SCHERTO GILL

LEARNING ACROSS CULTURES

An ethnographic and narrative study of postgraduate overseas Chinese students' intercultural learning

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Chapter I Introduction

1.1 My personal journey

This thesis was inspired by my own intercultural learning experience in the UK, through formal academic learning and living and working in this country.

In the summer of 1997, I arrived in the UK for a short visit, which was followed by one year's postgraduate study at a British university. My trip to the UK was the realisation of many years' desire, curiosity and interest about Western culture and an expectation to learn new educational theories. At that time, mainland China had been opened up to the West for nearly twenty years, and I had met and worked with people from a few Western countries before I left China, so, in a way, I felt Western culture was no novelty for me. Even so, actually living in a Western country and studying on a postgraduate course in a Western academic institution was a rare and unique experience for the majority of Chinese young people, including myself.

For the first year or so, my experience was twofold. On the one hand, many cultural experiences became learning opportunities, which helped clarify my perceptions and understanding of myself and my previous assumptions and values. Open-mindedness, the result of many years' preparation for experiencing Western culture in the way I was brought up, the education I received and the image of Western culture in my mind, helped develop my feeling of 'homecoming' in a strange land. I did not really feel that I had gone through the emotional upheaval of 'cultural shock'; rather, speaking another language and integrating into another culture somehow made it possible for me to reconstruct my identity. Intercultural competence was thus in the process of being developed.

On the other hand, I was completely taken aback by the 'learning shock' experienced during my one year's postgraduate study. I was initially totally disorientated in terms of how to cope with postgraduate academic study in the UK. On reflection, I realised that this was due to a lack of understanding of the differences between the Western and Chinese education systems, how learning is perceived in Western education and the expectations of my performance of the Western academic institution. The academic challenge was compounded by a lack of the learning skills needed to cope with various academic tasks.

However, the 'learning shock' also brought me a profound understanding and awareness of the essence of learning in a British university. After a few months, I started a long process of adaptation to the learning mode and slowly but surely became more competent and confident in coping with the various academic requirements and challenges.

Unfortunately, the one year postgraduate course was completed with some dissatisfaction on my part, because just as I had adjusted myself to the British higher education system and felt able to meet its requirements, the course came to an end. So, two years after the postgraduate course, I joined the University of Sussex to pursue doctoral studies, with the aim of coming to a better understanding of what had happened to me and to many other Chinese students during their one year postgraduate courses.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the inter-relationship between the intercultural learning experience of the Chinese students studied and corresponding academic, socio-cultural contexts in the UK. It is also to investigate the influence of culture and the students' prior learning experience and life histories on the learning and adaptation process and how students transferred knowledge and skills or developed approaches and strategies appropriate for their new learning contexts.

The fundamental issues that emerge are largely under-addressed in the literature. These issues mainly concern the changes that Chinese postgraduate students experience as a result of intercultural learning, including:

- the overall intercultural learning experience
- the changes taking place during their studies in the UK
- the impact of these changes on the student's self concept and self perception
- the process of intercultural adaptation
- the strategies which resulted in successful intercultural learning
- the contextual factors that contributed to the learning experience

The key words here, as in my personal experience, are 'culture' and 'learning'. Why is culture (and cultures) so significant in the Chinese students' learning experience in the UK? I regard culture as a source of the self and I am interested in understanding what

happens to the self when the student is in a process of a cultural shift in an 'external' environment - in the case of the overseas Chinese student, this external environment is her learning context. Does she have to reinvent, recreate or reconstruct a cultural and self identity when confronted by new ideals and values?

In this thesis, culture is considered an important contextual element in which learning takes place. It is my intention to reveal other such contextual elements that help students' intercultural adaptation and accompanying qualitative change in their attitudes and perceptions; in other words, that which affect the process of learning.

The term 'intercultural learning' includes both the experience of encountering two different cultures and the learning that occurs through such an encounter when studying postgraduate courses within cross-cultural higher education. In this case, these are Chinese students studying at British universities, using English language which is not their mother-tongue.

The empirical work of this thesis was a study of the experiences of a group of 10 postgraduate Chinese students who studied in a British university. This work took place four years after the first significant influx of Chinese students into British higher education in 1998. The study focused on these Chinese students' perceptions of their intercultural learning experience during one-year postgraduate studies and explored the inter-relationship between intercultural learning, socio-cultural adaptation and individual personal development. The empirical work aimed at an in-depth understanding of these students' experience from a holistic perspective. It therefore painted a different picture from the research and studies in the literature that focus on issues of the marketing of British education as a commodity and deal with students' problems and needs as part of 'client care'. This thesis sought an alternative and more positive way of seeing international education and the phenomenon of overseas Chinese students' studying in the UK, rather than the conventional view, which tends to view these students as merely adding to the diversity on the campus and being an additional source of income to British Higher Education.

