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Chinese Research Students' Adjustment to the Australian Learning Environment

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Abstract: This paper reports on a pilot study conducted at the University of Newcastle, Australia, seeking to identify clearly the cultural dimension of teaching-learning difficulties encountered by Ph.D. candidates of Chinese cultural heritage during their research training. The cultural values implied by two educational systems in China and Australia were compared and analyzed in order to identify the communication barriers that may exist between students and supervisors, and which may negatively affect research performance.

Keywords: Teaching-Learning, Culture, Research Training

Introduction

AS A RESULT of globalisation, Australian universities are taking an increasing number of students from overseas. In 2000, IDP Education Australia reported 108,600 international students in Australian universities. Australia is ranked third after the USA and UK in attracting international students. Higher education has become a new enterprise, bringing both political and economical benefits to this nation. Within this new enterprise, students from Asian countries, in particular, students with a Chinese cultural heritage, provide the highest number of overseas postgraduate student enrolments at Australian universities (Davis, Olsen & Bohm, 2000). Among them, a large percentage are research higher degree students. The current rapid economic development in China has led to a high demand of students who have good command of advanced knowledge and technology from Western countries. The economical boom has also made it possible for many parents to provide financial support for their children taking graduate and postgraduate studies overseas. A British report pointed out that around 18,000 Chinese students are completing higher education in Britain. Receiving postgraduate education in English-speaking countries is becoming increasingly fashionable in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (The Economist, 29 March, 2003). Since the early 1980's, the USA has been the first choice for higher education by students of the PRC. To develop high quality of teaching is a major concern of governments and of vital importance to the universities in English-speaking countries in order to meet the needs of the competitive educational market in Asia. At the turning point of the new century, research on research higher degree students is focusing on two major areas: (1) study on effective commu-

nication and pragmatics (Kim, 2001; Morita, 2004) and (2) study on intercultural competence and research training (Byram, 2003; Gu, 2005). The problems which higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background encounter in English speaking universities have been studied in the United Kingdom (Richards, 2004, Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), Canada (Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma, 1996) and the USA (Kachru 1999, Gieve & Clark, 2005).

However, with respect to higher degree research students, the emphasis in existing literature normally deals with the students' language proficiency, (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002) which has sometimes been seen as being deficient. Predominantly, studies have presented a supervisor's perspective on how students misunderstand their new cultural environment (Campbell 1995, Rastall, 2006). It seems that researchers have rarely sought the students' perspectives, nor have they explored learning in terms of the process of cultural interaction between international students and their university supervisors. It is not until the beginning of this century that more attention has been given to the intercultural context in education (Yang, 2002; UKCOSA, 2004).

In terms of study on the special learning difficulties faced by students with a Chinese cultural background, progress has been made in comparing the contexts, characteristics, contracts and contributions derived from education systems in so called "Greater China", in other words, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (Bray & Qin, 2001, Watkins & Biggs 2003, Ehrman et al, 2003). A comparative study attempted to identify the differences in learning cultures between higher degree students from China and Hong Kong, who were enrolled in an MBA program at Hong Kong University (Thompson, 2002). In an American university, an ethnographic research has provided some evidence

that distinctive features of learning problems exist among the sub-groups of Chinese and Japanese postgraduates in various disciplines (Leki, 2001). In Canada, a 2-year qualitative study of a group of Chinese students enrolled in a MBA program has revealed some common problems of learning at a Canadian university (Raymond, 2002). However, little detailed information and knowledge are available in relation to the comparison of the “insiders’ view” to the “outsiders’ view” of the three sub-groups of higher research degree students with Chinese cultural background who are undertaking research in English-speaking countries.

The difficulties encountered by higher degree research students of Chinese cultural background in adjusting to the new learning environment in Australia have drawn great attention from Australian academics (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, Volet & Renshaw, 1996, Fung & Mackerras, 1998, Kirkpatrick & Xu 2002, Zhang, 2004). One of the crucial issues in training research students with a Chinese cultural background is that there is a cultural gap of expectations between the students and their supervisors (Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2003). In Australia, some research explored the students’ misunderstanding of their new cultural environment through the eyes of Australian university supervisors (Campbell, 1995). However, there is little evidence that cross-cultural training of students has been part of Australian university curricula. Currently, there are few organizations at Australian universities providing systematic guidelines for cross-cultural interaction in teaching and learning except language centres which mainly focus on improvement of English language proficiency in international students. This paper reports the research finding from a project conducted in the University of Newcastle, Australia. It has been revealed that Ph.D students with Chinese cultural background have specific problems in the Australian learning environment (Chen, 2005, 2007).

