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## BOOK REVIEW

**Revisiting the Chinese learner: changing contexts, changing education**, edited by Carol K.K. Chan and Nirmala Rao, Hong Kong, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong & Springer, 2009, xix + 360 pp., US\$38.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-481-3839-5

This book is a sequel to two earlier books: *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences* (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) and *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and Pedagogical Perspectives* (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The Foreword clearly states that the current book is very timely in light of the numerous educational reforms targeting teaching and learning processes that are sweeping through Chinese educational systems. The focus is on how these reforms impact learners and their beliefs about, and conceptions of, learning; on teachers' beliefs, conceptions, and their educational practices; and on teachers' responses to these reforms. The 11 chapters are divided into four main sections: an introductory chapter, a section focusing on students, another focusing on teachers, and a concluding chapter. Unlike the earlier two volumes, which included higher education students, this volume narrows the focus to elementary and high school students.

The editors lay out the landscape of teaching and learning in Chinese educational contexts, namely mainland China and Hong Kong, in their introductory chapter. They begin by reviewing the ground covered by the previous two volumes and explain how their book will extend the field of knowledge. A major theme is the existence of continuity and change amid the plethora of education reforms aimed at bringing about fundamental changes in teaching and learning processes in classrooms. These changes, such as a move towards more student-centred modes of teaching and learning, mirror those taking place in classrooms in many other societies as well.

Section Two, entitled “Student beliefs and approaches to learning”, examines how Chinese students respond to the tensions engendered by the interaction between traditional and novel beliefs regarding learning and the processes that students use in their learning. In Chapter 3, Watkins presents empirical school-based data from Hong Kong secondary schools regarding students’ motivation levels and their thoughts on competition within the school context. He points out that besides its commonly cited negative effects on students, competition may in fact have some motivational value for them. In Chapter 4, Law et al. discuss the findings of their research study conducted in four Hong Kong secondary schools. Their study aimed to discover what, if any, changes had occurred in students’ epistemological beliefs and students’ beliefs about teachers’ roles amid a climate of ambitious reforms aimed at cultivating independent lifelong learners, creative thinking and collaborative learning. They present evidence that both students and teachers have developed new strategies to cope with these reforms. At the same time, many tensions persist as both parties attempt to reconcile the novel learning and teaching experiences with more traditional ones.

Half the chapters in the book, most of which present psychometric or classroom observation data, are dedicated to the third section, entitled “Teacher beliefs, changing pedagogy and teacher learning”. Among the chapters that stand out in this section is Chan’s chapter. She examines how two expert Hong Kong teachers grapple with the task of introducing computer-supported knowledge building in their senior high school Geography and Chinese Language classrooms. She also finds out how their students respond to this pedagogical innovation. Her findings make for comforting reading. Not only were the students able to grasp the point of the new ways of teaching and learning, they responded well to the idea of collaborative

learning. The teachers' struggles are well documented too, and echo those from Law et al.'s chapter. Another positive finding is that both teachers managed to view this pedagogical innovation as one that could be implemented within the constraints of examination pressures rather than as one that directly contradicted these constraints. Rao, Chi and Cheng turn the spotlight on mathematics teaching in urban and rural schools in mainland China. Their chapter looks at how teachers attempt to implement teaching strategies that will bring about more active student learning. It reports that in both urban and rural settings, teachers were attempting to actively engage their students during Mathematics lessons through class discussions and questioning. However, urban students outperformed their rural counterparts in mathematics achievement, a phenomenon that the authors attribute to disparities in home-based support for learning.

The editors conclude the book with a chapter which reiterates an idea that was expounded on in the two previous volumes – the need to consider the Chinese learner in context, instead of in isolation from the context. It also revisits the apparent paradoxes of the Chinese learner and the Chinese teacher by analysing the empirical evidence presented in the previous chapters and linking this evidence to recent education reforms. More importantly, it presents the valuable contributions that this book makes to current knowledge about learning theories, pedagogy and education reform. The book is indispensable reading for educators around the world who are interested in learning more about the possibility of bringing about fundamental changes in teaching and learning in classrooms. It continues in the fine tradition of the previous volumes of debunking the myth of Chinese learners as being nothing more than rote learners incapable of deeper conceptual understanding.

## References

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