"Chinese Students' Participation: The Effect of Cultural Factors

Introduction

Education has become one of the largest industries in the world, accounting for in excess of US $35B (2008 data) annually, (ITAUSDC, cited in Douglass et al. 2011. pp. 1), while the export of tertiary education makes a significant contribution to the economies of the USA, the UK, and Australia. Recently, education surpassed tourism as Australia's largest services industry export (AEI, 2010), while it is the USA's seventh largest (ITAUSDC, cited in Douglass et al. 2011, pp. 1). The role of the English-speaking educational provider countries is substantial, with the USA, UK and Australia capturing 18%, 10% and 7% of all international tertiary students respectively (OECDDFE, 2012).

The sheer volume of internationalisation of education has created substantial challenges for teachers, especially when they have to work with students who come from substantially different cultures and languages to those in which teaching is provided. Perhaps the largest example of this is the growing number of Chinese-speaking students who are studying in English-speaking countries. In both the USA and Australia, Chinese students comprise 25% of international student enrolments (Open Doors, 2011). If other predominantly ethnically Chinese regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore are included, the figures climb to over 30% for each country (AEI, 2010; Open Doors, 2013; The Complete University Guide, 2013). These students not only have to be sufficiently proficient in English, but they also have to adapt to the Western educational norm of predominantly dialectical teaching (Kolb and Kolb, 2005) in contrast with the tendency towards a more didactic teaching style within their countries of origin.

One issue of particular concern is that of participation in teaching and learning activities within the classroom. While some students actively participate in discussions, many Western educators have experienced the "silent Chinese student" phenomenon (Dougherty and Wall,

1991; Yang, 1993). Despite the recognition of this issue by tertiary teachers it has rarely been discussed in the academic literature. One exception to this was a report by Hwang et al.(2002), which confirmed that the techniques to elicit Chinese students' participation in the classroom are a matter of concern for tertiary educators involved in small class teaching. The lack of critical consideration of this issue has fostered informal responses, such as staff discussions that often ascribe the phenomenon to unspecified "cultural causes" and stereotypical beliefs about Chinese students' rote learning, surface learning, and other behaviours (Chalmers and Volet, 1997; Watkins, et al., 1991). Since the relationship between culture and pedagogy has been well established (e.g., Stigler et al., 1999; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999), answering this question requires researchers to enquire on a cultural basis into the reasons for Chinese students' reticence. It is in this context that we have provided this introduction to the Asian concept of "*kiasu*", which may assist Western educators' understanding of the "silent Chinese student" phenomenon. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to: (1) Introduce readers to the *kiasu* concept; (2) Discuss the inter-relationship and interaction of *kiasu* with other Chinese cultural elements; (3) Explain its potential effect on students' classroom and 'blended' study behaviours; (5) Report recent research which suggests that some *kiasu*-like behaviours are also present in USA, Hong Kong, and Australian student cohorts, and; (6) Propose a research agenda. The overarching objectives are to: (1) Assist Western educators in better addressing the phenomenon of the "silent Chinese student" and; (2) Stimulate further research in the area.

The Role of Questioning in Constructivist Western Teaching

Educators find the "silent Chinese student" phenomenon disturbing because of its impact on the longstanding Western classroom routine of teachers asking students questions (for an overview review refer Gall, 1970), with students reciprocating by asking questions of

teaching staff (Helfeldt and Lalik, 1976). Such interactions allow both students and teachers to check the understanding of the concepts presented (Carrier, 1963; Dillion, 1986). This Western constructivist dialogic learning model (Hammond and Gao, 2002) is one in which knowledge is actively co-constructed via a highly verbal, interactive learning process (Holmes, 2004). Despite its prevalence within teaching settings, the dialogic learning method is "… not shared by much of the rest of the world" (Catterick, 2007, pp. 116) even within Western cultures, a view shared by Kim and Bonk (2002), and Wright and Lander (2003). Consequently, even Western students can be challenged by interactive teaching, but this challenge is exacerbated for students whose experience of learning is based on the more didactic "fragmented, linear, competition-oriented, and authority-centred" learning model with which Chinese students are more familiar (Hammond and Gao, 2002, pp. 228-229). For such students, the "Western classroom practices of volunteering answers, commenting, interrupting, criticising, asking questions, or seeking clarification in the manner adopted in the West, may be seen as "bold and immodest"…" (Holmes 2004, pp. 296).

