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"The Chinese learner" or "learners from China"?
A multiple case study of Chinese masters' students in the
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"*The* Chinese learner" or "learners from China"?
A multiple case study of Chinese masters' students in the University of Bath

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents research into Chinese students' learning experiences in the UK. In recent years this has become an important issue given the fact that students from China now form the largest international student group in British universities. In this study, I explore problems of stereotyping 'the Chinese learner'. It aims to challenge essentialist conceptualisation which sees individual students from China as undifferential collective members marked by a unique and fixed set of cultural scripts.

A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted to investigate experiences of 13 Chinese postgraduate students in a UK university. Specifically, an audio diary method combined with various types of interviews, observation and internet-mediated methods were employed. In addition, the research design evolved under critical reflection as the study progressed. The research was permeated by complex social interactions. This in turn required careful attention to ethical considerations and the conventions that governed such interaction.

The research reveals how diverse meanings and understandings the participants derived from their experiences combined to impact on their perceptions and actions. Firstly, the findings indicate the interrelationship between different contextual factors. They show that the students' learning performance was influenced by various social activities. The participants, aware of the challenges they face, employed diverse strategies to survive and succeed in new cultural and academic environments. Finally, the research reveals the reformation and reconstruction of self-identity as crucial consequences of learning in the UK.

In the conclusion, I summarize the findings and give recommendations. Specifically, I stress my stance of problematising an over-generalised depiction of 'the Chinese learner' and call for much greater attention to be paid to the complexity of each individual, and the power of individual agency. I also urge future research to turn to methodologies sensitive to individual difference, without necessarily denying similarities that may be attributed to shared cultural constructs. Finally, a model as a base on which to study students' experiences is tentatively proposed to aid future research.

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on a range of learning experiences of a group of Chinese students in the UK. I seek to draw attention to the issues they face at a potentially crucial turning point in their lives. This introduction first outlines key aspects of the context within which the study is set. It provides some background information on key transformations that have taken place in China in recent decades. The significance of Chinese learners in Britain, with their contribution to British economy, is also discussed, which serves as a further element of this contextualisation.

The first section in this chapter also stresses key motives behind the study. My central concern here is that, important as the acknowledgement of commonly shared characters among Chinese students may be, it is erroneous to prescribe any static, core features to 'the group' simply because they share the same broad geographical or political origin. Such cultural prescription is, however, widespread in much of the current literature of Chinese learners.

My advocacy of anti-essentialism appears again in the second and third section of the chapter, where I clarify my research purposes, present my research aims and list my research questions. I argue that instead of referring to 'the Chinese learner' as though we are dealing with an undifferentiated mass marked by a unique set of cultural scripts, we need to bear in mind the changing nature of culture and study these students as individual agents whose identities are mobile and fluid. Hence, it is essential to focus on social contexts and interpersonal interactions in everyday life. Drawing on social constructionism, I argue that changes and developments among Chinese students studying in the UK can only be adequately understood through the study of their lived experiences, both on and out of campus and within relations of power. In the final section, I present the organization of the study, with a brief clarification of the contents of each chapter in the thesis.

1.1 Background

In this section, I firstly focus on the implications of an increasing influx of students from mainland China learning in the UK. I then summarize the changes taking place in the past decades in China, which are possibly responsible for the situation. Specifically, the economic reforms result in an emerging middle class in Chinese society; meanwhile the educational reforms lead to a more and more fierce competition in Chinese labour market. Both factors underline increasing self-funding mainland Chinese students in Britain.

1.1.1 Increasing numbers of Chinese students in the UK

The past decade, particular the last 7 years, has seen a dramatic expansion of Chinese student enrolments in UK universities. HESA statistics for 1994/1995 suggest 2295 Chinese students studying for a qualification at either under- or post- graduate level. In the new century, Chatham House data, as noted by Nania & Green (2004), records an annual growth rate of 74% in the number of students from mainland China within British higher education institutions. A more recent HESA (2008) report on non-UK domiciled students[1], furthermore, presents a population of 49595 Chinese students following degree courses in UK universities. Hence, within 10 years, the number has grown by 20 times. Considering that the numbers counted only those registered in tertiary education, the total number will be even bigger if additional Chinese students enrolled in language or secondary courses are included.

Moreover, among the increasing number of Chinese faces on campuses, a majority of them are studying for a non-research degree. According to HESA (2008), the number of mainland Chinese students coming for a taught master course has grown most sharply, from 245 in 1995 to 21620 in 2006/07. This is followed by that of undergraduate Chinese, which rose from 502 to 18410. The number of those enrolled for a research degree shows a more moderate increase, from 1570 in 1995 to 5170 in 2006/07. The dominating position of taught postgraduate students within the whole cohort of

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[1] HESA (2008) uses the term of 'Non-UK domiciled students' to refer to the students who were not residents in the UK prior to the start of their programmes of study.

mainland Chinese students (21620 out of 49595) partly accounts for my focus on this group in this PhD research.

1.1.2   Changes in China

When reviewing the flows of mainland Chinese students learning overseas in the new century, (marked by increases of 65%, 118%, 47% in 2000, 2001, 2003 respectively), Yao (2004:10) attributes the causes of 'the huge efflux surge' to social factors. Following Yao's analysis, I draw on several crucial social changes Mainland China society has undergone in the past decade:

Firstly, Chinese economic reforms, which began in 1989, lead to a growing middle class in China (Bian, 2002; Rastell, 2006). The increased financial incomes and personal savings make studying in Britain an affordable and achievable objective. In addition, it is acknowledged that highly educated personnel are crucial for maintaining a rapid economic development (e.g. Chen & Feng, 2000). With this in mind, the Chinese government is encouraging self-financed students to learn abroad (Agelasto, 1998). The relevant policies and regulations consist of the freedom for the graduate to choose whether or not to return to China and the establishment of a scholarship in 2003 to reward the excellent self-supported research students in five counties, including the UK (*ibid*; Lin, 2005). In addition, the development in available technology has increased the channels for obtaining information about foreign universities. International education exhibitions in China, free access to international universities' websites, and returned graduates from foreign higher institutions are among diverse sources for prospective students to engage with the international education market; all of which may contribute to the expansion of Chinese students overseas (*ibid*).

Secondly, higher education reforms in China, in particular the massive enrolment expansion launched in 1996, have resulted in a more and more fierce competition in Chinese domestic labour market, which acts as another driving force of Chinese students learning abroad (Yao, 2004). Specifically, before 1996 Chinese higher education could be characterised as an elite system, in terms of those gaining entry and in their subsequent employment destinations. People graduating from universities were

socially accepted as both intelligent and diligent, for whom jobs were allocated by central or local governments (Agelasto, 1998). The 1996 education reform, however, extended opportunities for school leavers to continue into tertiary education on a large scale (Nuffic, 2005; Pretorius & Xue, 2003). The significantly growing number of university graduates, together with the gradual substitution of a labour market for the job allocation practice in the late 1990s, created the increasing difficulties for those seeking what might be identified as an 'appropriate' job for a university graduate (Agelasto, 1998). Credential inflation began to appear and many of the positions, which were previously open to those with undergraduate degree, began to demand postgraduate degrees.

Meanwhile, expanded recruitment at the undergraduate level has increased the competition for postgraduate places, compared with the years before 1996. For example, in 2006 397,925 students enrolled in postgraduate schools in China, compared with a total of 3.77 million students who obtained their first degree in the same year (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2006). Insufficient domestic places for postgraduate studies, along with the problems of poor facilities, inadequate teaching staff and unsatisfactory quality, has increased the attractiveness of masters' courses in foreign higher education institutions.

Moreover, in that the relationship between education and individual participation in economy has changed radically in recent years through the development of labour market rather than a job allocation system, this has led to an education assuming a greater economic significance for the individual and also promoted a positional competition within education, with both the level and source of educational qualifications increasing the significance. This would suggest an assumption that for Chinese people nowadays studying abroad is not only a means to satisfy internal learning interest but the means of gaining some sort of social or economic advantage (Lin, 2005).

Under such circumstances, Britain, which is the country of origin of the English language (Lin, 2005), enjoys not only a high reputation in the higher education

(Chinanews.cn, 2008; Lin, 2005; Blaug & Woodhall, 1980), but also great cultural heritage, ample historical resorts, beautiful natural environment and secure social conditions (Lin, 2005), is among the most popular destination for Chinese students (chinaview.cn, 2007). These, together with a short duration of most postgraduate courses, the efforts of British universities to promote British education in China (news.bbc.co.uk, 2001), and recently allowing foreign students to stay for maximally two year after graduation (Chinanews.cn, 2008; ukcosa.org.uk; ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk), lead to the surge of Chinese students in British universities.

1.1.3 The financial contribution of Chinese students to the UK higher education institutions

Being the largest group of international students in the UK, the students from Mainland China have contributed a lot to British higher education, at least through the tuition fees they pay (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002). As the result of the full cost fee policy for non-EU students which was introduce in 1980, British universities financially benefit a lot from the expansion of foreign students in general and mainland Chinese students in particular (Taylor, 2002). In 2005, non-EU students were charged by Britain universities around £7,000 per person (Treasury committee, 2005). Some subjects were particularly more expensive, such as MBA in Bath University, where students need to pay over £20,000 for the one-year course in 2005/6. Taking into consideration the total number of mainland Chinese students in UK, the amount of funding obtained in this way is expected to be huge. According to the estimates of Chatham House(Nania & Green, 2004), which has surveyed 23 of the top 100 universities in the UK, the average financial contribution of Chinese postgraduates, in form of tuition fees, amounted to £1.5 million per university, while the total contribution to the UK economy reached £1.4 billion (Treasury committee, 2005).

1.1.4   The significance of deepening our understandings of Chinese students in the UK

A critical analysis of the existing literature of Chinese learners shows limited academic research of these students' experiences in the UK (see 2.2; Scherto, 2005). Although it is generally recognized that British universities should attend to Chinese students' voices and should try to meet their demands so as to maintain their appeal for the

Chinese market, the acknowledgement mainly stems from a perspective of Chinese students' capacity as consumers of higher education commodities and as the objects of UK universities' competition (Scherto, 2005, Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002).

The overwhelming concern of revenue generation, which seems simply the most important incentive to recruit Chinese students, has been criticized as being responsible for the lack of an in-depth understanding of this group (Scherto, 2005). Another problem is that, from my personal observation and experience, some British academics still think that foreign students are grateful of the opportunity to study in the UK, even though these foreign students are clients, and the British higher education system is dependent on them.

Furthermore, not only is research in this field sparse, my observation is that the majority of relevant research of Chinese students resorts to a simplified and stereotyped approach to differences in Eastern and Western culture. Specifically, widespread in literature, Chinese students are commented on as a group suffering from culture shock, who lack 'points of references, social norms and rules to guide their actions and to understand others' behaviours' (e.g. Furnham, 1997:16); they are also depicted as being troubled by significant differences in various aspects of teaching and learning between what they were used to in China and what they experience in the UK (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). With the belief that cognitive behaviours and learning outcomes are subject to such differences (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002), the forms of the differences, especially in terms of knowledge construction, remain the focus of studies of Chinese students (see section 2.2.2).

In addition, the essentialist approach which the previous research is observed is closely linked with methodological flaws (see section 2.2.4). The arguments that advocate 'the Chinese learner' as a distinct group are based either on a fixed interpretation of 'the Chinese culture', particularly the Confucius's teachings; or primarily on perceptions of Western staff (see section 2.2.2). Ignoring the voices of learners from China has a consequence in the culturalist and ethnocentric discourses which dichotomise 'the East' from 'the West' in general and 'the Chinese' from 'the British' in particular. As for

research focusing on Chinese learners, such as those done by Watkins & Biggs (1996) and Jin & Cotazzi1 (996a, b; 1998a, b, 1997, 2001), data have been gathered by large-scale questionnaires or single-round interviews (see section 2.2.2.4). My concern is that those research methods have intrinsic limitations and cannot by themselves enable us to embrace the complex of individual experiences or the dynamics of individuals' interactions with varied contextual influences. The interweaving between the essentialist misunderstanding of 'the Chinese learners' and the methodological inadequacies to address the misunderstandings imposes dual tasks to my research, that is, the efforts of understanding Chinese students as distinct individuals and locating such efforts in the practices of innovative research methodology.

