

Xia Yu

**Text Memorisation
in Chinese Foreign
Language Education**



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Preface

Reading, reciting and memorising text is a widespread learning practice for both first language literacy and foreign language learning in China. Yet, it was not until recently it became a research topic in foreign language education. Is this practice a dilemma that Chinese students can neither live with nor live without? As a foreign language learner and educator who had received most part of my education in China, I have long been fascinated by this phenomenon and fortunately brought a high degree of familiarity with the research theme and educational environment it is based upon.

Drawing on wide-ranging and carefully chosen sources, this book looks into the practice of text memorisation in China against a background of Confucian heritage learning and western attitudes towards memorising, particularly audio-lingual approaches to language teaching and later largely negative attitudes. The inquiry was conducted along two lines: to conceptually examine a number of issues central to the understanding of the practice of text memorisation in the Chinese educational context, and empirically inquire into Chinese learners / teachers' practices and perceptions of the inclusion of text memorisation in foreign language learning and teaching.

In the preparation for this book, I have benefited from numerous people in various ways. Above all, I had the privilege of working with Professor Rosamond Mitchell, who is highly respectable in terms of intellectual breadth and depth. She guided me through the whole journey of this research – including the re-orientation of the book – as an unflagging source of support and encouragement. I feel indebted to Dr. Glyn Hicks, George Blue and Dr. Jaine Beswick whose comments have helped me to see things from different perspectives. I am also grateful to Professor Martin Cortazzi, who made constructive feedback on earlier version of this book.

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I hereby proclaim that any and all inconsistencies, ambiguities and errors committed herein are exclusively my own.

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CHAPTER 1

Text Memorisation: A Historical Overview

As an experienced English learner and foreign language educator brought up in China, I have long been fascinated by the way some Chinese learners learn English – learning texts by heart¹. Yet it was not until recently that I began investing serious thinking in this learning practice when I found that it continued to be used by the new generation of Chinese learners of English even though they were equipped with various types of modern language learning equipment such as video, multimedia systems, language laboratories, internet and so on. One student born in the 1980s wrote:

From Junior One to Senior One, I spent four years learning texts by heart. According to our ancestors, 'Memorising 300 Tang poems makes one a poet himself'. ... It is also true to foreign language learning. I regret not reciting enough texts then. (L. Sun, 2005: 218; Chinese original)²

The research to be reported in this book was, in effect, inspired by English learners like Sun in China, who seem to have a lot to say on this practice based on their own learning experiences. Anecdotes abound, and feelings are strong and mixed. Is it something our students 'can neither live with nor live without' (Ding, 2004)?

The practice of learning texts by heart makes one straightforwardly relate it to the stereotype of Chinese learners who have long been described as 'proverbial rote memorisers or recyclers' (Dekert, 1993: 133) or 'relentless rote learners' (Biggs, 1991: 27). There has been an increasing interest in Chinese English learners with the influx of more Chinese students into western countries. A number of attempts have been made to depict and explain the specificity of Chinese learners, but these reveal a contradictory and, in most cases, over-simplified picture (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Continuing debate on Chinese

- 1 Throughout this book, the terms *learning texts by heart* and *text memorisation* are used more or less without differentiation.
- 2 The Chinese quotes (including proverbs or sayings) throughout the book are translated by myself except otherwise noted.

learners and the Chinese ways of English learning has kindled in me even greater interest in seeking a fuller understanding of the largest group of English learners in the world through investigation into Chinese learners' practice of learning texts by heart.

Economic reforms and the opening of the doors to the West have been in operation for over 30 years and profoundly changed almost every aspect of Chinese society including its value system. While many traditional beliefs crumble and people have undergone enormous ideological changes, why is it that the Chinese English learners have not dispensed with traditional learning methods, in this case, learning texts by heart – an extreme use of memorisation? How can they benefit from the practice with which they might start from kindergarten and continue onwards up even to university? This is the overall motivation underpinning this inquiry.

