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University life uncovered: making sense of the student experience
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Negotiating an identity in English: the discursive construction and reconstruction of Chinese students

Trevor Grimshaw
Department of Education, University of Bath.

Abstract
This paper explores the international student experience in terms of the construction of identity. Based on the preliminary findings of a British Academy funded project, it focuses on Chinese-speaking students attending a UK university. Through interview-based case studies it documents the cultural, linguistic and academic challenges that these students face, as well as their strategies of self-presentation. The conclusions offer fresh insights into the day-to-day lives of the students, providing a more nuanced image of 'the Chinese learner' than is outlined in much of the existing literature. The paper also suggests important ways in which universities can enhance support for these members of the student body.

Introduction
In recent years international students have made an increasing contribution to the British higher education sector (Wachter, 1999; Smart, 2001; De Wit, 2002; British Council, 2004). One of the most notable developments has been a growth in recruitment of students from the Chinese speaking world, who have become the largest group (Zweig & Chen, 1996). It is of vital importance for British universities to appreciate the needs of these students, not only because of the responsibility of inclusive education but also because their satisfaction is linked to the revenue of British HE and its reputation in the global market.

However, to date little research has sought to investigate the diverse experiences of Chinese-speaking students. A British Academy funded project (HD081X) was designed to address this gap. Through ethnographic interviews involving the elicitation of personal narratives, the project explores the students' experiences of British academic life. This paper presents some preliminary findings from the project, focusing specifically on the contrast between the stereotypical identity that is imposed upon them by the host institution and the multivariate identities that the students themselves embody.

Perspectives on 'the Chinese learner'
In academic discourse there is a strong tendency to stereotype students from the
Chinese-speaking world. In seeking to isolate the attributes of these students, academic staff, international offices and professional development specialists often draw upon the literatures of intercultural communication and comparative organisational behaviour (Brick, 1991; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Accounts of ‘Confucian Heritage Cultures’ have resulted in a relatively consistent image of East Asian learners as: passive; reticent in class; teacher dependent; and exhibiting reproductive rather than critical or speculative learning styles (Ballard, 1996; Flowerdew, 1998; Atkinson, 1999). Although some authors attempt a more nuanced perspective, the discourse of ‘the Chinese learner’ (itself a mass generalisation) nevertheless assumes a deterministic relationship between the perceived features of ‘Chinese culture’ and the behaviours of individual students (cf. Watkins & Biggs 1996, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

However, in recent years a growing literature has challenged the stereotypical construct of non-Western students (Kubota, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Phan, 2004; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Grimshaw, 2007a). Pennycook (1998) sees this as a product of residual colonial discourses. Drawing upon Said’s (1978) thesis on Orientalism, he argues that colonialism generated a series of dichotomies that presented the ‘West’ in self-flattering opposition to the ‘Rest’. Behind these colonial constructs of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ lies the undeclared assumption of racial difference as cultural inferiority. Pennycook illustrates how these persistent notions constantly resurface in the public domain and feed into the dominant discourse of international education (1998).

Orientalism is part of the broader cultural phenomenon of Otherisation; i.e. the tendency to “over-generalize, stereotype and reduce the people we communicate with to something different or less than they are” (Holliday et al, 2004, p. xv). This has been problematised within the field of international English language education, where the prevailing professional-academic discourse perpetuates a “negatively reduced image of the foreign Other” (Holliday, 2005, p.1). Students for whom English is an additional language are often subject to ‘native-speakerism’: a form of discrimination which operates in much the same way as racism and sexism (ibid.; Grimshaw, 2007b).

Ultimately, the key distinction is between an essentialised and a non-essentialised view of culture (Holliday et al., 2004). The former assumes that people belong to homogeneous, mutually exclusive cultures; and that their behaviour is defined by their membership of these cultures. In contrast, the latter, which is associated with progressive, critical forms of social research, sees culture as a ‘social force’ and each person as belonging to a multiplicity of groupings (relating to region, ethnicity, social class, profession, etc.). Thus, “the world is made up of a vast complex of shifting, overlapping, swirling, combining and splitting cultures” (Holliday, 2005, pp. 23-24).

