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10 Overcoming the cultural challenges in supervising Chinese research students in Australia

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A large number of Chinese students are currently studying overseas especially in English-speaking countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom. Research in the areas of international students and Chinese students include topics such as learning styles and coping with differences (Bochner 1986; Catterall 2003; Chung, Kelliher and Smith, 2006). However, supervising Chinese higher degree research (HDR) students has not generally been the subject of extended discussion in the literature on international students. Singh (2009: 185) describes the lack of knowledge of Chinese research students among Western supervisors as ‘cross-cultural ignorance’.

Here we specifically focus on those who study for research degrees as 100 per cent of their studies (the majority of whom are PhD students; only a small number do full Masters by research study); not those who do course work degrees. One of the reasons for this is that it is only recently that the numbers of such students have been large enough for higher education institutions to consider them as a group. This recent development has at least two stimulants – Western universities are finding it difficult to sustain the numbers of research students from their own undergraduates and increasing numbers of Chinese students are seeking research degrees in Western universities, especially those in English speaking countries. Universities which ensure that both the students and supervisors have a successful relationship will gain a competitive advantage in attracting research students. The second reason for the lack of attention to the supervision of Chinese research students (Singh 2009) is simple ignorance of the large cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners (Chung 2008). Research in cross-cultural marketing between Australia and China has established that ‘psychic distance’ between Australia and China is the second-largest after Panama (Fletcher and Bohn 1998). By reason of these two factors, Western supervisors are typically given Chinese students without any preparation or training and Chinese students are treated simply as a part of a homogeneous international student group or simply as just PhD students like any others.

Although there appears to be a large amount of literature on Chinese students’ learning styles and general literature on international students, these are mostly
focused on ESL students or students undertaking course work; there is little research about Chinese research students (Singh 2009). In fact, according to Singh (2009) it is not only Western universities that are ignorant of Chinese students; the Western world is ignorant of China and the Chinese. This is not an overstatement, as Bush (2008) stated at a recent conference whose justifying theme was that ‘China is still disconnected from the West by confusing and complex cultural exchanges’.

In this chapter, we focus on the relationship between Western supervisors and Chinese research students insofar as it relates to the provision of feedback on written work. Research degree students are distinguished from other postgraduate students as the process of writing a long research thesis is an isolated experience relying much on the one-on-one student–supervisor relationship (Deem and Brehony 2000).

The provision of feedback is not a straightforward matter. Rather, it is a complex social interaction where there are enormous possibilities for misunderstanding unless both parties to the relationship clarify their expectations and continue to manage communication processes. The inability to manage these dynamics often results in delayed completion and damaged personal relationships, and in more serious cases, to discontinued candidature. Where the parties to this complex social interaction have different cultural backgrounds, the possibilities for misunderstanding are magnified and the need for sound management is correspondingly increased.

Past research on research students has tended to be limited to research students’ research culture (Deem and Brehony 2000), technical skills and knowledge (Barry 1997), and academic skills such as learning skills, writing skills and dissertation planning (Swales 1992). There is limited literature focusing on Chinese research students who are supervised by Western supervisors. Within this framework, we are focusing on the one-on-one relationship between the supervisors and the students and how this relationship may shape the candidature. The importance of this relationship is directly linked to the outcome as well as the experience of both the students and the supervisors (Mcclure 2005).

In this chapter, we explore how to manage the cross-cultural variables between Western supervisors and Chinese research students in the context of cross-cultural communication and the provision of feedback on written work. This chapter does not deal with teaching and learning styles or the changing of those, or teaching strategies for international students (Boyacigiller, Goodman and Phillips 2003). It deals with solutions for this one-on-one personal relationship in order to produce the best possible outcome for both students and their supervisors.

**Cross-cultural variables: Collectivism**

The frameworks provided by cross-cultural studies provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the relationship between Western supervisors and Chinese research students. Cross-cultural psychology considers variables of culture along various continua.
The first relevant continuum is that which has collectivism at one extreme and individualism at the other (Hofstede 2001). China is a collective society and Australia is an individualistic society. China is a ‘high trust’ culture where commitments are based on personal relationships rather than black and white legally binding rules. People rely on others they know for information and support and have a more dependent relationship with each other. People interact in networks which are based on multiple layers of contexts (Chung 2008). 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 in Western society. Here, we are referring to the more Anglo-based Western society in broad terms. The more obvious representations of these societies are those such as in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada and New Zealand which are also the five most popular international student destinations. Although there are other Western countries and they each may differ from one another, it is not the main purpose of this chapter to distinguish the differences between each of them. 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. In terms of the expectations of students, Chinese students expect these multi-layers more than Western students. Equally, this is also the current practice between Chinese supervisors and Chinese students in Chinese universities. Students, in fact, refer to their supervisors as the ‘boss’ with the understanding that once they become their supervisors’ students, the relationship becomes a dependable relationship between them, while it is less so in Western universities.

