

# A Cultural Analysis of e-Learning for China.

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**Abstract:** This e-paper discusses e-Learning for China based upon the experiences of a free content website. Chinese culture, The Internet, and education are discussed using a number of deep links into online bibliographies, online journals and other knowledge objects. A cultural analysis is undertaken and conclusions are made. The future of research into e-Learning for China is considered.

**Keywords:** China, Internet, e-Learning, Cultural Analysis, Marketing.

## 1. Introduction

This e-paper discusses the future of e-Learning for the Greater China Region (GCR) from a Western perspective. It builds from a conference paper delivered by Friesner and Hart (2003) that evaluated a case study, and conducted a cultural analysis, of free e-Learning for the GCR. Some of the commentary included therein is also included here. However this e-paper will enhance points made as well as interlinking with an array of knowledge objects that will give a richer flavour to future discussions on e-Learning for China. It does not aim to be all encompassing but intends to stimulate discussion and research on the topic of e-Learning for China.

In this e-paper the general drivers of Chinese culture are addressed. Then the cultural aspects of e-Learning for China are discussed in more detail. A cultural analysis of the Marketing Teacher experience is undertaken, and the context of learning online in China is explained. The discussion is then considered in relation to the cultural drivers of Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) namely language, religion, values and attitudes, aesthetics, law and politics, technology and material cultures, education, and social organisation. Conclusions are made and areas for further research are anticipated.

## 2. Chinese culture

Culture embodies the ideas, customs and social behaviours of a society. In broad terms the study of culture is often associated with many disciplines including economics, politics, media studies, sociology, history, anthropology, science and information technology, the law, education and literature. This e-paper considers only a few aspects of

Chinese culture. [Heidelberg University](#) has a first class Internet Guide to Chinese Studies if a deeper understanding of the disciplines mentioned above is required. Their portal offers links to valuable information on Chinese culture under a number of subject headings. However, this e-paper considers culture from the perspective education, or more specifically e-Learning. Education is important to the Chinese Government and many Chinese learners study in Europe and The USA, and Western Learners also have the opportunity to [study in China](#). A useful bibliography on education in China is offered by [The Ohio State University](#). The importance of e-Learning in China is recognised by The China Education and Research Network ([CERNET](#)). E-Learning forms part of a blended learning strategy that includes radio, video and IT, and forms part of the solution for growing demands for education and shortages of teachers in China. The topic of education and e-Learning is returned to later in this e-paper. Throughout this e-paper there is an opportunity to follow deep links to online-journals and e-papers, online bibliographies and websites. The links represented by tables 1 and 2 represent some additional sources of information on Chinese culture that may prove useful to readers of this e-paper.

**Table 1:** Additional online bibliographies on Chinese culture

Link	Topic
<a href="#">University of Hawaii</a>	Chinese Education
<a href="#">Universiteit Leiden</a>	Chinese Education
<a href="#">The Chinese Philosophy Page</a>	Chinese Philosophy
<a href="#">Essential Reading in Chinese Philosophy</a>	Chinese Philosophy
<a href="#">Chinese Cultural Studies Bibliographical Guide</a>	Chinese History
<a href="#">University of Missouri, Columbia.</a>	Chinese Religion
<a href="#">Modern Chinese History: A Basic Bibliography</a>	Modern Chinese History
<a href="#">University of Maine at Farmington</a>	More Chinese Bibliographies
<a href="#">University of Hawaii</a>	More Chinese Bibliographies
<a href="#">Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library</a>	More Chinese Bibliographies

**Table 2:** Additional online journals on Chinese culture

Link	Topic
<a href="#">Education about Asia</a>	Chinese Education
<a href="#">The Asian Studies WWW Monitor</a>	China and The Internet
<a href="#">China Perspectives</a>	Chinese Economy
<a href="#">The Asia Pacific Magazine</a>	Chinese Economy
<a href="#">Asia-Pacific Law and Policy Journal</a>	Chinese Law
<a href="#">Comparative Connections</a>	Chinese International Relations

### 3. A cultural analysis of [www.marketingteacher.com.cn](http://www.marketingteacher.com.cn)

The experience of creating and running a free e-Learning website for The GCR forms the basis of a case study. Marketingteacher.com was created in 2000. It is a website dedicated to marketing learners, teachers and professionals and states a clear mission 'for marketing learners.' The website contains over twenty short lessons on marketing topics including the marketing environment, strategy, tactics, and planning. Each lesson is supported with its own exercise and associated answer. Best of all for its 700,000 annual visitors (or 5,000,000 yearly hits) is that the website exploits the most powerful words in marketing, it's free! Praise has been received from students, lecturers and practitioners from many Western nations. However, a strategy of adaptation is needed if the same free e-Learning is to be marketed to Chinese learners. This section of this e-paper aims to answer the question, how can the underpinning idea of free e-Learning using the Marketing Teacher format be applied to non-Western cultures?

