Chapter 10
Personal Interaction and Informal Learning: The Case of China

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ABSTRACT
Although the importance of casual and spontaneous personal interaction in informal learning is generally well acknowledged, less is known about which world regions or countries have cultures of personal interaction that foster these characteristics. This information is important because without it policymakers struggle to select appropriate actions to improve learning and education. In this case study of China, the authors investigate the characteristics of personal interaction there and consider their effects on informal learning. They present a systematic reflection on the literature about the culture of personal interaction in China and how these interaction practices facilitate informal learning. China is strongly influenced by Confucianism, which with other cultural practices such as guanxi (關係), shapes personal relations in unique ways that have important implications for informal learning. The authors hope that this analysis sets a precedent for future studies about China and other parts of the world.

INTRODUCTION
Although past studies have highlighted the importance of personal relations for informal learning and some have addressed its relationship with culture, perhaps because informal learning is still a relatively unexplored field (Cullen et al., 2000) and most theories about and research into it have been developed in Western countries (Kim & McLean, 2014), we still lack studies that show how specific characteristics of personal interaction in different parts of the world affect informal learning.

In this chapter, we aim to describe the main characteristics of personal relations in China and analyse their implications for personal interaction and informal learning. As, like most East Asian
countries. China contains a unique mixture of cultural values and practices that influence the way people interact with each other, we believe that it can serve as good example to illustrate how a region’s culture can shape informal learning in unique ways. Based on the literature about Chinese culture, we identify the main characteristics of personal interaction in China, outline their cultural causes and synthesise them into a model upon which their effects on informal learning can be discussed. Finally, we suggest possible ways to overcome any potential downsides.

Terminology

According to Schugurensky (2000) and Livingstone (1999), formal education is education provided through official institutions that is usually mandatory up to a certain level. Informal education comprises all other forms of education outside the official system but still involving people acting as tutors and students, and some kind of curriculum. Informal learning on the other hand is all other learning that takes place outside of both the formal education system and any form of non-formal education.

In this paper, we use Livingstone’s definition and the taxonomy proposed by Schugurensky (2000) to build the scheme presented in Figure 1 (By Authors), which serves as a framework for this study. Whether taken as originally proposed or as later expanded (Bennett, 2012), it seems that the taxonomy proposed by Schugurensky (2000) remains the most useful classification of informal learning. According to this taxonomy, informal learning can be classified using two criteria: intentionality and consciousness. This results in three or four different categories (Schugurensky, 2000; Bennett, 2012). However given that all learning can be conscious and/or unconscious, we propose a scheme in which informal learning is categorised simply as either intentional (self-driven) or unintentional (incidental).

BACKGROUND

Although most people think of school as the place where people go to learn and society seems not to question the large amount of time that we spend in education institutions, formal education is neither our most natural way of learning nor the channel through which individuals learn the most during their lives. Formal education is a system that represses spontaneity in the classroom and remains focused on the production of ‘compliant consumers and tame workers’ (Jeffs, 2001, p. 46). The modern education system developed during the 18th century in a period known as ‘enlightened despotism’ – also known as ‘enlightened absolutism’ – and its form was at least partially due to its convenience for the industrialists who desperately needed trained workers for their factories and a nursery for the children of these workers (Gonzales, 2012). This system was then imported to other countries for similar purposes (Doin, 2012). For instance, Elaine Johnson (2004) writes that when US companies were having problems competing with their British and German counterparts during the late 19th and early 20th centuries they partially blamed their problems on a poorly educated work force (Johnson, 2004, p. 12).

Before the introduction of formal education as the ‘de facto’ form of instruction, people generally learned informally; boys learnt to do farm work and other daily tasks by helping their parents during childhood and eventually became apprentices of a craft, if they had the possibility of working for someone who could teach them (Jeffs, 2001). Similarly, girls helped with household activities until they reached marriage age. During that time ‘education,’ as such, was exclusive to the aristocracy. Similarly in China, people learnt informally prior to the introduction of formal education; children learnt the skills of farming and household labour by helping their parents or relatives (Britanica, 2014). The first schools appeared in China around 2000 BC, dur-