Method

According to Kramsch’s post-structuralist theory (1993) on teaching of culture and language, educators should not believe that we are able to build a bridge between cultures therefore we can avoid cultural conflicts between teaching and learning due to the cultural differences of students and teachers. Rather, our attention should be paid to the cultural boundaries due to such difference. Only after being aware of the boundaries can we consider an action of how to narrow the gap between teachers and learners. Therefore, as a primary step, this research attempts to identify the difference between the students’ expectation according to Chinese culture and the supervisors’ view in accordance to Australian culture. The research involved some intensive qualitative data

gathering and text analysis, using an extended in-depth interview method (Kvale 1996) for higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background, and a more conventional semi-structured interview for their Australian supervisors. The categories investigated were their initial expectations, their predictions of problems, their view of their learning culture, which was then compared to their view of the teaching culture in their home country, and finally their view of the student/supervisor relationship.

In order to ensure the credibility of the data, a number of factors had to be taken into account. The first related to the unequal balance of power and cultural bias that may occur if an academic staff member were to be the interviewer. The second was concerned with the restrictions experienced by interviewees having to perform in their second language. In order to overcome these difficulties, all student interviews were conducted by a fellow postgraduate Chinese student, in the comparatively stress-free environment of her home, with interviews being conducted in Chinese and later translated into English for the purposes of analysis. The supervisors were interviewed by a chief investigator in this study who was a colleague and fellow supervisor at the same university, in order to maintain parity of status in both interview situations.

Methodologically, an innovative step was taken. The higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background were directly involved in the investigation as investigators as well as subjects. Two Chinese Ph.D students were assigned to identify the teaching-learning problems of their peers by interviews through their own language (Chinese). This prevented any cultural misunderstanding in collecting data. The Australian supervisors were interviewed by the Australian background teaching staff members. The “cultural conflicts” identified from both sides of students and supervisors were compared and analysed in the cross-cultural context.

In order to implement the research in a manageable way, the research investigated 60 higher degree research students with Chinese background enrolled in various disciplinary studies (Education, Arts, Science, Economics and Engineers) at the University of Newcastle. The initial investigation will identify common problems of learning in higher degree students with a Chinese cultural background. According to Valimma (1998:120), new postgraduate students, regardless of their cultural origins, encounter two new cultural frames, namely, *disciplinary-based cultures* and *institutionally-based cultures*. In addition, international students face a difference between their *home cultures* and new *target cultures* (i.e those of the country where they are undertaking study). A survey through questionnaires was used to investigate

how learners' previous "disciplinary-based cultures" and "institutional based cultures" affect their current study in a new cultural environment.

Based on the information obtained through a survey, 20 students were invited for a further interview. The selection of students took into consideration a balance of gender, discipline and duration of research experience in Australia. The interview was conducted in Chinese in order to avoid any miscommunication and misunderstanding. The interview was tape-recorded and the transcript was translated into English. On the other hand, 6 Australian supervisors were invited to take part in one tape-recorded interview aiming to identify "cultural conflicts" experienced during their supervision on those students with Chinese cultural background. The interview was conducted by an Australian academic who is also a supervisor for research students at the same university.

Finding

The quantitative data collected through survey was processed using SPSS software. A comparison was made in order to identify the distinctive features of learning problems among the three sub-groups. The transcribed data through qualitative investigation was loaded into N6 software allowing all the textual data collected to be used in later stages. Initial coding/indexing derived from the literature particularly the two cultural models (disciplinary-based and institutional-based) followed by finer-grained analysis of specific detail. Each interview was entered as a separate text file. Comparative analyses were undertaken between the supervisor-interviews, including their comments on higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background across various disciplines. The analysis was assisted by the matrix operation in N6. This function was especially salient for micro-theory building in this project as many of the elements of the project including data collection can be envisioned as matrices (eg, separate interviews by two different interviewers and the two cultural models etc.). The matrix function also assisted in identifying strong connections between specific themes and also gaps and discrepancies. One approach built into the interpretation was interplay between the separate investigators- those with a Chinese cultural background and those with an Australian cultural background. This approach has maximized the chances of highlighting divergent and contradictory data and contributed to the overall robustness of the process. From the interview with higher degree students with a Chinese cultural background, the following features were identified:

1. They expected a hierarchic distance to be maintained between student and supervisor.

Clearly, this is a distinctive feature of their native academic culture and plays a strong role in establishing expectations in a research relationship.