This distinction has important implications for our understanding of students from the Chinese-speaking world. The construct of ‘the Chinese learner’ as a ‘reduced Other’ is a product of “essentialized binarism” (Lin, 2008,p.vii); while the alternative, non-essentialist perspective views Chinese students as complex and creative subjects who display a variety of cultural forms and behaviours.
This also impacts significantly on our conceptualisation of identity. From a non-essentialist perspective, identity is constantly negotiated through communication. These negotiations are unequal, for “it is the powerful groups who have more resources and capital to construct powerful identities for themselves and dictate the rules of the identity game to subordinated groups” (Lin, 2008, p.2). But there is always a tension between imposed and created identities (Holliday et al, 2004). Individuals are able to assert agency by manipulating the cultural resources at their disposal, selecting from a range of options (dress codes, rules of etiquette, belief systems, artefacts, etc.) in order to achieve their purposes in specific contexts (ibid. p.13). A convenient metaphor is that of a pack of playing cards. Social actors are engaged in a sophisticated game of interaction in which, at any given time, one of them may play a specific identity card in order to achieve a particular effect (ibid. p.18).

Language plays an integral role in these processes. A person with limited proficiency in the medium of interaction will inevitably find it more difficult to express his or her identity effectively. Pellegrino Aveni (2005) explores this issue in terms of the study-abroad experience. Drawing on the symbolic interactionist tradition, she investigates the construction and presentation of ‘self’ by (American) international students within a (Russian) second language environment. Her study reveals that the overseas students are frequently frustrated by the inability to articulate their thoughts or feelings effectively in the language of the host culture. They are unable to joke; they cannot respond when being patronised; and they complain that a ‘false persona’ is being imposed upon them. The author subsequently examines the strategies they develop in order to overcome these challenges and develop a ‘self’ that is better adapted to their new context.

The research

The preceding literature highlights some of the key issues which might affect Chinese-speaking students overseas. However, the research presented here gives particular priority to the voices of such students, by eliciting accounts of their everyday experiences on and around a British university campus. The methodology was qualitative and interpretive, involving a series of emergent questions. The data presented in this paper relates to one of those questions: How do the students construct and maintain their sense of identity in a British academic context?

The study involved case studies of 20 students from Mainland China and Taiwan studying at the University of Bath. The participants (14 female and six male) were following one-year full time master’s programmes in a range of disciplines: biology, marketing, interpreting, economics, management, education, electrical engineering, finance, accounting and sociology.

The data were generated by means of ethnographic interviews (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) that took place at regular intervals over a period of 15 months, incorporating the academic year 2006-2007. These interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and/or a Chinese research assistant. Because the study focused
on the daily lives of the students, it seemed natural for the interviews to take place in non-instructed settings, such as coffee bars and halls of residence. In some cases the interviews were supplemented by email correspondence.

The main medium of interaction was Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese). This distinguished the study from most previous ones in the literature. The participants were empowered by being able to communicate in their first language, as this allowed them a greater range of expression. It also facilitated rapport, thereby enabling more fruitful field relations. The extracts in this paper have been translated into English. Some code switching took place, though this was always initiated by the interviewee. It generally involved words or phrases that the participants found easier or more natural to express in English, such as academic or technical terms.

The study followed the steps of the ethnographic research cycle, as described by Spradley (1980). This provided a systemic and coherent overall strategy for data generation, but also allowed sufficient flexibility for the pursuit of emergent themes. By following the participants through the entire cycle of their master’s programmes it was possible to trace patterns of development and identify significant milestones.

When interpreting the data the researchers made a particular effort to identify member categories of description; i.e. we allowed the participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. The analysis also took account of the common tendency towards essentialism. We made frequent use of the device of ‘bracketing’. That is, we sought to put aside the preconceptions and the ‘easy answers’ that are characteristic of essentialist accounts of the world. Instead, were guided by this basic principle: "While respecting whatever people say about their own culture, take what they say as evidence of what they wish to project rather than as information about where they come from" (Holliday et al., 2004 p.48).