### 4. The context of online education for the People's Republic of China.

China has 1.3 billion people and the second revolution, that of the market economy, is now nearly twenty years old. There are three main reasons why China will quickly develop online learning. Firstly there are as many companies in China as there are people living in New

York, approximately 19 million. Secondly there is a dramatic need for growth since nearly 400 new cities, with the associated explosion in jobs, have been created over the last two decades. Finally the Chinese population has a bimodal distribution of wealth (Levy 2003). The Eastern provinces tend to be very wealthy whilst those in the West remain relatively poor. Pressure has been put on the Chinese Government by the World Trade organisation (WTO) to resolve this inequality and a central strategy is learning. Such an approach is deemed to be appropriate to drive a shift from a manufacturing economy to one that has a more knowledge-based workforce. Tang (2000) offered an overview of recent Internet development in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese government has been committed to developing information technology research and development since the late 1980's and demonstrated this by implementing its 'High Tech Research and Development Programme' containing four Golden Projects. The four Golden Projects were launched in the 1990's: The Golden Bridge provided the information technology backbone, the Golden Duty aimed to connect financial and taxation organisations, the Golden Card's goal was to allow the acceptance of credit/debit cards in stores and at ATM's, and the Golden Trade was designed to assist Chinese businesses to trade in Chinese characters (language symbols) in global markets. In 2003 it remains difficult to see how successful the Golden Projects have been. For example, it is very difficult to arrange credit card transactions in Renminbi (RMB) over The Internet, something that Western e-

commerce takes for granted. Credit card usage forms the basis of later discussion since Marketing Teacher does have a non-obligatory, chargeable online course. The latest survey on China's Internet development shows by 30 June, 2003, China had about 470,000 portals, with 68 million Internet users, and the numbers are growing every day (Financial Times 2003). More information is available from [The East Asian Collection](#) at the University of Melbourne. The PRC is a country with a population in excess of one billion and the future opportunities for e-Learning are fantastic.

A model was needed to analyse the issues of adaptation of the [www.marketingteacher.com](http://www.marketingteacher.com) concept of free e-Learning to a Chinese context. The literature was reviewed relating to models and frameworks of business culture. The benefits of this approach are that there is an academically respected base of research that can be drawn upon to assist with cultural analysis. The business approach to cultural assessment does rely upon an accepted epistemology that links in with other areas of cultural knowledge. For example, antecedents such as values and beliefs, education, social hierarchy and many others have their basis in cultural studies.

## 5. Selection of appropriate cultural models

There are a number of models and frameworks that could be used to analyse the culture of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to give an indication of the appropriateness of e-Learning strategies. Some are very detailed whilst others are straight-forward. The models and frameworks initially considered included those of Hawkins et al (1992), Terpstra and Sarathy (2000), Hofstede (1984, 1994, 1996), and Wills et al (1991). This list is by no means conclusive but gives an indication of the breadth of models and framework in the literature. The models of Hawkins et al (1992) and Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) are similar and contain some common antecedents such as values, education and learning, social status and organisation. Hawkins et al (1992) approaches culture from a consumer lifestyle perspective whilst Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) consider culture in its wider contexts. This means that the Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) cultural framework is much simpler and easier to apply. For these reasons Terpstra and Sarathy's framework was preferred and implemented over the model of Hawkins et al.