1.2   Purpose of the study

To provide a corrective to stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner' in the literature, this thesis opens a close investigation of overall experiences of a group of Mainland Chinese students in a British university. None of my participants lived outside China before coming to the UK, with only one exception having lived in another Confucius Heritage Country (CHC, Biggs, 1996). In addition to the focus on their academic learning, their personal lives are equally stressed, from a consideration that out-campus experiences could have dramatic impacts on learning outcomes.

To fulfil the aims, my study is characterised as being process-oriented, context-based and individual-focused. These key methodological aspects are under-addressed in previous research (see section 2.2.2.4). As argued earlier, this is largely responsible for the misrepresentation of Chinese learners as distinct individuals. Specifically, illuminated methodologically by social-constructionism (e.g. Cottor, et.al, 2004), I adopt a process-oriented approach which allows me to focus on the processes of change and personal development among my participants. Challenging the arguments which ascribe fixed or static traits to human beings, I claim that any efforts to reveal the socialization of Chinese students in Britain should be located in the 'process' rather than 'product'. Advocating that given sufficient contextual facilitators, students can exert agency to adapt and develop, rather than being merely victims of static cultural forces, the approach allows me to observe the anticipation, experiences, disappointment

and successes, and a variety of changes they undergo within the year of masters' course. In particular, it enables me to reveal their prior education experiences in China; the initial expectations towards learning and living in Bath; the changes in their attitudes, values and views, and why; the impacts of changes upon their self-image, self-confidence, self-knowledge and self-perceptions; the gradual adaptation to the new environment -- or failure to do so -- and how these happen.

Moreover, drawing on social-constructionism (Burr, 1995), I emphasize contextual influences on learners; i.e. all learning activities are context-situated and subject to various and varying influences, from physical settings to interpersonal relationships and rules and norms which regulate such relationship. I argue that it is through interaction with changing environments that students, who have the ability to think, reflect and act with the aid of contextual facilitators, set up goals, adjust actions and achieve personal transformation. The direct consequence of a stress on contexts is my exploration of the participants' experiences in several social settings in this thesis (i.e. lecture rooms, work place, collaborative groups, and venues for social gathering). By exploring diverse contextual dynamics, I am able to explore how individuals' performance is restricted in some contexts but facilitated in others and how the contextual factors combine to affect individuals' learning outcomes.

In all, rejecting a 'big' cultural approach which explains learning behaviours from fixed cultural ascriptions (see Holliday, 1999), I aim to approach individual experiences in their own terms. Drawing on a holistic view of my participants experiences which integrate on- and off-campus lives, my methodology not only enables me to reveal contextual influences but also to perceive individuals as capable human agents, who retain the ability to communicate with the contextual factors so as to maximize personal achievement. I argue that the dynamics in individual-environment relationships results in individual differences. This will challenge the essentialist depiction of 'the Chinese learner'.

1.3   Research questions and research methodology

My empirical work involved a group of 13 Mainland Chinese students who studied in a

British university for taught masters' courses in the year 2005/06. To serve my research purpose of challenging cultural stereotypical labeling, my epistemological stances were interpretative and subjective. They were concerned with accessing daily experiences, emphasizing participants' own voices, and stressing the interpretation and understanding of actions and perceptions within specific social contexts (see section 3.2).

Within this epistemological paradigm, the research enabled me to answer the following questions. That is: What are students' experiences in learning contexts? What are their experiences in non-academic contexts? How are these experiences interlinked? And how does a student change, and why?

It should be noted that the research questions did not emerge simply and in this form, but evolved over a considerable period of time, based on my research for my masters' degree, on my extensive review of the relevant literature in the first year of my PhD study, and more importantly, on my reflection upon my own experiences as an overseas students in the UK. This process in itself illuminated the inseparability between learning outcomes and personal lives (see section 3.5).

The investigation was conducted in a longitudinal, in-depth qualitative, multiple case study format. A novel aspect of the research was the use of non-structured audio diaries as a key data collection method; a method I was strongly committed to as it gave me access to the freshest personal records, to individuals' explanations for their behaviours, to their portrayals of personal difficulties, needs and concerns, and to the most private parts of their lives and deepest internal worlds. The more than 3000 diary entries that were gathered formed a solid foundation for my in-depth understandings of lived experiences of the participants and my problematisation of portrayals of 'the Chinese student' against essentialist 'cultural' features. It should be pointed out that, as with the finalization of my research questions, my adoption of audio diary as a major data source was not a simple, clear-cut decision. Instead, after finding little illustration of the method in either methodology texts or examples among empirical research, my determination to use it was based on mixed considerations, from my clarification of the

research purposes, my intuition of it as a 'fit for purpose' method, my comparison of it with more mainstream data generating methods, and my examination of the effects of other studies using a 'structured' diary format. The whole process is fully explained in the methodology chapter (see sections 3.5.4.3).

Another advantage of a diary method was its flexibility to be employed combined with other research instruments. Throughout the data-collection period, I conducted over 150-hour interviews, both in semi-structured and un-structured forms to serve different purposes. Follow-up interviews were crucial in my research design because they enabled me to clarify confusing points in students' daily diaries and probe the interesting issues emerging in their diary accounts, pursuing their attitudes and emotional responses at key stages (e.g. the beginning/ending of the course; pre-/post-examination period; holiday periods; essay writing periods, etc.). For a detailed description, see Chapter 3 (see section 3.5.4.4).

Influenced by a principle of 'multi-voicedness', a feminist epistemological stance, I consciously widened my data sources to the maximum feasible extent, by which I mean instead of fixing data collection methods as personal dairy and follow-up interview, I brought other possible channels of information into my research. Emails, on-line chatting, the participants' on-line blogs, observation and conversations at social gatherings and chance encounters were all significant sources which deepened my understandings of the students. Furthermore, my interaction with the families, friends and classmates of the participants, my communication with other Chinese students in the university and other British educational institutions, and my attention to Chinese or global issues in which the students were interested increased my sensitivities to the participants' inner feelings and personal growth. These enhanced the credibility of my interpretation of their subjective experiences (see section 3.5.4)

What also must be addressed here is researcher/participants relationship. This was crucial because otherwise I would not have succeeded in my 14-month longitudinal study that could be very demanding for my participants who at the same time were preoccupied with their intensive postgraduate courses. But, more importantly, my

research purposes and epistemological stances required a jointly constructed and carefully maintained non-hierarchical relationship between me and my research subjects. I could not have uncovered such intensive experiences of the participants, if they felt they could not account for their experiences or speak of their feelings in their own terms. Nor could I have achieved my purposes if they had found their voices were not met with tolerance, with objectivity and - crucially - with respect. For a detailed account of the establishment and maintenance of this relationship as well as its importance to my study, refer to the relevant sections in chapter 3 (i.e. 3.5.5; 3.8, 3.9)

Moreover, the nature of my research methodology highlighted that ethical issues were a significant concern in relation to conduct and data analysis. A diary method produced much data relating to sensitive personal lives. The situation was further strengthened by a friendly nature of the researcher-participant relationship and a deep trust I gained from the participants. To safeguard students' privacy was a priority in my study, particularly when data used concerned emotional family conflicts or love affairs, or the issues such as overloaded part-time working and cheating in assessment, which would have very serious consequences if the students' identities were identified. There was always a tension between giving adequate background information but protecting the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The measures I have taken to deal with ethical concerns are described in chapter 3 (see section 3.8).

1.4   The organisation of the study

To report my study, the thesis is composed of six chapters, the content of which can be summarized as follows: chapter 1 provides an introduction. It presents the background to the study, argues for the inadequacy of much previous research of Chinese students and indicates the importance of the present research. It also contains a brief illustration of my research purposes, the research questions and the research methodology.

Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature. An in-depth examination of existing studies of Chinese students in English-speaking countries and of Chinese learners in general exposes their limitations, namely that most of the research draws on Confucianism and views it as providing cultural explanations for Chinese students'

learning behaviours. In their depictions, students in China or other CHC contexts are either 'problematic' rote, passive, reticent learners or 'model' students who are keen thinkers, hard working and ideal group workers. Among all these accounts, what is absent are such important concepts as the complexity and fluidity of culture, the hybridity and plurality of individual identity; and the interrelationship between individuals as agents and contextual factors.

This review of previous empirical work is followed by an examination of discourse-oriented theories. The Foucauldian binding concept of power/knowledge and the critiques of colonial and post-colonial discourse combine to illuminate the origin of and the reasons for the distorted presentations of 'the Chinese student' overseas: that is, a cultural and essentialist reductionism. To offer a correction, I draw on social-constructionism, arguing that human beings are social and continually changing with changes in contexts. I hence put forward a dialectical format as a more appropriate theoretical frame for understanding learners from China in the UK.

Chapter 3 deliberately sets out to provide an account of the development of my methodology, particularly, how my research questions, samplings and the selection of research instrument were formed and reformulated throughout the research. I choose to portray in this chapter how the research unfolded, rather than pretending it was conceived in total from an early stage, in order that an account of this development adds to the validity of my research findings. Moreover, it is to support my argument that not pre-designed research but those growing as organic process can best approach the dynamics and complexity of individuals' experiences. The rejection of any simple straightforward planning allows my research methods to evolve in a gradual and circular process. It gives flexibility of the methodology which keeps editing and adjusting along with the data-collecting going on and my understanding of the participants increasing. It is also required by the process of trust-building between the participants and me, which is the prerequisite of the success of my longitudinal research and also originates from the epistemological stance of giving power to those being researched.

Intercultural learning experiences cannot be understood without contexts. In Chapter 4, I pick up several social contexts in which students report their frequent participation. These are the group work that their courses often demand, the places in which they are employed outside their studies, the lecture room and the venues for social interactions. I also choose to focus on their relations with family and their experiences of formative assessment, with the identification that despite these students being in Britain and away from their families, 'family' remains one of the most influential factors on learning; and that formative assessment, and the interaction with tutors in the process, present one of the most difficult challenges in their post-graduate study. The rationale for my choices is that only through in-depth analysis of the sites of learning and employment, of crucial interpersonal relationships and particularly, of the underlying power relationships, is it possible to understand students as individuals; to deeply and closely explore their concerns, worries, changes and developments; and to reveal how stereotypical perspectives are formed in a mutual way within the lived experiences of the participants. Moreover, it is from my concern with depth in the study which means that I must select just some of the many social contexts that my vast and extensive data actually accesses.

Chapter 5 draws together the discussion from chapter 4. In the first part of the chapter, I review the findings and synthesize the processes the participants have undergone to adapt to their new academic and living environments. The focus is on the challenges they have faced, the strategies they have used and the contextual elements leading to their changes. A description of common characteristics is not founded on the sacrifice of the recognition of differences among individual experiences, however. On the contrary these differences are emphasised in order to reveal the dangers of oversimplifying and over-generalizing 'the Chinese group'.

The discussion continues in the second part of the chapter with a detailed exploration of identity formation and transformation over the period of living and learning in Britain. In this part the elaboration of identity issues is addressed through examining individual participants' changed positions in the power dynamics of diverse contexts; their exerting of agency to negotiate a more favourable identity; and the consequent impacts of their subjectivity. The theoretical concern about self-stereotyping as a response to

unequal power relationships, as presented in chapter 2, is sharpened in the discussion of the students' renewed Chinese self, which it is argued is a defensive strategy adopted in response to prejudice and social exclusion in their daily lives.

