

**How MI Theory fits  
into traditional and modern China  
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In May 2004, Howard Gardner was on a speaking tour in China. I was fortunate to be with him on part of his trip and witnessed how he and his MI theory were received in China. In Beijing, his talk attracted educators from all over China. In Shanghai, the auditorium was packed for his talk; with many students standing in the aisles for the entire session. Everywhere he went, he was invited to pose for photos and asked for his autograph. He was interviewed by newspapers, television stations, and magazines. And he was called onto the stage at the People's Great Hall in Beijing after a children's performance to receive flowers while more than two thousand children, teachers, and parents applauded. In short, he was treated like a rock star.

Noting this rock star phenomenon, I began to wonder why MI theory is so popular and prevalent among Chinese educators. Also, how do Chinese educators adapt this Western theory of intelligence for use in Eastern educational contexts? With these questions in mind, I talked to many Chinese educators and psychologists, read a number of articles and books, and gave keynote speeches at two more MI-related conferences in China. I will now share with you some of my observations and reflections.

**First, why is MI theory so popular and prevalent among Chinese educators?**

Gardner's *Frames of Mind* book was translated into Chinese in 1990. It was not a big hit. Some people blamed it on a poor translation, which surely affected its readability. The fundamental reason why the book was not well received, however, was that China was not yet ready for the theory. In 1999, Gardner's book *Multiple Intelligences: Theory into Practice* was translated into Chinese. Like *Frames of Mind*, the book was published by a commercial rather than an educational publisher. This was a clear indication that the field of education in China had not yet recognized the significance or relevance of MI theory.

Then, what finally brought MI theory to Chinese educators' attention? The answer is the *Outline of Curriculum Reform for Compulsory Education*, issued by the China Education Commission in July 2001. The *Outline* was a policy statement from the central government. It did not specify particular theoretical foundations for Chinese curriculum reform. It did make clear that, for Chinese education to meet the challenges of the future, it is imperative that curriculum and teaching respect the developmental characteristics of children, take into account their individual differences, and emphasize active learning. Following the birth of the *Outline*, a series of debates among educational researchers and leaders centered on theoretical foundations for curriculum reform. Because MI theory clearly supported the basic tenets of the *Outline*, it was quickly perceived to be one of the

main theoretical frameworks for China's curriculum reform. Evidently, it was the historical and political context in China, rather than the influence of individuals, that gave MI theory a central position in Chinese educational reform.

Turning the policy statement into practice required specific operational mechanisms. In 2002, the Chinese Educational Association selected the project "Using MI Theory to Guide Discovery of Students' Potential" as one of its key research and development projects. This provided the project with financial support, gave it national attention, and attracted participants from all regions of the country. Most importantly, a systematic and large-scale implementation of MI in Chinese schools became a national priority. Two leading institutions of higher education, the Institute of Education in Beijing and East China Normal University in Shanghai, assumed leadership roles in the north and south areas of China to insure that the project work met high standards.

There is no official record of how many Chinese schools use MI theory as a guiding principle for curriculum reform. Given their large number and wide geographical spread, the task is not practical. For example, in the Shan Dong province alone, approximately 400 schools have participated in MI-related curriculum experiments. All types and grades of schools are involved in MI implementation: public and private; regular and special education; preschools, elementary, high schools; and vocational schools; schools in city, urban, and rural areas; key schools that serve a highly select student populations and district schools that enroll primarily children from working class families. Widely recognized and highly regarded, MI theory has become a blueprint for educational reform in China.

Like everywhere else in the world, MI theory has been used "creatively" or foolishly in China. To attract parents and increase tuition many schools, particularly preschools, claim their schools are MI schools. Hundreds of "how to" books were quickly developed to "train" children to be multiply intelligent. A music box for infants is called a music intelligence box. Stuffed animals are said to help foster young children's inter-personal intelligence. On milk cartons, milk is described as providing a nutritious foundation for the development of multiple intelligences. One particular method has been developed to identify people's multiple intelligences by reading their skin creases.

