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Chinese students in a UK Business School: hearing the student voice in reflective teaching and learning practice

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Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a study carried out in 2001/ 02 with nine postgraduate students from the People's Republic of China, enrolled on taught Master's programmes in a UK university Business School. The aims of the research were to explore the development of the students' orientations to learning during their year of study in the UK and to explore how the researcher's interactions with the study group contributed to her professional reflections and influenced her academic practice. The main conclusions of the project were that participants' underlying approaches to learning did not change substantially over the year, owing to the culturally-implicit nature of UK academic conventions and that they experienced high levels of emotional isolation and loneliness which affected their academic confidence.

Chinese students: reflecting on stories of their experiences in a UK Business School.
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Introduction: internationalism in the UK educational community

Universities in Britain have long been multicultural, multiethnic communities, with a membership of scholars from a broad range of overseas nations. In spite of this historically-consistent diversity, however, the international contingent remained relatively small for most of the twentieth century. During this time, the overwhelming majority population among students and academics was domestic, predominantly white British. Teaching policies and practices in universities tended to reflect the needs of that constituency, therefore, and stemmed from the style of the selective British education system (Scott, 1995, Barnett, 1997). Recent changes in UK Higher Education (HE) funding and expansion of the sector, however, have increasingly encouraged universities and colleges to look towards overseas students both as a source of revenue and as a way of broadening the cultural diversity of the university community (Humfrey 1999). International students have grown not only in numbers but also in the range of their countries of origin. In this context, China (PRC), has emerged as an attractive market.

Educational diversity in Britain: the implications for educational quality

There is no doubt that an increase in the number of full-fee paying Chinese students in UK HE has made a positive contribution to the financial health of many British institutions. Nonetheless, a range of issues attend this increase, which have the potential to influence the quality of students' educational experience. Life as an international student in Britain is not always easy (McNay, 1995; Humfrey, 1999). A body of literature has developed over a number of years documenting the challenges experienced by international students in Britain, both in the fulfilment of their initial expectations of the university experience and in their ability to achieve academically (including, Shotnes, 1987; various in Kinnell, 1990; various

in McNamara and Harris, 1996; Mortimer, 1997; Turner, 2000; Devos, 2003). Key within this literature are accounts of the teaching and learning implications that stem from a UK cultural pedagogy that is far way from that to which many students from non-Anglo cultures are accustomed (Earwaker, 1992). Linking to these factors are implicit "post-imperial" assumptions within underlying UK pedagogical frameworks that construct one-way flows of learning benefits from the university to the international student rather than more reciprocal learning cultures (Humfrey, 1999). Such issues affecting overseas students also impinge on academic equality in UK HE. They question the extent to which both the institutions and the people within them are aware of or equipped to ensure that culturally-different student groups receive real equality of access to apparent educational opportunities. In spite of such challenges, however, numbers of students from the PRC have continued to rise, making them the largest group represented among international students (Economist, 2003a, b). As such, they constitute an important community within universities, one whose participation is likely to have considerable influence in shaping the teaching and learning dynamic shared by everyone in the classroom.

The scope of the project

Within the context of growing internationalization of UK HE - in which Chinese students play such a part - it is useful to consider the extent to which teaching and learning in the UK and China reflects indigenous pedagogical cultures and what influences such cultural pedagogies might exert on the experiences of transnational Chinese students. In exploring such perspectives - by moving away from implicitly-defined parameters of British pedagogical theorizing - researchers and practitioners might be better able to contextualize students' orientation to learning and more effectively enable access.

This project explored the experiences of a group of full-time postgraduate (PG) students from China who came to study in the UK as part of the contemporary community of Chinese scholars living and working in Britain. It was a small-scale, academic-year-long investigation of the living and working experiences of the group, from their arrival in Autumn 2001 until mid-2002, when they were nearing the end of their study period. Within the project, the conceptualization of the educational experience was drawn broadly. It included discussion with the students about any aspect of their lives which they felt affected their understanding or day-to-day experiences of education and learning.

The impetus for the work derived from my own professional experiences, as an academic who had worked both in China and the UK. After spending three and a half years in China in the late 1990s, coordinating the delivery of a British Business degree programme and teaching in State universities in Beijing, I returned to the UK at a point when large numbers of students from mainland China were beginning to participate in UK-based study for the first time. My experiences of working with students in China, however, seemed to contrast significantly with the accounts of colleagues in Britain. Their stories of Chinese students in the classroom described them as passive, struggling to meet the conventions and expectations of the UK system. My own experiences in China had been that, while some students struggled with making the learning transition to UK-style study, nonetheless students had generally been active, engaged and had achieved academic results above the normal distribution of cohorts of their UK counterparts. As I became increasingly involved in education development projects focusing on internationalization and responsible for teaching cohorts that were largely people by international (predominantly Chinese) students, I determined to explore these apparent contradictions in perception and experience in a more systematic manner. An open and exploratory framework for the project, therefore, enabled

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me to reflect on these concerns and also facilitated the emergence of participants' personal stories, reducing the 'unthinking' imposition of my own academic preconceptions on their accounts. The overall results of the study were documented in participants' rich personal accounts, as they discussed their thoughts, orientation and motivation to learning over the year. These insights documented not only their explicit personal experiences but, through the longitudinal nature of the work, enabled some interpretation of the profundity of changes in participants conceptions of learning, and the implications for theorizing about learning development in a cross-cultural context.