The title of the thesis originates from two key publications edited by Watkins & Biggs: *The Chinese learner: culture, psychological and contextual influences* (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) and *Teaching the Chinese learner: psychological and pedagogical perspectives* (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Being perceived as mile stones in challenging 'deficit' views of students from/in Chinese contexts, both books are widely referenced and commended by researchers and educationists in the field. Inspiring as they are, for example, in terms of defending Chinese national esteem, I have to question their depiction of '*the* Chinese learner' as by culture good academic achievers. Such accounts are in nature as dangerous in over-simplication and over-generalization as those 'deficit' views Watkins & Biggs try to oppose to (for detailed discussion see sections 2.2.2.2, 2.2.2.4, 2.2.2.5). By removing the definite article (*the*) and replacing it with a propositional phrase (i.e. *from mainland China*), I stress my idea that the target group should not be homogenized by biological definitions or political, cultural origins.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

In this chapter, the emphasis is on the cultural stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'. Firstly, I review the literature on Confucian tenets and how some of the existing research depicts Chinese students based on fixed interpretation of Confucian values. Then, drawing on Foucault's writing on power/knowledge and the critiques of Orientalism and colonial discourses, I explore how an essentialized conceptualization of 'the Chinese culture' and 'the Chinese people' is formed and stabilised, and why. In the last section, I present my theoretical framework which is characterised by anti-essentialist stance; I also put forward a dialectical approach which helps better interpret the experiences of students from China.

It should be noted that although I study the Confucian stereotypes found in the literature, it is not my intention to condemn all the literature on Chinese learners as being in this vein. Rather, I recognize the developments in recent literature in particular, which challenge the cultural stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'. Writers such as Ryan & Hellmundt (2005) and Ryan & Carroll (2005), point out the common difficulties that the international students may share with other groups of learners, for example, new students in higher education. Ryan & Hellmundt (2005) stress that learning behaviours and outcomes of international students can be largely influenced by their language inadequacy, unfamiliarity with hidden rules of 'the new games', consequently damaged self-confidence, as well as the inappropriate attitudes of host teachers who perceive the presence of international students as a 'threat'. Apart from these authors, Louie's (2005:17) warning of 'gathering cultural knowledge' exemplifies a more critical view. His emphasis on the ever-changing nature of culture, the transformation of interpretations of Confucianism throughout historical time and the manipulation of Confucian values to satisfy different needs signify the danger of oversimplification of the 'CHC' culture.

In this chapter, the new developments in the literature, i.e. more anti-essentialist views of Chinese culture and Chinese learners, are firstly drawn on to criticize the interpretation of Confucian philosophy (see section 2.2.1.2) and then the interpretation of 'the Chinese learner' as bearers of Confucian values (see sections 2.2.2.2, 2.2.2.4). They also shed light on the way I conduct this study (see section 2.2.4).

2.2   Existing research about Chinese learners – the stereotype of the Confucian learner

The influence of Confucius' values on learners in/from China is often repeated in conference presentations, journal articles and students' research theses. Many relevant studies refer to Confucius' teaching as the keys to their interpretation of Chinese culture, which in turn they believe provide clues for their understanding of 'the Chinese learner'. Li (2004:88) for example, comments that 'the cultural and educational background that characterises Chinese EFL learners has stemmed from the influences of Confucius, the first teacher in China'. Similarly, reviewing the existing literature in the field, Kennedy (2002) explains that the literature, based on an understanding of Confucian codes of social conduct and its concept of 'face', depicts students from China as modest and self-effacing. Hence, I would like to start this chapter with a review of Confucian principles. In doing so I make no claim to be an expert in the ancient philosophy, nor to explore what they 'really' mean, because I doubt whether any objective interpretation exists. Instead, my descriptions are founded on current research about Chinese learners. Then I focus on the stereotypes of 'the Chinese', 'the Asian' or 'the Eastern' learners. I finally concentrate on the research of Chinese-speaking students learning in English-speaking countries.

2.2.1   Confucian philosophy

As mentioned (see section 2.1), it is usual that researchers, teaching practitioners and learners themselves go back to Confucius' maxims for an explanation of the characteristics of 'Chinese' teaching and learning. Many papers in the field are found to start from Confucius's biography and include explanation of Confucian tenets (e.g. Bloom & Solotko, 2003; Rodrigues, 2005). Confucianism, valued as 'the Heritage' of Chinese culture (Watkins & Biggs, 2001), is usually described and evaluated as a set of

ethics which achieves and maintains social order through governing human interactions. Different in the degree, these studies stress cardinal relationships, face and moral requirements (e.g. Tweed & Lehman, 2002a, b; Li, 2004). In the following section, I will review the beliefs about how Confucian philosophy serves to attain interpersonal harmony and shape Chinese people. Particular attention is given to the widespread themes of social connection (*guanxi*) and the closely related principles of harmony, compassion (*ren*) and filial piety (*xiao*).

2.2.1.1 Interpretations of Confucian philosophy and Chinese society

The significance of interpersonal relationships is one of the most extensively discussed of Confucius's tenets (see Ho, Chan & Zhang, 2001; Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002; Ho, 1995; Ho, 1998; Ho, Peng & Chan, 2001; Ho & Wu, 1997; Ho, Peng & Lai, 2001). It comprises five basic hierarchical relationships: between husband and wife, emperor and officials, father and son, elder and younger brothers, and elder and younger friends (Mencius, *TengWenGong*, Chapter 4). Kennedy (2002) states that to manage the relationships well requires obedience and respect from the superior to the inferior in the above five pairs. In other writings, more rules are identified and examined in detail. As indicated in the following paragraphs, several authors base their interpretation of 'the Chinese culture' on the concept of 'relationships'. They stress compassion for others, depreciation of oneself, respect for one's superiors and righteous action, which are intended to facilitate good social relationships.

Ho has made numerous contributions to writings on social connections (*guanxi*), person-in-relation and relational identity. Although she mainly works in the field of social psychology, her ideas have informed educational researchers (e.g. Hwang, Ang & Francesco, 2002; Cheung & Kwok, 1999).

Specifically, starting from the five cardinal relationships, Ho argues that individual behaviours in Confucian culture are strongly influenced by their social concerns; and that the standard that individuals abide by to conduct appropriate actions is not self-perception, preference or personal needs, but the attitudes, obligations or indebtedness of related others. Her proposal for 'methodological relationalism', with respect to

human thoughts and action, implies interdependence or interrelatedness as the essence of Confucian society. Elaborating on this concept, Ho points out that in role-dominant Confucian society, individual identity is formed upon the social relations and the characters of the groups he/she belongs to; while the self is developed through intersubjectivity. Since everyone shares the attributes of a particular group and the society as a whole, they benefit from the increase but suffer from the decrease of the group's social reputation. (Ho, Chan & Zhang, 2001; Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002; Ho, 1995; Ho, 1998; Ho, Peng & Chan, 2001; Ho & Wu, 1997; Ho, Peng & Lai, 2001)

Turning now to an important 'Western' researcher of Chinese culture, Hofstede (1980) investigates multi-national management in IBM branches in over 50 counties and based on research findings provides interpretations of different 'cultures'. He explains cultural differences in terms of four dimensions: namely individuality/collectivism, power/distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. The Confucian stress on relationships is evident in Hofstede's earlier work, in which Hong Kong Chinese culture is characterized by collectivism and high power/distance ratios (*ibid*). This point is further explored in his later study, where 'cultural dynamics' is included as the fifth dimension (1991; De Mooij & Hofstede, 2002). 'Ordering relationship by status and observing this order' are viewed as positive Confucian teachings. They feature the 'long-term orientation' in contrast to the other pole named 'short-term orientation', both of which are compositions of 'cultural dynamics' (Hofstede, 1991:165–6; 2001:354–5). All Chinese societies, together with Japan and Korea, are described as being long-term oriented and hence celebrate dramatic economic growth in the past decade.

Bloom & Solokto (2003) point out that compassion plays a crucial role that functions to achieve harmonious social relations. According to their interpretation, the concept is an umbrella term for virtues, with love as the underlying principle. They also explain compassion as Confucius' firm belief that a ruler should govern his subjects by moral power and should treat them with virtue, love and concern so as to win a following without resorting to physical force (Bloom & Solokto, 2003; Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

It is also well documented that Confucian filial piety acts to regulate Chinese people's

behaviours with respect to intergenerational relationships, which concern not only child/parents but descendants/ancestors (see Ho, 1998; Bloom & Solokto, 2003). The core of filial piety is reported as affection, reverence and unconditional submission. It comprises a set of stringent requirements which one has to follow from birth to death (*ibid*). According to Sung (1998), one has the responsibility to care for one's aged parents and meet both their emotional and material needs; one has an obligation to take care of one's body as owes one's very existence to one's parents; the male has the duty to ensure birth of a son to continue the family line; and one should be always striving to gain face and glorify the family. Bloom & Solokto (2003) state that filial piety harmonizes the relationships in their family, which in turn harmonize the society. Similarly, Ho (1998) identifies continuity in the traditional pattern of parenting, regarding the emphasis on academic achievement, moral teaching and care of children.

In addition, throughout the publications by Hwang, a prolific Taiwanese social psychologist; social favour (*renqing* in Chinese) is continuously stressed as another Confucian cultural characteristic that closely relates to interpersonal relationships. In a paper entitled 'Face and favour: the Chinese power game' (1987), he refers to the concept of *renqing* ('social favours' in English) which are exchanged among people in the form of goods, help, information and sometimes, money. The author, furthermore, indicates a set of hidden rules or social norms related to the practice. Briefly, within diverse social groups, every member should keep emotionally in touch with others; whoever confronts difficulties should be given a hand; and those who have been given a favour should be grateful and try their best to help others in return. According to Hwang, on the one hand, the internalization of these rules and expectations regulate individual behaviour accordingly. On the other hand, they bind together social members, in that all people, adhering to the standards of social exchange, try to get along well with others and manage their social network well. Therefore, *renqing* contributes to the integration of Chinese society. It is also a kind of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) where individuals are concerned.

In the same paper (1987), Hwang points out the importance of 'face' or *mianzi*. For him, *mianzi* plays a similarly crucial role to *renqing* and *guanxi* in maintaining a harmonious

Chinese society. He criticizes the practice of studying these indigenous concepts separately. Instead, he argues that all of them need integrating in order to understand the social behaviours of Chinese people deeply. The close link between face and social relations is better reflected in his comment that 'face' concerns not only personal efforts but also a positional aspect where an individual's face is subject to the extent of his/her social network, the stage that his/her friends, acquaintants and communicators are found on the social ladder, and personal power perceived by others (Hwang, 1987). In addition, Hwang (1987) emphasizes two types of 'face-work', both of which consist of a set of strategies including face-saving, face-gaining, face-giving and avoiding loss of face. Specifically, the horizontal sort of face-work means that face position could be increased by personal endeavour for intellectual attainment, for wealth and for moral reputation. It can also be enhanced through one's connection with others belonging to the higher social class, through exemplary behaviours and through actions beneficial to society. The vertical sort, more interestingly, refers to how individuals manipulate and project a favourable self-image in order to maximally gain benefits from resource allocators. The idea has been developed in practice by Leung's exploration of a Hong Kong-China intercultural business negotiation environment, the findings of which show that Hong Kong negotiators do engage in face-work as an effective cultural strategy to 'seek competitive advantages in a complex bureaucratic Chinese society' (2003:1593).

Differently from Hwang, who works only on *mianzi*, Ho (2003) clarifies two dimensions of 'face'. According to her, *lian* concerns the ascribed character of a decent and morally good person; while *mianzi*, refers either to physical facial features or to achieved reputation and social status based on one's efforts. From her analysis, both dimensions describe the ability to cope smoothly with people. A noteworthy aspect of the paper is that it stresses the emotional significance of losing face. People may experience unbearable sufferings from their inability to act in a socially acceptable way, to perform in accordance with their social status and to achieve socially expected ends. The loss of face could involve damage of confidence, severe self-criticism and even isolation from relatives and intimate friends. It may also be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, depression, shame and guilt. As such, although enhancement of face always brings the acquisition of individual prestige and glorification of the whole family and

social associates, to some extent, avoiding losing face is perceived as the main concern for Chinese people. That is the way that from both family education and schooling, children internalize the obligation to perform as demanded by their social positions (Ho, 2003).