Even with the difficulties just highlighted, it should be noted that interactive learning is not merely a cultural taste in Western education - it has a real impact on learning outcomes. In one of the most thorough empirical reviews of education, Hattie (2009) cited an encyclopaedic range of meta-analytic estimates of the effect on learning produced by teacher and student contributions. In that review, active questioning by teachers was shown to increase student learning by an average of 0.41 of a standard deviation (roughly equivalent to one third of a grade: see Poropat, 2009). However, the opportunity to provide feedback to students is even more valuable, producing an increase in learning of 1.13 standard deviations (or roughly one whole grade). Given this importance of questioning and feedback in teaching, any reticence of students either to answer or to ask questions would appear likely to

substantially limit their learning, giving weight to the informal concerns of teaching staff, and making the unspecified "cultural causes" of any reticence to participate worthy of further investigation.

The Role of Questioning in Western & Confucian Heritage Cultures

While all learning is "situated" within specific contexts, including technological and cultural factors (e.g. Brown et al., 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991), when students from countries with a Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) (Rao and Chan, 2009), attend Western tertiary education, they are situated both within their Western classrooms and within their cultural overlay of values and beliefs in relation to learning (Rao and Chan, 2009). Hess et al, (1987) and Chen and Stevenson (1995) suggest that traditional Chinese values are pervasive even among the American-Chinese diaspora and are "evident in Chinese families in societies with very different political structures, such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore or Taiwan, and are also manifest in overseas Chinese families" (Rao and Chan, 2009, pp. 4). Thus, wherever they come from, "Chinese" students are likely to have CHC values. This includes American (or Australian) Born Chinese ("ABCs"). Thus, when Western teaching relies upon knowledge discovery and student participation, we tend to observe student reticence in face-to-face teaching.

Consequently, much attention has been paid to the "Chinese Learner" (Watkins and Biggs, 1996), which has been a subject of interest to educators since the late 1980s (e.g. Hess et al., 1987), with arguments over whether they have surface, deep, or rote learning tendencies, as well as the mechanisms and benefits of their approaches to learning (e.g. Biggs and Watkins, 1996: Kennedy, 2002: Marton et al., 1996: Webb, 1997). However, the success of Chinese students in Western educational environments (e.g. Mullis et al., 2004), despite an assumed emphasis on memorisation, has led to a reappraisal of their learning methods in light of their

CHC (Rao and Chan, 2009). Discussion of deep versus surface and rote learning has focused on processes that take place within the student, thereby distracting attention from interactional patterns, such as the role of questioning in the traditional Chinese learning environment.

Traditional Eastern education methods have been characterised as didactic, instructional, and expository in nature (Rao and Chan, 2009), so it has been tempting for Western educators to assume that questioning was an alien concept to Chinese learners, thereby limiting attention to the manner of the interaction within the Western classroom. Sadly, this assumption is based on a misconception. In the Confucian educational tradition, which underpins much of the educational experience of Chinese learners, while memorisation, understanding, and reflection are emphasised, questioning is also considered to be one of the basic components of education (Lee, 1996). Thus, Chinese students often will have experienced educational interactions based upon questioning. The main way in which this questioning differs from the West is that in Confucian model, students are expected to respond only when a degree of knowledge has been acquired, whereas in the dialogic Western model students are expected to respond from the outset (Li, 2009).

