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Cultural issues in commencing the supervision of Chinese research students

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This paper discusses the impact Chinese students' culturally-specific features might have on the processes by which they commence their higher degrees by research candidature. We explain how existing frameworks in cross-cultural studies and an appreciation of the different educational background might be used to create a better understanding of the Australian supervisor-Chinese PhD student relationship. We provide strategies to deal with features of Australian academic culture which the Chinese candidate might find confronting so as to maximise the chances of a successful start to candidature and a reduction in the possibility of problems arising.

The purpose of this paper is to consider how culturally-specific features of Chinese students might have an impact on the processes by which they commence their higher degrees by research candidature. Its rationale is the requirement for sound strategic management practice and the need to understand the challenge of cross-cultural communication from both sides of the equation.

For the purpose of this paper, the 'Chinese' students referred to include all students who are from China or Hong Kong as international students, and those born in China or Hong Kong who now have permanent residency who are therefore domestic students (see Table 1). However, some of the features may vary to a degree among these different groups of students. Predominantly the group showing as from China in Table 1 will be the major concern for Australian universities and supervisors. An increasing number of this group comes to Australia after completing their Master degrees which are relevant to this paper.

The global movement of international students has turned higher education into a major export industry. In 2007, about 455 000 international students were studying at Australian institutions (DFAT, 2008). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, education services exports is now Australia's third largest export, worth about \$15 billion, including on-shore earnings by international students (Healy, 2009). International fee-paying students born in China are a significant feature of international students more generally although they are likely to be in a slightly different situation from many students in that they may be the holders of a scholarship to cover the costs of tuition fees and/or a living allowance.

Although international PhD candidates have some common needs (Owens, 2007) they are not an homogenous group. Chinese research students will probably become proportionately more significant vis-à-vis undergraduates because of the rapidly increasing number of

Table 1 Overseas and Domestic Students 2006 by Course Level and Country of Birth

Country of Birth	Overseas Students			Domestic Students			All Students
	PbD	Other Course Levels	Total	PbD	Other Course Levels	Total	
Australia	37	842	879	21370	544382	565752	566631
China	645	54215	54860	925	11852	12777	67637
Hong Kong	255	20525	20780	392	8281	8673	29453
Other OS	6549	160603	167152	9685	128238	137923	305075
Unknown	172	6951	7123	481	7746	8227	15350
Total	7658	243136	250794	32853	700499	733352	984146

Source: DEEWR Customised Aggregated UEAG Data File, unpublished. Obtained from the Centre for Population & Urban Research, Monash University.

undergraduate places available in tertiary institutions and contracting numbers of students in China.

China does not share the education philosophy which underpins teaching and learning systems in Australia (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Adjusting to the Australian system is therefore a major challenge for Chinese research students. On the other hand, supervisors are rarely aware of the cultural differences let alone do they receive training in supervising Chinese students. A final introductory point is that just as PhD students overall are not a homogeneous group, neither are Chinese PhD candidates.

In this paper we attempt to explain how existing frameworks in cross-cultural studies might be used in order to create better understandings of the Australian supervisor-Chinese PhD student relationship. Although there is little or no empirical information on the subject, there is a body of literature relating to the specific characteristics deriving from Chinese culture. The comparative literature is based around two frameworks. The first is Hofstede's (2001) four dimensions of culture that include power-distance and collectivism versus individualism. The second is Hall's (1976) continuum of high to low context cultures. These frameworks are widely applied in cross-cultural business and other studies and we argue in this paper that the insights derived from the frameworks assist in explaining the dynamics of the supervisor-PhD student relationship. In addition to the comparative cross-cultural literature, there is a body of data about Chinese culture which is also relevant.

Power-distance

One distinguishing feature of Chinese culture is the acceptance that large differences in power between individuals and groups of individuals are a natural feature of society (Hofstede, 2001; Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991p.367). This acceptance derives from

Chinese values and concepts about the structure of interpersonal relationships and society which have survived, and probably sustained and been sustained by generations of Maoism. Essentially for the purposes of this discussion, a Chinese student will perceive themselves as being required to conform to standards of behaviour prescribed by their position within prescribed relationships. This approach contrasts with that of many (although perhaps not all) Australian academics. Many Australian academics actively reject the need for conformity and regard the individual as able, if not obliged, to challenge existing social structures.