**Results: some emergent categories**

Although the analysis of data is ongoing, certain categories relating to identity construction are evident. One major recurrent theme is the notion of study abroad as a process of self improvement. Many participants stated that their motivation for coming to the UK was to acquire a qualification that they could use for ‘beating on doors’ (qiao men zhuoan) when seeking a better job in their home country. Several others aimed to develop linguistic skills, stressing in particular that ‘British English has high status’; or to gain experience of another culture (e.g. “I thought this ‘international’ background would do me good in the future”). Some saw overseas study as a means of gaining face (e.g. “My father saw his friends’ children study abroad, and so…”). Most were aware that the study abroad experience would be challenging. In summary, these Chinese-speaking students were engaged in a conscious ‘reconstruction of the self’.

However, they also experienced some disappointments. Despite their initial expectations of an intercultural experience, several commented on the social distance between themselves and Western students. One interviewee remarked: “To be
honest, we are not be able to get close... They don’t talk to us.” British students seemed preoccupied with their own activities and showed little interest in their non-Western classmates. One participant stated: “I guess everyone walking in the campus would very much notice that international students are being segregated” (email correspondence).

Some participants attributed this social distance to differences in culturally-based norms of interaction:

I just feel it is more tiring to do group work with students from other countries... We have had some unpleasant experiences... But when Chinese students get together, we all have a common understanding about how long we will take to complete the task, how we should divide up the task, and so on.

The sense that it was more efficient to deal with members of one’s cultural ingroup extended to university support services. One interviewee explained that, when needing help from the computing help desk, “we wait until the Chinese assistant is on duty”.

Departments and individual members of staff appeared to vary in terms of efforts towards integration, some organising extra-curricular social events. However, some interviewees reported cases of exclusion:

I do feel something different, that is, the way Western lecturers treat Western students and Asian students. For example, our department was making a leaflet which introduces our courses... The department only asked Western students’ opinions, while neglecting ours. When they needed some pictures of students, they only asked Western students again. Not one of the students they asked was Asian. I had never experienced this kind of thing before; but when it happened, I felt very uncomfortable. It is a kind of discrimination. Or, at least, they didn’t respect our opinions.

When discussing their induction into university life and the people to whom they turned for help or advice, many of the interviewees mentioned the role of informal support networks composed of fellow students. To some extent this was seen as a reproduction of the ‘classmate’/’countryman’ system which occurs in Chinese universities, often attributed to prolonged companionship and notions of group loyalty (cf. Grimshaw, 2007a). However, it was also explained by a lack of awareness of the support services available in British universities; or, more commonly, the assumption that, for cultural and linguistic reasons, it was simply not efficient to deal with these services.

Statements about the approachability of university staff varied greatly between accounts. In some departments informal orders had developed so as to compensate for the
aloofness of academic staff:

Researcher:  How about when you have some difficulties in your studies? Do you ask your friends or classmates?

Student:  Mainly I will try to solve it myself first. If I can’t, I will ask the PhD students in the lab. If they don’t know the answer, I will ask my lecturers. But I think mainly it is PhD students who help me most… Tutors seldom appear in the lab.

Language related issues were another major category. English language proficiency was seen by many as the major issue for Chinese-speaking students. One stated: “As long as we have strong language skills, we can manage the other aspects”. Another commented that, in fact, “the course content is not difficult at all, compared with that taught in a Chinese university”. The real challenge was reading, writing, following lectures and contributing to seminars English. The frustration of being unable to express themselves clearly had a strong affective impact on some students:

It was so tiring and stressful to study here. I have never been like this. It was mainly the language barrier. For example, I spent two weeks to write an essay and got a mark of 60 per cent. But a British student spent a few days writing a very similar essay and got 80 per cent. It was so frustrating. I felt what I did was in vain, and so began to lack confidence.