Using the literature to set frameworks for the project

Historically, much of the literature about Chinese education has focussed on general characterizations of the education system or descriptions of the formalities of teaching and learning dynamics and provides less information about individual student experiences within the learning process, the main focus for the current project (for examples see Hayhoe, 1996; Bai, 2000; Chen 1999; Lin, 1993). Nonetheless, an exploration of contextual literature helped me to develop insights into the personal frames-of-reference with which Chinese students came to Britain and to understand their previous academic contexts better. For the purposes of this project, the literature also generated broad characteristics - a notional student 'learning profile' - against which to explore how far study participants' experiences resonated with the literature. Inevitably, the extent to which factors drawn from such general contexts influenced individuals was diffuse and ambiguous -- and it was essential to approach general or 'stereotypical' models with caution. If nothing else, however, discussion of existing research about two education systems provided a preliminary 'dialogue' between the project data and the literature already in the field.

Chinese teaching and learning: a pen portrait

The environment described in the literature is formal, disciplined, teacher-centred and didactic (Reed, 1988; Cleverly, 1991; Leung, 1991; Chen, 1999; Cortazzi and Jin, 2001; Turner and Acker, 2002). The approach to a unitarist, factual construction of knowledge is established early - questions and criticisms of knowledge content or methods are not tolerated (Turner and Acker, 2002). Responding to more than fifty-five years of Socialism, education is designed to be socially normative, a cornerstone of the country's economic modernization policies (Ho, 1986; SEC, 1996; Li, 1994). Political and civic education exert a strong influence on the curriculum, determining which subjects are favoured by students (Sciences, not Humanities) and how assessment and progression is managed (Turner and Acker, 2002). In spite of high levels of unassessed homework, written examinations comprise most formal assessments, with large set-piece assessments marking educational progression. Student class rankings and class streaming according to ability derive from exam marks. Assessment is predominantly individual.

In spite of classroom formality, teachers and students engage in friendly extramural relationships. The teacher acts as personal mentor as well as educator and disciplinarian (Biggs and Watkins, 2001; Ho, 2001). This construction of the teacher's role correlates not only with Confucian notions of educational relationship hierarchies but also with socialist constructions of education as taking place within local communities, facilitating the formation of social and political character alongside cognitive development (Partington, 1988; Lee 1996). Civic and moral education and the governance of personal behaviour are strong themes featuring in the typical Chinese student's education career (Turner and Acker, 2002). Parents are also highly involved in routine discussions about children's education (Ho, 1986; Zhu, 1999; Economist, a, b, 2003). In spite of such involvement and support from

teachers and parents, however, many Chinese students do not regard their schooling positively. Highly competitive classroom dynamics and scarcity of places at 'good' institutions, mean that education is highly pressurized - "like stuffing a duck" (Turner and Acker 2002, p.110). When confronted with high-school and college entrance examinations, which are extremely competitive, student suicides are not uncommon. The popular view remains, however, that education correlates strongly with future career success and will bring security to both the student and their family (Economist, 2003 a, b).

The pre-Socialist tradition

Within a wider picture of Chinese education, Confucianist views about learning remain influential within contemporary pedagogy. Confucianism strongly equates learning and 'knowledge' - learning functions as the process of factual and tangible knowledge-acquisition, within a cognitive taxonomy (Fu, 1996; Lee, 1996; Allinson, 1989). A strong traditional value is placed upon 'wisdom', characterized as gerontocratic and male (Szalay et al, 1994). Within this value system, education is part of a ritual progress through life, conferring a 'social passport' to adulthood. Confucianist educational constructs, therefore, assert youth, formality, a focus on propositional knowledge, and open-access. Procedural knowledge, where explicit (mainly confined to learning techniques and structures), follows in linear fashion from the propositional, reflecting the didactic learning context (Bruner 1996). Historically, popularly-practised Confucianist ethics have driven a meditative aspect to learning (Biggs and Watkins, 2001), which many 'western' commentators have classified as 'rote' learning (Cleverly, 1991; Ramsden, 1992; Chan and Drover, 1996). In Chinese learning conceptions, however, an important contextual role exists for meditative, repetitive, memory-based approaches as vehicles for achieving deeper learning (Mok et al, 2001). Reflective, transformational attributes of learning tend to be associated with informal spiritual or

meditative practices and develop as a result of concentrated discipline over the course of a lifetime rather than within the narrow confines of formal education.

Confucianism also equates effective learning with labour - success derives from hard work and disciplined concentration, irrespective of one's intrinsic intellectual gifts (Zhaowu, 1998). Lack of educational success is constructed as lack of effort rather than an absence of cognitive ability. Accompanying this specific, incrementalist construction of learning, critique is not privileged. Given the central role of teacher as sage and the concept of wisdom gained step-by-step, critique is reserved as an activity for those who have already completed the learning journey rather than for students embarking upon it. Again there is an emphasis on ritual progress through stages of learning, accompanied by stoic labour and contemplation, rather than critical engagement with the objects of learning or of those who are teaching. It also highlights the role of contemplative memorization as a central activity in the process of learning (Mok et al 2001).