Thus, Western educators experience the interplay of tacit CHC beliefs and the current Western educational philosophy of student-centred, interactive teaching, but do so with misapprehensions of the cultural forces at play. This makes it unsurprising that these complex interactions often bemuse both parties, made more puzzling as teaching is a complex process, one that is affected by student characteristics, teachers' skill and activities, and their capacity to respond to the heterogeneity present in modern university classes (Watkins and Biggs, 2001). The fact that Chinese students are familiar with question and answer interactions, yet fail to respond according to expectations within Western classrooms, suggests that it is this cross-cultural component that needs to be addressed by Western teachers, not necessarily the Chinese educational system.

Cultural Characteristics of Confucian Heritage Cultures

One of the more often-cited aspects of CHCs is that they have repeatedly been rated as collectivistic rather than individualistic in cross-national cultural comparisons (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars, 1993). While some researchers (e.g., Oyserman et al., 2002) have identified limitations in the individualistic-collectivistic dichotomy, Yu's (1980) findings supported the idea that achievement motivation among Chinese was based on group or collectivist values. Independently, Gu (2006) also found that the Chinese culture is collectivistic. This was confirmed recentlyby the marked contrast in average individualism scores for the USA, Australia, and the UK as 91, 90 and 89 respectively – (i.e., very high) whereas Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Taiwan respectively scored 25, 20, 20 and 17 (i.e., very low or to put it differently, high on collectivism) (Hofstede, 2013). Another major dimension along which cultures vary is Power Distance, which is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions accept and expect power to be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2013). The Power Distance score for the USA, Australia and the UK are 40, 36, and 35 respectively (i.e. low), while Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Taiwan respectively are 68, 80, 74, 58 (i.e. high). Thus, on these two dimensions the "Chinese" culture from a variety of countries is distinctly different from the USA, British, and Australian culture in that it is both collectivistic and deferential. The collectivistic characteristic typically leads members of Chinese societies to conform to socially accepted norms of behaviour to avoid sanction (Yang, 1993), whereas increased Power Distance perceptions tend to increase the perceived gulf between students and lecturers. Together, these are likely to result in a reluctance to pose questions of a lecturer, in case they are seen as questioning their authority. On this basis Western-style two-way questioning could be considered as "bold and immodest" (Holmes, 2004, pp. 296).

Linked to these characteristics is the long-recognised Chinese cultural focus on "*face*" (Hwang, 1987), defined as "the need to be respected by others and not be embarrassed in social situations" (Hwang et al., 2002, pp. 74), leading to compliance with social norms by means of well-developed feelings of shame and embarrassment. One way in which *face* is expressed is when a student who is uncertain about the answer to a question posed in public by a tutor, avoids answering for fear of losing *face* by giving an irrelevant answer. In their mind, it is safer not to answer knowing that the tutor will inevitably have to pass on to another student. This is so even if the non-respondent does not understand and would benefit from attempting an answer. Similarly, students who are uncertain of a concept are unlikely to ask a related question in class for fear of losing face because that could lead to judgements of a lack of diligence on the part of those asking. As such, *face* helps to express cultural values related to Power Distance, for example by discouraging acts that would alter one's position in power relationships. *Face* also reflects cultural values related to collectivism, in that the shame and embarrassment associated with loss of *face* helps to inhibit actions that may lead to exclusion from a collective. Consequently, *face* is both culturally consistent with CHCs, and operates in manner that is generally pro-social in that it is supportive of maintaining social relationships, even while it inhibits active participation in learning.

The *Kiasu* Phenomenon

While *face* may often have a prosocial function, more competitive and less prosocial expressions of CHCs also exist. One of these is "*kiasu*" a word originating in the Hokkien dialect that is generally translated as "the fear of missing out", a mindset defined by the Macquarie Dictionary (2011) as "Singaporean English Colloquial - afraid of losing out to someone else; anxious not to be disadvantaged". This phenomenon was first associated with Singaporean Chinese individuals' competitive psyche, and has been a topic of lively

discussion within Chinese communities at least since the Straits Times (circa 1985) publicly raised the issue of what was seen as the cause of the "ugly Singaporean" phenomenon. Due to the raised profile of *kiasu* and its negative aspects, it then became a matter of national pride for Singapore to extinguish its negative aspects while still maintaining the competitive mindset which underlay it (for its history refer Poskod, 2011). Soon after this a popular cartoon strip series appeared that humorously displayed the extremes of the *kiasu* phenomenon via its central character Mr Kiasu (Lau, 1990). While Lau's cartoons may have discouraged such behaviour by promoting self-reflection, the national characteristic is still of concern to the current Singaporean Prime Minister (Chang, 2012),