2.2.1.2 Criticism

Although bringing to light the great importance of relationships, the works reviewed above have a danger of decoding behaviours of 'the Chinese' according to simple manageable fixed standards. Statements, typically represented by 'Reliance on others is necessary because we are really just part of a whole' (Bloom & Solokto, 2003:29), may overstress Confucian scholars' advocacy of interdependent construction, and blur the distinction between individuals. Similar interpretation of the tenet of interpersonal relationship, despite illuminating the social character of human beings, may imply a reduced significance of individuals, whose identity is only meaningful when concerned with the appearance of others.

Moreover, Hofstede's work (1980) can be criticized in terms of overgeneralization and dichotomization. In particular, his fifth dimension of cultural dynamics is challenged by Fang (2003; 2005). He argues that it mistakenly divides interrelated values into opposing poles; it ignores the fact that the historical orientations such as respect for ancestors are also an articulated core value for Chinese people; it pays inadequate attention to the short-term orientations such as opportunity driven behaviours which have been recuring Chinese traits in history. Besides, Fang questions the fifth dimension as being based on methodologically weak research, in terms of using unrepresentative samples and misinterpretation in translations and hence lacking validity.

Similarly, Ho's research appears to have intrinsic weaknesses. With its celebration of cultural differences, her arguments demarcate too severely those categorized as Confucian heritage cultures and those termed Western countries. She puts 'the Chinese' and 'the Westerners' at opposing ends of a single dimension, by arguing that in the former an individual's role in a particular group determines his/her behaviour, whereas in the latter personality counts more. Furthermore, if one looks closely at her relational

analysis method, which argues that only by clarifying in advance the rules and norms implicit in social relationship, could individual behaviours be understood (Ho, 1998:4), there could be the high possibility of the formation of stereotypes, as this may reduce individuals to homogenized representatives of a national culture.

The same criticism can be applied to Hwang's writings. In his 1987 paper, he proposes the so-called 'universal continuum of socially expected behaviours' (p967), ranging from the industrial west which stresses 'isolated individuals socialized to make rational decisions on the basis of self-interest' (p967) to Chinese society and 'similar' societies such as Japan where *guanxi* has persistently strong influences in a variety of social settings. Attributing the reasons in part to culture and in part to the hierarchical structure of the Chinese community, Hwang invites readers to see 'the Chinese' as a homogeneous group characterised by complicated interpersonal obligations, sensitive to social positions and forced to be corrupt in order to obtain social resources (see also Leung, 2003). With the heavy stress on the peculiarity of 'the East' in contrast with 'the West', his mention of possible changes in terms of young Chinese, including the changes arising from economic marketization and from education and mass communication, seems very brief and weak. Although a more detailed discussion of the influences of modernization is found in his paper about young people's perception of filial piety (Hwang, 1999), this is a pity that Hwang seems to hold a more open mind with respect to family relationships rather than relationships at a broader social level. In addition, it needs to be noted that in Hwang's writing, both individual variation and social variation over time are ignored and he writes simply of an undifferentiated, ahistorical 'the Chinese'; if the present young Chinese behave in a 'non-Chinese' way, Hwang displays a tendency to look for reasons in the growing influences from the Western individualistic values than to reflect on the possible intrinsic similarities shared by human beings (see Hwang, 1987).

2.2.2 Interpretations of Confucius' teaching and Chinese learning

Are Confucius' values the root of Chinese learning? It is common in the relevant literature to give a positive answer. Yet debate emerges over how these traditions affect

'the Chinese learner'. In the following, I provide an overview of some of the research which is influential in this field. Special attention is given to two sets of contradictory arguments: one sees Confucian ideas as barriers to efficient learning and hence 'the Chinese learner' as deficient; the other highly appreciates Confucian ideas and believes that these ideas enhance the capacity of 'the Chinese learner' in different learning situations around the world. The literature I review here includes studies conducted in Mainland China, in other Chinese speaking communities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, in other CHC contexts such as Japan and Korea, and of Chinese immigrants in English speaking countries.

2.2.2.1 Argument 1: Chinese learners: docile and inefficient?

In this group we can identify literature which portrays Chinese students as submissive, uncreative and given to rote learning. A large proportion of such claims, as Kember & Gow warn us (1991), is derived from anecdotal evidence and shared by 'Western' observers who either teach in CHC classrooms or encounter Chinese students in their own country. Biggs (1996:46-47), for example, quoted the following remarks by instructors of Asian students overseas.

> 'Students from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong appear to be much more inclined to rote learning. Such an approach does not help problem solving.'
> '…it can be difficult to cope, in small (graduate) classes, with overseas students who are reluctant to discuss, criticize and express an opinion.'

There are similar declarations based on research evidence which confirm the seemingly low quality and inadequate efficiency of learning regarding students in or from CHC contexts. What should be noted is that in such studies, the data have mainly been gathered through questionnaire instruments or several rounds of interviews. Not being backed up by 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), the findings can be weak and vulnerable to challenges. Zhang, et.al. (1999), for example, conducted a small-scale research in one Australian university, in which they invited fifty Chinese business students to complete a questionnaire and later ten out of the total for an interview. Their findings suggest that cultural differences significantly influence academic experiences:

on the one hand, international Chinese students were 'excited by new freedom' (p7) on the other hand, they lack preparation for 'the new academic demands' (*ibid*), particularly independent learning. Holmes (2004; 2005), by doing three rounds of interviews with thirteen ethnic Chinese students in New Zealand, report that Chinese students have great difficulty in participating class discussion because they 'scared of teacher' (2004:299); and that the critical thinking skills are a 'mystery' for them (2004:302), as 'in Asian culture, there is no critique' (2004:302).

There are also scholars attempting to summarize the key features of -- by doing so they actually polarize -- Chinese learning approaches and Western ones. Ballard & Clanchy (1991; see also Zhang, et.al. 1999; Homles, 2004, 2005), for example, label the learning approach in a 'more traditional' culture like China as 'conserving', in that it fosters students' capacity to reproduce the instructed knowledge. Western education system, however, is 'extending-oriented', which emphasizes innovative problem-solving and encourages learners to develop analytical and speculative abilities.

Moreover, Tweed & Lehman (2002a, b) develop a 'Socratic-Confucian framework' in order to understand Chinese learners in comparison with their Western counterpart. Firstly, in terms of 'overtly question (Socratic) versus respect (Confucian)' (2002a:10), Tweed & Lehman suggest that Chinese students are unaccustomed to the idea of openly questioning knowledge presented by teachers. The reason is attributed to the Confucian stress on social harmony, whereby students are encouraged to accept power distance. According to their description, submissive respect to powerful seniors like instructors has negative connotations to Western people, but is socially intelligent behaviour to Chinese. They also believe that the hesitation to vocally participate in lectures and tutorial, as a necessary consequence of seeking polite submission, cause problems for Chinese students' learning in Western universities. Furthermore, Tweed & Lehman extend their argument to the realm of private thought. In their discussion of, as they put it, 'privately question (Socratic) vs. accept or postpone questioning (Confucian)' (2002a:11), they suggest Chinese learners' reluctance to question features not only in classroom behaviour but also in their private thinking. Here Chinese individuals appear to be depicted as being deficient ones with respect to Westerners. It seems to imply that

the former hold 'irrational attitudes of submission to authority' (Achbar et al., 1992, cited in Tweed & Lehman, 2002b:95) because 'Confucius did not encourage … searching individualistically for truth' (2002b:92).

The other dichotomized categories in Tweed & Lehman's framework include 'consider/express personal hypothesis (Socratic) vs. absorb and embrace (Confucian)' (2002a:12), 'desire for self-directed (Socratic) vs. structured tasks (Confucian)' (2002a:12) and 'learning for its own sake (Socratic) vs. pragmatism (Confucian)' (2002a:13). The first pair describes the Chinese-style as absorptive learning in contrast to Western-style critical learning. Chinese learners are regarded as ones favoring absorption of presented knowledge rather than the generation of original and critical opinions. Problems in completing Western writing assignments are proposed as a consequence. Simultaneously, the high achievement of Chinese students in the West is believed to arise because some Western assessment methods are also oriented toward description and acceptance of facts, despite their articulated aim of enhancing critical thinking. In addition, the second pair declares the Chinese preference for structured tasks in contrast to a Western appreciation of free choice. Based on Hofstede's (1980) distinction between collectivism/individualism, Tweed & Lehman (2002) maintain that Chinese students have a collective expectation of guidance and leadership. This suggests that Chinese learners are unable to take on or are evading personal responsibility for learning, and are probably troubled in Western learning settings where such attitudes are disparaged. The last pair describes Chinese views of education as a means to ends whereas Westerners learn for learning's own sake. With cherished intrinsic motivation for learning and a firmly held belief that external stimuli of learning harm the probably learning outcomes in the Western world (Biggs, 1996), it is not surprising that Chinese learners are perceived to be inefficient.

2.2.2.2 Criticism

Kennedy (2002) calls for attention to a widespread deficit view of Chinese learning. He (2002:442) cites from Cortazzi & Jin (1996b:174) to challenge the present cultural imperialism, i.e. arguing that 'there is no reason to suppose that one culture of learning is superior to another…'. For me, it is much easier to resent arguments based on

inadequate or incredible data, for example, those quoted from Hong Kong external examiners. It is more difficult to identify an essentialist nature in statements such as those of Tweed & Lehman. The latter present their analysis in the content of their articulation of cultural heterogeneity and interdependence, and their rejection of ethnocentric reactionism. However, for me, their claims to respect such notions do not bear scrutiny. As shown above, although claiming two cultural approaches to learning are unnecessarily bipolar, the authors do present them as opposing anchors in most, if not all, dimensions of their framework and by doing so demarcate the East and the West. Besides, although the authors assert their appreciation of the values of both cultural heritages, the use of Confucian-influenced learning strategies, according to them, are to pass some types of Western assessments which do not require ability to question, evaluate or generate ideas. Furthermore, although the authors mention different learning approaches held by some of the second or later generations of Chinese immigrants due to Westernization, they homogenize the Chinese students in their home country.

2.2.2.3 Argument 2: Chinese students as ideal learners

In this group we find the researchers who are attentive to the paradox of Chinese learners. The paradox has been described by Kember & Gow (1991) as anecdotal evidence of rote learning but high academic achievement. Trying to understand why Chinese students outperform Western students internationally, a number of researchers reflect on and re-examine Confucian influences on learning (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 1996). These authors, to different degrees, support the idea that neither passive learners nor strict expository teaching are hallmarks of poor learning; for them, negative description of learning issues in China may result from a superficial understanding or simply a misinterpretation with a biased presupposition from Western culture. The authors in this group hence tend to evaluate Chinese traditions in learning positively and deem some aspects of teaching current in CHC countries to be more successful than those in Western countries.

A milestone publication within this category is the book *The Chinese learner: culture, psychological and contextual influences* (Watkins & Biggs, 1996), which is an edited collection of research papers. In the following section, I firstly review the key issues

discussed in the book, with additional evidence from other sources. Then I briefly go over the work of Jin and Cottazzi, who have contributed significantly on the learning and teaching in Mainland China. Their influences in the field are too well recognized to be ignored. Finally, I focus on key issues of 'critical thinking' and 'autonomy', both of which seem to be more stressed by researchers studying Chinese learners abroad than those working in CHC contexts.