The contemporary scene

In the twentieth century, Socialist revolutionaries sought to eradicate every trace of the imperial system, often through violent means. Many of the measures taken, however, did little initially to replace existing pedagogies (Pepper, 1996). Ways of teaching remained constant and notions of learning and assessment were unchanged. Post-revolutionary educational models remained normative, becoming institutionalized. Continuity of practice within the Chinese system has been largely practical, however, the result of scarcity of resources and - because of the continued persecution of intellectuals (Hayhoe, 1989; Pepper, 1996) - a serious shortage of intellectual capital with which to develop alternative pedagogical approaches. Certainly for students in China today, learning tends to focus on

knowledge content, remains mainly teacher-centred, is competitive, exam-focused, elitist, and largely male-gendered. Contemporary social progression is secured through education.

Picturing Chinese students

Summarizing the preceding discussion, **Figure one** draws out a range of learning characteristics and expectations of a notional Chinese university student.

Figure one: Chinese student archetypes

The 'model' Chinese student
Young, unmarried, full-time student
Works hard to achieve results - the harder working, the better the student
Passive-receptive learner, listens to the teacher and studies privately
Learns mainly by reading and processing knowledge
Responds to teacher direction obediently and adopts both structures and substance of study according to teacher direction
Combines intellectual capability and 'good' moral behaviour - a good citizen
Highly competitive with others in cohort, strives to be the 'best'
Does not question accepted norms and ideas in the classroom
Learns within defined disciplinary rules and boundaries

Building on progressive models of students in HE in the UK (including, Entwistle, 1988; Barnett, 1990, 1997; Various in Barnett, 1992; McNay, 1995; Dearlove, 1997; Bauman, 1997; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Ketteridge et al, 1999; Light and Cox, 2001), shown at **figure two**, it is possible to make an exploratory comparison between Chinese and British student archetypes as a way of identifying potential challenges for Chinese students when studying in the UK environment.

Figure two: British student archetypes

The 'model' British student
Any age, studying through many patterns
Combines hard work and trained / natural ability
Active learner, asks lots of questions and participates vocally in class
Learns by combining a range of learning skills - an active, problem-solving-based learner
Meets the teacher's suggestions with independent mind and imagination, studies in trained but personalized style
Intellectual and moral behaviour not an inevitable combination - the development of individual ethics

| May strive to 'do one's best' against the standard |
| Takes a critical stance on knowledge and learning |
| Contextualises learning and relates learning to other aspects of life in a holistic manner |

The gaps between the two archetypes are fairly obvious, some structural and some deriving from intellectual and pedagogical issues. Most aspects draw upon student motivations and orientation to work. Practically, potential differences in orientation to learning could result in a number of obstacles to Chinese students' success in UK HE, unless they received effective support to gain access to understand implicit UK academic conventions.

Research themes and questions

The contextual and theoretical frameworks that boundaried the current study were broad, encompassing cultural pedagogies, teaching and learning theories and practice-based HE dynamics. Taking the information mapped out in the literature, however, a set of themes emerged, which can be briefly summarized by way of conclusion.

First, the broadest, descriptive question for the study was to explore how project participants responded to studying in the UK and how they framed their experiences in that context. All the participants in the study were undertaking postgraduate study and had experienced many years of education before their arrival in the UK. To what extent, therefore, did their experiences reflect the themes suggested by the literature and how far were any struggles they experienced in the UK similar to those 'gaps' inferred from a UK / China comparison? The second question derived from how participants framed their experiences: were they disparate in their approaches to learning or did their collective accounts resonate with the literature? Third: how did participants construct learning - did this change during their course of study in the UK? This question was of central importance and integrated the other themes in the agenda for the project, as determined by the literature. Finally: what did I learn as a teaching

practitioner that might help me support future students from China when they come to the UK?

The difficulties of exploring the nature of motivation and learning experience across cultural boundaries expose questions about the practicality of the work. Nonetheless, the literature also presented a starting-point that provided insights into the nature of international student experience. Importantly, it also initiated an agenda for intellectual and professional reflection. The most important point to reinforce in a study of this kind, however, is that while the literature operated illustratively as an historical and theoretical backdrop to the work, both beginning and end-point for the main focus of the project remained the students themselves, hence an explicit emphasis on interpretative research methods.

Research strategy

The epistemological perspective from which the project stemmed was broadly within the interpretative tradition. Inherent in its design was a reflective element for myself as researcher. Overall, the project strategy was constructed, therefore, as an iterative exploration of both how Chinese students developed during their studies in Britain and the impact that hearing their stories would have on me as an academic. The project operated within a number of phenomenological themes within narrative research, through their assertion that social realities are not objectively given but consciously and unconsciously constructed by participants (Schwandt, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Not only did these values emphasize participants' implicit, insider perspectives but also unified the group – Chinese students in a different cultural setting to their own – and the aims of the project. These were to generate insights rather than hard and fast theoretical perspectives. As noted in Ellis and Bochner (1996. P.16), the aim of interpretivism is to deal in

perspectives on life, not expert answers. Grounded in cultural theory, dealing with a culturally-disparate group, therefore, the interpretative perspective offered particular benefits to this study.