This research thus attempts to explore how learning texts by heart is practiced and perceived in modern China by accessing English learners' and teachers' voices. It is hoped that this investigation may shed light on the question of why Chinese learners have continuing interest in employing this learning method which might be primitive in every aspect seen through western spectacles. It is also hoped that an inquiry from an emic perspective can push ahead the current understanding of Chinese students who 'were learning rather more effectively than they "should" have been, given what Western research predicted to be counter-productive teaching / learning environments' (Watkins & Biggs, 2001: preface; see also Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Taking the perspective of cultural pedagogy / education³ as the approach to the current research, this book follows two lines of enquiry: (1) to explore relevant literature in order to offer a systematic analysis of the role of memorisation in (language) education in general and in relation to Chinese learners in particular,

- 3 Before taking the perspective, I also substantially explored the memory base of language and its implications for foreign language learning from a psycholinguistic perspective (X. Yu, 2011). Along with the recent development in psycholinguistics, applied linguistics and corpus linguistics, the memory base of language has been gaining increasing amount of attention in SLA (Second Language Acquisition). For readers who are interested in this topic, I would like to invite them to consider the following three lines of inquiries, namely, the dual-nature view of language (Skehan, 1998) and the formulaicity of language (cf. Bolinger, 1975; Sinclair, 1991; Widdowson, 1989; Wong-Fillmore, 1976; Wray, 2000, 2002) as well as the role of rehearsal in memorisation and implicit learning (cf. N. Ellis, 2002; Robinson, 1995, 1996; Williams, 1999). Since these inquiries are well beyond the scope of discussions in this book, I would not go further into these areas.

a huge group who are notoriously known as rote-memorisers; and (2) to report on an interview-based empirical study which investigates Chinese beliefs and practices regarding text memorisation as a learning / teaching device by accessing the individual voices of a group of learners and teachers.

Being aware that there are a number of historical reasons for Chinese learning methods (Harvey, 1985), I would like to begin my inquiry by reviewing the practice of text memorisation in China from a historical perspective.

1.1 Text memorisation in China

This section will discuss how text memorisation is practiced in China from ancient literacy education to contemporary foreign language teaching and learning.

1.1.1 *Text memorisation in Chinese literacy education*

Given that text memorisation has been a traditional way of acquiring Chinese literacy in China, this subsection explores how memorisation of textual materials was practiced in different historical periods and examines why great importance was attached to the practice in Confucianism-dominant China.

1.1.1.1 *The practice*

Despite the fact that memorisation of classics was highly valued in the literacy education of ancient China, literature on how text memorisation was practiced remains sparse. For example, a western scholar mentioned it in passing in a book on Chinese tradition:

The Four Books ['The Great Learning' (*Da Xue*), 'The Mean' (*Zhong Yong*), 'The Analects' (*Lunyu*) and 'Mencius' (*Mengzi*)] ... were for six centuries (A.D. 1313–1905) used as school primers, to be recited and memorised, and as the basis of the civil service examinations which selected bureaucracy. (De Bary, 1960: 113)

From the reading of this document and similar sources, it appears that learning through memorisation occupied an important place in the traditional, Confucian education prior to the advent of modern China in the 20th century. Boys of wealthy families were said to start their literacy education as

early as the age of three using three textbooks⁴: (1) the Trimetrical Classic (*sanzijing*), which 'contained three-character lines of verse consisting of 1,068 characters'; (2) the Thousand Character Essay (*qianziwen*) which 'consisted of 1,000 characters in lines of four characters each with no character repeated throughout the entire book'; (3) the Hundred Names Primer (*baijiaxing*), which 'contained 400 family surnames' (Cleverley, 1985: 16). The boys first learned to copy the characters from these books and read them aloud. They were required to memorise these texts and recite them verbatim.