A repeated theme in Watkins & Biggs' book (1996) is the problematisation of 'rote memorization', which has been centered on in the chapters by Biggs (1996), Marton, et.al. (1996), Salili (1996), and emphasized by Watkins & Biggs (1996) in their summarizing in a concluding chapter. It is also a focus of other researchers, who to different extents are enlightened by the above authors and study the issue in diverse settings according to their interest (e.g. Barron & Arcodia, 2002; Ramburuth, 2001; Smith & Smith, 1999, 2000). In the Western literature on education, rote learning has a poor reputation as it implies mechanical memorization without thinking (Entwistle, 1977). When questioning the anecdotal observation (see section 2.1.2.1), Kember & Gow (1991) point out that it is not an inherent characteristic of Asian students, but may derive from the nature of the curriculum and teaching environment. Authors in Watkins & Biggs' book go further and argue that the learning strategies adopted by Chinese students are in fact deep-learning oriented and have a high-quality learning outcome. Specifically, Marton, et.al (2006) report that CHC students learn repetitively because they believe memorization could lead to understanding. Similar findings have been presented elsewhere by Cooper (2004), who claims memorization through repetition can effectively act as a means to deepen understanding (see also Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). By contrast, in Watkins' research (1996), the sample students prioritize understanding in order to memorize better in terms of quality and quantity. On the one hand, they seek deep understanding for the sake of learning; on the other, they do rote learn for the sake of assessment. In summary, Biggs & Watkins (1996) state that memorization does not equate rote learning. No rigid rote orientation can be identified among Chinese learners. Their preference for repetition arises from their motivation for achievement, as indicated in exam results. Therefore, CHC learners do not learn by rote more often than Western students (Hu, 2002). Although they are not verbally active, the mental effort

they pay contributes to the achievements they have gained in learning (Kelen, 2002).

Another theme emphasized by the book is Chinese students' multiple conceptions of achievement. As with Tweed & Lehman (2002a, b), Witkins & Biggs (1996) believe Chinese learners learn in order to achieve pragmatic purposes. However, they do not refer only to instrumental aims when describing such 'pragmatism', as Tweeds & Lehman (2002a, b) do. Instead, they indicate Chinese learners are motivated by extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and strive to succeed for both personal and social reasons (Salili, 1996).

Relationships are also a focus of the book, in which the complexity of teacher-students relationship receives full attention. For Watkins & Biggs (1996), the authority of lecturers is only a part of the picture; what is more significant is the mutual respect, shared responsibility and warmth which feature in the otherwise hierarchical teacher-student interaction. In the book, the student-student relationship is also discussed by Tang (1996) and Winter (1996) with respect to peer work. It is reported that a cultural emphasis on collectivism influences the students to spontaneously start working together (Tang, 1996). Elsewhere Watkins & Biggs (2001) indicate that in CHC contexts, teachers are aware of the benefits and consciously use collaborative learning in the classroom. This is in line with the findings of Mitchell & Lee (2003), who report that in Korea, the teacher singles out more capable students as language models, and believes it efficient to make all the students learn to the same level of achievement through the various practice exercises. Similarly, Carless (1999) argues that Chinese teachers believe that it is by comparison with peer that students know their shortcomings. Learning in groups goes beyond knowledge transfer (Kenney, 2002); it becomes an efficient way promoting deeper and achievement-oriented learning: students '…engage in high-level cognitive strategies such as analyzing, relating and application through experimenting, discussing, arguing and learning' (Tang, 1996:191).

Most research reported in Watkins & Biggs (1996) draws on samples of students in Hong Kong. Although such a group shares features with Chinese learners in general, they are also unique in some way. This is because of the use of English as the medium

of instruction in Hong Kong schools, of conflicting values of British colonial and Chinese traditions in Hong Kong society and of the political and economic positions Hong Kong holds. For all these reasons, despite the research already conducted in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, Chinese Mainland students, who consist of roughly 25% of the world's learners (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a), would have remained an enigma if not for those researchers exploring this virgin field. Among all contributors to this field, Jin & Cottazzi are perhaps among the most influential. Their reports open a window on the teaching and learning in mainland China; and have gained such popularity that they must be reviewed separately in my study.

Jin & Cortazzi define the Chinese 'culture of learning' as 'taken-for-grounded frameworks of expectations, attitudes and beliefs about how to teach or learn successfully' (2006:9). It is characterized by: the great importance attached to education (Hu, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b); the stress on the cultivation of morality (Carless, 1999; Hu, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b), the reliance on textbooks, and submission to orders and rules listed in them (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b; Wen & Clement, 2003; Hu, 2002); the hierarchical but harmonious relationship between teacher and students (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Hu, 2002); effort rather than the innate ability being regarded as the determining factor for successful education (Carless, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998a; Kelen, 2002); and the key role of examinations in Chinese education, as in other East Asian countries (Salili, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Sakui, 2003).

All the features in fact have already been reported by others based in Hong Kong (e.g. Gao & Watkins, 2001; Chan, 2001; Salili, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Stokes, 2001; Mok, et.al. 2001) and on non-Chinese East Asian countries (see Mitchell & Lee, 2003). Therefore, they, rather than marking the special nature of mainland China, confirm the significant similarities existing among CHC countries. Specifically, by observing classroom teaching, particularly EFL classes, Jin & Cortazzi describe Chinese teaching methods as textbook oriented, teacher-dominated, expository and explanatory (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Kelen, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 2001; Carless, 1999; Wen & Clement, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a,b). This accords with the findings of researchers in Hong

Kong and Taiwan, where teachers are found to analyze, interpret and clarify the points of knowledge; and set heavy homework and repeated drills, exercises or tasks (e.g. Mok,et.al, 2001; Lewis & Cook, 2002; Sakui, 2003). The noteworthy point is that Jin & Cortazzi, echoing other researchers who support an empathetic understanding of the Chinese (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 2001), tend to evaluate positively the traditional directed instruction. In their description, through carefully reviewing, teachers assist students in memorization and internalisation of the new knowledge (Hu, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a,b); they emphasize repeated practices since these are considered beneficial to the acquisition of knowledge (Salili, 2001; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b); the essence of teaching, despite being through authoritative transmission of knowledge, is to help learners' assimilation of the knowledge in the most effective and efficient way (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a; Hu, 2002).

As such, according to Jin & Cortazzi (1998b; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a,b), Chinese teachers are expected to have deep and authoritative knowledge, so as to effectively and efficiently transmit knowledge and supervise learning tasks; they play the role of moral model and apply strict discipline, with the belief that praise may undermine a student's character. This opinion is widespread elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Kelen, 2002; Mok, et. al, 2001; Carless, 1999; Wen & Clement, 2003; Hu, 2002; Mao, 1995; Salili, 2001). Once again, harsh discipline is tolerated by Jin & Cortazzi and many other researchers in this category. They call to our attention that seldom using encouragement, criticism and punishment are perceived by 'the Chinese' as a demonstration of teachers' care for students' moral and academic development, which do not necessarily result in negative feelings as always noticed among students in the West, but can lead to a warmer relationship between them (Carless, 1999).

Regarding the approaches to learning, further similarities can be identified in the findings of Jin & Cortazzi and of those working in other CHC contexts. Specifically, Cortazzi & Jin (1996b), studying kindergarten and primary classes in China, claim that children are trained for a set of learning strategies. Hu (2002) summarizes such strategies as the four Rs, i.e. reception, repetition, review and reproduction, and the four Ms, i.e. meticulousness, memorization, mental activity and mastery. These reported

strategies are in line with Watkins & Biggs' (2001) emphasis on memorization. Moreover, like Watkins & Biggs (2001), Jin & Cortazzi oppose the passive description of CHC learners (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, 2001; Mok, et.al., 2001), in that they either memorize what has been understood or make use of memorization to help future learning and to facilitate deeper understanding (Hu, 2002; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996b; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b). Above all, Jin & Cortazzi celebrate Confucian values which teach learners to be highly motivated, diligent, perseverant and aspiring to knowledge for personal fulfilment, the glory of the family and the advancement of society (Hu, 2002; Chan, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b).

2.2.2.4 Criticism

This debate is ongoing. Although Watkins & Biggs suggest a solution to the Chinese learners' paradox, and although Jin & Cortazzi strive to correct a negative image of Chinese students and the Confucian heritage educational system, they themselves are faced with challenges. Kumaravadivelu (2003) is one of those who question Cortazzi & Jin's research. According to him, the opinion survey adopted by Cortazzi & Jin cannot – in fact he doubts if any method can --'separate culture as a variable to investigate its causal connection to classroom behaviour'; therefore, studying learning behaviours of L2 users through cultural lenses will 'result in nothing but a one-dimensional caricature of these learners' (2003:714).

An equally pertinent criticism comes from Stephens (1997). She invited twelve Chinese teachers to reflect on and comment on Jin & Cortazzi's views with respect to the way of thinking, of working, of writing and of managing tutor-student relationships. The findings show that in each aspect no consensus existed in the participants' responses. Differences in learning cultures seem to be constructed differently by different individuals. Based on these findings, Stephens argues that the ideas of Jin & Cortazzi are too simplified. Their picture of collective-oriented Chinese learning is painted against a view of Chinese culture as something profoundly different from an 'idealized' Western academic life (Stephens, 1997:121), which takes little consideration of historical and circumstantial factors that influence students' learning performance. For this reason, it may 'miss as much as it may reveal' (Stephens, 1997:120).

Besides, Ho, Peng & Chan (2002) doubt the starting point of the Biggs & Watkins' (1996) examination in the Chinese 'paradox'. For them, the belief in Chinese students' superior academic achievement lacks supporting evidence, since it is only backed up by quantitative achievement tests, which may be good at evaluating knowledge acquisition but insufficient in assessing knowledge-generation ability (see also Tweed & Lehman, 2002, a, b). They also question the empirical and methodological grounds of the Watkins & Biggs' (1996) arguments. According to them, the self-reporting questionnaires lack reliability and validity; particularly, the participant students possibly avoid reporting surface learning strategies with an awareness of their lack of social approval; and the research on rote memorization is in fact misplaced, because 'humans would find it rather difficult not to generate, even from rote memorization, some understanding' (Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002:32). Some more methodological problems are identified by Tweed & Lehman (2002a, b). In that Hong Kong universities are more selective than Australian ones, to compare academic performance of the two populations is problematic. Besides, for Ho, Peng & Chan, Biggs' design of the SPQ items (i.e. Study Process Questionnaire, 1987) reflects Western conceptualization; the finding therefore has limited validity to reveal the extent to which Chinese learners take a deep/surface approach.

Moreover, Ho, Peng & Chan (2002) re-examine a highly valued attribute, i.e. diligence. They question the adequacy to commentate Chinese learners as diligent because they studiously spend time on repeated and uncreative work. Relying on related research results, they criticize the practices of giving too much homework to school children, since the quantity of homework can not guarantee the innovative application of knowledge, nor the development of independent exploration. Hence, to punish those failing to reach the expected level of 'diligence', for these authors, is meaningless and possibly leads to the opposite ends from those which education is expected to meet. Moreover, Ho, Peng & Chan (2002) give an opposite description of the student-teacher relationship to that in Jin & Cortazzi's work. They articulate that a warm, mutual respect, son-father type of relationship is sometimes romantically idealised. The students may show 'fear, silence and outward compliance in front of teachers but disrespect, non-

compliance and passive aggression behind their back' (2002:42). Their research findings also show that some students openly display hostility to teachers in class. Finally, unlike Jin & Cortazzi who argue for an appreciation of the Chinese culture of learning, Ho and her co-authors (2002) claim that the Mainland education system is in trouble, the ultimate goal of it being in fact subverted by the over-emphasis on examinations. Their point is supported by the obvious perceptions of a need for change which has inspired the top-down reforming policies presently carried out by the PRC government.