The influence of culture in the research design

Historically, within Chinese culture, the development of conditions of trust have been an important prerequisite for achieving openness in any social interaction (Tsui, Farh and Xin, 2000), enhancing already-present sensitivities about confidentiality and trust affecting much cross-cultural research (Hantrais and Mangen, 1996). At least in part, this stems from particularistic historical Chinese social conventions, making ritual power dynamics evident in interpersonal communication (Gay, 2003). In addition, China's recent political history has sensitized personal information disclosure and its uses. Such protocols had the potential to influence both quality and integrity of information-disclosure in the project. It was particularly important, therefore, to establish personal rapport with participants quickly and to develop an interactive, cooperative research frame. Notwithstanding an awareness of the influence of such cultural factors, it was equally important to balance the opposite dangers of engaging in discourse with cultural stereotypes instead of real people and to be sensitive to the participants as individuals (Beamer and Varner, 2001). Such concerns were emphasized by the fact that interviews took place in what was a second language for participants. It was within this nexus of issues that the key ethical considerations of the project lay. Full and open communication with participants was important to ensure that they gave informed consent before undertaking the work. It was also essential to facilitate the departure of any participant who chose not to continue, reassuring them of the confidentiality of the information they had shared.

Outline Research design

The research took place over the course of one academic year, 2001-02, at a post-1992 university, involving nine students recently arrived from the PRC to the UK to study one-year taught postgraduate degrees in Business. Lightly-structured data-collection conversations, which were tape-recorded, took place approximately monthly during the academic year (excluding vacation periods), totalling six interviews in all. The project's aim was to obtain information that revealed the individuals as they developed and to reflect on how their experiences resonated with the "typical" Chinese student profile outlined above. This was primarily achieved by the use of life-history-style case methods, tried and tested within narrative and action research (Winter, 1989, Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The overall framework for the discussions was to investigate primary motivational influences affecting each participant during their studies.

Discussion: The participants, their stories and the literature

One of the project's central questions was to draw out how far participants' accounts illuminated the themes about Chinese and British students and education established in the literature review. As noted throughout, the emphasis in the project was on rich illumination of the individual accounts rather than achieving broad generalization. Notwithstanding this interpretative emphasis, however, there were some clear elements in the participants' accounts which resonated strongly with themes within the established literature.

Firstly, participants' struggles to accommodate the differences in approaches to education and learning during their year in the UK and their commentary on their previous study in China supported the broad themes that emerged from the literature. In particular their accounts

highlighted a structured, teacher-centred emphasis on propositional learning in China, compared to a more student-centred, discovery-based procedural emphasis to learning in the UK:

> In China the teachers always tell the students what to do, when to do, how to do, everything they will tell us! This is a big difference…Here in a lecture, when sometime the lecturer tell something, something, then we are divided into groups and we discuss in the groups. But in university in China, the whole lecture is the teacher saying. (QWY, p.3-4)

At the same time, the accounts also highlighted the relatively limited extent of transition and change that the students underwent during their year in the UK and identified that much of their experience was confined to explicit *learning about* learning in the UK rather than *participating in* the implicit cultures of learning reflexively:

> I think the difference is in the teaching style…here the lecturer only point something, the next thing you must do by yourself. The lecturer [in China] tell everything. You already know which part you should go in. [Here], they only give the guidance, the rest of the thing you must do by yourself. So you have to worry. If I go in the wrong direction, I totally lost. You learn a lot of things there, but it is no use.

> It is a little bit different from the Chinese point of view and an English point of view. You know a Chinese, even though you study a lot, maybe you couldn't improve but you have to keep on going because maybe a long time later you could get the result, get the achievement by your attention of this course, your diligence of this course. But according to the British education system, I think you have to know how to write the essay at first, and how to write in a formal system. (WS, p.37)

Their experiences, therefore, largely illustrated the considerable human effort of accommodating two different culturally-articulated notions of education and learning in a relatively short period of time. These themes are further developed in **figure three**, which compares the notional models of Chinese and British students and the status of the study participants as they developed over the year.