The collective-individualism continuum has the added dimension that Chinese culture has a particular concept of the optimal relationship between and within these multiple layers because of the primacy attached to harmony. The importance of collectivism in Chinese society is increased by the general desire for harmony to maintain collective peace (Fan 2000). In Western academic life, protagonists are comfortable with debates between opposing, even polarised views, on the assumptions that any audience can ‘pick and choose’ the strengths and weaknesses of competing positions and that greater understandings are likely to be derived from stretching the boundaries and testing the tensions. Usually (although not invariably), such vigorous debates are conducted without personal rancour, and disagreement is perceived as being in relation to a position in an argument rather than as a reflection on personal inadequacy. However, generally speaking, people from a Chinese background would not feel comfortable with the antagonism inherent in such interdisciplinary, theoretical or methodological debates (Chung 2008). In fact, previous research has shown that some supervisors from British universities were shocked to find ‘these new students [referring to international students] don’t know much about research’ (McClure 2005). Research findings have been consistent in identifying that international students in general lack capacity in research (Channell 1990; Elsey 1990; McClure 2005), especially for research students who are quite different from those who do course work.
Cross-cultural variables: Power distance

A second and related continuum employed by cross-cultural psychology is that of power distance (Hofstede 2001), the extent to which people from different cultures tolerate differences in status between individuals. The concept of power distance, Hofstede argues, is a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between a superior and a subordinate as perceived by the less powerful of the two, and focuses on the level of equality between people in a country's society. The measurement of power distance is on a spectrum of scales. In high power distance cultures, such as the Chinese culture, it is accepted that there is a high level of difference in status and power between members of society (Chung 2008; Mcclure 2005; Spencer-Oatey 1997). China and Australia are at different ends of the continuum. Chinese people easily accept large differences in power and status between individuals; Australians generally do not (Hofstedte 2001).

There are strong links between collectivism and power distance in Chinese culture. Confucian philosophy conceptualises society as a collective organisation of hierarchies based on five sets of formal relationships, each of which has specific obligations and responsibilities, and on the basis of which all other relationships are modelled (Chan 2003; Kirkbride, Tang and Westwood, 1991: 367; Shenkar and Ronen 1987: 271):

1. Man and the State
2. Man and his wife
3. Man and his siblings
4. Man and his children
5. Man and his father

The acceptance of these hierarchical relationships creates an acceptance that there are differentials of power and status. This means that individuals define themselves in relation to each other by reference to the differences in power (Cai, Wilson and Drake 2000: 595; Hofstede 2001). Relationships are governed by trust.

For Chinese PhD students, this concept is relevant, because supervisors are the ones to be respected and orders from supervisors are to be followed strictly without discussion and questioning. This certainly leads to abuse of power in some cases and explains why Chinese students would never complain (Spencer-Oatey 1997). In addition, research degree students in general tend to be more mature students and this certainly applies to the Chinese research degree students' group.

Chinese students see themselves as on a lower hierarchical order than their supervisors and in turn accept this relationship. They seek advice from their supervisors and consider all advice given as absolute and correct. Directions from supervisors are also seen as normal and acceptable and therefore to be followed without questioning. This hierarchical relationship may also extend to a personal level. Advice and support from supervisors is expected to relate to more than academic related matters. The governance of trust in this hierarchical relationship is unstated, however, it is accepted by both parties.
Cross-cultural variables: Uncertainty avoidance

A third cross-cultural variable is 'uncertainty avoidance', the extent to which people can tolerate uncertainty (Hofstede 2001). Hofstede defines uncertainty as a situation in which anything can happen and one has no idea what might happen. He distinguishes uncertainty avoidance from risk avoidance. The level of uncertainty in areas such as technology, law and religion, forces people to confront an uncertain future. To cope with uncertainty, people constantly manage anxiety. Hofstede argues that different cultures have developed values and procedures that enable them to cope with uncertainty in different ways, for instance, in their systems of technology, law and religion at large. Rules are attempts to regulate behaviour so that the uncertainty of human behaviour can be reduced (Chung 2008):

As the Chinese are high on the 'uncertainty avoidance' scale, students can accept vague instructions without asking specific questions for clarification. Difficulties of language and cultural confusion do not concern Chinese students as much as they would Western students.

Cross-cultural variables: Masculinity/Femininity

A fourth cross-cultural variable is the 'Masculinity/Femininity' continuum. Masculinity and femininity, in Hofstede's words, refer to 'the dominant gender role pattern in the vast majority of both traditional and modern societies: the patterns of male assertiveness and female nurturance'. The concept of masculine versus feminine explains many of the cultural traits of different societies. It is demonstrated in education, organisational behaviour, personal pursuits and the roles played by each gender.