2. They believed that students should never challenge the supervisor's ideas, since the supervisor is regarded as an expert authority in the area being researched, while the student is seen as occupying the position of apprentice.
3. Their experience was that supervisors did not realize the difficulties that students faced. In some cases students believed that supervisors did not know about the problems, whereas in others, supervisors appeared to regard it as being the students' responsibility to adjust to the new culture.
4. Co-operation was a new form of learning for the students from China. The expected format was for information to be delivered in a direct line from the supervisor, rather than material being 'discovered' through joint investigation between fellow students.

Some specific problems involved the suggestion by supervisors for students to "go away and think about it". Many students interpreted this as meaning "keep learning until you agree with me", rather than trying to arrive at their own conclusions. That is, for many of the students, the perception remained that the supervisor knew the answers, and the student had yet to reach that level of wisdom. Under these circumstances, the question "What do you think?" tended to disorient students, as they saw it as a test of their knowledge, rather than as encouragement to produce their own individual opinion.

In addition, a number of new concepts caused difficulty to the students: Firstly, a "substantial contribution to the field of study" was not understood by most of the students from mainland China and Taiwan with Hong Kong the exception. Secondly, the concept of "independent research" was quite unclear to them. These students expected to be given a great deal of specific direction and were unpleasantly surprised when they received critical evaluations of their work. Finally, the processes of dealing with research ethics remained a mystery to all of them. They believed that if they had a clear research idea that would lead to a clear conclusion, then ethics was irrelevant and perhaps even a barrier to progress.

On the other hand, supervisors underwent a semi-structured interview, which was conducted by a colleague supervisor. Results of the student interview had not been made available to the interviewer prior to conducting the supervisor interviews in order that emphasis and value assignment would be independent of those results. The 5 categories for supervisor interview were in accordance with those similar for student's interview:

1. Expectations of students.
2. Current practice in supervision.
3. Understanding on learning culture in China.
4. Awareness of teaching culture in Australia.
5. Teacher /student relationships and interaction.

All six of the supervisors interviewed were male. One was of Chinese origin, one of European and one of American, while the other three were Australians, at least one of whom had undergone training in America. Subject areas included Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Geology and Environmental Science.

The interview responses were coded on a four point scale, these being (1) 'positive' (P) wherein no problems were seen to be present, (2) 'mildly positive' (MP) in which some difficulties were acknowledged but they were seen as being an expected part of the process, (3) 'mildly negative' (MN) in which difficulties were seen as being an annoyance but they could be overcome with some effort, and (4) 'negative' wherein many of the problems remained without

a solution. Because of the nature of the interview data, wherein the interviewee was given a topic area and stimulus question, the 'fence-sitting' or 'I don't know' category was found in practical terms to be irrelevant. The first two question categories were found to overlap to such an extent that they have been coalesced in Table 1. The columns in this table refer firstly to the supervisor, who has been given a designated alphabetical symbol which remains constant throughout the Tables. The second column shows the number of overseas students which that supervisor has supervised, which gives some indication of the relevant experience of the supervisor in this type of situation. The third column is an assessment of the amount of adjustment needed by the supervisor to deal with Chinese students while the fourth column refers to the attitude of the supervisor in having to make that adjustment. The final column relates to whether the process of dealing with Chinese students conforms readily to the supervisor's normal practice.

Table 1: Expectations and Practice

Super	Number	Adjust	Attitude	Practice
A	(1)	MP	P	P
B	(1)	N	P	MN
C	(3)	N	P	P
D	(40)	MP	P	P
E	(3)	MP	P	MP
F	(4)	MP	MP	MN

Clearly, while all supervisors seemed to recognize that there were extensive differences, five out of the six saw the adjustments as being highly rewarding, while the sixth one regarded the process as fairly positive. Three supervisors saw dealing with higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background as conforming to their normal practices, while the other three seemed to think that the process could be forced towards what they regarded to be 'normal'.