Within Singapore, public debate continues on the topic (e.g. "The Ugly Singaporeans I have Encountered Over the Years", 2012), but the issue is not restricted to the island nation. For example, Foo (1991) identified the parallel Hong Kong phenomenon of (phonetically) "*par chup sue*" - literal translation: "scared to lose" (Ho et al., 1998). Likewise, the Malaysian press has suggested that Malay Chinese also exhibit the *kiasu* mindset (e.g. Abdul Ghani, 2003).

Both *kiasu* and *par chup sue* are based upon an intensely competitive desire to succeed, but they also have negative aspects reflecting "an obsessive concern with getting the most out of every transaction and a desire to get ahead of others" (Hwang et al., 2002, pp. 75). Examples of *kiasu* behaviour include pushing past people to get into a lift first, filling one's plate at a buffet with the most expensive items or even or "grabbing freebies meant for the needy" (Ho et al., 1998, pp. 361).

The nature of *kiasu* has been debated. For example, *kiasuism* was characterised by Hwang (2003) as a form of competitiveness, however, Kirby and Ross (2007, pp. 109) suggested it

"may become a form of 'hypercompetitiveness'..." a term coined by Horney (1937) to refer to a neurotic personality attribute. However, Ryckman et al. (1997) described "hypercompetitiveness" as an extreme form of individualism, and Chinese societies are low on that characteristic. Thus, Kirby and Ross (2007) may be correct in stating "kiasuism is a tactic" (p. 110) rather than a trait. *Kiasu* only becomes hypercompetitive behaviour when winning becomes an end in itself (Bing, 1999) in a maladapted individual (Kohn, 1992). Further, Kirby et al., (2010, pp. 250) concluded that "*kiasu* is a set of conscious behaviours designed to achieve a desired goal" rather than a pathological condition (Ho et al., 1998).

Kiasu Tactics and their Deployment in the Educational Environment

Kiasuism varies in its extent and the way it may be applied. With respect to this, Hwang et al. (2002) developed a taxonomy of positive and negative elements of *kiasu* behaviour. Positive *kiasu* behaviours involve exerting additional effort to increase one's performance (Kirby et al., 2010) including being diligent and hard-working (and being seen to be), by studying longer and more diligently, asking questions during a professor's office hours, and reading supplemental materials (Hwang et al., 2002). By contrast, negative *kiasu* behaviours "involve the use of guile, deceit and selfishness to gain competitive advantage" (Kirby and Ross, 2007, pp. 111) and involve keeping knowledge and advantage to oneself. Negative *kiasu* tactics cited by Hwang et al. (2002) include not sharing study notes, hiding scarce reference books elsewhere in the library, or even deceiving others about the amount of study one is doing. This is designed to gain advantage by being better prepared or lulling others into a false sense of security about the effort required to grasp the study material. In addition, it is possible for students to employ both negative and positive *kiasu* tactics simultaneously to maximise advantage, although this does not appear evident in research to date.

Negative *kiasu* tactics are unpopular with fellow students when detected (Kirby and Ross, 2007). In addition, university teachers may also find them problematic when kiasu-based reticence to interact denies the lecturer the normal feedback loop by which he or she gauges student progress. In any case, apart from interfering with interactive teaching strategies, actively competitive behaviour can detract from learning outcomes. For example, Johnson, et al. (1981) found that students who adopted competitive learning strategies had substantially worse academic performance (0.78 of a standard deviation lower) than did students who adopted cooperative approaches (Marzano, et al., 2000). This means that to the extent that Chinese students pursue strategies consistent with *kiasu*, their academic performance is likely to suffer.