Hofstede argues that societies dominated by values typical of 'male' assertiveness, competitiveness and toughness, are extreme examples of masculinity; in contrast to societies dominated by typically 'feminine' values of caring, nurturing and concerns for relationships and the living environment. A comparison of Australia and China is difficult, because China was not included in Hofstede's original research (Chung 2008), however, later studies (Fan 2000) show China is high on the masculinity scale. Hence, achievements are highly regarded within the Chinese culture.

This element of culture is relevant to PhD students as education is highly valued in the Chinese society. A PhD, as the highest form of education, is regarded as the top quality one can achieve.

Cross-cultural variables: High- and low-context communication styles

Hall provides us with a tool to analyse the different ways that particular cultures communicate: the distinction between high-context and low-context communication styles (Hall 1976). The main element of Hall's theory is his
emphasis on the importance of contextual factors in the communication process. Czinkota, Ronkainen, Moffett and Moynihan (1995) explain that in a high-context culture, the unspoken meaning is at least as important as what is actually said, while in a low-context culture, most of the information is contained in the words themselves. The concept of high-context and low-context is frequently adapted by business scholars in cross-cultural research, because it has a high level of explanatory value:

Context is the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event. The elements that combine to produce a given meaning – events and context – are in different proportions depending on the culture. The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high- to low-context.

(Hall and Hall 1990)

Hence, the concepts of high-context and low-context culture are two ends of a continuum. Hall suggested that people from a high-context culture communicate with high-context messages in a high-context manner and vice versa (Chung 2008).

People from a low-context culture such as Australia provide a high level of content and a low level of words. Low-context communicators discuss very specific topics, ask direct questions and expect direct answers, use precise and fewer words, talk specifically and straight to the point. The typical means of argument is to present the main point first and explicitly and then proceed to provide the evidence to support. By contrast, high-context people such as the Chinese provide a high level of words but a low level of content. High-context people expect their intention to emerge from a reading between the lines of a multiplicity of statements (Chung 2008).

In cross-cultural communication generally, low-context culture communicators find it difficult to grasp the clear intentions of high-context culture communicators, because they are unable to understand the hidden agenda or even that there is a hidden agenda. The large amount of words used by the high-context communicators prevents their low-context counterparts from understanding specific and concise concepts with words of precise meanings. Low-context communicators also mistake the supporting evidence of the high-context communicators for the main argument (Chung 2008).

On the other hand, high-context-culture people convince themselves that the explicit words of the low-context communicators do not mean what they mean, and look for the hidden agenda. They pay less attention to the point on which the low-context communicators are focusing, because they understand it as minor supporting evidence. This clearly creates tremendous difficulties between the high-context and the low-context parties, where difficulties are magnified by the other influences on the supervisor–research student relationship. The high- and low-context culture and language concept is closely related to the supervision of Chinese PhD students as the communication between supervisors and students is
the core of their relationship (Deem and Brehony 2000), especially writing their thesis in English (Volet 2003). This will be further elaborated later.

**The concept of ‘face’**

Over and above the general cross-cultural variables, there is a specifically Chinese concept of ‘face’ (Adler, Braham and Graham 1992). Face is a complex concept to explain although much has been published on this topic (Chung 2008; Hong and Prud’homme 1999; Volkema and Fleury 2002; Ulijin, Rutkowski, Kumar and Zhu 2005). Face is a mixture of respect and self-respect. Having only one English translation of to ‘lose face’ is not sophisticated enough to distinguish between the subtle differences in Chinese language that reflect aspects of this part of the culture (Ingleby and Chung 2009).

One feature of the concept of face is the need for individuals to preserve their own sense of positive self-approval and that of others. A person can lose face where they cause embarrassment to themselves by their own behaviour (although many non-Chinese may also act in this way, it is not the purpose of this chapter to extend the discussion into those areas). A person can also cause another to lose face by exposing wrongdoing or imposing an obligation with which the other is unable to comply. The concept of saving face explains why aggressive behaviour in personal interaction is not acceptable. Face saving is one way of promoting harmony. Many suggest that ‘face saving’ is a ‘very Chinese thing’ (Adler, Braham and Graham 1992; Blackman 1997; 2000). Certainly, Chinese pay more attention to the concept (Ting-Toomey 1999) and use it as an excuse for many behaviours.