Harmony and collectivism

Another distinguishing feature of Chinese culture is the desire for harmony to maintain collective peace (Fan, 2000; Hofstede, 2001). By contrast, Western people are comfortable in denying requests and in accepting that there are issues in relation to which reasonable people can disagree. Western academics see vigorous debate as an indicator of a healthy academic community. Indeed, many conferences and special editions of journals are organised precisely with the aim of advancing debate by pitting polarised views against each other. But people from a Chinese background would not feel comfortable with the antagonism inherent in such interdisciplinary, theoretical or methodological debates (Chung, 2008).

China is a high trust culture. In Chinese cultures people interact in networks which are based on multiple layers of contexts. These multiple layers, which might include kinship ties, old school ties, regional links or community of origin links, are of a far broader dimension than the one-on-one interactions which characterise daily existence. The implication of these multiple layers is that the Chinese candidate will conceive of

every interaction with their supervisor and the university in the context of broader settings. This conception obviously involves a particular concept of the optimal relationship between and within these multiple layers because of the primacy attached to harmony.

Face and face-saving

In Chinese cultures, one consequence of the primacy of collectivism and the desire for harmony is the need for individuals to maintain their face in relation to other people. Western people do not necessarily see an antagonistic relationship with another human being as a reflection against that other human being. There is even a level on which respect emerges from a competition with a 'worthy adversary.' But in Chinese culture, people are anxious to maintain their own sense of positive self-approval and that of others. Obviously this concept (which has yet to be fully understood by Western academics) is closely related to the desirability of, and is a technique for the maintenance of, collective harmony (Tse, Belk, & Zhan, 1988). Maintaining one's face and the face of others to whom one is related is a form of self-respect (Gesteland, 1999) and respect for others to maintain harmony (Chung, 2008).

Although the concept of 'face' is not exclusively an oriental notion (Guirdham, 1999; Lewicki, Saunders, Minton, & Barry, 2003; Lloyd & Trompenaars, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1999), there are specifically Confucian concepts of face. The phrase 'to lose face' is not sophisticated enough to explain the complexity of the feelings of all those involved in such a situation. In the Chinese language, two different terms are generally used to discuss the issue of 'face'. The two phrases have differences in meaning and are used for different occasions. 'Diulian (丢脸)' is used for a situation where someone causes embarrassment by their own behaviour. For example, a child who did not meet their parents' expectations or an adult who behaved in an inappropriate manner would cause embarrassment to themselves because of their own actions. 'Diumianzi (丢面子)' is used to describe a situation where a person is embarrassed by the behaviour of another; perhaps because the other's wrongdoing is exposed or because the other is unable to comply with an obligation in a complementary relationship to fulfil an obligation or to comply with the other's expectations (Hanna & Wilson, 1998).

The concept of saving face explains many incidents of interaction in Chinese life. For example, aggressive behaviour in negotiation is not acceptable because it

causes a loss of face to the other as well as to the aggressor. From the Chinese perspective the concept of face means that an offer by one party will be seen in terms of the effort required to make the offer, whereas to Australians the value is usually evaluated in terms of its value to the offeree. Chinese research students will be anxious to maintain their self-respect and also to maintain what they perceive as respect appropriate for their supervisor.

Educational backgrounds

This specific features of Chinese philosophy discussed above are reflected in, and for our purposes, accentuated by, differences in the respective societies' education systems. Ladd and Ruby (1999) assert that 'in the Chinese education system, the teacher is the final authority.' In contrast, the Australian education system places emphasis on active learning and the acquisition of transferable skills (Varga-Atkins & Ashcroft, 2004). This difference has been identified as a source of learning problems for Asian students (Kutieleh, Egege, & Morgan, 2003) and is a cause of culture shock. The shock is not just the requirement for students to develop critical thinking skills, but also to accept that many problems do not have one particularly 'correct' answer (Broadbear, 2003). For Asian students, the focus is on gaining knowledge rather than engaging in critical thinking. This conflicts with the approach to learning in Western universities at the doctoral level (and even in many aspects of undergraduate learning) (Kutieleh et al., 2003).

The differences in approach go beyond the processes of learning and extend to the authority of the academic. Yap (1997) notes that overseas students from Chinese cultures 'consider that authors and lecturers are always right, while they themselves are 'nobodies.' Additionally Ladd and Ruby (1999) assert that 'in the Chinese education system, the teacher is the final authority.' Research students in Australia are expected to think independently, creatively and laterally and to share and discuss their thoughts with their supervisors. Students from the Chinese education system are expected to accept the authority of their supervisors and in turn expect detailed instructions and frequent checking on their progress.