This research will be of interest to current and future overseas Chinese students, international marketing and recruiting staff, academic staff and supporting working with overseas students, and above all, the British higher education institutions themselves.

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1.3 Rationale and background to the study

Overseas Chinese students are suitable subjects for the investigation of these issues as Chinese education systems are very different from their British counterparts and the Chinese education system may have encouraged Chinese students to conceptualise learning in a way that is in great contrast to that which is expected of students by the British education system. The number of Chinese students in British Higher Education has increased greatly in recent years, for example, from less than 3,000 Chinese students in British higher education in 1997/8 to over 20,000 Chinese students in 2001/2. Hence many British higher education institutions are not well prepared for the characteristics of Chinese students and the support they need (Alexander 2002).

There has been a good deal of research into the 'problems' experienced by overseas Chinese students, such as language inadequacy, both in the academic and social contexts, students being unused to independent study and self directed learning, a general lack of study methods and skills, not to mention being overwhelmed by the Britishness embedded in most of the subjects studied and teaching materials, and a common failure to establish a rapport with host students (Kinnell 1990). Additionally, the Chinese students are often characterised by Western academic tutors and researchers as *not* being pro-active in seeking solutions to problems as well as lacking critical and analytical thinking, which is exacerbated by a so-called traditional methodology of 'rote learning' and heavy dependence on 'teacher guidance'. All these features make overseas Chinese students a very interesting case for further investigation.

The literature is constantly evolving in this area and there is much discussion of the need for awareness of overseas students 'problems' and of remedial strategies and support provision. Nevertheless, the whole picture of overseas Chinese students remains a gloomy one from a British institution's perspective. The fact that overseas students contribute to a multi-cultural campus seems to be less worthy of investigation compared with the 'problems' they are deemed to create for professional practice. The opportunities for overseas Chinese students to take an intercultural approach in their learning develop skills and cultural adaptability and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for British students, teaching staff and other international students to gain both socio-cultural and academic intercultural understanding are currently thin on the ground.

So far, there has little research exploring the phenomenon of the intercultural learning of overseas Chinese students, in terms of the changes in their assumptions and worldviews, new personal paradigms of values, and subjectivity. Through this research, I have come to understand that the greater part of Chinese postgraduate students' experience is unknown to the Western researchers, in particular, what happens to these students when they are in between cultures and subjectivities, and what impact the process of intercultural learning has on their evolving identities, values and worldviews.

1.4 Research questions and research methodology

This study has taken a qualitative approach to investigating overseas Chinese students' one-year postgraduate experience in the UK. The epistemological paradigm that has guided the research is constructivism, which holds that realities are known to us by being constructed socially and experientially. In other words, the world is only known to those who experience it.

Within this epistemological paradigm, the study set out to investigate the following research questions:

- What are overseas PG Chinese students' intercultural learning experiences in the UK; in particular, what changes do the students undergo?
- How and why do these changes take place?

The investigation was conducted in the case study format using ethnographic methods of participant observation, informal interviews and constant and in-depth reflection on the participants and my own experience. I believe that only by using the case study methodology, would I be able to explore profoundly the phenomenon of overseas Chinese students' intercultural learning in the UK and collect a variety of data over a prolonged period of time (Yin 1989). The case study involved ten participants over a period of one year and I used a multi-design approach to get a more holistic view of the dynamics of the students' experience (Jensen and Rodgers 2001).

The ethnographic research method enabled me to act as both researcher and researched. I worked on a part time basis at the British university in the role of Chinese Student Support Officer. Through this, I had access to many overseas Chinese students and made enquiries about their learning experience over the academic year. Meanwhile, I had also been a postgraduate student in the UK and undergone a similar learning

process and had similar experiences to my fellow students from China. Both roles put me in the position of an insider in this research and using ethnography seemed the most appropriate research method.

Despite the advantage of being an insider in this research, I have been aware, throughout the data collection, of my own potential bias as a researcher. First, I had been living in the UK for more than five years when I started this research; whereas most of the participants of the research had been here for less than one year, with two participants here a little more than one year. I had adapted to both the socio-cultural and academic environment much more than my participants. This could potentially influence the way that I interpreted the participants' experience. I tried to make use of, and problematise this potential bias by using myself as one of the research subjects. Second, during the five years of my absence from China, there had been tremendous social and cultural changes. The impact of globalisation and the strength of the Chinese economy have brought profound social and cultural shifts in people's ways of thinking and their perception of Western culture and their personal paradigm. My lack of experience of these shifts could potentially result in my misunderstanding the participants' experiences.