The reviewed literature, typified by the book of Watkins & Biggs (1996) and the work of Jin & Cortazzi (1996a, b; 1998a, b; 1997; 2001), seems to expose the following problems. Firstly, despite their attention to the complex nature of the issues, they are perhaps not free from the accusation of homogenizing Chinese learners. For instance, in their retrospect of the book 'Teaching the Chinese learner', Biggs & Watkins (2001:288) conclude that the 'the Hong Kong educational system is in value and traditions very Chinese'; that teaching and learning in CHC contexts share many similarities, due to 'a common cultural heritage' (2001:285). They, therefore, insufficiently address social political and economic differences among various Chinese communities and within Mainland China. Besides, problems can be identified in the differences they mention among 'vernacular' Confucianism: i.e. Mainland classroom teaching is more student-centered; Mainland students learn in a more comfortable class atmosphere and Mainland teachers are worse paid but have less work load. Lacking adequate empirical evidence to support their opinions, such conclusions seem to be at least over-generalized, if they do reveal some aspects of the facts.

In addition, Stephens (1997) is correct in her observation that the work of Jin & Cortazzi (1996a, b; 1998a, b; 1997; 2001) has a tendency to dichotomize the West and the East. The CHC culture of learning is depicted as one respecting education very highly, believing in effort as the source of success, depending on textbooks, rewarding modesty, obedience and virtuous behaviour, and stressing hierarchical but harmonious teacher/student relationships (see section 2.2.2.3). It is treated as something in contrast with Western pedagogy and learning approaches, which disparage punishment, perceive memorization negatively, recognize individual differences in intellectual ability,

emphasize learners' self-exploration and restrict teachers' roles within the classrooms. The tendency is even clearer in Jin & Cortazzi' recent paper entitled 'Changing practices in Chinese cultures of learning' (2006a). Despite the stated aim to analyse changing aspects of learning behaviour in China, the current teaching practices in Mainland Chinese English classes are similarly described as being based on Confucian values. 'Changes' seems refer to the top-down policies, which according to the authors would introduce the Communicative Language Teaching approach in Chinese ELT classrooms. With no empirical data provided, it is difficult to see whether any 'change', for example in terms of learning strategies, have already occurred by adopting those advocated practices, which are in nature very Westernized. In addition, no teaching in other subjects nor at postgraduate level is discussed. Jin & Cortazzi's attempt to modify their cultural model of Chinese learning can also be seen in their unpublished presentation at the Second Chinese Learners Conference (2006b). Although they agree that 'cultural models cannot be reduced to simple labels' and 'there is no one-to-one correspondence between a cultural model and particular individuals' (unpublished handout), throughout the presentation, cultural continuity is stressed much more than changes or differences in students' attitudes.

Thirdly, although the reviewed literature aims to address stereotypical portrayals such as 'rote learner' and 'passive Chinese', their attempt to do so in fact reinforces another set of stereotypes. For example, Chinese learners are considered to be vocally quiet but mentally active; well-disciplined, diligent and high academic achievers; they prefer collaborate learning; and they cherish their friendly and empathetic relationship with teachers (Barron & Arcodia, 2002). Underlying their arguments is the strengthened stereotyped image of collective Chinese culture, which advocates ranks, hierarchies and the importance of obedience to smooth social relations. These newly formed stereotypes, although probably solving 'the (original) paradox of Chinese learner', lead to the emergence of other enigmas. One example is Xu's (2004) longitudinal studies of a Mainland Chinese university which finds across four years that students' deep approach to learning declines while the surface approach increases. Another example is Wang & Wen's (2001) comparative study of Hong Kong university and Nanjing University which reveals participants in both universities retreat from 'a conception of learning as

applying' after two years of university education (p146). Unable to suggest the satisfactory answers, researchers of both studies call for further investigation into 'the life and learning experiences of Chinese students in different university settings' (Wang & Wen's, 2001:146), which my project may hopefully address.

2.2.2.5 The comparison and contrast of two arguments

In examining the above two sets of arguments, both similarities and differences are identified. Firstly, they account for learning behaviours primarily from a cultural perspective. Not being empirically established, their explanation of any educational practices in a Chinese context based on Confucian Heritage seems implausible (Clark & Gieve, 2006). There is a consequent danger of over-generalization. Moreover, both sets of arguments result in cultural stereotypes. They isolate the West from the East; the latter, in particular, seems to be assigned an essentialised and static image. All students of Chinese origin are treated as part of an undistinguished mass. What is insufficiently addressed here is individual differences, variation among sub-cultures as well as dynamics of cultural changes (*ibid*).

However, the two arguments are obviously different: one viewing Chinese learning positively, the other, negatively. The difference is partly rooted in the different interpretations of 'the Chinese culture'. Briefly, one appears to see in Confucianism the subversion of students' autonomy or free-thinking; the other tends to praise Confucian teachings and argues that they advocate mental activity, self perfection and the personal quest for knowledge. As such, Confucius causes confusion (see Shi, 2006). Furthermore, the differences may reflect the interrelation between knowledge and power. Specifically, in the extreme 'deficit view', the colonial thought can be recognized, with indications of cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism. By contrast, studying the positive evaluation, there seem to be traits of willingness to protect a threatened social identity and national esteem. Stereotyping and anti-stereotyping will be discussed in detail later (see section 2.3).

2.2.3   Chinese students abroad

When discussing the issue of the problems of Chinese students studying abroad, Watkins & Biggs (1996) highlight language difficulty, culture shock and homesickness.

In particular, learning in a foreign language is recognized as the most significant source of educational difficulty. The reason for this is attributed to the learners' previous language learning experiences, which provide inadequate practice of writing and speaking in English.

In addition, plagiarism is emphasized. The hardship involved, according to Watkins & Biggs (1996), is partly owing to their incompetence in English, which makes it difficult to paraphrase a linguistically good source-work, and partly because of cultural differences, considering that international copyright convention is new to the Chinese and that marking the author's name has an implication of flattering. Moreover, Watkins & Biggs (1996) list problems concerning the teacher-student relation and classroom behaviour. In this category, we see the conflicts between a Chinese accustomed hierarchical relation and a Western accustomed warm egalitarian relation; between Chinese favorable receptive skills and Western favourable questioning skills; and between Chinese preferred collaborative learning and the difficulty to apply it in the foreign country.

In general, Watkins & Biggs (1996) seem to view cultural difference as a barrier to students' adaptation. This is indicated in the following assertion: 'These social difficulties naturally impel already collectively-inclined international students to work and live in their own ethnic groups, which in turn brings unwillingness to adapt, even of hostility to, and from, the host culture' (1996:278). In accordance with the comments made previously, Watkins & Biggs may again be accused of homogenizing learners from China, over-generalizing certain problems but over-simplifying the issue of overseas students' experiences in cross-cultural higher education. One dangerous consequence of their arguments is that the 'victims' are blamed, in that the failure of adaptation is seen as a problem for the Chinese students, not for the host.

In addition, within the literature on Chinese learners abroad, there are contributions from Australian educators, who, following Watkins & Biggs (1996), question the anecdotal evidence relating to the group's learning behaviours. For example, Ramburuth (2001) investigates the learning approaches of international students (including those

from Hong Kong and Mainland China) in the University of New South Wales. By modifying and implementing Bigg's Study Process Questionnaire (1987), Ramburuth (2001) gather data from 885 local students and 350 international students. The findings show that the international students do engage in deep learning. Similarly, Smith & Smith (1999) select 202 Australian and 192 Chinese students from two Australian universities. Using data gathered from the Approach to Studying Inventory scale (ASI), they conclude that Chinese students employ a deep but more disorganized approach to study; and they are more likely to be concerned about a fear of failure than their Australian counterparts. The noteworthy point is the differences identified among different national groups of Chinese students, which is reported by Smith & Smith in a later paper (Smith & Smith, 2000). According to them, Malaysian-Chinese and Singaporeans are more dependent and have a stronger need for a structured programme of instruction than Hong Kong students; but the Hong Kong students seem to be more influenced by anxiety and a fear of failing.

In contrast to these reviewed studies above, other Australian researchers have adopted qualitative-oriented instruments in their investigation of Chinese-speaking international students. Their research interests cover issues of autonomy, critical thinking, and adaptation to a Western learning environment. For instance, Jones (2005) interviewed four local and four Chinese students from Hong Kong and Malaysia, with a purpose of exploring their responses to writing a critical commentary. The findings show that despite the differences in terms of native language and prior education, Chinese students' conceptualization of critical thinking is very similar to that of their Australian counterparts. Jones therefore, suggests high adaptability of Chinese students and the significant influence of contexts on learning. Chanock (2003), based on a review of theoretical and empirical data, articulates the fallacy of polarized generalities of Western and Eastern interpretation of autonomy. In her opinion, autonomous learning would not necessarily exclude a dependence on teachers. Her paper highlights the point that ethnocentric bias cannot be eliminated unless cultural changes and overlaps, and variation and distinctive features among individuals are respected. In addition, Tan & Farrell (2001; Chanock, 2003) deem that beneath the problems of lacking English proficiency and difficulties with learning in a new environment lies a root problem of

identity. They suggest that to help CHC students gain academic success in Australian education, academic staff need firstly to assure the group that their ethnic identity would not be lost through adaptation.

A more holistic review of cross-cultural learning is given by Volet (1999), with a focus on learners from CHC as international students in Australia. Volet establishes four types of transfer of learning from the home to host cultural-educational settings, each of which are illustrated in terms of commonly discussed learning issues in the literature. Specifically, the category of 'appropriate transfer' consists of high motivation for academic achievement, diligence and informal spontaneous collaborative learning. According to Volet, these emotional and social aspects of learning travel well and are in agreement with the characteristics of learning valued in the host context. The category of 'ambivalent transfer' comprises CHC students' responsiveness to instruction, attempt at cue-seeking before examinations or to conform to task requirements, and memorization of learning materials. All these features are evaluated dramatically differently by CHC students and academic staff in the host country: the former appear to view the strategies as highly appropriate and appreciate them as survival skills in an unfamiliar environment, while the later tends to perceive them as barriers to good learning. For Volet, the reasons for this incongruence lie partly in misunderstanding between CHC students and host academic staff, and partly in the assessment methods used by the host institutions.

In terms of 'difficult transfer', Volet (1999) refers to the situation that some of the aspects of learning are well suited to the home educational context but are not accepted and have to be adapted in the host environment. In this category, she identifies CHC students' reservation in public discussion, and their expectations of teachers to be kind, available outside classes and helpful for examination preparation. The point Volet stresses in this aspect is that CHC students do value tutorials and also show willingness to adapt; the key to successful adaptation lies in training to help them develop adequate skills. The fourth category is 'inappropriate transfer', in which copying verbatim information without proper referencing appears. CHC students seem accustomed to the practice in home context, but will be accused of plagiarizing in Australia.

In her discussion of transfer of learning, Volet reminds us of the subjectivity of the issue. For her, to judge the appropriateness of certain aspect of learning, researchers should bear in mind that the unique values popularized in Confucian Heritage Culture, although probably having already influenced students and acting as constraints and affordances for their behaviours, are not the students' fundamental belief or intrinsic disposition. She also warns of the danger of stereotyping in 'snapshot' type research and draws attention to the heterogonous and changing nature of both CHC learners and focal contexts.

With respect to Chinese learners in the UK, a number of research studies can be identified. What is reviewed here are the papers presented in the first Chinese Learners Conference in Portsmouth (2004), since they to some extent represent the current trend in the focused field in the UK. In one paper, Gu & Schweisfurth (2006) compare two studies, which respectively investigate the changes in EFL teachers after involvement in a training project in China, and the adaptation of Chinese students who are on degree courses in British universities. In both studies data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews. The findings show that focal group in the two contexts are determined and willing to accept changes. However, the EFL teachers learning in China freely decide to what extent their professional practices would be adapted; by contrast, Chinese learners in the UK are motivated because they 'in part have little choice' (p87). The differences reveal that learning outcomes can be influenced both by learners' interaction with learning environments and by cultural constructs. Another conclusion drawn by the authors is that intercultural learning can stimulate an enhanced awareness of self, own culture and other culture, and hence lead to personal growth.