Four manifestations of cross-cultural issues at the start of candidature

There are some features of Australian academic culture which the Chinese candidate will find strange. An

example of 'normal' Australian behaviour that a Chinese student will find strange is the supervisor or academic leader as barbecue host. But there are other features of Australian academic culture which the Chinese candidate will find confronting. Obviously these are not watertight mutually exclusive categories, and probably are more accurately typified as being points on a continuum. But we distinguish the two on the dimension of the extent to which the Chinese candidate can accommodate the feature of Australian culture within their own world picture.

We should also note by way of introduction to the following sections that

Chinese PhD candidates are less likely than Australian PhD candidates to have a pre-existing relationship with their supervisor or supervisory panel because it is more likely that the domestic candidate will have 'come through the ranks' of undergraduate and/or honours programmes. This means that the first meeting between the Chinese candidate and the Australian supervisor will be relatively more important than the equivalent meeting at the start of a domestic candidature.

Confrontational behaviour 1: names

If a domestic PhD candidate addressed one of the co-authors of this paper as 'Professor Ingleby', his typical response would be to the effect of 'Richard's fine' with an attempt to put the nervously deferential candidate at ease with some light hearted comment along the lines of 'people only use 'Professor' when I'm in trouble.' For those domestic PhD candidates who did not start off with the first name this would be an innocuous interaction. So if an Australian candidate used 'Professor' on a second occasion, a raised eyebrow or a smile might be enough to make the point that the formality was unnecessary. But a Chinese candidate may actually feel uncomfortable and compromised, rather than reassured, by the imposition of familiarity.

For Chinese candidates the situation is more complicated on two dimensions. The first is that names themselves are different in China. In China names are shorter and the surname comes first. The other author of this paper's Chinese name is Chung Mo. Two syllables are typical of Chinese names. For Chinese candidates, English names are lengthy and difficult to remember. Professor is easier than Richard (or is it Ingleby?).

The second dimension is that, by reason of the

power distance discussion above, Professor Ingleby and Dr Chung are seen as Professors and Drs, holders of powerful positions rather than first name intimates. After numerous requests some may settle for Professor Richard or Dr Mona but Richard is only likely to be reached with any level of personal comfort about 10 years after first association or graduation. To insist on the first name may result in discomfort and the use of

... a Chinese candidate may actually feel uncomfortable and compromised, rather than reassured, by the imposition of familiarity.

no name at all. When writing an email or a letter, the salutation 'Dear Richard' is easier because it is less confronting. In general, Chinese students will be more comfortable if confrontational behaviour is avoided.

In the authors' view, to force a student to address the supervisor by a first name achieves no real academic benefit. It is better to leave the student to be comfortable with whatever they want to do.

Confrontational behaviour 2: the candidature as a partnership

The power distance concepts go beyond the use of names. Typically, an Australian supervisor might start (or even precede) the supervision process by discussing the candidature in terms of a joint venture between two colleagues. These discussions might well include comments by the supervisor to the effect that the candidate will soon become the specialist in the area of the thesis, and that their specialist knowledge should outstrip that of the supervisor within a matter of months. The domestic candidate might see such comments as challenging in an intellectual sense and perhaps even as flattering in a personal sense. But it is unlikely that a domestic candidate will be discomforted by the concept of their PhD candidature as their transition from comparative novice to comparative expert. For a Chinese PhD candidate, a discussion in such terms challenges their assumptions about the authority of the supervisor in a very confronting manner.

It should also be noted that the Chinese PhD candidate's acceptance of the authority of their supervisor is capable of being exploited by unscrupulous supervisors. The inclusion of the supervisor on the list of authors and even the supervisor publishing a PhD student's research without the student's name can be common in some Chinese universities. Vulnerability to unscrupulous supervisors is a cultural challenge of the supervisor student relationship (Trompenaars, 1993).

The supervisor's comment that 'I am moving house this weekend' or 'I would like to go out this weekend but we can't take our children' will be taken by the Chinese candidate not only as a request for assistance, but also as a request for assistance where offers of help are anticipated and the non-offering of help will be criticised. There is hardly room here to list the possibilities of exploitation and neither is such a list necessary to make the point. The domestic candidate is far more likely to have the self-confidence to decline the 'opportunity' to provide assistance in the supervisor's home or to meet the urgent need to provide 10 hours per week of tutorials in Biology 101.