As a researcher, I made my background and purpose of research visible and clear to all participants. Thus, by being explicit about my potential bias, integrating who I was in the entire research process and creating opportunities for reflection and interpretation collaboratively with participants, my research has provided insights not only into the adaptation process of intercultural learning but also into the transformative learning opportunities that it produced for the participants. The enquiry created many opportunities for the participants to reflect either together in a group or individually on their learning experience. As the research proceeded, new knowledge was constructed by the participants through constant reflection on the reality and lived experience.

The data collection benefited from the ethnographic context of a whole year's work. There is a rich and detailed data set, which includes recordings of in-depth interviews and conversations between the participants and me, my research journals throughout the research, a collection of life histories based on the participants' lived experience, and a collection of my personal experience, encounters, reflections and observations of various aspects of postgraduate studies in a British university.

1.5 Synopsis

This thesis has ten chapters:

This chapter, Chapter I, has briefly explained my personal background and interest in the area explored, the purpose of study, the main issues addressed by this thesis, the research questions and the methodology used.

Chapters II and III are both literature review. Chapter II investigates the concept of culture and concepts and theories of intercultural learning. It also reviews some of the existing research into overseas Chinese students' experiences in the UK and argues that there is some incongruence in intercultural learning theories and current empirical findings. Chapter III continues investigating intercultural learning, but from a more abstract angle, arguing that it is an adaptation process leading to personal development and growth. It further seeks to use learning theories and theories of narrative self-identity to support the argument. The discussions in both chapters provide the theoretical framework for the thesis.

Chapter IV sets out the background, context and rationale for this study.

Chapter V explains the epistemology, methodology and the research design and reflects on the effectiveness of the design and some ethical issues.

Chapter VI gives accounts of two participants' life histories. (The rest of collected life histories are in Appendix I.) These life histories provide details of the context of Chinese students' upbringing, prior educational experience, a history of exposure to Western culture and explain their motivation and purpose for studying in the UK and the overall impact of the learning experience on their self-concept and self-identity.

Chapter VII is also an empirical chapter, presenting an outline showing the progression of the participants' perceptions of their adaptation and individual development and describing and analysing the participants' learning experience under themed topic headings.

Chapter VIII opens up the discussion about the processes involved in the participants' intercultural adaptation, strategies and the contextual factors contributing to their experience. The topical analysis also unfolds other aspects of change these students experienced, including the development of intercultural competence and an ongoing construction of self-identity.

Chapter IX continues the discussions in Chapter VIII by developing the empirical findings into an integrated model, from which the implications of the findings are incorporated into the research's methodological core, arguing that the narrative process of the research has enabled the participants to reflect and negotiate meaning from their lived experience. This integrated perspective suggests that active meaning making has enhanced and transformed the participants' understanding and experience of intercultural learning.

Chapter X reflects on my personal journey as a change (and changed) agent through this research and considers some further implications for the teaching and learning of overseas Chinese students in British Higher Education.

1.6 A note on focus

The field I have researched is complex and the narratives from which the research is derived are very rich. Inevitably this led to issues of focus. The interpretative approach to the narratives in this research derives from what Bruner (1996:XIV) terms 'confluence', where many streams of elements flow together. In my thesis, these include anthropological, sociological, intercultural and psychological elements, but it is important to note here that there are many other aspects of the data that I could have pursued, yet did not. For instance, I could have looked into the differences between the participants, especially from the demographic angle, such as how participants' intercultural experience varied according to their social class, age, gender and ethnicity; I could have explored the differences in learning characteristics and adaptations to British Higher Education from the perspective of the participants' prior educational experience; or investigated whether there were intra-cultural differences in terms of the participants' attitudes towards British culture, Western Higher Education, their inter-personal relationships with students from other cultures and the participants' overall intercultural adaptation process. I could have looked into the social relations within the intercultural learning context as perceived by the participants, in particular, in terms of power and authority in relation to their academic tutors; or taken the opportunity to investigate power relations, cultures and other sociological elements in the phenomena explored. In addition, I would have liked to devote some part of the thesis to both learning discourse and social discourse as embedded within the phenomenon of

overseas Chinese students' studying in Britain. I was also tempted to investigate cultural discourse and cultural analysis.

However, I have chosen to exclude or move these elements to the background of the thesis and focus entirely on the changes taking place during the intercultural learning processes and the development of the participants' self-identity. The space and scope of this thesis only allows me to concentrate on the issues which particularly motivated me about the experience of overseas Chinese students. My own journey of intercultural learning inspired me to pursue eagerly what other students experienced in similar areas. As to the features mentioned above, they are equally important to an understanding of overseas Chinese students' intercultural learning in the UK. They could perhaps be the focus of future studies.

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