**The concept of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’**

The concept of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in Chinese culture is strong for historical reasons. The Chinese have a general perception that foreigners have exploited China for many centuries (Breth and Jin 1991). More importantly, Chinese are educated to know ‘there is a difference between in-group and out-group’ (内外有別). The Cultural Revolution and the years since have further reinforced this concept in the minds of Chinese who went through that period (Chung 2008). Chinese have been educated at every opportunity to ensure that boundaries are not crossed; all parties must accept this. Even within Chinese culture, people are divided into sub-groups and boundaries are created around them (Blackman 1997). The perception of a strong distinction between insiders and outsiders (Probst, Carneval and Triandis 1999) functions to maintain harmony within a group (Adair 2003).

Petronio, Ellemers, Giles and Gallois (1998) note: ‘We fit in our environment by drawing lines around those things that are important to us, and then control them through rules’. Yet, it is also recognised that to fit successfully into the environment, enough flexibility within boundaries is required to allow a degree of integration between ourselves and the environment. Such boundary communication evokes emotions in ourselves and others and requires emotional awareness and regulation.
Adjustment is necessary when boundary crossing is initiated by one or both parties in order to build the relationship. When boundaries are unattended to, it provides another reason for miscommunication to occur (Coupland, Wiemann and Giles 1991). When boundaries are too tight, the parties are not receptive to each other’s definition of an affective event. When they are too loose, communication may cease altogether, because the boundary is not salient and the parties are unsure of the appropriate behaviour (Dayringer 1998).

Miscommunication will, when detected, generally cause a tightening of boundaries in all cultures (Willemyns, Callan and Pittam 1997). Boundaries may be adjusted to ensure parties are kept within them; violation of boundaries may cause serious communication difficulties. The process of boundary crossing in cross-cultural communication depends on the culture of the parties. Some cultures prefer to tighten boundary walls at the beginning and work towards loosening them when trust is built. Other cultures prefer to start with very open boundaries, tightening them only when they feel threatened. A Chinese–Australian communication setting involves these two opposing approaches to boundary crossing.

For the Chinese, Caucasian Australians have the physical identity to be easily identified as members of an ‘out-group’ in any context. They will never be seen as Chinese. Although many of them become good friends and associates of Chinese people, still they are labelled as ‘foreigners’; they will never be considered as insiders. Hall and Hall found that people of high-context culture make a greater distinction between insiders and outsiders than do low-context culture people (Hall and Hall 1990). Therefore, being the highest (Hodgetts and Luthans 2003) on the high-context cultural scale, Chinese, certainly, are the most keen to keep the groups and maintain the boundaries.

To overcome boundary barriers, ‘cultural go-betweens’ may be used. These are people with extensive knowledge of both cultures who are capable of behaving appropriately in either culture when required. These people are also described as bicultural and they bridge the cultural gap in cross-cultural encounters. Overseas Chinese are often used in this role by Westerners seeking to create relationships with Chinese institutions (Chung 2008). This is relevant, because when Chinese students have questions, they tend to turn to their own people (fellow Chinese) for assistance. They look up to fellow Chinese as a more appropriate role models rather than fellow Western students or supervisors.

The educational background of Chinese research students

Chinese research students come from academic backgrounds which are significantly different from the secondary and tertiary experiences of Australian research students in terms of:

1. Competitiveness
2. Constant grading
3. Examination-based selection processes
4. Scarcity of undergraduate places
5. Different teaching methods and learning styles

The competition for places at the key schools in China, which provide the best opportunities to go to the best universities, commences at the kindergarten stage. Children are constantly graded by examination and places are allocated on the basis of those gradings. Schools and universities are themselves graded and the competition is intense, because the university system is unable to match the demand for places. One reason for this is that universities were effectively shut down for the period of the Cultural Revolution. The Gaokao system (the university entrance examination) is the final hurdle for students to compete for places in tier-one or tier-two universities. Only five per cent of the age population get into tier one universities in China (Olsen 2009). One consequence of this is that many Chinese students look elsewhere for tertiary study. Each of these students is overwhelmingly likely to be an only-child, and in most cases, an only-child of only-children into whom are channelled all the expectations of two parents and four grandparents (see also Chapter 13 in this volume for a discussion of generational relationships and expectations between Chinese students and their parents).

Within the Chinese educational system, the method of teaching is different. There is far greater emphasis on rote learning and the ‘right’ answer than in the Australian system, where active learning is encouraged or at least is supposed to be encouraged. There is abundant research on the Chinese/Asian students’ lack of critical thinking skills (Broadbear 2003; Lingard 2006, 2007) which is not a result of level of intelligence but different teaching styles. An implication of all the foregoing is that the students who come to Australia as research students are likely to:

1. Have had a long history of emerging from the pack as successful school and university students who complied with the requirements of the system better than their peers did.
2. Pursue a research degree in Australia, because they have been unable to meet the competitive requirements imposed by Chinese institutions or by those of other countries, and so are spending money on tertiary education which may well have been cobbled together by their parents and grandparents.