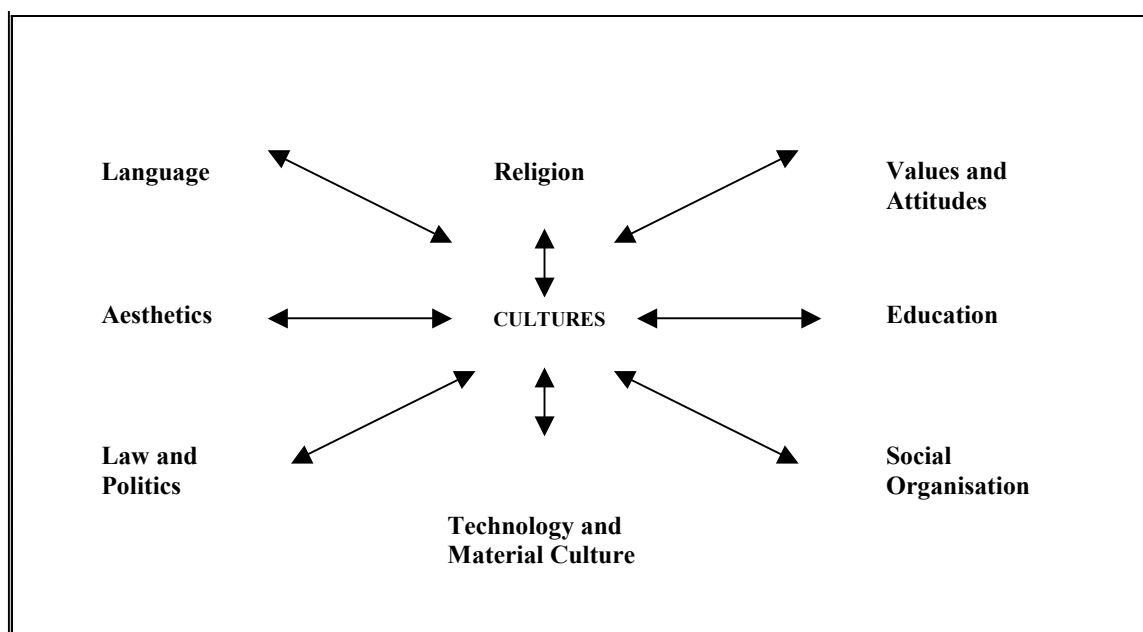
The influential work of Hofstede (1984,1994,1996) on culture contains more than 11,600 questionnaires from more than 50 countries. The dimensions of culture are based around *individualism/collectivism*, *power distance*, *masculinity/femininity* and *uncertainty avoidance*. Unfortunately none of the original surveys focused upon the PRC. However parts of the Greater China Region, Singapore, Hong Kong (not part of the PRC until 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1997) and Taiwan, were included. The Greater China Region is made up of diverse cultures and this should be taken into account when creating web content for learners. As educators we try to deal with learners as individuals but we need to appreciate the collective nature of culture in the Greater China Region. Perhaps as these regions adapt to the market revolution a more individualistic culture will emerge. Hofstede (1996) revealed an additional fifth dimension namely *Confucian dynamism*. Confucianism is a Chinese trait and its characteristics include a strong bias towards obedience, the importance of rank and hierarchies and the need for smooth social relations. The Chinese e-learner may feel that they are subservient to a teacher and this could prove problematic when no physical tutor exists. There could also be an indication that if problems exist that the learner may not contact the teacher/website to put things right. They could accept second rate materials or simply not revisit a website. The age of the Hofstede's findings is recognised and any further analysis at this stage would need to take into account the undoubted changes that have occurred in China over recent years.

Wills et al (1991) consider learning as part of their model of culture. The dimensions of learning, or 'diffusion,' are used to consider a cross-cultural model that suggests a relationship between the high/low context of a culture and the rate at which new products are adapted (Wills et al 1991). Naturally products per se are not considered here but an educational service is. Therefore once an e-Learning website meets the needs of its patrons one can expect it to diffuse into use relatively quickly i.e. the number of visitors and repeat visitors will increase relatively quickly. Once again, the age of this research is recognised and it is used here more as an indication of, rather than a driver of e-Learning in China.

The cultural framework of Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) is used to consider the cultural context of the Marketing Teacher China free website. The key areas from the framework

provide the structure for the analysis. The detail was provided by the responses from the two business teachers interviewed and a summary of key parts of the literature relating to values and attitudes, education, social

organisations, technology and material culture, law and politics, aesthetics, language and religion.



**Figure 1:** A cultural framework – Tersptra and Sarathy (2000).

## 6. Language

The national and official language of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua) with 1.3 billion speakers. There are a further 200 languages in use as well as a countless number of dialects. People from differing provinces often have trouble understanding each other. However the dialects do have a common written form and this would be a saving grace when it comes to communicating with the whole GCR.

Translation of the Marketing Teacher website is an important issue and indications show that direct word-for-word translations are not adequate. Therefore any Western co-ordinators of e-Learning projects need to beware the pitfall of self-referencing. From a Western perspective it would be like a Chinese website being translated into English, and as one respondent commented '*it would be very boring.*' Hedberg and Brown (2002) comment that grammar is context specific in Chinese languages so that the student builds up a picture of the meaning of symbols as the text is being read. Hence graphics and pop ups can distract the reader and confuse the context of the communication. So catchy homepages that are intended to grab the eye can also confuse the non-Western reader and therefore have the opposite effect. More information on the

languages and linguistics of China can be found at the [Chinese Language Teachers' Association](#).