In order to deal with such issues, two strategies are available. The first is the use of group sessions so that groups of students can discuss issues such as:

- Understanding instructions.
- Engaging in debate.
- How to understand each other's communication styles and messages.

In general Chinese students are willing to learn new ways and adapt. Adjusting to a different education system is a challenge in which they will allow themselves to be engaged.

A second and more ambitious strategy in relation to these and other issues is for Australian universities to make pre-departure cross-cultural training available. The relationship with the supervisor should be the focal point of pre-departure training for Chinese candidates. The concepts of Australian academic culture need to be explained thoroughly and demonstrated using a role play concept with appropriate trainers. The simulation of an Australian supervisor supervising a Chinese student will be more successful if the role of the Chinese student is played by an individual of observable success (Chung, 2008). For the Chinese students, advice from a fellow Chinese (who belongs to the insider group) is more likely to be received as insightful and intelligent, especially if such a person is able to clearly distinguish the differences and explain the meaning of the differences between Chinese and Australian culture. Such pre-departure training should be linked to student services and include follow-up services in relation to welfare and academic matters. This will better prepare students and provide tracking mechanisms to monitor progress.

Confrontational behaviour 3: the candidate and the critical approach

The confrontational nature of statements about the candidature as a partnership will be exacerbated for

the Chinese candidate if the supervisor requires the candidate to generate a critical approach. Typically, a supervisor might try to urge a PhD candidate into the process of independent critical thought by requiring them to prepare a review of a published or draft article with comments to the effect of: 'Read this and tell me what you think could have been done better' or 'Tell me why this is wrong?' or even just 'What do you think about this?'

The domestic candidate, even if they found the task difficult, would typically understand the purpose of the exercise and realise that the supervisor was directing them to the challenge of generating their own ideas and critical approach. For the Chinese candidate, the generation of the critical approach is not a natural process. The concept of advances in understanding being achieved by challenges to accepted paradigms is inconsistent with both the philosophical and pedagogical heritage of the candidate.

A Chinese candidate might interpret the 'What do you think?' questions as a test of their knowledge or competence. The answer to 'Tell me why this is wrong' can be extremely hard if there is nothing wrong in any absolute sense but the supervisor is testing the candidate's capacity for debate. The Chinese candidate might be concerned that what they think is wrong is different from what the supervisor thinks is wrong. But simply to say 'I can't see what's wrong with it' may indicate a lack of knowledge which will cause the supervisor to think that the student is not good enough; which in turn gives rise to the candidate's concerns about their future relationship.

Therefore the Chinese candidate may see the requirement of a critical approach as confronting and potentially causing a loss of face. Or if the candidate is exceptionally bright, and sees an angle that the supervisor has not seen, they might be concerned about causing a face losing situation for the supervisor. One strategy to handle this situation is to avoid the questions or suggest that the candidate can take the question and paper away and answer them later. This issue requires long-term practice and training. Again the pre-departure training could explain the critical approach and what supervisors really mean when they ask these questions. The supervisor must also ensure that instructions are understood clearly. 'Yes' does not necessarily mean 'Yes, I understand and I will do what you ask me.' This is a delicate situation to handle because a confrontational approach such as 'Do you understand my question?' will be taken as 'Your English is not good

enough.' The question 'Do you understand my question?' might provoke 'My English is very bad, I will try'.

Difficulties in communication are accentuated by the fact that Chinese use the word 'yes' differently from English speaking people. One reason is a linguistic one that there is no generalised use of the word 'yes' as much as it is in English. Two different Chinese words are translated to yes even though one confirms a statement having been made and another confirms the veracity of the statement. There are at least 5 meanings which a Chinese student will express in the word 'yes' so as to avoid confrontation in a situation.

- i. 'I heard the sound you just made.'
- ii. 'I am still here.'
- iii. 'I can't say no because that is too rude and blunt. I will only say yes so you don't lose face.'
- iv. 'To keep harmony I will say yes. I will work out whether I really have to do as I say or not later.'
- v. 'I agree with you. I will do this. I agree to comply. Etc.'

