the perspective that Li offers on the concept of learning that is commonly taken for granted and seen as a universal constant, is illustrated by the case of a newly introduced educational policy in Taiwan. Although one could ex-

pect that processes of modernization lead to a move towards Western and thus mind oriented academic practices in East Asia, Li's findings suggest otherwise. For example, Taiwanese schoolchildren used to not be required to study Confucian texts. The country's government however recently announced a new educational policy proposal that calls for all high school students having to take one class per week to read Confucian texts. In China itself, the legacy of Confucian values is seen to be resurfacing as well. After denouncing Confucian values during the Cultural Revolution and the mere ambivalent exploration of them in the decades that followed, several indications of the persisting value that is placed on this heritage and its penetrating influence in the country's politics can be identified. On a symbolic level, Li notes that a large statue of Confucius was recently erected on Tian An Men Square, the utmost political center of China. These two examples illustrate the value of an interconnected view of socialization processes, culture, and education and the influence of these dimensions on politics.

In conclusion, the implications of this work are clearly evident for the fields of education, developmental and cultural psychology. Its main argument however includes important implications for the fields of socialization and politics. Li argues that the historical, philosophical, literary, social and political traditions of diverse cultural contexts have shaped the way in which children today are socialized. Underlying beliefs about what 'good' learning means and thereby the value that is placed on certain learning tasks (verbal eloquence) over others (thoughtful contemplation) and, the way in which they identify with these values can take on different meanings. She hereby convinces the reader that it is crucial to understand the marked influence that underlying cultural variables have on the way in which a concept as important as learning is understood. It is expected that globalization will only increase rather than reduce the need to understand cultural variations in this domain in a meaningful way, since quality formal learning has taken on one of the highest levels of importance of our time. It is therefore crucial to understand the way in which 'quality' is conceptualized and how this differs qualitatively between cultural contexts. Li's book makes a significant contribution to this end.

## References

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