This is rarely explained to the Western educationist and/or supervisors hence there has been no or little attempt at understanding from Western educationists towards Chinese students (Tomich, Mcwhirter and Darcy 2003; Valiente 2008). The typical Western attitude has been ‘They come to us to learn the Western education system. Why should we do anything different other than showing them what we do?’ (Volet 2003). This attitude only works in a market environment where Western institutions can rely on a constant stream of Chinese students who are not accommodated within their own system, and where ‘Western education’ was such a novelty that very few had access to it. A study by Skyrme (2007)
found Chinese students who failed their course did not have the skills to learn in a Western university.

**Implications of cross-cultural variables**

The first section of this chapter was lengthy, because our experience is that the Western audience is generally inexperienced as to the specific and defining characteristics of mainland Chinese research students. In this section of the chapter, we consider some of the implications of these characteristics for an issue which is complicated enough of itself, the process by which supervisors provide feedback on candidates’ written work.

By reason of the factors relating to face and power distance, the Chinese research students’ reaction to feedback generally is much more likely to be a personal response than that of the Western research student. Although Australian candidates will be used to the concept that ‘the person who never made a mistake never made anything’ the Chinese student is more likely to take negative feedback as a personal attack rather than constructive criticism on the emerging nature of their written and research skills.

This is because the combination of the concept of face and the educational background of the Chinese candidate means that they are likely to regard the feedback as determining whether their written work is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and will see negative comments as causing them a ‘loss of face’. Negative comments are much more likely to be regarded as a statement of personal incompetence than in the terms that the supervisor might intend, namely as an assessment of the point of progress on the scale from novice to expert (which scale the supervisor themselves may remember moving along in earlier times).

The importance of this point goes beyond the personal happiness level of the research students. Particularly at the early stages of candidature, there is a vital need to test emerging theories and understanding, to check that tangents are not too tangential, to monitor enthusiasm and to give general guidance as to the potential viability of emerging ideas. This creates the requirement of an environment where ‘back of the envelope’ comments (referring to when you just write something down on whatever piece of paper that comes to hand) can be the focus of discussion. If Chinese research students are only prepared to present ‘the best’ work for comments so that they can demonstrate their intelligence and avoid adverse criticism, then they may be missing out on constructive feedback at the early stages of candidature when it can be most valuable.

There are also differences in expectation on the part of the candidate in terms of what is to be provided by the feedback. Because of their educational background, the Chinese candidates will expect specific direction from their supervisors rather than a suggestion that they ‘have another go’ in a trial and error approach. This specific direction will be sought so that they can obtain the ‘right answer’ or at the very least have an example of ‘the right answer’ so that they can emulate it.

These differences in expectation as to the content of the feedback can be seen in terms of how the absence of comment is received. A Chinese research
student is more likely than their Western counterpart to assume that the absence of comment means that the work is ready for submission, rather than that there are no serious theoretical errors, or that the work is at the point where it should be, given the present stage of the candidature. Indeed, perhaps the likeliest interpretation that a Western candidate will ascribe to the absence of comment is that the supervisor has not looked at the draft in a detailed manner, or thinks that there are more important aspects of the candidature to focus on for the time being.

There are also cultural variables which will influence the candidate’s response to a supervisor’s annotations. Chinese candidates are much less likely than their Western counterparts to question the supervisor’s response. This means that the supervisor’s manuscript notes may assume a higher status than the supervisor intends, as Western supervisors often make notes on drafts which are intended as records of thoughts which are prompts or questions for consideration, rather than as definitive directions for future activity. The Western candidate’s world picture is far more likely to tolerate a relationship where the supervisor is conceived of as a ‘senior colleague’ whose experience is respected but not treated as sacred. While for the Chinese-Chinese supervisor-student relationship, the relationship is accepted as a mixture of master-servant, employer-employee, parents-children and teacher-pupil relationship. This is far more complex than any other relationships and especially difficult for Western supervisors to comprehend without suitable training and preparation.