## 7. Religion

Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are the main religions. Care should be taken to make sure that religious beliefs are not contravened. However there may be a benefit in recognising the behaviour of Chinese e-learners. For example, one respondent pointed out that by recognising a particular religious event or festival a website could earn favour and respect. There are a number of useful links to information on Chinese religions such as [Taoism](#), [Confucianism](#), [Buddhism](#), [Christianity in China](#), and [Judaism in China](#).

## 8. Values and attitudes

Chinese culture is influenced by the philosophical principles of key thinkers. Despite the ideological changes encountered during the Cultural Revolution and more recent market orientation, Confucianism still has a strong cultural impact upon Chinese society (Chan 1999). The culture in China strongly respects a good education and degrees and diplomas enhance a virtuous education (Oh 1991). The Chinese have a value orientation (Zhu and He 2002). Communism, materialism

and Post-materialism are the three competing value orientations. The communist values see a selfless dedication to the well-being of society and mankind. The materialism values see the pursuit of immediate rewards and physical happiness. The post-materialism values see a way of life where the importance of material rewards is downplayed and there is an emphasis upon harmony between people and nature (Inglehart, 1979). To understand the place of education in the GRC one need only to look at the expansion of education in the GCR and the increasing number of Chinese learners gaining Western qualifications. Whichever value the student subscribes to, education is highly regarded.

## 9. Aesthetics

There are a series of cross-cultural differences between Western designed websites and Chinese developed sites (Hedberg and Brown 2002). The results of their study into visual media and cross cultural meaning holds some interesting results for websites that undergo a straight translation from English into Putonghua. For example the left edge of the page may not be the point where the student begins to read. The aesthetics of Chinese art may hold the key to web design that suits Chinese learners. The Chinese are keen gamblers and game players. Games tend to be rich in colour and appear very complicated to the Western eye, and this is reflected in the popularity of Internet gaming. The cultural understanding of colour and images could also lead to confusion in communication. For example parts of Chinese culture see people marrying in black and being buried in white. Logos and symbols associated in marketing may not carry the same impact to Chinese learners as they do with their Western counterparts. According to the Chinese Peoples Daily top Chinese brands include Hongtashan (cigarettes), Haier (household appliances) and Wuliangye (liquor). Chinese branding and images need to be considered when constructing case studies or using examples.

## 10. Law and Politics

The National People's Congress is the highest organ of state power in the PRC. The Government is controlling and this makes commerce very different to that in Western culture. The recent problems encountered during the SARS virus outbreak may make the Chinese government less prone to holding back information that is in the public interest. Copyright remains a huge grey area. This

means that website content could be copied or reproduced without permission. Censorship still exists if one wishes to publish an educational text in China. [The Asian Law Centre](#) links to resources on Chinese law and banking and finance, competition law, commercial law and e-commerce law, amongst many other legal areas. China has its own [laws on e-commerce](#) and e-transactions, privacy and information security that need to be considered especially if an e-Learning project is to collect information, collect fees or protect any intellectual property.

## 11. Technology and material cultures

Filtering is a problem for Western websites. Effectively the Chinese government censors websites by blocking access from China. The Chinese government maintains an active interest in preventing users from viewing certain web content. It has managed to configure overlapping nationwide systems to effectively block such content from users who do not regularly seek to circumvent such blocking. Such blocking systems are becoming more refined (Zittrain and Edelman 2003). Blocked sites tend to fall into one of a number of categories including democracy, health, news, government, religion, Taiwan, Tibet, entertainment and education. Indeed both the Western and GCR Marketing Teacher websites suffer from filtering. They share this disability with MIT and the Learning Channel as well as almost 700 sites list in Yahoo's education directories (Zittrain and Edelman 2003). The Chinese government does not co-operate on the issue of filtering and this makes it difficult to accurately represent the extent of this problem. Until its extent is understood, strategies for overcoming the problem cannot work. This is a huge problem for providers of free or chargeable content. One could invest time and effort in created online materials and promoting their existence only to find that your site has been filtered and that no right of appeal exists.

As technology develops apace there is a sources of very up-to-date information on China and technology. The Australian National University publishes a free online journal entitled '[The Asian Studies WWW Monitor](#)' that covers a variety of related topics.