Table 2 relates to the supervisors' awareness of differences between the learning culture of the students and the situation that they found themselves in while working towards their doctorate in an Australian University. The first coded column refers to the relative level of comfort that supervisors think

students experience in conforming to their surroundings, while the next column assesses whether the students work more readily as individuals, as is usually encouraged in doctoral research, or in groups, where mutual support might be more readily available. The third coded column attempts to characterize the amount of guidance that the supervisor is required to give, this area sometimes leading to the generalization that the supervisor actually does the research for the student. The next column inquires as to the degree of initiative shown by the student, such behavior sometimes being regarded as culturally inappropriate in Chinese cultures. The final two columns refer to the students' thoroughness in their investigative processes and their competence in the use of technology in their research.

Table 2: Learning Culture

Super	Comfort	Ind/gp	Guid.	Init.	Thor.	Tech.
A.	N	P	P	P	P	P
B	MN	P	P	MN	MP	P
C	P	P	P	P	P	P
D	MN	N	P	MN	MP	P
E	MN	MN	MN	MN	MP	P
F	P	P	P	P	P	P

It is to be noted that only supervisor A, himself of Chinese origin, and supervisor D, the very experienced Australian, identified any real difficulties, but both (especially A) were very positive about other aspects. Interestingly, all were very positive about the students' use of technology, Supervisor A pointing out that use of computers in China was several years in advance of Western cultures, 'Broadband' technology having been in common use for a number of years.

In assessing the supervisor's awareness of his own teaching culture, Table 3 examines the supervisor's comfort in dealing with the students, the role that the

supervisor must adopt in terms of advisor, source of knowledge, guide or director, and the student's resultant comfort with that role. The variety of approaches needed to take into account different learning strategies was investigated, as well as the supervisor's assessment of the students' comfort within that varied context. Stereotypically, students with Chinese cultural background have often been characterized as being fairly inflexible in their learning strategies, even to the degree wherein a variety of approaches have appeared to be threatening to their work processes.

Table 3: Teaching Culture

Super	Sup.comf.	Role	Stu.comf.	Variety	Stu.Comf.
A	P	P	P	MP	P
B	P	P	P	MP	P
C	P	MP	MP	P	P
D	P	MP	MP	P	MP
E	P	MP	MP	MP	MP
F	P	MP	MP	MP	MP

Here the supervisors seem quite comfortable with their establishment of an appropriate teaching culture, with only minor problems being noted in the ways in which students fit in to that culture. However, the total absence of any negative responses here may well indicate a lack of supervisor awareness of some of the difficulties that students highlighted in the first section of this investigation.

Establishing a solid working relationship and trying to balance it with social relationships often causes difficulties when unspoken cultural expectations are not made explicit. Table 4 attempts to investigate such relationships between student and supervisor in an attempt to discover the degree of awareness that supervisors have of the type of difficulty expressed by students in points 1 through 4 of the student responses.

Table 4: Supervisor-student Relationships

Super	Similar	Distance	Stu.comf.	Cult.problems.
A	MP	P	P	MP
B	MN	MP	P	MP
C	MP	P	P	P
D	MN	N	P	MN
E	MP	MP	MP	MN
F	P	N	MN	P

The majority of supervisors saw differences between their research students with Chinese cultural background and their Australian ones, but only two, notably the more experienced ones, identified any real problems in establishing a hierarchic distance that they saw as being comfortable. Four of the six supervisors noted that students could establish their own comfort zone and adapt with few problems to their new situation. Cultural variations, such as students wanting to give presents to their supervisors, were not seen as providing major difficulties, although it was not completely clear which side did the adjusting in this case.