There are recurring problems, which will be discussed in the following section, in the written work of Chinese students which are attributable to the nature of the Chinese language. Chinese writing is more different from English than are many other languages. Languages such as French, German and Italian share many commonalities with English in terms of roots and letters. Even Cyrillic alphabets and discourses have some recognisable features. Chinese is completely different. The language is not based on an alphabet; rather, the communication is by means of pictures. Schoolchildren do not learn the ABC. Rather, they learn characters. The number of characters learnt is an indicator of the sophistication of one’s language. There is no concept of singular and plural. One tree describes a single tree. Two trees are ‘two tree’; three trees are ‘three tree’. There are no tenses. ‘I eat an apple today’. ‘I eat an apple yesterday’. ‘I eat an apple tomorrow’. There is no definite or indefinite article. Chinese students have a constant struggle with whether an ‘a’ or a ‘the’ is required before a noun. The inability to correctly use these articles may irritate supervisors as they are considered a basic skill. Behaviour based on learnt skills due to the nature of one’s mother tongue penetrate into future behaviour subconsciously. The foregoing behaviour continues to reoccur with Chinese students when writing English. Spell checks are not automatically performed not due to careless or knowingly ignoring advice. Chinese students are not in the habit of doing spell checks, because they do not have to do that when writing Chinese. Therefore, they are not in the habit of doing that when writing in English. If reminded, they may still forget, because it is not part of their routine practice.
What does the Western supervisor do when confronted with such (perceived) illiteracy? If corrections are not made, then there is the danger that the candidate will gain the impression that the level of expression is at the required standard, when this is demonstrably not the case. Nevertheless, in order to correct every error of expression, the supervisor might feel that they are devoting an unjustifiably large amount of energy to remedy a problem which is not their responsibility. There is also the danger that the concentration on the minutiae of singular and plural might detract from the big picture issues present in every candidature and also might inhibit the candidate from presenting work for consideration in the future. Perhaps the best compromise is for the supervisor to correct one paragraph to the required standard and then ask the candidate to apply the principles in the correct paragraph to the balance of the next draft. However, this may be seen as meaning that the only corrections required are on that page. Obviously, the supervisor should make it clear that they are aware of the enormity of the challenge faced by someone trying to express themselves in a language which is totally dissimilar from their own. The supervisor should also be prepared for unintentional continuous reoccurrence of the simple mistakes at any stage, due to lack of being in the habit of correcting them.

Solutions to a workable supervisor–student relationship

Due to the English tradition of a research degree (not including postgraduate course work degrees), the single supervisor–student relationship is the dominant feature of this education process. The first strategy which we propose, to reduce students’ dependency, is to ensure that the supervisor–candidate relationship is not the only institutional experience of doctoral candidates. As relationships are fundamental for Chinese, without institutional experience the Chinese students will have an even more isolated one-on-one personal relationship with their supervisors only. Students are basically in a much more vulnerable position compared with other students, especially local students who have their personal network to draw upon for support. At the same time, Chinese students also lack local general knowledge which they may need to draw from their supervisors. Although the supervisor is a crucial figure, and the relationship with a supervisor is one of the most important ingredients of a successful candidature, we argue that sessions or other activities involving all candidates can:

1. Supplement good supervision
2. Minimise the damaging impact of less good supervision
3. Increase the chances of a successful candidature

Many universities are already providing group sessions of different types of activities; however, when participation is left to the students, the sessions are often not fully utilised. For Chinese students especially, they do not seek out these opportunities often, because they do not know what there is to seek. Because they are more network-dependent on personal interactions, unless they find out from...
Challenges in supervising Chinese research students

their fellow Chinese (either students or supervisors), they are more reluctant to participate. The importance of group sessions is that they can assist individual candidates to realise that the particular challenges which they face are a reflection of the general enormity of the doctoral candidature rather than a particular personal defect on their part. It may well be that the early stages of the doctoral candidature are the first time that the research student has found academic life to be 'difficult'. This is especially useful when they find they are not the only ones who are making the mistakes. It saves face.

The next advantage of group sessions is that the group level is of itself more comfortable and reassuring for candidates from a collective culture (Hofstede 2001). At their Chinese universities, they will have had collective academic experiences, but also collective sleeping, dining and social arrangements. Group sessions are one way of minimising the culture shock of moving from a collective to an individualist culture.

If the sessions involve presentations by early career researchers, especially those who are Chinese, about their recent experiences with doctoral candidature, then this has the added benefit of creating role models who can be a bridge between the inexperienced candidate and the supervisor (who the candidate will necessarily perceive as distant from them by reason of the power distance variable (Hofstede, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 1997)) especially if these earlier career researchers are Chinese. The early career researchers can themselves benefit from this experience which can be formally or informally introduced as a supervision training programme. Especially if the earlier career researchers are Chinese, they will be seen by the students as at a lower level of the hierarchy than their supervisors. Therefore, they are closer to the students themselves. Consultations and advice are sought from them more frequently and on a much less formal level. This middle-tier supervision may act as a 'wind break' for both the students and supervisors. Therefore, it is advisable for universities to incorporate this into their HDR training policies.