The challenge for an Australian/Western supervisor is that the meeting is inconclusive unless they can determine which yes the candidate really meant. It is impossible to judge how effective the meeting is. This in turn has an impact on a very important factor of a PhD candidature, the time frame. This is because while the supervisor thought a plan was drawn and agreed, from the candidate's perspective, there was nothing set in concrete. This lessens the supervisor's control on the length of the PhD candidature.

Confrontational behaviour 4: communication of expected standards

It is not unusual in the early stages of a PhD candidature for a supervisor to set the candidate a task which is directed in some way to using the critical approach to generate a properly formulated research proposal. For example: 'Read this paper and give me 500 words about how you would use the writer's methodology in relation to your area of interest' or 'Read this paper and tell me in 250 words the most important question that it does not answer.' These tasks are not easy. They are not meant to be easy. They are the sorts of tasks which are devised to stretch and exhort the candidate and to monitor their intellectual development towards the generation of the sort of research question that can sustain a successful doctoral candidature.

Possible responses to these tasks will lead to differential responses from the domestic and the Chinese candidate. The candidate may not understand what is required; or they understand but lack the capacity

to fulfil the request. Whereas the domestic student might approach the supervisor and confess to being all at sea with a statement such as: 'I couldn't read that paper without holding a dictionary in the other hand', the Chinese student's concept of face will make them less likely to volunteer the statement that they cannot do what they are required to do. The Chinese student might seek solutions from Google to find what others have written and confirm their thinking. This would be seen as a safer way of handling the situation than losing face by providing something of poor quality or that is simply just wrong. Chinese students would classify anything contrary to established authority as wrong.

The concept of face also means that the Chinese student will respond less positively to criticism. The Western student might see it as an inevitable part of the process that their first written efforts are drowned in a sea of red ink and quasi-expletives. Some Western students might even feel reassured by evidence that their supervisor is being so diligent. But the Chinese student will see the supervisor's adverse reaction in a far more personal light. This could easily lead to tears and admissions of criticism as correct but complaints about the manner in which the criticism was presented. One way to ameliorate this problem for supervisors who provide plenty of written feedback is to give the candidate the opportunity to read it first quietly. If the candidate is given the paper then the supervisor should make an excuse to leave for a few minutes. The excuse should not be the need for a cup of tea because the candidate will take this as a request for them to make the tea.

The adverse reaction of the supervisor to the candidate's written work is likely to be influenced by the fact that the supervisor and the candidate have different writing styles. In a high context culture, such as the Chinese (Hall, 1976) the writer (or speaker) uses lots of words and builds up gradually to the point that is sought to be made. In low context culture the emphasis is on economy and precision of expression. The Australian supervisor comes from a low context culture and because of this may well regard the high context Chinese candidate's written expression as verbose, indirect and therefore immature. The Chinese candidate will have difficulty understanding the basis on which this assessment is made, because of the cultural background to the assessment. Further, because of the issue of face, they will respond more adversely to the assessment than the supervisor might intend.

Pre-departure training will be very useful here by explaining the differences between the language of

high context culture and the language of low context culture. This theory can be used to point out that differences of communication style result in Chinese candidates writing in a high context way. The supervisors should acknowledge that it will take time to convert from writing in a high context style to a low context style. The face issue will also prevent students from seeking help even though they realise they need it. Previous research shows that students are more likely to attend additional workshops if they perceive these workshops as being directed to more elite students (Chung, Kelliher, & Smith, 2006) and for their attendance to be required by institutional fiat rather than necessitated by their personal weakness.

Concluding comments

The issues in the four preceding sections are obviously compounded by their relationship with each other. A Chinese student will respect the supervisor by not disagreeing with anything so as to give the supervisor face. Even if the student has a different opinion they will not disagree with the supervisor. Equally, if the supervisor gives the student a straightforward statement that their work is unworthy, the student will feel that they have lost face. The student will expect the supervisor to preserve the student's face by demonstrating the poor quality of work in a different way, perhaps by demonstrating a way of writing differently. Correspondingly, when the student advances in their candidature, they would never expect to eclipse the supervisor in public because this would make the supervisor 'lose face'.

The overall message we seek to communicate to the academic community is that the issues that we have discussed will not go away if they are ignored. Our argument is that better preparation of candidates and supervisors, together with embedded policies of mandatory directions directing the use of support services will increase the chances of a successful start to candidature.

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