

Cultural Conflict in PhD Supervision.

**Shen Chen, Doug Absalom & Allyson Holbrook.
SORTI, University of Newcastle, NSW.**

During the past decade, there has been substantial expansion in the provision of both undergraduate and postgraduate programs for overseas students in Australian Universities. The main source of such enrolment has been Asia and the Middle-East, enrolments exceeding 62,000 in 1998. The difficulties encountered by Asian Students who come to Australia to study have provided a rich field for research (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991, Volet & Renshaw 1996, Fung & Mackerras 1998). Because of the diversity of this group, however, their experiences cannot be regarded as culturally homogenous. However, to date, much of this research has focussed on students with a Chinese cultural heritage background. This refers not only to students who speak Chinese or a version thereof but also those who identify with Chinese heritage culture(s). One strand of research, for instance, identifies the distinctive features of learning styles of Asian students with a Confucian based heritage learning culture (Watkins & Biggs 1996).

The problems Chinese students encounter in English speaking higher education settings have been studied in the United Kingdom (Chan & Drover 1997), Canada (Kirby Woodhouse & Ma, 1996) and the USA (Kachru 1999). With respect to Chinese postgraduate research students, the emphasis in the literature has often been on the students' language variations, (Cadman 1997, Paltridge 1997) which have sometimes been seen as being language deficiencies. Predominantly, studies have presented a supervisor's perspective on how students misunderstand their new cultural environment. (Campbell 1995). Differences in approaches to supervising PhD students in various countries have also been the subject of extensive research (McMichael 1993, McQueen 1994). However, researchers have rarely sought the students' perspectives, nor have they explored learning and supervision difficulties in terms of the process of cultural interaction between overseas students and their university supervisors. One notable exception is the longitudinal work of Aspland (1999) with female students. This study identified that the conflict between supervisor expectations and student intentions had a significant cultural dimension. This mismatch has the potential to lead to students giving up their studies altogether through experiencing poor self esteem and low satisfaction with the program.

According to research by Valimaa (1998), new postgraduate students, whatever their cultural origins, encounter two new cultural frames, disciplinary based cultures and institutionally based cultures. In addition, overseas students face a difference between their home culture and the target culture. Hence overseas research students need to accommodate to multiple new cultural frameworks. The current study examines the process of interaction between Chinese students' home or heritage cultures in relation to the discipline and institutional dimensions of the target culture. It attempts to identify and document 'cultural conflicts', i.e. the substantial differences in learning derived from two sets of cultural value systems, from both the students' and supervisors' standpoints.

The project involved some intensive qualitative data gathering and text analysis, using an extended in-depth interview method (Kvale 1996) for students, and a more conventional semi-structured interview for supervisors. Students also completed a questionnaire in which they rated a number of aspects of the supervisor/student relationship on a five point likert scale. 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 based on the 'four culture' model, 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 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 for the purposes of analysis. The supervisors were interviewed by the CI2 in this study who was a colleague and fellow supervisor, in order to maintain parity of status in both interview situations.

In the first section of the project, seven of the eight students interviewed identified the following features:-

1. They expected a hierarchic distance to be maintained between student and supervisor.
2. They believed that students should never challenge the supervisor's ideas.
3. Their experience was that supervisors did not realise the difficulties that students faced.

In addition, six of the eight students asserted:

4. Co-operation was a new form of learning for Chinese 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 specific features caused difficulty:

5. A "substantial contribution to the field of study" was not understood by seven of the eight students.
6. The concept of "independent research" was quite unclear for five out of the eight. These students expected to be given a great deal of specific direction and were unpleasantly surprised when they received critical evaluations of their work.
7. The processes of dealing with research ethics remained a mystery to all eight of the interviewed students. 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. If, as was more usually the case, their work involved a fuzzy idea to be

investigated, then the ethics requirement for specificity of detail was seen as being quite unreasonable.

8. The language problem was certainly one that students were aware of and they expected the supervisor to assist by proof-reading material for submission for publication. There was also some cultural problem awareness, with students expecting the supervisor to direct and train students to co-operate with their colleagues.

Few of these difficulties are startlingly new or unexpected, but the question remains as to whether supervisors are aware of them in any practical sense, and whether there are strategies in place to deal with such difficulties.

In the second section of the project, 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 CI2 prior to conducting the supervisor interviews in order that emphasis and value assignment would be independent of those results. The six major sections of the supervisor interview can be categorised as involving:-

1. Expectations of overseas students.
2. Current practice in supervision.
3. Observation of student learning culture.
4. Awareness of own teaching culture.
5. Teacher /student relationships.
6. Any other comments.

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 three point scale, where a generally positive or 'no problem' reaction was awarded a score of 1, 'some difficulties' received 2, and 'extensive problems' was designated as 3. 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 seen to be irrelevant. Any further discrimination within the middle category into 'slightly positive' or 'slightly negative' was seen as being too fine a separation to be productive or accurate. 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 with the supervisor's normal practice.

Table 1. Expectations and Practice.

Super.	Number	Adjust.	Attitude	Practice.
A	(1)	2	1	1
B	(1)	3	1	2
C	(3)	3	1	1
D	(40)	2	1	1
E	(3)	2	1	2
F	(4)	2	2	2

Clearly, while all supervisors seemed to recognise 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 Chinese students 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 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 characterise the amount of guidance that the supervisor is required to give, this area sometimes leading to the generalisation 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 behaviour sometimes being regarded as culturally inappropriate in Chinese heritage 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.	3	1	1	1	1	1
B	2	1	1	2	2	1
C	1	1	1	1	1	1
D	2	3	1	2	2	1
E	2	2	2	2	2	1
F	1	1	1	1	1	1

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.

Table 3. Teaching Culture.

Super	Sup.comf.	Role	Stu.comf.	Variety	Stu.Comf.
A	1	1	1	2	1
B	1	1	1	2	1
C	1	2	2	1	1
D	1	2	2	1	2
E	1	2	2	2	2
F	1	2	2	2	2

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.

Table 4. Supervisor-student Relationships.

Super	Similar	Distance	Stu.comf.	Cult.problems.
A	2	1	1	2
B	2	2	1	2
C	2	1	1	1
D	2	3	1	2
E	2	2	2	1
F	1	3	2	1

The majority of supervisors saw differences between their Chinese students and their Australian ones, but only two 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's not completely clear which side did the adjusting in this case.

A comparison of these two sets of results reveals a number of difficulties that seem to pass unrealised 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 collegiality, but professional independence and initiative. This appeared to provide considerable difficulty for students but was seen as only a minor problem of adjustment for the 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 don't realise their difficulties appears to be justified. However, the difficulties of having students adjust to co-operative learning processes has been realised 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 overseas students.

The three specific areas identified by students as providing problems, namely 'substantial contribution to the field', 'independent research' and the ethics aspect, 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 institutional culture 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. While two out of the eight identified it as a major concern, and a further two rated it as a secondary concern on a five point scale, the remaining four listed it as number 5, that is, being of least relevance or concern. 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 Chinese 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 computerisation, 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. As might be expected, students are driven to make greater adjustments than are the supervisors who are well established in three out of the four 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.

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