The next part of the strategy is to clarify what features of the supervision process are to be discussed in group sessions. The two most important are:

1. Formal rules of candidature, administrative and examination processes
2. Expectations of written work in low-context Australian academic culture

In relation to the rules of candidature, our experience is that Chinese candidates are reluctant to raise these issues with supervisors especially with Western supervisors, because they perceive the supervisor to be a figure of authority to whom such questions might be a challenge. Another reason for having group sessions is that, unfortunately, many supervisors are unaware of the relevant rules. In any event, there is nothing to be lost, and everything to be gained, by removing the 'fear factor' of rules and processes. The individual supervisors benefit from being relieved of this burden. If the presentation about rules and processes also involves the candidates meeting the administrative staff, this makes the processes more transparent and accessible. This is more relevant to the Chinese students,
because many of them often have little Western social experience. When they run into problems, they often have fewer means of generating questions. In other words, they do not know what questions to ask. From the university’s perspective, there is a greater probability that its rules will actually be complied with, and the chances of bad experiences are lessened. However, for Chinese students, the concept of rules and following them is very different than for local students. Flexibility is expected when applying rules in China.

These points are particularly strong in relation to the examination process, which takes place at the stage of the candidature where anxiety and exhaustion can be at their highest levels. The communication of rules in public makes it more likely that the examination process will run smoothly and that the candidate will leave the university with a positive experience and reflection. For Chinese HDR students, this is especially important, because often they would have at least undergraduate experience (some would even have postgraduate experience) from China. They often apply their prior knowledge which differs a great deal from China, in which case, they would have been misled by themselves or sometimes by fellow Chinese students.

It is also valuable to communicate the required standards and expectations about writing and editing in group sessions. The points which we have outlined in the previous section of this chapter about the differences between Chinese and English language are not complex points, but it is remarkable how little is publicly stated about the differences in language. Most academics have a general understanding of the ‘problems’ with Chinese students’ written skills, but we strongly suspect that there is far less understanding of the reasons, especially the reasons for repeated ‘simple mistakes’. Both sides of the communication can benefit from an improved awareness of the distinctive features of their mutual language backgrounds.

The differences in modes of expression and argument are more than ones of language alone. As we have discussed in the preceding section, high-context communication differs from low-context communication. There are many useful texts about the presentation of argument in Western academic culture which can be given out as pre-reading and then discussed within group sessions. We specifically refer to the distribution of material as pre-reading, because Chinese research students will take longer to read and understand written material than their Western counterparts.

In the presentation of these group sessions, it can be clarified that academic writing is not a 'one off' activity. Candidates who feel dispirited that they have ‘been wrong’ or ‘made mistakes’ because their written work is the subject of criticism should be reassured by more experienced academics discussing in public the fact that even experienced writers do not generate pre-publication drafts as a first step. The discussions of editing in public can communicate to candidates the important point that writing evolves gradually in a process of criticism and self-criticism. This is important for Chinese students because:

1. They lack primary and secondary education in English and hence lack the knowledge of basis literature as well as the methods of reading
English literature. Often, Chinese HDRs only have command of English in their particular field. This makes their capacity to express themselves limited.

2. Having been elevated to the top end of academia, the ‘face’ issue is important when coming to editing their written work. An understanding of the editing exercise gives another dimension to their English writing. It reduces thinking that ‘my English is poor’.

With the comparatively low technology of using a word processing program projected onto a screen, it is possible to edit publicly on screen and to demonstrate how words and sentences can be moved around to good effect. Students can also see that the process of constructive feedback is of benefit to the candidate and that the generation of a better piece of writing does not necessarily entail the conclusion that the first draft represented a personal failure or inadequacy on the part of the writer. Indeed, having the text up on the screen and working on the text effectively ‘depersonalises’ the process as the text rather than its author becomes the subject of the discussion. This removes the ‘face’ issue for Chinese candidates.

In the course of these discussions, there will almost necessarily be discussion of the differences between high- and low-context culture (Chinese and English) in terms of:

1. Numbers of words used: Chinese students always use more words than English writers do, because they are high-context culture people; even when they write in low-context language, they still write in high-context style.

2. Propositions and evidence rather than ‘build up’: The style and pattern of high-context culture communication are that propositions and evidence are provided to the audience in order to support their argument – the conclusion comes at the end.

3. Linear compared with multiple arguments: One of the cultural differences between Chinese and Westerners is that Chinese use what Hall (1976) refers to as ‘M-time’ rather than ‘L-time’. That is, Chinese students are capable of parallel, multiple tasks compared with the mono-task behaviour of Westerners. This is reflected in their style of argument when writing. They present parallel argument which can be seen as not logical by Western supervisors who are more used to linear arguments that pursue each singular point along a line of arguments and supporting evidence.

The process of discussing feedback can be structured by setting the group specific questions in relation to the piece of writing and in particular first asking: What are the points that the writer is seeking to establish in this piece of writing? In this process, the demonstration pieces of writing may illustrate differences between the different writers of different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this exercise forces candidates to confront the point that the purpose of writing must go beyond the writer trying to establish that they have spent a lot of time reading the work of previous researchers in the field. The expected writing of a PhD thesis is that
precise questions must be established first. This is a characteristic of low-context language with which Chinese students may struggle.