Kirby et al. (2010) provided some preliminary insights into factors encouraging *kiasu*-type tactics. They tested the correlation between the propensity to employ *kiasu* tactics and the individual personal attributes of: (1) conscientiousness, (2) maximisation, and (3) distributive justice. These concepts were defined as follows: *Maximisation*: The trait whereby people seek to optimise their decisions (Kirby et al, 2010); *Conscientiousness*: The trait of being careful and of meeting one's commitments and obligations (Costa and McCrae, 1992), which has been demonstrated to reliably predict academic performance (Poropat, 2009), and: *Distributive Justice*: The perception of the fairness of outcomes received based upon the contribution or effort contributed (Greenberg, 1990).

Kirby et al. (2010) found that Maximisation as a trait had the greatest impact on the use of both *kiasu*-positive and *kiasu*-negative tactics. This was unsurprising, because maximising individuals care about outcomes and choose tactics to optimise them. Similarly unsurprising was the result that a sense of Distributive Justice had a significant effect on the use of positive

kiasu tactics, and none on the use of the negative. By contrast, Conscientiousness was found to have no significant effect on the use of either positive or negative *kiasu* tactics. Consequently, Kirby et al. (2010) surmised that *kiasu*-type tactics of either type may not be the choice of conscientious individuals, because in the highly-structured university environment "merely doing what is expected of them may provide enough of a competitive advantage for them to succeed" (pp. 258). Despite this, positive *kiasu* behaviours in an academic environment suggest making extra effort over and above merely satisfying the course requirements, so further research is warranted in this area. In addition, Kirby et al. (2010) found that both older subjects and males were more likely to utilise positive *kiasu* tactics. This was an unexpected result because age and competitiveness are typically negatively correlated (e.g. Duda and Tappe, 1988) although the finding is consistent with males tending to be more competitive than women (e.g. Campbell, 2002). The study also found that distributive fairness tended to correlate with the adoption of positive *kiasu* tactics. This result gives some situational insights but individual dispositional issues and the determinants of the use of *kiasu*-type tactics remain largely unclear. However, what can be said with certainty is: (1) That the *kiasu* phenomenon is well established; (2) *Kiasu* is relatively widespread among Chinese-based cultures and; (3) *Kiasu* has both positive and negative expressions within educational settings.

The Interaction of *Kiasu* and *Face*

The general cultural norms referred to above, and the concept of *face* are factors of which many Western lecturers are already aware. By contrast, most Westerners are unaware of the concept of *kiasu*. When *kiasu* is understood as a competitive strategy based upon a drive for success and above all advantage, it adds a further dimension to the understanding of Chinese

students' behaviour. A student may realise that by answering or posing a question, he or she may reveal information that would share a perceived advantage with others. Thus, in many cases the student either knows the answer or is aware of an issue that should be raised, but believes they are acquiring an advantage by remaining silent, even if this involves the momentary public embarrassment of apparently being unable to answer. This illustrates a dilemma, faced by students attempting to balance the often conflicting motivations derived from *face*, and *kiasu*. Often this dilemma will be resolved in favour of *kiasu*. Indeed, "the key to obtaining competitive advantage through kiasuism lies in selecting and implementing the right tactic for the situation" (Kirby and Ross, 2007, pp. 108).

In relation to the *face* concept, gaining prestige in the eyes of others could be achieved by showing knowledge and studious behaviour, but this risks sharing too much and advantaging others, which would be antithetical to *kiasu*. Thus, a loss of *face* involving being embarrassed or shamed in front of others could be caused by either asking or answering too many questions in the class norm (Hwang et al., 2002). For example, if the questions appear to be asked out of a lack of knowledge this will have obvious consequences for an individual's esteem, but if too many are answered correctly this may be seen as "showing off", thus making themselves look good and their reference group look bad. Kirby and Ross (2007) found that the use of negative *kiasu* tactics correlated negatively with peer-based assessments but positively with empirical academic performance. This reflects the individual student's conflict between being strategic and competitive, and thus being *kiasu*, and simultaneously complying with group norms.