Aiming to investigate psychological and socio-cultural adjustment of the target group, Spencer-Oatey & Xiong (2006) conducted a study with a sample of Chinese learners in a foundation English course in a British university. A cross-cultural adaptation questionnaire was developed and based on 126 responses, 20 semi-structured interviews have been conducted. The study produces noteworthy findings, some of which are listed by the authors as follows: the majority of the participants report little psychological pressure and little difficulty in sociocultural adjustment; the majority view sociocultural

adjustment as important; adjustment in social interaction and in daily lives is reported as problematic and highly correlated with psychological stress. In conclusion, the authors suggest the need to carry out longitudinal studies in order to explore the issues over time.

Furthermore, Cortazzi & Jin (2006a) suggest two linguistic challenges faced by Chinese students in the UK, which are weakness in academic writing and difficulty in speaking spontaneously in seminars or group work. However, the two problems have already been accepted as common problems of international students (Furnham, 1997); as such their proposal cannot be regarded as original. Besides, the discussion of these problems is based on Confucian influenced Chinese 'cultures of learning', which themselves are not problem-free (see section 2.2.2.4). With no sound empirical study conducted and no fresh data provided, the contribution of the paper to the understanding of Chinese students overseas appears limited. Yet, Cortazzi & Jin (2006a) are useful in terms of their suggestion of possible influences from demographical backgrounds and other variables. Further study, according to them, is needed to explore the differences between those from well-off families and those funded collectively by extended family members; those enjoying more educational opportunities due to '*guanxi*' and those depending more on personal effort; and those from a one-child family and those having siblings.

2.2.4   *Summary of the section: some implications for the study of Mainland Chinese students in the UK*

To understand Chinese learners, particularly those present in Western classrooms as L2 users, Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls for attention to a critical awareness of complexity of the cultural understandings, to the methodological issues in cultural studies, and to the need for sufficient sensibility to the age, gender, education background or geographical location of learners in any study. Drawing on his ideas, I try to summarize what I have learned from my review of the literature. The following points influence my research of students from Mainland China learning in the UK.

Firstly, it is important to note Chinese learners 'could be more subtle and complex than they are often made out of to be' (Kennedy, 2002:434). This implies two potential

meanings. One is the possible variation among 'the Chinese student'. Different groups of Chinese students, in terms of their demographic background and major subjects, can hold different motives, different perceptions and different approaches to learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The other is the possibly similarities shared by Chinese students and their Western counterparts. Scollon (1995) reminds us that individualistic cultures can be collective-oriented and collective cultures can also be individualistic-oriented. Pellegrino (2005) indicates that some assumed cultural images of Chinese students, reluctant to interact with people in the host country for example, can be attributed to any L2 users such as native American students studying in Russia. Therefore, considerable care must be given, in that any 'fixed conceptualizations of cultural characteristics can mask differences that exist between individuals and groups of individuals in a given cultural group' (Smith & Smith, 2000:71). The complexity of the issue I am looking at lies in its interweaving with social, political and economic changes in China in the recent past (Clark & Gieve, 2006). It cannot be reduced to a manageable but simplistic label of cultural beliefs (Stephens, 1997; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Secondly, methodological considerations are crucial. Ho, Peng & Chan's (2002, see also Tweed & Lehman, 2002 a,b) criticism of Bigg's self-report questionnaire and Kumaravadivelu's (2003) criticism of Jin & Cortazzi's opinion survey (see section 2.2.2.4) teach me that in my research design the voice of Chinese students should be prioritized. For me, ethnocentric stereotyping is partly a consequence of imbalanced excessive data reporting the perceptions of Western teachers, partly because of the dominant use of quantitative research instrument and interview methods which by themselves have intrinsic limitations. Seeing solely through Western researchers' eyes, and examining the focal group mainly through taking 'snapshot' pictures may possibly result in a distorted interpretation of Chinese respondents' perspectives and cognitive behaviours. It is also a reason for which Clark & Gieve (2006) think highly of the scholars in the University of British Columbia. To be more specific, Duff (2002) adopts an ethnographic approach to examine the lived experiences of minority students. The approach is reported as appropriate because it reveals how the group suffers from alienation, isolation and exclusion on a daily basis (p316). Similarly, in Morita's

research (2004), a longitudinal qualitative approach is valued as being process-oriented. It enables her to reveal the situated nature of learning, and document identity negotiation and changing perspectives of Japanese students overseas in a holist way over an extended period of time. Benefiting from taking such care in research design, the authors produce the following insightful findings: '‘local’ and ‘nonlocal’ students represented internally very heterogeneous groups…nevertheless, members of the class tend to see the groups as distinct entities…based on easily perceived visible and audible cues' (Duff, 2002:310); ‘behind their (Japanese students) reticence were multiple, interrelated issues including language related issues, issues of culture, curriculum, pedagogy and power’ (Morita, 2004:596). ‘A seemingly homogeneous group in terms of gender cultural linguistic background responded to their L2 classroom variously’ (Morita, 2004:597).

Thirdly, contextual factors require adequate attention. Both Duff's (2002) and Morita's (2004) study suggest that culture is not the only explanation for specific learning behaviors. Other authors identify the relationship between learning environment and learning performance. For example, Kendeney (2002) reports that when learning context changes, Hong Kong adult students change learning strategies accordingly. Similarly, evidence gathered by Miliszewska et.al. (2003) shows that Hong Kong students view unfamiliar project-based tasks as challenging but useful and valuable learning experience. This is confirmed by Jones (2005) and Kember & Gow (1991), who point out that many characteristics of learners from China may result from teaching practices, teachers' perceptions and assessment methods; and they could adapt willingly and easily to student-centered approaches if the learning environment encourages them to do so. The point is highlighted by Clark & Gieve (2006), who assert that research devoted to understanding learners from China, particular those studying abroad, should get away from reified, abstracted and frozen conceptions of culture; instead, they should seek explanations from situated contexts. Here, by stressing contextual factors, I do not intend to deny cultural influences; however, cultural influences should be viewed as dynamic and shifting backgrounds rather than stereotypes to guide the exploration of individuals' learning experiences (Chanock, 2003).

Therefore, I conducted a longitudinal multiple case study to challenge cultural essentialist views against 'the Chinese learner' (see section 3.5.2.3 for clarification of research aims and questions). Adopting multiple data collection methods (see section 3.5.4), particularly a diary method (see section 3.5.4.3), I am able to investigate the lived experiences of thirteen Chinese students in the UK. Perceiving the participants' actions and perceptions as the responses to contextual dynamics, the research hopefully provide a solution to the problem, that is, viewing learners from China as undifferential collective members marked by a unique and fixed set of cultural scripts.

2.3   Culture, discourse and Chinese learners

In this part, the emphasis shifts from reviewing the recent research studies of Chinese learners to exploring the causes of stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'. The attention is firstly given to Foucault's illustration of discourse/power relationship. The interplaying and inseparability of these two concepts not only explain the influences of Confucianism in Chinese history, but more importantly, shed light on the problematic but common depiction of Chinese students overseas. I then work on critics of Orientalism and colonial discourses. Detailed discussion in this part of literature shows me how the deformed representation of 'the East', 'the Asian' and 'the Chinese' are fossilized and popularized, particularly, how a generalized 'Other' (Holliday, 2005:19) involves a culturalist and essentialist reductionism.

2.3.1   Discourse, power, and the essentialized Chinese

Recently, across varied fields of social science, one sees a clear tendency which stresses the constitutive role of language and recognizes the function of symbolic practices in the construction of meanings and identities (Parker, 1992; Mumby, 1993; McKay & Wong, 1996). In this section, I review Foucault's theory of discourse/power relationship. My review will possibly account for the influences of Confucianism as official orthodoxy in Chinese history and as a source of cultural value set in present Chinese societies. More importantly, it provides theoretical underpinnings for my understanding of stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner' (see section 2.2.2). It founds my criticism of the practices which tend to ascribe a fixed cultural identity to students from China and describe them as a reified, homogenous and homogenised group.

Originally marked as a structuralist, Foucault is viewed as the most distinctive representative of post-structuralism (Mills, 1997). His work is in such a significant position that is continuously quoted, commented on, modified and criticized by social researchers (Anderson, 2003). The significances of his thoughts lie in his elaboration of discourse as a concept and his use of discourse analysis as a method in social science studies (Howarth, 2000; Mills, 1997). In doing so, he argues that no settled structure exists which explains all social practices; nor is it possible to objectively investigate a situation without a consideration of discourse (Anderson, 2003).

Foucault's most remarkable contribution is his work on the relationship between power and knowledge. By coupling power and knowledge together, he indicates that power is always bound up with knowledge; the body of knowledge is always a target for the exercise of power (Smart, 1985:75; Merquior, 1985). The interconnection between power and knowledge is realized through discourse (Howarth, 2000). In other words, power formulates the social and physical world by controlling the ways in which the world is expressed and represented (*ibid*). Hence, meaning is regulated by power which governs not only what can be said under critical social and cultural conditions but also who can speak, when and where (Mills, 1997). Hence, objects and subjectivity are discursively formed; they are constructed, identified and classified by utterances and texts (Anderson, 2003).

This point can be further explained using two ideas. Firstly, Foucault's power/knowledge model has consequences for the conception of truth (see Howarth, 2000). As argued in his genealogical approach to the analysis of discourse/knowledge, there is no absolute objective explanation of reality in that there is nothing outside the discourse. Using 'games of truth', truth is produced against social-cultural contexts and knowledge is constructed by a combination of social, institutional and discursive pressures (Danaher, et.al. 2000:40). He is aware that everyone, including himself, speaks and acts within the discursive frameworks of the time. 'Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power' (Foucault, 1987:72, see Howarth, 2000:72). Discursive practices of knowledge, therefore, should be perceived with reference to the particular political,

economic and social context (Smart, 1985; Merquior, 1985; Danaher, et.al. 2000). This implies that any study of discourse should be located in broader power systems with their influences on human's thought and behaviour.

Secondly, much of Foucault's work investigates the production of subjects through the power (Smart, 1985). He shows the importance of classification to the normalization and in turn to the formation of different subjects (Smart, 1985). The subject is not a stable universal entity or a self-governing one, but a result of discourse (Danaher, et.al. 2000). Subjectivity is perceived to be discursively produced; that is, 'subject is dependent on the prior existence of discursive subject positions … functions in discourse from which to comprehend the world' (Lawy, 2006:326).

Moreover, Foucault illuminates the way the social order is constituted by the discourse of power, which produces the subjects who fit into, constitute and reproduce that order (Danaher, et.al. 2000). He turns our attention to the impacts of power and its distribution throughout societies, which regulate or control a population through the operation of institutions, in the field of education in particular (Boyne, 1990; Danaher, et.al. 2000). As a result, people are categorized and ordered into manageable groups, being subject to bureaucratic regimes.

Foucault's binding of discourse and knowledge together emphasizes language as a way to create the social world, to mould individual thought and to shape the self. This sheds light on the issue of why Confucianism was picked up as the orthodox ideology by diverse ruling classes in Chinese history and why it remains influential in contemporary China. Specifically, centring on virtue, compassion and discipline, Confucianism could be interpreted as having a function of forming a docile and diligent population, particularly if we locate the origin of Confucianism as a time of social and political disorder in China. It thus had tremendous value for the controlling class to establish and consolidate a well functioning social order. This point may explain the role of Confucianism as a state ideology in Chinese history. Furthermore, in recent decades, the economic success in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, makes PRC leaders aware that contributions of Confucianism are not only confined to the moral and

political areas but have extended to the broad economic field (see Dirlik, 1995; Yao, 2001; Englehart, 2000; Chen, 1992). Having carried out the overall reform policies and placed economic development in a strategically important position, the present communist leaders, learning from the economically successful experiences of other Eastern Asian countries, might perceive the importance of Confucianism in its result of producing capable, cooperative, diligent and disciplined workers for the modern corporation (see also Hofstede, 1980) and therefore increasingly emphasize the Confucian teachings in China mainland (see Dirlik, 1995; Yao, 2001; Englehart, 2000; Chen, 1992).