Using the ‘computer screen illustrated via a data projector’ is a simple tool whereby an editing technique can be demonstrated so that the points that the writer is trying to establish are shown in the new version of the document. This can provide Chinese students with a great deal of clarity. It is not surprising to hear from Chinese students of all levels ‘tell me what you want me to do, I will do it’. Often, it is this lack of previous experience and knowledge of the required format they stumble over with no idea of a solution. For Western supervisors with no training in high-context communication, they often fail to provide solutions, because they cannot comprehend the specific difficulty Chinese students have.

The second phase of this exercise is then to number each of the points that the writer is making and ask the group to then number the text that they are reading according to which (if any) of the points it is relevant. The third phase is to treat each of the points as the first sentence of a paragraph, and for the balance of the text to be moved over if it is relevant to any of the points that the writing is seeking to establish.

This exercise introduces candidates to the concept of writing as propositions supported by evidence and reveals the process of linear thinking on the run. In addition to giving candidates a tool with which they can reflect on and edit their own writing, the exercise also reveals that writing (almost) necessarily goes through stages which we find it convenient to label as follows:

1. Accumulation
2. Organisation
3. Analysis
4. Synthesis

In the accumulation phase, the writer gathers thoughts together in a process which resembles free association. In the organisation phase, the writer attempts to structure these thoughts in a manner which is capable of being understood by another intelligent human being. In the analysis phase, the writer imposes some framework of purpose or relevance so that there is a ‘point’ to the entire exercise. In the synthesis phase, the writing is integrated into the larger project.

Whether or not these stages are conceptually distinct or vital in all writing is not as important for the purposes of this chapter as the point that each stage contains different requirements in terms of feedback. In the group sessions, there should be discussion with candidates that they are likely to derive the most benefit from their work being read if they ask specific questions of their supervisor such as:

1. Are there any important previous studies which I have omitted to mention?
2. Can you see the argument that I am trying to establish in this chapter?
3. Is there enough evidence to support this argument?
Likewise, if these group sessions are being used for the purposes of supervisor training, early career researchers should be encouraged to discuss the purpose of the feedback process. For example, is the supervisor reading the work:

1. To check that the project is progressing at all?
2. To discuss the fundamental assumptions underlying the definition of the question?
3. To decide whether an argument has been clarified as to its terms?
4. To decide whether sufficient evidence has been provided to support the argument?
5. To consider whether the writing is in a finished state?

The answers to these questions will determine the extent to which supervisors should concern themselves with concepts of spelling and grammar.

There are two obvious responses to the foregoing discussion. One is that ‘supervisors do this anyway’. Our rejoinder to this is that good supervisors do much of this but there is no harm in reinforcing the messages from good supervisors, and unfortunately, not all supervisors are good supervisors.

The second obvious response is that what has been described is good practice generally, rather than a specific response to the needs of Chinese research students. Our response to this is that on one level, this point is correct. However, the foregoing discussion is a reminder for those supervisors who are burdened by constant spelling and grammatical mistakes.

For Chinese students, correcting their spelling mistakes may have two effects: 1) ‘My English is not good enough’ which sometimes results in attempts to create perfect writing using cut, copy and paste; 2) ‘There are no other issues I need to deal with’. Therefore, when the time comes that the supervisor indeed points out project content-related issues, there may be a response ‘Why haven’t you told me this earlier?’ The aforementioned discussion is to ensure supervisors do not lose sight of the whole picture of Chinese students’ PhD theses.

In conclusion, in this chapter, we have specifically examined the cultural characteristics of Chinese students and discussed how they impact on Chinese research degree students, in particular PhD students. We focused on the relationship between Chinese students and Western supervisors. We identified major culturally related issues in this very important one-on-one relationship. A main concept which has a major impact on the performance of Chinese research degree students is Hall’s high- and low-context culture. Chinese are high-context culture people and they write in high-context language. English is a low-context language. To switch from high-context to low-context writing is not easily achieved. We have highlighted several of the prominent culturally related issues in the writing of PhD dissertations. In addition to the writing and relationship issues, we draw the attention of Western supervisors to the bigger picture of a PhD. In short, this chapter offers to Western supervisors without prior training or knowledge strategies for successful supervision experiences.
Notes

1 Although other countries also have systems of gradings, the Chinese system is more competitive due to the culture and the large numbers of students at any point in time.

2 Of course there are cultural variations in other cultures, especially high-context cultures which often have degrees of similarities. In this chapter we are not dealing with individual characteristics but rather characteristics of whole cultural groups insofar as they can be identified.

References


Challenges in supervising Chinese research students