This scenario becomes more complex when Chinese students' collaborative approaches to researching and writing assignments are considered (Rambruth and McCormick, 2001; Tang,

1996). In these situations, students from CHC societies may act in a manner that is detrimental to the group effort in order to subtly benefit themselves. This may seem puzzling to a Western educator because their CHC students are simultaneously low on individualism and highly collaborative yet they may covertly apply competitive *kiasu* tactics. It is clear from this discussion that the "silent Chinese student" in class may be more knowledgeable than first appears and that the mechanisms driving their behaviour are not easily discernible. The existence of these complex and conflicting perspectives and tactics is difficult for Western educators to manage if they are unaware of these complexities.

This discussion of interactions between *kiasu* and cultural norms reveals only some of the complexities of the situations that may face students. The *kiasu* strategies adopted by students depend in part upon the problem at hand, the attitudes of their reference group, the student's own level of knowledge, their cultural mores, the level of *kiasu* influence, the teaching methods involved, and other variables. In typical classroom activities *kiasu* and *face* issues have considerable scope to affect the level of student participation in both the posing and answering of questions. These outcomes remain likely as long as these issues are part of the individual Chinese student's mindset, but will vary between students and will in part depend upon teachers' responses, such as fostering class participation norms, varying their teaching style and assessment policies, as well as the approachability and level of engagement with the lecturer, and the characteristics of the student cohort.

In application, these variables give rise to a range of possible behaviours when students are uncertain about a study element. In such a case, their first point of reference tends to be their 'study group'. However, if they have a view which differs, the collectivist tendency will encourage students to not voice their unique ideas. Hence, students may seek out a staff member after class, but may not wish to be seen doing so as it may appear to be questioning

their study group's decision. Often students resort to an email, sometimes using a pseudonym, to resolve the issue for two reasons: Firstly, to maintain privacy in relation to the enquiry; and secondly, to gain the advantage of the correct answer if it differs from the group's. If an advantage is obtained, the *kiasu* tendency will be to keep it to oneself to maximise individual advantage.

Kiasu and "Blended" Teaching environments

The discussion so far has related to the effects of *kiasu* and cultural issues on classroom learning situations, but this discussion would be incomplete without reference to other teaching modes especially "blended learning" which integrates the "flexibility of E-learning while maintaining the human contacts" (Jones and Lau, 2010, pp. 407). "Flexible learning and "flexible delivery" are similar concepts which "allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning style" (Higgins, 2012, pp. 39) However, given the trend towards blended learning that is, "the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison and Hanuka, 2004, pp. 96) the impact of these two variables should also be considered with respect to the *kiasu* and cultural issues outlined.

One approach that may reduce the effects of *kiasu* and *face* is the adoption of computer-mediated learning practices, such as online learning centres and activities including online discussions (e.g. Sautter, 2007). There is some evidence that computer-mediated learning does ameliorate student reluctance to participate, with a 'knowledge building' approach recently trialled successfully in the classroom by Chan (2009). Interestingly, the approach required considerable pre-preparation and the use of student exhortations to collectively "rise above" [sic] to get students to "pool questions and explanations for deeper enquiry" (Chan 2009, pp. 179; for further detail refer to Lee et al. 2006, & Van Aalst & Chan, 2007). Other research by

Hwang and Arbaugh, (2006), relating to the use of online forums, found that *kiasu*-positive students tended to contribute to discussions via larger numbers of postings, while *kiasu*-negative students tended to observe rather than to contribute, which is consistent with the tactics identified by Hwang et al. (2002). However, the mechanism by which a student could maintain participation in a greater number of forums, to gather information, while simultaneously limiting what they share, is unclear (Hwang and Arbaugh, 2006). This requires further research.