Figure three: Model students and real people compared

The 'model' Chinese student	The 'model' British student	Participants
Young, unmarried, full-time student	Any age, studying through many patterns	All between 22 and 25; unmarried
Works hard to achieve results - the harder working, the better the student	Combines hard work and trained / natural ability	Focused on hard work - striving to be a 'good' student through hard work; self-recrimination for poor effort; sought emotional reassurance in research interviews
Passive-receptive learner, listens to the teacher and studies privately	Active learner, asks lots of questions and participates vocally in class	Frequently embarrassed to ask questions in class; limited participation - an emotional issue; sought reassurance in research interviews
Learns mainly by reading and processing knowledge	Learns by combining a range of learning skills - an active, problem-solving-based learner	Focus on reading and remembering; some took notes - found problem-solving learning challenging
Responds to teacher direction obediently and adopts both structures and substance of study according to teacher direction	Meets the teacher's suggestions with independent mind and imagination, studies in trained but personalized style	Sought guidance from lecturers; adapted own approaches to study where environment was highly unstructured and independent; some put off work where insufficient guidance was given
Combines intellectual capability and 'good' moral behaviour - a good citizen	Intellectual and moral behaviour not an inevitable combination - the development of individual ethics	Somewhat critical of UK students on moral grounds; sought to meet expectations of family by doing consistently well
Highly competitive with others in cohort, strives to be the 'best'	May strive to 'do one's best' against the standard	Highly competitive; disappointed with poor marks; actively benchmarked personal performance against groups in the cohort
Does not question accepted norms and ideas in the classroom	Takes a critical stance on knowledge and learning	Struggled with criticality - most used research interviews to explore conceptions of learning and critique
Learns within defined disciplinary rules and boundaries	Contextualises learning and relates learning to other aspects of life in a holistic manner	Seeking the 'way' to succeed in the UK system - looking for rules; differing levels of independence emerged over the year

What emerges from the comparison in **figure three** is that the starting-point in the academic year for participants aligned closely to the model of the Chinese student within the literature.

Given the highly normative and uniform structure of education in the PRC, this is relatively unsurprising. Moreover, participants' views, attitudes and recollections of their previous learning correlated closely to other accounts of Chinese students and education (Gallagher, 1998; Turner and Acker, 2002). Equally, it was clear that though the majority of participants attempted to move away from their arrival orientation to accommodate the demands of UK study, this proved to be very difficult:

> I think after we finish the study here, we can't learn more. We are just busy with our coursework each week, I think…Even though we don't take the lecture, maybe we read some books and we can finish the coursework…I think the courses, not the courses, but the course-works are nonsense…because the teacher always expects the students to have finished the coursework perfectly and have many time to think about that. But now we are just busy finishing that. Hurry, hurry, we are always in a hurry, so we can't finish that (HLG, p.16-17)

> In fact, I am not satisfied with my score in semester A…Very bad, very bad! I know Marketing and technology is D, D1. I have never got. Because I have become a bad student here in Britain…I can't get an excellent or good score for my study. In China, I am not top three, but I'm top ten student. But here I'm a bad student… (HLG p.25)

For most, their emphasis on achieving this through attempts to explicitly acquire knowledge-based techniques or methods for improved learning - especially when struggling with both the subject and English-language challenges of assessments - was also consistent with the tangible propositional assumptions which had underpinned their previous education:

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Although she (the lecturer) tried to explain it to me and she tried her best to explain it, but I still can't get anything. I still can't get any information. I don't think I can connect to the things that she said, connected with the knowledge that I learned before. (CD p13)

Here the lecturer is focusing on the idea not the grammar or something else like some little things. But in our country, we learn English just as a foreign language, so when we learn the writing we just focus on the grammar or the vocabulary, something like that. So when I feel like I finish this essay quite successfully, but maybe my idea is not good and I didn't support my topic enough, use enough material to support, so that is not, so I didn't get the high mark. (CD p21-2)

The minority who experienced both the highest levels of understanding of the UK system (and academic success) were also those who expressed the highest degree of personal emancipation and independence during the year:

I think British education, the most benefit is the independent study, yeah. You must investigate a topic by yourself to find information, to write and to think the structure and then to write. I think it is helpful. (YMX, p. 40)

I think this should be important or good memory…Because before I came to Britain, I haven't lived alone. My parents looked after me. But here, everything you should do yourself, so I think this should improve the life skill, yeah. (PT, p.45)

They were also the oldest in the group, with either previous work experience and/ or previous exposure to international companies and people. All of these factors together coalesced to enable a more open response to their new context and an enhanced reflective ability from both Chinese and UK perspectives - embracing an implicitly reflexive, pluralistic position.

For the majority, however, both academic success levels and accounts of personal happiness were lower:

> To be honest, I think it is really hard work! I don't think everyone enjoys studying. They just do things they have to, they just study because they have to. (CD p24)

> Fun! I haven't find it fun in my study! (HLG p26)

For some, this resulted in a rejection of the UK orientation to learning and expressions of feelings of anger and unhappiness at their treatment by the university, and especially at the role of lecturers within the process:

> In Chinese [there is] a saying. "There is no bad student, just a bad teacher."…Because every student, every people, they can learn. Why they didn't learn well, maybe is the method of the teacher…the teacher has some problems. They cannot teach the student well. (YMX, p.7)

It seemed for them that the emotional pain involved in the experience was considerable and required externalization to come to terms with. For one participant, the initial shock of the experiences in the first semester was sufficiently great to prompt abrupt departure from the UK in January.   For others, linking into their original purposes which were not exclusively academic, their attempt to adapt to the UK context involved a relatively simple, instrumental accommodation - with the aim of satisfying the extrinsic objective of obtaining a degree certificate:

Normally, just like I study here for more than half a year and to do lots of work just to understand other people's thoughts, just like translate, no just like paraphrase their thoughts in my own words, but basically those thoughts are theirs. It is not difficult. (CD p36)

To a large extent, therefore, participants' experiences and motivations roughly conformed to Biggs' (1999) and others' (e.g. Ramsden, 1992) assessment of learning motivations as surface, deep or achieving. Notwithstanding this broad consonance, however, the main theme emerging from this aspect of the project's work was an account of the emotional turbulence accompanying the intercultural transition between educational systems. For all participants, whatever their ultimate academic or personal destination, the journey over the year involved considerable suffering and enforced personal reflection in ways that tended to undermine confidence and, for some, the ability to more forward effectively. A key theme for further exploration in an environment of continuing international exchange, therefore, may be within the affective aspects of inter-cultural learning and integration of pedagogical and pastoral strategies to scaffold learning development for international PG. students.

For the majority of students in this study, the experience of a one-year Master's in the UK was not a happy one. Moreover, in academic terms, most participants also questioned its usefulness, though personally they valued highly the experience of living overseas for a year and acknowledged the contribution of a Master's degree in future employment. The extrinsic values of the experience were clear, therefore, while the intrinsic aspects remained more ambiguous. Pedagogically, this factor presents a number of implications for the continued development of one-year programmes and invites further exploration of their underlying objectives, design and organization.

The pattern of development over the year

Building on the themes identified in the previous section, one underlying key question for the

project was to explore how far the students' attitudes towards learning changed during their

year in Britain. Again, **figure three** illuminates this question. In spite of the students' own

assessment of their development during the year, an exploration of the survey and interview

data together showed a complex pattern of change and stability, of conflict, challenge and

resistance as each participant was exposed to a new learning context. The main areas in

which these patterns could be seen lay in the students expectations of themselves and how

they developed.

In terms of the point at which the students felt that they had begun to acquire new skills in the

learning process, the first assessment was an important watershed. Essentially, having

worked though the first set of coursework assessments in December / January, the students

were able to talk about tangible new aspects of the learning and to discuss how they had

responded to the need to develop new skills. As noted above, for some, this discussion

facilitated personal reflection and questioning about their underlying approach to learning, for

others the focus was more instrumental, resting on the explicit aspects of successful

assessment technique. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the main focus of the skills development

that participants noted was in the technical areas of academic work - essay-writing,

information searching skills etc. This was supported by the new skills they were developing

in group-work, thought the students articulated less enthusiasm for those activities and

regarded general interpersonal skills as outside the formal learning process:

I don't like groupwork…I don't think it is useful. (HLG p28)

During those days, it is really a nightmare. It is really a nightmare to me! (WS, p.33-4)

Group work? Maybe I not get used to this, so I don't really like group work, but I know it is a good way to improve myself or learn something… (YB p18-19)

An interesting issue within this context is the generally low-level of awareness that participants' showed of shifts in their orientation to learning. Their accounts largely focused on the technical / instrumental aspects of the learning process when identifying progress or development, rather than relating skills-acquisition to any fundamental changes in view about the context and epistemological composition of the learning. For example, one participant noted that he cited references in essays because it was a UK academic convention, part of assessment requirements, not because he believed it to be useful:

Actually, I like to write article that use my own point of view. I do not like to use other people's point of view instead…But I think most people believe that you have to quote some people from the gurus or there very famous people in this field - you have to quote them. But I think…the people who want to know what you studied, what you learned from your work, they have to see your own idea, not what you quoted from another work. (WS, p.26)

These incidences illustrated both a maintenance of the obedient, ' passive-receptive' student persona (Biggs 1999; Gay, 2003) - just doing what's necessary to pass and what the teacher required, not asking questions, keeping opinions to oneself - and was an example of the essentially unchanging conceptual framework with which participants evaluated their learning experiences.

What emerged clearly from the accounts about attitudes towards teaching and learning and the participants' expectations of relationships with also attested the persistence of pre-existing implicit theories. These aspects of the interviews illustrated the difficulties that participants experienced in shifting towards a new mental framework from which to evaluate their learning experiences. Overall, the response typifying attitudes to new behaviours and new styles of classroom interaction was to judge them negatively based on criteria established in China. Nonetheless, certain other aspects of the new environment were accommodated into an emerging set of evaluation criteria from which to judge experience. The degree to which participants shifted their fundamental values and beliefs in this context, however, seemed fragmented and patchy - certainly the dominant underlying factors remained relatively unchanged.