Discussion

A comparison of research results from higher degree research students with Chinese cultural background and their Australian supervisors have revealed a number of difficulties that seem to pass unrealized in the interactions between supervisors and students. Firstly, students expected a hierarchic distance but a professional closeness between supervisor and student, whereas the supervisor expected a type of personal congeniality, but professional independence and initiative. This appeared to provide considerable difficulty for students with a Chinese cultural background but was seen as only a minor problem of adjustment for the Australian supervisors. The students' firmly held belief that they should never challenge the opinions of the supervisor has apparently exacerbated the problem for the students, particularly in relation to methodology, whereas the supervisors seem to have regarded this only as students taking time to adjust to their new educational environment. To this extent, the students' complaint that supervisors do not realize their difficulties appears to be justified. However, the difficulties of having students adjust to co-operative learning processes has been realized at least by the highly experienced supervisor (see table 2) and all supervisors note that they have to make adjustments (table 1) in dealing with students with Chinese cultural background. Nevertheless, the clear differences in these specific expectations provide a substantial dilemma in establishing

working relationships between student and supervisor.

The three specific areas identified by students as providing problems, namely (1) 'substantial contribution to the field', (2) 'independent research' and (3) the ethics aspects appear to be taken for granted by supervisors. None of them identified such aspects as being significant problems nor did they seek to provide specific structures to help students deal with them. It appears as if these features may constitute 'expected' parts of the discipline and the research process which have become so ingrained as to pass without comment from those who are comfortably established within those cultures. There are difficulties in doing this, of course; a "significant contribution" almost by definition denotes something new and currently unidentifiable whereas instruction in "independent research" almost becomes self-contradictory. As well, some of the predictions about 'ethical' aspects may be almost as ephemeral to supervisors engrossed in their subject matter as they are to students. Nevertheless, it appears that these items may need to be confronted fairly directly if the adjustments for students to their new discipline and institutional cultures are to be achieved more proficiently.

The major difficulties identified by supervisors, notably those related to use of English as a Second Language, particularly in its written form for publication purposes, received a mixed reaction from students. The student attitude appeared to be that it was only a passing problem and that they would improve in time, or that the supervisor would 'fix it up' until they reached the necessary competence. Supervisors, though, saw it as being the feature that stood out in dealing with the students, since it took the most time to come to terms with. One supervisor claimed to have read fifteen drafts of one paper before it was anywhere near satisfactory, but the student seemed to regard the problem as a trivial annoyance, rather than a major barrier that could prevent the attainment of a doctorate. Given our historical preoccupation with "Standards" of language and notions of correctness within genre expectations, we may ultimately have to come to terms with the fact that language modes are changing more quickly than ever before,

and that we may need to broaden our areas of tolerance for language variation. Given the influences of multiculturalism and computerization, the process of compromise in this area may well place more pressure on native speakers to change than on second language learners to conform.

It appears then that the inter-relationships between students and supervisors provide a number of complexities and misunderstandings that are not totally transparent to either party. The research results have demonstrated three major areas of disagreement, namely those relating to professional working relationships, the ethos of research such as substantial contribution to a discipline, and finally the role played by language. As might be expected, students are driven to make greater adjustments than are the supervisors who are well established in the research cultures that operate in these situations. Nevertheless, supervisors too have had to make substantial change to their practices in recognition of some of the positive aspects displayed by their students, notably in the areas of technical excellence and commitment to task. As a general principle, it might be noted that a way forward in developing improvement in such relationships may well be not only to increase empathy and understanding of other lesser known cultures, but also to establish a conscious awareness of features of our own. The results have also demonstrated that there was no significant difference among the students from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong although the students from Hong Kong seemed to be more optimistic towards their adjustments in new cultural environment of learning due to the

strong influences from the western countries in their under-graduation education.

Conclusion

All in all, in spite of a single case study conducted in one Australian university, there are at least three important conclusions which can be reached through this investigation. Firstly, the research results have confirmed Kramsch's claim (1993) that there is a boundary of teaching and learning cultures identical from countries where the conventional foundation of education may be different from each other. Therefore relying either on students' views or supervisors' views to evaluate the performance of teaching and learning might be misleading with a bias since an assumption of 'universal culture of teaching of learning' seems questionable in the setting of international education. Secondly, there is no "bridge" available for students with Chinese cultural background nor their Australian supervisors to cross the cultural gap. Learning and teaching in this sense is a process of cultural confrontation. Conflicts are unavoidable but might be reduced or resolved through purposeful interactions. Finally, in order to establish such a mechanism for encouraging productive interactions between students and teachers who have various cultural backgrounds, the concept of adjustment should be changed in the light of research finding. In other words, the process of adjustment should be two-sided actions from students and teachers rather than one-way imitation of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do".

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