Further research on the *kiasu* effects in blended teaching environments will need judicious experimentation in actual teaching situations. However, the cited literature offers some preliminary guidance. On-line discussions appear to elicit more participation than in-class contributions, and give encouragement for teachers to provide greater opportunities for on-line participation. However, there are three caveats which apply. Firstly, some researchers such as Catterick (2007) believe that online learning disadvantages non-Western students due to their lack of a constructivist tradition. Second, concerns about *face* suggest that anonymity may be required to encourage questioning behaviour while ensuring no loss of *face* for students who ask questions perceived to be naïve. The third caveat relates to the effect of a *kiasu* strategy. Even though the student might take part in anonymous on line discussions, they would very likely not wish to contribute what they considered to be unique knowledge or raise issues that would display that knowledge or share an advantage with others. Also, while positively *kiasu*-motivated students would seek information in anonymous public environments they would remain averse to revealing strategically useful insights during such discussions if the content was visible to the student cohort. Similarly, negatively *kiasu*-motivated students would participate, if required, but neither would illicit new information nor reveal any by their interactions. As shown by Kirby et al.'s (2010) preliminary research, it

cannot be assumed that the addition of computer-mediated teaching elements alone would overcome the problems of face-to-face teaching CHC cohorts.

Kiasu-like Behaviour in Western Cultures

Increasing research into *kiasu*-based behaviours in the educational environment has revealed evidence that similar behaviours exist not only in Chinese societies like Hong Kong (e.g. Chua, 1989) but also in non-Chinese Western student populations, such as those in Australia (Ho et al., 1998), and the USA (Kirby and Ross, 2007). The behaviour observed by Hwang and Arbaugh (2006) was that while the Western students participated more, they shared less, which is essentially a 'hold-back' strategy similar to the tactic exhibited by negative *kiasu* Chinese students. Hwang and Arbaugh (2006, pp. 9) stated this new insight "the holding back of information by the *kiasu*-negative individual... does not seem to have a direct equivalent in recent discussions of Western competitive attitudes in the research literature". However, this *kiasu*-like tactic could be interpreted as merely the operationalisation of individualistic competitive strategies, rather than being due to any cultural overlay. This is so because Westerners generally do not possess the *face* and collectivistic characteristics that drive the wide range of *kiasu* behaviours exhibited by their Chinese student counterparts. While there has been some research into academic hypercompetitiveness (e.g. Bing, 1999) the topic of kiasuism and *kiasu*-like behaviours among Western students also demands further investigation.

Discussion

This review of some of the Confucian Heritage Culture mores and the phenomenon of *kiasu* has highlighted some important Chinese cultural features that affect internationalised university classrooms. This has implications for both practice and research.

With regards to practice, there is the realisation that Chinese students have been typically exposed to traditional behaviourist learning, which tends to nurture students who cooperate with their teachers, but are nonetheless competitive with respect to other learners (Hammond and Gao, 2002). By comparison, Western constructivist learning means that classes tend to be more vocal, questioning, and collaborative both with teachers and between students. This paradox provides an opportunity to manage the effects of *kiasu* among Chinese students, by encouraging them to attend to different aspects of their cultural identities.

There are several responses that tertiary teachers are likely to find useful when faced with Chinese students who display a reluctance to participate. For example, such students might be encouraged to shift their mindset to focus upon their collectivistic values via collaboration. To make this change it is necessary for the teacher to establish the social dynamics required to facilitate collaborative inquiry (Chan, 2009). Dougherty and Wall (1991) suggested that culturally sensitive teaching staff could achieve this by making greater use of small discussion groups. Chinese students tend to respond better to small group activities because they provide a lower risk of loss of *face*. Thus, small group discussions could be used to develop consensus views which would be delivered by a group spokesperson who would be more comfortable contributing, because they would be delivering a group's collective view (Holmes, 1997). This also parallels the collaborative learning that often takes place in the Chinese context such as in informal study groups (Tang, 1996).