At the end of the year some participants acknowledged they had overestimated the extent to which their English would improve. Some attributed this to the lack of interaction with members of the host community. They continued to use English only in limited contexts, such as the seminar room or the refectory. Though the perception is difficult to confirm, one marketing student even claimed that: “My spoken English has become worse, because I speak it less frequently in the UK than when I am in China”.

In contrast, an interesting realisation for some was the increasing usefulness of Chinese (especially Mandarin) as a lingua franca:

Most of our classmates are from Chinese-speaking countries. Even people from Malaysia can speak Putonghua too. We all speak Putonghua… My friend and I decided to communicate in English. But gradually we gave up, because we found it weird to speak to our own friends in English.

Another recurrent theme was the under-representation and misrepresentation of Chinese cultures. Some interviewees commented on the scarcity of up-to-date library resources relating to their home countries, although assignments required them "to support [their] arguments with evidence from a context with which [they were] familiar". Others commented on the influence of the British media in shaping people’s perceptions of China. Reports concentrated on a limited range of issues, especially human rights and the environment, while failing to reflect the diversity of views within
Chinese society or the efforts being made to resolve the problems. The interviewees were particularly disappointed when lecturers illustrated points with negative examples from China. In contrast to these generalisations, the interviews contained much discussion of regional differences, social class, educational background, and various other distinctions of which British people remained unaware.

Whilst the imposition of reduced identities was a problem, some participants also acknowledged that they stereotyped themselves. Some did this as a response to being in an unfamiliar environment and feeling the need to ‘close ranks’. Some admitted they autostereotyped because this appealed to their tutors’ taste for exoticised accounts of the ‘East’. Others did so for strategic reasons; e.g. claiming inadequacies in their previous education in order to make excuses for underachievement. One education student resigned herself to accepting a reduced identity simply because it was the easiest option. Her dissertation supervisor had enthusiastically recommended some references “about Chinese education”. She found these to be out of date, inappropriate to her context (she was from Taiwan), and relating to students of the wrong age group. But in order to avoid offence, and because she lacked alternatives, she eventually based her literature review on these sources.

**Conclusions**

This project, despite its small scale, has yielded a richness of data that has yet to be fully explored. The preliminary findings suggest that for the participants life at a British university was a character-building experience in more ways than one. While it represented an opportunity to reconstruct the self through the acquisition of skills and knowledge, it involved much anxiety due to linguistic and cultural issues. The data also confirm that other forms of construction and positioning were at play, including the persistence of Orientalist stereotypes within everyday academic discourses. The participants responded to these challenges by various means, including ‘strategic essentialism’ (cf. Lin, 2008). Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that, in their willingness to accept the packaged realities supplied to them by their Chinese-speaking students, academic staff were complicit in the processes of otherisation and reduction.

This has serious implications for British universities. Firstly, it is vital to acknowledge the complexity and dynamism of our students’ cultures. This should be reflected in the provision of academic, administrative and pastoral services. Although some institutions already provide staff with training in intercultural communication, we need to ensure that this training encourages participants to view culture as difference, encompassing ethnicity, social class, gender and other dimensions, besides nationality (Kramsh, 1993, pp. 205-206). The training should also address culture as an interpersonal process, rather than presenting and prescribing “cultural facts and behaviours” as if they were “fixed, normative phenomena” (ibid.). For suggestions, see Holliday et al (2004).

This study also highlights the urgent need to reassess the validity of current English language placement tests, as well as current methods of in-sessional support. In doing so, universities should take advice from specialists in the fields of TESOL and applied
linguistics. For more extensive discussion of these issues, see Edwards et al (2007).

Future research can apply the methodology of the present study to larger scale projects involving cross-university collaboration and international students from other backgrounds. Since one of the major findings was the role of informal support networks, the conceptual frameworks of future projects might be informed by sociocultural theory, specifically the literatures of “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2004). Through this enhanced understanding, sociologists of higher education may contribute to the formation of a truly international academic community.

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References and further reading


