

BOOK LAUNCH:
Revisiting the Chinese Learners

John Biggs
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CERC Studies in Comparative Education 25

Revisiting The Chinese Learner

Changing Contexts, Changing Education



Edited by
Carol K.K. Chan & Nirmala Rao



Springer

**Comparative Education Research Centre
The University of Hong Kong**



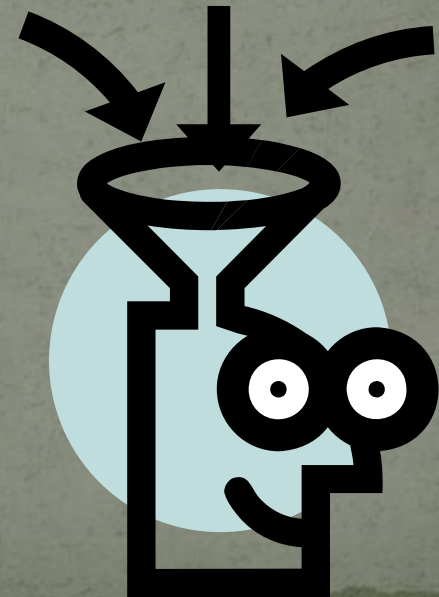
A decorative graphic featuring a central yellow oval with the word "Congratulations!" written in a black, cursive font. The oval is surrounded by four yellow stars with black outlines and radiating lines, and two wavy ribbons, one pink and one red, that swirl around the central text.

Congratulations!

- My heartiest congratulations to Carol, Nirmala, and the twenty and more contributors to this important new publication. I am very sorry I am unable to join you in the launch of this exciting new book, but I am honoured to have been asked to say something even if from a distance. Although I retired from the Faculty of Education 15 years ago it is so nice to still remain in touch professionally, with this and with the Classroom Learner project.

- I am deeply gratified that the problem of what 20 years ago I called “The Paradox of the Chinese Learner” has given rise to research that is still ongoing. Just briefly to remind you of that so-called paradox: Chinese students appeared to western observers as rote learning massive amounts of information in fierce exam-dominated classrooms yet in international comparisons, students in the Confucian heritage greatly outperformed students in several western countries.

- It seemed we westerners could be quite wrong in thinking what constituted good educational practice. It defined an urgent research question that many addressed, an especially important contribution being Ference Marton's work on how Chinese learners construed the roles of memory and understanding in ways that were foreign to typical western educators.



- Much of this work was brought together in *The Chinese Learner* (1996), edited by David Watkins and myself.



THE CHINESE LEARNER:

**CULTURAL,
PSYCHOLOGICAL**

and

**CONTEXTUAL
INFLUENCES**

Edited by **David A. Watkins** and **John B. Biggs**



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- That work raised more questions still, especially about educational contexts, beliefs and practices, which were investigated in contributions to *Teaching the Chinese Learner* (2001, also edited by David and I. And now we have *Revisiting the Chinese Learner*, which is a very timely collection of excellent contributions that take into account the many changes that have taken place since those previous two books,

Teaching the Chinese Learner:

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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changes such as:

1. Changing theories of learning and teaching, with increasing emphasis on knowledge construction rather than knowledge transmission, and the view of learning and teaching as situated. Thus, rather than talking about *the* Chinese learner, we should talk about Chinese learners in their various contexts and systems. This is a very important qualification



changes such as:

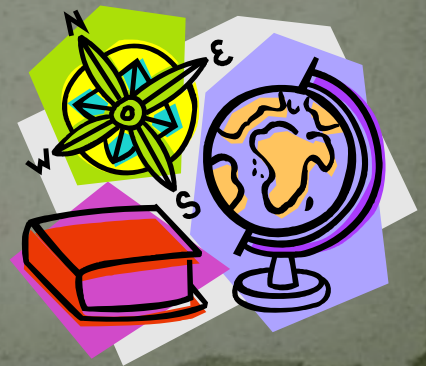
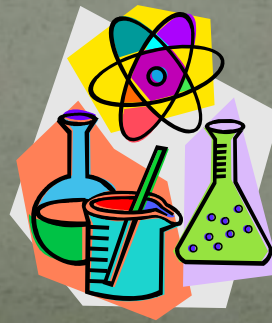
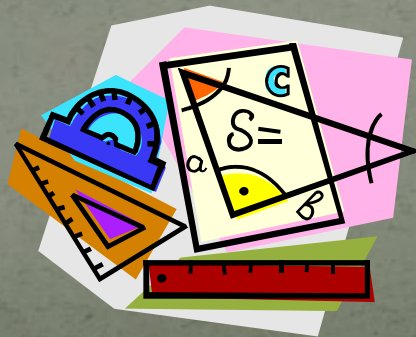
2. The globalisation of education especially through educational technology, and enormous socio-economic changes Confucian heritage countries.
3. Changes in educational policy, aims, curriculum and organisation, and decentralisation of educational decision-making in many Confucian heritage cultures.





- In the present book, the focus is on how these changes impact on learners and their beliefs about, and conceptions of, learning and teaching; on teachers' beliefs and conceptions and on their educational practices; and on how teachers are themselves learning to deal with changing policies and practices. A recurring theme in *Revisiting* is how traditional beliefs sit alongside changing aims and practices. Change doesn't occur top-down but is evolutionary, and like in evolution itself, what evolves is context dependent.

- I am reminded of when I came to Hong Kong twenty three years ago. The challenges of integrating what western educational theory saw as good teaching and learning with what was going on in Hong Kong schools seemed overwhelming. I was stunned at the rigidity of teaching and assessment practices – as they were then – that were completely contrary to my educational philosophy. How could I prepare teachers for a system I saw as the antithesis of good education?



- I lamented my existential dilemma to a colleague (from another faculty) on the staff bus who saw my point with sympathy. But such is the interaction between person and context, I was to learn there was more to good education than what I had in my baggage when I arrived in Hong Kong. It was here in Hong Kong that I taught my best students, and ultimately did my best work.



- That little personal journey brings me back to *Revisiting the Chinese Learner*. While the focus in this book is on Chinese systems, the central theme, of developing educational change in ecologically valid ways in a fast changing world, is a universal concern. I hope that theme of universality is recognised and translates into lovely international sales, for that is what the book deserves.



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