Watkins and Biggs (1996, 2001) suggest this can be followed by group assignments in which the benefits of collaboration within groups are stressed. This can be couched in terms of the mutual benefits that can be achieved. Since the groups are competing with each other, inter-group competition may be promoted as a motivator for intra-group collaboration. By contrast

with the fact that between-student competition interferes with student academic performance, inter-group competition results in better performance for students (Johnson et al., 1981; Marzano et al., 2000) because it simultaneously encourages within-group cooperation. A study by Tang (1996) may have inadvertently benefited from this effect, as it was reported that Chinese students in the study adopted a deeper approach to learning when they worked in groups that were effectively competing with each other. It appears that in such situations the tendency to enact *kiasu*-related behaviours is focused on the inter-group competition, allowing more room for intra-group collectivism. Consequently, this approach appears to have value as a means of encouraging greater participation and collaboration between Chinese students, or other students using *kiasu*-like tactics.

At the same time, Hwang et al. (2002) suggested that *face* can be used to stimulate classroom contributions. This can be achieved by displaying the class list on a screen or whiteboard and noting who contributes to discussions beside each class member's name. This gives positive feedback to contributors and, via *face* and social norm paradigms, encourages contributions. At the same time, this may have the beneficial side-effect of limiting the dominance of over-contributory students who might be outshining their cohort to a socially unacceptable level (refer Hwang et al., 2002).

The effectiveness of such tactics in counteracting the interactions of negative *kiasu* behaviours and *face* may be limited by the complexity of the interaction between these tactics, which will remain a major influencer of classroom behaviour for Chinese students. From their perspective, every in-class action has the potential for loss or gain, and thus has inherent risks. Risk avoidance in such settings is impactful because deep learning is acknowledged as often requiring risk-taking (Rosie, 2000). In addition, the Chinese diaspora maintain many of their

cultural values even after a number of generations in a Western country (Rao and Chan, 2009).   In summary, the preceding discussions may better equip teachers to recognise when *kiasu* tactics are being employed, and alert teachers to some of the interactions which may be affecting in-class behaviours. In addition, the countermeasures outlined may go some way to reducing *kiasu*-negative behaviours and lessening their impact when they are employed.

In relation to research, the studies that have implicitly addressed *kiasu* have had positive outcomes on the academic performance of Chinese students, providing optimism that teachers can ameliorate the effects of *kiasu* on learning, and that future research on the relationship between *kiasu* and education will be beneficial. Apart from the CHC mores already outlined as potential tools by which to offset *kiasu*-negative tactics, other CHC mores, such as *guanxi* - a beneficial personal relationship usually based upon reciprocity (Yeung and Tung, 1996) could be a fertile area for inclusion in a research agenda. Many research questions are evident, including: (1) What are the situational and individual factors that predispose individuals to the use of *kiasu*-positive and *kiasu*-negative tactics, in face-to-face teaching and online?; (2) What are the characteristics of *kiasu*-negative non-sharing communications and can they be recognised, in class and online?; (3) What is the extent of practise of *kiasu*-tactics among Western students and if so are there any identifiable differences in tactics/behaviours from those of Chinese students?; (4) In relation to teaching, what situational modifiers or teaching techniques can be used to minimise the negative consequences of the application of *kiasu*-negative tactics and to encourage *kiasu*-positive behaviours? As Kirby et al. (2010) argued, research on kiasu within tertiary education has so far, "only exposed the proverbial tip of the iceberg" (p. 259), with much still to be learned about this intriguing phenomenon.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Inter-cultural understanding is essential for teaching the increasingly internationalised students of the 21st century, making cultural issues including *kiasu* a fertile area for research. The rapidly increasing numbers of Chinese students entering the Western higher education systems and the rapidly changing teaching and learning environment, which is moving towards blended learning, make this particularly pertinent to Western educators. However, although *kiasu* has been seen entirely as an Eastern phenomenon, due to the unique cultural characteristics in which it was first observed, its tactics appear to have analogues in Western student cohorts of very different cultural characteristics. These issues provide an opportunity for research, but together they provide a compelling case for the importance of educators not only considering, but actively addressing *kiasu* and its associated cognate phenomena.

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