Developing this aspect of an essentially-constant constitution of implicit theories over the year was participants' maintenance of an instrumental approach to learning in the new environment. For example, opinions about the contribution of lecturers to the learning process seemed widely and strongly held. Paradoxically, participants retained the belief of changing themselves to accommodate new conditions, while maintaining behaviour patterns that drew on their previous context and might not have been useful. For example, they did not easily approach lecturers to ask questions or to clarify aspects of the modules, in spite of numerous suggestions I made over the course of the interviews. Partly this was because of perceptions about the limited access to lecturers:

> Communicating with the lecturer is a very problem also…You know, here [in the UK], it is (knocks on table), "sir, miss, can I come in?" (Raises his voice) "Yes, come in please, yes." The lecturer is something like hiding in a very small, closed room. The lecturer puts on the paper, 'I will only see students on a Monday, only for one short slot of time.' Only I can see

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the lecturer on a Monday at this time. Oh, it is not quite easy, I think. But I can't just knock on the door and say, "Miss, I have something to show you, " something like that…That is, maybe like this, "from Wednesday to Friday, don't see me at all, please." Something like this. The students so scared. If I really got some problem on Friday, I have to wait until next Monday and maybe it is nothing." (LG p 9-10)

Partly this evolved because participants felt lecturers were unfriendly and did not wish to risk rebuff and loss of face:

I do not think they very care about us. (HLG, p.25)

It seemed clear that, in terms of cultural interfaces and communication exchanges, participants encountered significant emotional difficulties in accommodating their new cultural environment and integrating their experiences into the context of their existing values. Nonetheless, they maintained a discourse of adaptation and openness to change at times at odds with the approach they took to making sense of their experiences.

What is clear is that participants engaged in an ongoing process of managing the conflict between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Their fundamental, implicit values for assessing, contextualizing and making sense of their formal learning experiences, while tested, seemed largely unchanged over the year. Nonetheless an active sense of self-determination and independence in their broader lives seemed also to stem from the patterning of learning experiences in which they had engaged. To this extent, it is clear that the group's implicit theories both of learning and self had shifted, though not without an emotional struggle, as discussed above. Linking this with the simple fact that their previously unitarist conception of learning had been confronted with the playing out of a different epistemology suggested a

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strongly-present but almost unrealized articulation of a shift in the underlying implicit theory for the students as a group. The brevity of their experiences over a single academic year may account for its relatively unrealized presence and may also account for their inability to articulate its presence other than in general life terms.

Did participants' attitudes to learning change?

Overall, the emerging pattern of shifts in implicit theories of learning shown by the group over the year is counterintuitive. On the one hand, participants' self-perception was that they had changed only in the acquisition of new educational skills and knowledge and that their attitudes to learning remained relatively unaffected by their experiences in the UK. The interview data certainly seemed to support that their underlying sense of selves as learners was indeed relatively unchanging over the year. On the other hand, they all seemed aware of shifts in the emotional and practical manner with which they negotiated their personal lives, related in some way to their learning experiences. In this way, participants' implicit theories of learning in their broadest sense did, indeed, develop. The untested question touches the profundity of these changes. Both the literature and the interview accounts support a view of Chinese students as adaptable and flexible to new learning environments, but in a framework where the learning process remained objectified, not touching the individual deeply. In such a context, it is interesting to consider whether the emergent sense of independence and self-determination remained explicitly with the participants after their return home or whether it was somehow 'boxed' within the cultural dynamics of their UK life-worlds and not part of their ongoing personal development.

Personal and professional reflections

There is no doubt that this project has exerted a profound influence on my professional practice and sense of self. In many ways, this was surprising to me. Having already worked

with Chinese students for a number of years in the university context, both in China and in the UK, and researched the subject of Chinese education for some time, when I set out on the project I felt that I could anticipate some of the likely outcomes of the work. I also maintained a sense of professional self that, I believed, took into account student diversity. For example, I consciously designed teaching interventions and assessment strategies to meet the needs of a range of students and different learning styles and offered high levels of student contact outside of the classroom. From the beginning, however, the project took me by surprise because of the relatively high levels of personal contact that I experienced with the students in the study group compared to others that I had worked with in the past. What I realized, as I worked through the months of the project, was that my orientation to the students and to my professional position in the university existed very much within a British cultural framework and that I had always maintained and protected my emotional distance from students, almost completely separating my professional and personal lives. To a large extent, that dualism began to disappear as the project progressed. The students came to talk with me about a range of personal issues - from broken windows and getting laundry done to problems with classmates in group work - in the course of their discussions about education and learning, though most of these talks were off-tape. They were also interested in my personal life as well as our professional contact. During interviews, the students greeted and treated me as an old friend. It was clear that they both trusted me and enjoyed the contact that we had together. Indeed, some who participated in the study told me that, given the little contact they had with British people over the year, I was their 'only British friend'. I have to say that I found this very sad, though it went some way to explaining the deep sense of hurt and anger some participants expressed when I asked them to look back over the experiences of the year and evaluate them.

In terms of specific teaching and learning issues, it became clear in the project that the participants studied in ways that were different from the implicit student norms operating in my institution and governing lecturers' working assumptions. It was also apparent that accommodating these UK culturally-implicit norms which underlay teaching, learning and assessment strategies was difficult for participants and that they needed personal and emotional support to succeed academically. Moreover, a sense of academic success was intrinsic to participants' general sense of well-being and confidence as they progressed through they year. In some cases, the simple provision of a clear pedagogical rationale for the nature of a particular educational convention in the UK - which I was able to provide in a matter of minutes - scaffolded their learning development considerably. Again, however, an ethical question intruded, which I have considered deeply since, about the degree to which - in a globally-connected educational world - it is reasonable to articulate academic success in an ethnically culturally-normative manner which inherently privileges the domestic cohort. It also encouraged a continuation with the conscious experimentation of teaching design and strategy I had embarked upon and a further exploration of the teaching and learning needs of other groups of international students.