## 12. Education

An overview of the educational system of China is offered by [Surowski \(1996\)](#) and includes systems for primary, secondary,

higher and adult education. The educational system in China is described for the Chinese army in a summary displayed by [The University of Maryland](#). Both of these sources support a wider dialogue about Chinese education. E-Learning is one aspect of blended learning and has its own series of issues that are evaluated as follows.

A simple text translation into Mandarin has a series of problems. It should be appreciated that learning is an active process and teaching materials should be variegated (Liu, Lin and Wang 2002). The activity associated with online learning is seen as a clear advantage. It is the critical engagement with the World that ensures that learning takes place (Dewey 1916). The system of education in the PRC is demanding and often begins at a young age. Learning Putonghua demands a good deal of effort as well as time consuming rote learning. Chinese culture is collectivist and often depends upon informal chains of communication. Therefore open discussion albeit in forums or web casts could see an infringement of cultural values (Can 1999). Western educators need to be sympathetic to the successful teaching strategies used by Chinese teachers, and embed them into e-Learning projects. Levy (2003) explains that most learning in China takes place in classrooms. Even where technology such as television or software is used it tends to be heavily instructor lead.

### 13. Social organisation

Liu, Lin and Wang (2000) advocate that the individual learning styles and preferences of e-learners need to be taken into account since a simple text translation may suit some learners whilst a multimedia approach is beneficial to others. Indeed it is possible to take a deeper look into the learning styles of Chinese students. Confucian philosophy has a role in shaping Chinese thinking and learning styles (Chan 1999). So there is an opportunity to conduct learning styles surveys (Kolb 1984, Mezirow 1991). This may give an indication of the preferred learning environment of the Chinese e-learner. Then web content can be developed to suit the preferences of a number of individuals. There is a need for further research into the learning styles of e-learners from the Greater China Region.

### 14. Conclusions

Based upon this cultural analysis, there are a series of drivers that will be taken into account as [www.marketingteacher.com.cn](http://www.marketingteacher.com.cn) is developed

for the Greater China Region. The challenges for free e-Learning are:

- a) The Greater China Region is made up of diverse cultures and this should be taken into account when creating web content for e-learners.
- b) Once an e-Learning website meets the needs of its patrons one can expect it to diffuse into use relatively quickly.
- c) The Chinese e-learner may feel that they are subservient to a teacher and this could prove problematic when no physical tutor exists.
- d) Indications show that direct word-for-word translations are not adequate.
- e) Care should be taken to make sure that religious beliefs are not contravened.
- f) Whichever value the student subscribes to, education is highly regarded.
- g) Chinese branding and images need to be considered when constructing case studies or using examples.
- h) The PRC Government is still controlling. Copyright remains a huge grey area. This means that website content could be copied or reproduced without permission.
- i) You could invest time and effort in creating online materials and promoting their existence only to find that your website has been filtered and that no right of appeal exists.

### 15. Directions for future research.

The reason further research is necessary is that there is undoubtedly the potential for income generation for Western organisations by providing e-Learning for China. The Chinese manufacturing economy is booming and education is a highly regarded commodity. There is a shortage of quality education provision in China, and a shortage of trained teachers. It is anticipated that Western universities and training companies are already in the process of creating such services. Any e-Learning project will need to be supported by research in the same way that international marketing research supports business enterprises that trade in the global market. It is anticipated that any research would be supported by a Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) type model that considers the drivers on culture discussed in this e-paper. Some areas for further research are stated in the conclusions above. The results of such research would then form the basis of a strategy for e-Learning for China. The strategy would have to be resourced either by central

governments or by public/private partnerships. There would need to be local Chinese representation and partnership in any venture. This forms the basis of potential research from a strategic point of view. From an operational perspective, the educational needs of individual Chinese e-learners would need to be addressed. There are a number of areas for further research including individual learning needs, preferred learning styles and the learning environment, lesson planning, the blend of learning and e-Learning methods. The applicability of Western learning taxonomies to Chinese learners and the balance pedagogical and andragogical would need to be considered in relation to Chinese culture. The usefulness of Western e-Learning strategies would have to be considered, for example video conferencing, forums, java based quizzes, and animation to name but a few. Finally the assessment and grading of Chinese e-learners against learning outcomes and assessment criteria would have to be addressed. E-Learning for China will generate rewards to those that identify the needs of learners and then satisfy them with a tailor-made learning package. This e-paper opens the door on a discussion for e-Learning for China from a Western perspective.

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