Aside from a number of ill-advised practices, numerous reports document that MI has become a driving engine in turning low-performing schools around, stimulating in-depth study of students' multiple potentials, involving high school students in curriculum design and assessment, and affecting a paradigm shift in vocational schools by focusing attention on unique intellectual abilities among their students, just to name a few. A program evaluation is certainly needed at this point in time, but I have not seen one, or heard of any plans to do one.

**Second, how did Chinese educators adapt MI theory for use in Chinese educational contexts?**

China is renowned for its more than 5000 years of civilization. Reviewing Chinese history, we see that no foreign ideology could live on that land without alteration, from Buddhism to Marxism to Christianity. MI theory is no exception. A closer examination reveals that the cultural assimilation of MI theory in China is indeed evident in every step from how the theory is introduced, interpreted, and practiced. Among many intriguing issues embedded in the assimilation process, I will highlight one here: the unit of analysis in conceptualizing intelligence.

Central to Western intelligence theories is the individual mind. Whether the theory of intelligence is singular or pluralistic, innate or ecological--the focus of the Western conception is the individual. From birth through adulthood, the individual is seen as the primary agent and expression of intelligence.

In contrast, under the impact of Confucius tradition, the family has also been the unit for Chinese to conceptualize and analyze intelligences. In this conceptualization, the younger the child is, the more important the family is as a unit of analysis. Compare to adults, young children are more family dependent and less individually independent. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to conceive the intelligence of a child separated from the family. In other words, the family is regarded as a shared agent of intelligence. There is no clear boundary between parents and their offspring, existentially, emotionally, or intellectually.

The relationship between family and family members can be likened to the relationships between a body and body parts. For example, I feel itchy on my leg and my hand comes to help by scratching it. Does my leg have to say, "thank you, hand." Does my hand reply, "you are welcome." No, neither one does so. Why, because they are supposed to help each other as they belong to a single unit. Though parts can be distinguished, they do not function independent of the body. The mutual relationship between parents and children are understood by Chinese in the same way.

And that's why in a Chinese family, when parents do something for their children or vice versa, you hardly hear something like thank you and you are welcome. From the perspective of the Confucius tradition, the family as a unit of intelligence is fundamental and irreducible when children are young. Any attempt to further reduce a family to a collection of individuals violates the integrity and meaning of the family unit.

Welcoming MI theory to their educational system, the Chinese have made good use of the theory in ways that are consistent with cultural preferences and values. For example, in addition to the emphasis on developing individual child's potential in a wide range of intellectual areas, Chinese MI educators have focused on issues related to the family's intellectual profiles and collective intellectual potentials. The distinctive intellectual profile of a child is frequently examined in the context of the family.

To help children develop interpersonal intelligence, many Chinese MI educators emphasize that the first and foremost task is for children to understand their parents—their feelings, needs, interests, values, and efforts or sacrifices to bring their children up.

To a certain extent, understanding one's parents is inseparable from understanding oneself. It is in this regard that inter and intra-personal intelligences in Chinese view are integrally related.

In China, educational intervention to strengthen a child's intellectual capacities involves the family as well. For example, many schools using MI theory to guide their practices have a parent school in the evenings or weekends, where parents learn about MI theory and related practices. Parents are asked to reflect on their own intellectual profiles as well as their values and beliefs in relation to their child rearing practices. These are not just school-based educational strategies. They reflect a deeply held belief about understanding intellectual development, a belief based in the Confucius tradition.

In short, MI theory has had a sweeping influence on Chinese educational reform in the last five years. This year, the Chinese Educational Association once again included a MI theory-related project in its five-year-plan. It would be of great interest for educational researchers to participate, observe, and document this social, educational, and cultural experiment in China. Hopefully, many of the people here today will be involved in this research and evaluation process.

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