In reflecting on professional practice, therefore, the main contribution that that project made for me is that it has encouraged me to trust students more with myself. Certainly I can empathize more readily with students from China now than was possible before I carried out the project. I am also able to see that the combination of personal confidence and learning support are extremely important if students are to be both successful and happy in the course of their studies, especially when they are in the UK for a short time. I am willing to take more responsibility for individual and group welfare and, in many ways, see myself much more in the role of advocate, teacher and friend than was the case in the past. Within the

construct of my current academic life, this is not an easy combination of roles to maintain. The emphasis in my professional environment is very much focused on scholarly pursuits rather than students. To balance obligations to research activity and teaching and student support is demanding. Nonetheless, striving to do so is much more ethically compatible with my professional and personal values and lets my conscience rest more easily.

An end-point: drawing the threads together

In assessing the outcomes of the project, the most important conclusion attaches to questions about the relationship between implicit theories and practical actions to support student learning. It was clear that participants strove continuously to grapple with UK academic conventions and practices in an attempt to understand and evaluate their learning experiences in some kind of way, even if very limited. It was also clear that their practical efforts to work within UK epistemological and pedagogical assumptions were largely frustrated because of a lack of opportunities to explicitly contextualise and discuss these issues within the framework of formal learning on the programme. Essentially they were left to try and grasp UK academic culture almost piecemeal from those tangible practice-based aspects of life e.g. rules about referencing and plagiarism etc, to which, as students, they not only had access but also were required to master quickly in order to successfully obtain their degree. Throughout the interviews, the students made discussion of these techniques of study and used them both to illustrate and explore conceptions of learning in the UK. It is no surprise, therefore, that is in these areas that there is evidence of change in attitude in the student accounts. Essentially, any more fundamental shift in conceptions of their learning context was impossible because those conversations did not take place within the boundaries of their studies and there were few other places to generate them. In a limited way, their conversations with me over the course of the year enabled them to ask questions, explore context and concepts which would

otherwise have been impossible. Such opportunities remained relatively limited, however, given the nature of the contact we had and did not encompass sufficient depth to allow them to deeply penetrate the cultural epistemology of their day-to-day experiences. As a result, participants' underlying cultural ideas and attitudes, values and belief about what constructed learning and education and their practice remained undiscussed and inviolate.

In a global sense, perhaps, this lack of cultural change is not particularly important. The group were generally successful in their studies and received their degree at the end of the year. It was also clear, however, that much of what they experienced in terms of learning remained relatively superficial, at the level of skills and knowledge-acquisition or surface learning, which confronted notions of the deeper or transformational learning achievable within postgraduate study. It also seemed quite likely to me during the course of the interviews that, even for those among the group who performed well over the year, they could have done better and suffered less personal unhappiness had they had access to evaluative frameworks from which to explore and make sense of their learning experiences. This assumption is inevitably untested. It was clear, however, that the burden of learning they undertook, especially in semester one, was far less about Business and was mainly focused on how to operate as a student in the UK. This focus inevitably detracted from deeper and richer potential learning experiences within the subject area itself.

The insights I have gained as an academic here are considerable, providing some obvious indicators of ways to frame academic practice to anticipate and respond to the anxieties of Chinese students. First, I now attempt make the context and rationale for the structures and practice of my teaching clearer, especially in the area of UK academic values and conventions. For example, I explicitly discuss differences in cultural knowledge traditions

and explore cultural diversity issues with students when I begin to teach them – and I encourage students to discuss these issues with each other, especially when beginning group-work activities. In general I have reflected more on the cultural aspects of my pedagogy and moved away from assumptions about the universal in teaching and learning practice in HE. I also spend more time developing academic induction for students. I have reconsidered assessment practice and try to embed any skills that I assess explicitly within the teaching programme – an issue of good practice, perhaps, but one frequently missed amidst the assumptions we may bring about the skills and experience with which students arrive in our classrooms. More profoundly, I have tried to get to know students better and to be more of a friend and mentor than before. In a number of ways, I have recognized the contribution of social and cultural learning to the development of academic confidence and performance. Such basic changes have been and continue to be invaluable in my teaching of all students, not just for those from China. At an institutional level, however, there are further potential insights to be gleaned and questions to consider. Primarily, how far the system and organization of taught PG. degrees in subjects like Business and Management sets Chinese students up for failure because we do not make sufficiently explicit the dominant cultural epistemology underlying curriculum design, and focus instead on the tangible aspects of learning procedures. In one year, the students do not have the time to do much more than satisfice in their conformity to extrinsic degree standards because there are simply so many things to learn. Practically, such issues could be addressed through changes in policy, culturally-sensitive curriculum design, academic training and development, student support and so on. More fundamental, however, remains the question of the viability of maintaining an academic system where, even at the postgraduate level, cultural aspects of pedagogy and epistemology are so implicit and embedded in systems and practices that they have become invisible.

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