

Chan, C. & Rao, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Revisiting the Chinese learner: Changing contexts, changing education*. Springer: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong. ISBN 978962-8093-16-8 (pbk.) 360 pp.

This is the third volume in a series that investigates the teaching and learning of Chinese students, the examples coming mainly from Hong Kong. The topic is becoming popular amongst English speaking readers. Only two years ago Continuum brought out a similar book, about half of which related to students in Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland (Liu, 2007).

Apart from the editors' opening and concluding chapters, there are nine contributions, the first three emphasizing students and their learning, the other six looking at teachers. Not surprisingly, there are overlaps between these two aspects within most chapters. This review aims to highlight some of the book's theses, particularly those that challenge historical assumptions about Chinese learners.

The introduction, by Chan and Rao, is worth reading in its own right, with its summary of traits inherited by students from societies based on Confucian values. (Incidentally, this section made me wonder what Chinese analysts of Western education would see as the historical source of values in *our* education system.) Some stereotypes are attacked. For instance, contrary to the widely held belief that 'rote learning' and 'deep understanding' are mutually exclusive, research suggests that "many Chinese students who use memorization are not rote learners but memorize with understanding" (p. 6).

Another widely held assumption is questioned in Chapter 3 by David Watkins, an Australian who has spent many years in Hong Kong. His description of the kinds and degrees of motivation amongst Hong Kong secondary students makes interesting reading.

Chapter 4's contents suggest that a distinction needs to be made between Chinese and Confucian pedagogy. The seven Hong Kong based authors worked with secondary students and their teachers as they set out to investigate students' beliefs about learning and about the role of their teachers.

Chapter 5, the first of the second section, will be of particular interest to teachers of reading. Marton, a Swede with an advisory role in Hong Kong, worked with a local team to investigate aspects of students' reading of argumentative texts.

What of the international understanding that Chinese children are particularly successful in mathematics? In Chapter 7, Rao, Chi and Cheng start by addressing suggested reasons for this, such as parental influences, the Chinese system of naming numbers and characteristics of the Chinese language. They then report on a project

which observed the teaching of mathematics in three different areas of Mainland China, ranging from (very) rural to a provincial capital.

The youngest subjects of the book's studies appear in Chapter 9. Here the importance of a teacher's role at the kindergarten level is highlighted by a number of proverbs and idioms. One example: *Though you have taught me for only one day, you will be my mentor all my life*" (p. 265).

Teacher educators are the target readers of Chapter 10 which reports on teacher development in Mainland China. The writers (Tsui and Wong) investigate the effects of the meeting between Chinese traditional views and Western ideas. A distinction is made between various models and philosophies, all of which are referred to in their translated (English) forms, in *pin ying* and its phonetic form. For more on views from within the system, turn to a translated book by Li (2005), who was formerly Chinese Vice Premier.

Until recently it has been difficult for non-readers of Chinese to read an 'inside' perspective such as Li's and the accounts in this book. It is hoped that this review has whetted the appetite of applied linguists, although they do not appear in the list of "scholars from a broad range of disciplines" (p.xiv) to whom the contents are addressed. With its range of contexts, its extensive literature reviews on which the new findings are built, and the index for easy access to topics of interest, this collection is recommended to all teachers and teacher educators whose classes include Chinese learners.

References

- Li, L. (2005). *Education for 1.3 billion*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China: Pearson Education.
- Liu, J. (Ed.). (2007). *English language teaching in China*. London: Continuum.

MARILYN LEWIS, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Auckland

Published in "New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics" Vol. 15 (2), 2009: pp.74-75.