Boys of seven and above were sent to private family school (*Sishu*), starting with the writings from the Confucian canon which are usually grouped as the Five Classics (*Wu Jing*)⁵ and Four Books (*Si Shu*). Students kept memorising these texts through reciting, drilling and checking understanding until they were ready to tackle the imperial civil service examinations (or *keju*). According to Unger (1982), a boy on average memorised a new 200-character passage every day for six years and he would have memorised textual material up to over 400,000 characters by the time he reached age 15.

Following is a brief description of recitation performed in the family school:

After the teacher finishes his explanation and checks with the students to see if they have correct comprehension, the students are required to read the text just learned 100 times: slowly at first, then a bit faster. The text should be read with rhythm, correct pauses and accurate use of the four tones. If any student cannot perform the reading-aloud properly, another 100 times of reading are required of him. (Shu, 1961; Chinese original)

A vivid picture of how text memorisation was conducted is offered by Price (1970):

- 4 These books are thought to have originated in the 13th century, the early 6th century, and the 11th to the 13th centuries AD respectively. Versions of these three primers, which were used together, dominated elementary education in China for seven centuries despite the fact that one of them (the Hundred Names Primer) was an apparently meaningless collocation of more than four hundred words for surnames (Woodside, 1992). The Thousand Character Essay, which had been in use for 14 centuries, was undoubtedly the most durable and influential literacy primer in world history (Z.-G. Zhang, 1962).
- 5 The Five Classics are 'The Book of Changes' (*Yi Jing*), 'The Book of History' (*Shu Jing*), 'The Book of Poetry' or 'Odes' (*Shi Jing*), 'The Ritual' (*Li Ji*), 'Spring and Autumn Annals' (*Chun Qiu*). Tradition ascribes the authorship or editorship of most of The Five Classics and Four Books to Confucius, but in fact they are a collection of writings from widely different times (Price, 1970).

Texts were committed to memory, with the aid of liberal physical encouragement and much noise. When successfully mastered they were recited by the individual student, back to his teacher, facing the class. The English pronunciation of the word used for this system of learning by heart, *bei*, or to 'back' a text, suggests well the sound of a busy classroom, with each pupil reciting at full voice his peculiar passage. (Price, 1970: 95; emphasis [italics] original)

'Liberal physical encouragement' can mean such exaggerated actions as swaying one's head to accompany the rhythm of recitation. If the use of body movement suggests there was some fun in this practice, the story in the Three Character Classic (*sanzijing*), however, was by no means pleasing. It was said that two scholars were so afraid of falling asleep over their studies that they tortured themselves to keep awake: one tied his hair to a beam in his house (*tou xuan liang*) and the other kept pricking his thigh with an awl (*zhui ci gu*). Stories like this⁶ have always been cited to show the hardship of memorisation, so to speak, if it is the main approach to learning in traditional education.

This traditional practice had such a long-lasting influence that it was still in existence in the early decades of the 20th century. This can be attested by the brief mention of the way of studying Chinese in the biography of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the former first lady in Taiwan:

She [Madame Chiang Kai-shek] was ... in favour of engaging an old-fashioned scholar to tutor her several hours a day in the classics and calligraphy⁷. She memorised her lessons in the traditional way of schoolchildren, chanting them aloud while rocking the body rhythmically. The tutor was 'terribly strict, and expects me to accomplish the almost impossible,' she wrote ... She persevered in her studies for many years, later translating Chinese folk tales and stories from history. (Tyson Li, 2006: 43)

The limited documentation of the practice of memorising textual materials, especially classics seems to suggest that this traditional Chinese learning habit was as deeply ingrained as the historical process that developed it was long and slow.

- 6 The two scholars in the story are often made paragons of enduring trouble and hardship for the young generation of Chinese learners. The popularity of the story shows the high respect of virtues of hard working in Confucian culture rather than advising the learners to physically follow ancient scholars.
- 7 This episode took place in around 1917 when Madame Chiang Kai-shek went back to China after having been studying in America for ten years. Her parents insisted that she hone her fluency in Chinese when they found that she had difficulties in communicating in her native tongue.