However, the power/knowledge relationship also indicates that the understanding of a certain discourse should be based on the studies of situations in which it is embedded (see also Wodak, et.al. 1999). This is because the discourses are socially produced and framed by certain social structures. A study of Shi (1996) has illuminated that Confucianism itself is likely to be interpreted and manipulated in different ways by different groups under different social circumstances. In that different interpretations of the same discourse can be present during the same period to fulfil different purposes, I doubt that there is an agreement upon what Confucius and his disciples actually meant.

Moreover, a closer look at the power struggles in Chinese history shows that the status of Confucianism as state orthodoxy was not completely unshakeable. On the contrary, associated with critical political reforms, several major challenges took place (see section 2.3.2.6). Besides, a scrutiny of Chinese history reveals how wrong it is to assume Confucianism as the only source of Chinese culture and to perceive that all Chinese in diverse societies are equally influenced by the same set of thinking principals. At a given historical moment in Chinese history, multiple influential discourses coexist, including Taoism and Buddhism, which all function to shape social members' actions, speech and cognitive development.

Similarly, Confucianism cannot be immune from social changes. Researchers advocating discursive psychology in fact have indicated that in the formation of cultural identities, economic and political factors can work outside but collaboratively with

dominant discourses (Edwards & Potter, 1992). There have been discussions elsewhere which show how family planning policy enforced in 1977 has influenced Confucian ideas on parenting; and how economic and political reforms may affect learning styles and social behaviours among the youth (e.g. Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002).

Bearing in mind the above listed suspicions, I have to ask myself the following questions: why the interpretation of Confuciansim is fixed into certain features (e.g. Hofstede's research, 1980); why 'the Chinese culture', particularly 'the Chinese academic culture', are essentialised based on such fixed interpretation (e.g. Jordan's listing of Confucian values, 1996:96); and why Chinese students tend to be described as a homogeneous unit sharing the fixed cultural heritage (e.g. Turner's presenting of 'Chinese student archetypes', 2006:33, see also section 2.2.2). Foucault's challenge of 'the truth' inspires me to further reflect on the causes of the stereotyping discourses on 'the Chinese learner', which is focused on in the following section.

2.3.2 *Colonial discourse, culturalism and essentialism*

In this section, I take up the issue which sees 'the West' and 'the East' along an 'us'-'them' divide. The seminal work of Said (1978) is firstly discussed, which gives insights into how the myths of non-Western culture are formulated and serve for the latter's colonizing ends. Pennycook's arguments are then focussed on; he develops Said's opinions by looking at the long lasting cultural effects of colonialism (1994, 1998, 2001). The cultural construction of colonial discourse, for Pennycook, serves not only to justify political or economical exploitation, but has formed the very foundation of Western culture. Moreover, several important notions derived from postcolonial critiques, i.e. Eurocentrism, essentialism and culturalism, are centered on; evolving from Colonialism, these thoughts are far from extinct in Western educators' perception of learners in/from China. Hence, they warrant continuous investigation. Lastly, I discuss neo-colonism, globalization and contextual factors, so as to show the possibility that Chinese people may represent themselves in a way that corresponds with colonial discourse.

2.3.2.1 Orientalism

Said, a Palestinian literature theoretician, is one of the most influential figures in analyzing and elaborating the creative power of colonial discourse. He became famous through the book Orientalism (1978), a critique of Oriental Studies, in which he comments on how 'the West' manipulates knowledge of 'the East' and how 'the East' is represented and exists in that knowledge. Summarized by Said himself later (1985), Orientalism refers to three overlapping domains. Firstly, it reflects on thousands of years of cultural and historical relationship between Europe and Asia. Secondly, it stands for a professional area in Western countries which has a focus on various Oriental cultures and traditions. Thirdly and most importantly, it is more like a collection of words, inventory images, fantasies, which demarcates Orient from Occident, than a loyal description of the reality.

According to him, the Orient signifies a system of representation where the powerful West defined, created, and 'orientalized' orient as 'the other', which, across countless national borders, has contrasting images, ideas, personality and experiences with the West (1978:2). It is also problematic that the former legitimates their depiction with a belief that the 'other' group of culture has no ability to speak of and for themselves – 'if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, …for the West and for the poor Orient' (Said, 1978:21). Such representations produce stereotypes and silence 'the Orient' (Buciek, 2003). 'The Orient' becomes a place for romance, exotic existences, great reminiscences and landscapes (Buciek, 2003).

Drawing on the Foucauldian theory of discourse, Said indicated that Orientalism is not simply a neutral discourse about the East, but reflects a form of cultural leadership which places Westerners in a superior position (Said, 1978:7). It is 'the West' which owns the knowledge of 'the East' and manipulates that knowledge to produce the binary opposition, i.e. masculine/feminine, normal/different, powerless/powerful. The images of 'the East' represent a West/East relationship featured by power, domination and varying degrees of a complex hegemony (Said, 1978:5). Following the interpretation of Buciek (2003), Orientalism embodies how a Western discourse produces specific

representations of and then politicizes the world, with its promotion of the acceptable representation and subversion of the diverging ones.

2.3.2.2 Pennycook's interpretation of Colonialism and postcolonialism

In this sub-section, I review Pennycook's studies on colonialism and postcolonialism. This is for three reasons. Firstly, Pennycook draws attention to the weaknesses of Orientalism. Secondly, when developing Said's argumentations in his investigation of a broader construction of culture, he has focused on a Chinese context and Chinese learners as non-native English speakers. Thirdly, through the analysis of English as a global system, he stresses the continuation of Colonialism into the present time.

Specifically, in his perceptive and insightful book *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (1998), Pennycook has mentioned Said's work eight times. Said's work is on the one hand valued as a major contribution to the discussion of colonial discourse (e.g. p16-7, p35, p37); on the other hand, it has been identified as problematic (see pp163-165). The major recognized limitations fall in three categories. Firstly, Pennycook finds that Said tends to deal with Orientalism as the 'misrepresentation' of reality. However, in that no reality can stand outside the discourses, there is no such question of 'mis'representation. Hence Said has made an epistemological error. Secondly, Pennycook points out that it is European high culture which Orientalism centres on. Agreeing with him, I feel that studying a purely aesthetic form of culture seems too limited to reveal imperialism's effects. Particularly relevant to my research is Pennycook's claim that a broader range of texts and different forms of culture constructs should be explored, to see how our interpretations of lives are produced. Thirdly, Pennycook criticises Said's view that powerful colonizers produce the powerless colonized. For him, power operates in a more subtle and complicated way. As such he locates his interest, not in the colonizing and the colonized, but in the 'colonizing strategy of representation' (p166). As such, Pennycook reminds us of the significance of seeing how diverse discourses on China are formed, and how the images of it as 'the other' are fixed.

Moreover, in contrast with Said who did not have a specific discussion on China, Pennycook has presented a detailed historical review of Chinese education. In the chapter named 'Hong Kong: Opium and Riots, English and Chinese' (1998), he outlines the history of educational policy in Hong Kong and how this policy served for broader colonial purposes of social stability and exploitation. Particularly, he shows how Chinese femininity is shaped against the presence of Western male desire through English education for women. Elsewhere, Pennycook examines the ways the Orientalist and Anglicist discourses inhibit the narrative choices concerning 'the Chinese' and 'the Chinese learner' (see Pennycook 1994, 2001). Fixed images are constantly produced, developed and refined through language.

Another crucial lesson I learn from Pennycook is how the colonial discourse continues to mould today's educational practices. According to him, the end of the colonial rule does not signify an end of colonialism. It is for this reason that he interprets post-colonialism not as a thought 'after' colonialism, but as one calling for the rethinking of colonialism. More importantly, Pennycook emphasizes that the significance of understanding the past is not for the rewriting of history, but for deconstruction of the assumed, given and fixed categories, which are widespread at present. Therefore, in his own words, postcolonialism is an ongoing political and cultural movement which challenges the received histories and ideologies of former colonial nations to open a space for insurgent knowledge to emerge (Pennycook, 2001:67).

2.3.2.3 Essentialism

The discussions on colonial discourse highlight the dangers of essentialist views in cultural understanding. As interpreted by Buciek, an essentialist position is a belief that 'things and phenomena have a real, true core or essence, a consistency and a determined ability which defines what the phenomenon is' (2003:9). It is a cognitive bias that creates fixed categories, which ignore the complicated nature of social, economic and geographical differences (Mahalingam, 2003).

As discussed earlier, Said (1978) calls attention to the essentialist ideas and assumptions, as they demonstrate the attempt by Eurocentric intellectual analysis with an attempt to

redefine the vast and inhomogeneous area of 'the East'. The essentialist discourse, as indicated by what Said calls 'Imaginative Geography', orientalises 'the Oriental' (p49); it popularizes what the familiar is and what the exotic is and dramatizes the distances between them. His analysis, therefore, reveal the significance of shifting the focus of the research from any statement about 'non-European cultures' to the people who apply it and for what purpose to apply it. Moreover, Hung (2003), with an attempt to address social contexts in the understanding of Orientalist accounts, has reviewed the changing Western depiction of 'the East' from sixteenth century to nineteenth century. Her description reveals how ancient China, as one enjoying economic prosperity, was created by Jesuit as European idealization; but 'then kept oscillating between the extremes of unreserved contempt and uncritical admiration, and between particularity and universalism' (p225)

However, essentialism does not appear exclusively in colonialists' oriental studies. Holliday (1999, 2005, 2006) has shown us how normal and natural many essentialist views seem to people in their everyday lives. For example, when we say we 'visit' different 'cultures' while travelling to an other country; or we expect people from France to behave exclusively differently than those from China, we already make essentialist mistakes (Holliday, 2005). Similarly, as previously analysed (see section 2.2.2.1), an essentialist Western educator may label their Chinese students as inefficient, uncritical and passive based on anecdotal evidence rather than careful observation; there are also those, such as Biggs & Watkins, Jin & Cortazzi, who sincerely hope to support Chinese students, but whose arguments reveal their stereotypical perceptions (see section 2.2.2.3). In all these cases, it fails to be recognized that all societies have some cultural elements in common while all cultural traits of a certain society are time and context specific. It is also ignored that not everyone from the same cultural backgrounds is identically influenced by cultural determinant. Age gender, occupation and other stratification variables all play a role in forming their identity.

2.3.2.4 Eurocentrism

Another feature of Orientalism identified by Dirlik (1996) is so-called Eurocentrism. By 'Eurocentrism', Dirlik (1996) refers to the condition that the oriental societies are

defined not by 'what they have but by what they lack'; they are always perceived and represented as something 'empty' and somewhere 'backward' (p100). Similarly, Holliday (2005) describes that in mediaeval time, the Orientalist painters depict sexual fantasies of 'the East' which are morally inappropriate in their home country. By doing so, he suggests 'the East' is Otherized as the one having negative and exotic features whereas the positive and unproblematic self of 'the West' is constructed and kept being strengthened.

A more detailed depiction is given by Pennycook (1998), which goes beyond a more general Eurocentrism and focuses on the cultural construction of colonialism. A series of dichotomies is listed, with the first characteristic of each pair describing European, the second non-Europeans: civilized vs. barbaric, cultured vs. natural, industrious vs. indolent, mature vs. childlike, masculine vs. feminine, clean vs. dirty (*ibid*). The author's historical overview illuminates how Europe constructs a self having superiority to the rest of the world, and how the views on colonizer 'Self' and colonized 'Others' impact on European culture.

Similarly with essentialism, a Eurocentric conceptualization does not retreat into history with the end of the colonial era. Pennycook (1998:171) describes the way Western tourist colonial discourse presents China as a homogenous place, which is featured by 'exotic and eternal, undeveloped and backward, crowed and dirty …'. A miserable and poverty-driven life of the Chinese is discursively constructed by the developed Westerners; the unpleasant actions are over-generalized while the lived experiences are neglected. Besides, within the 'incapable' label given by Western teachers to 'the Chinese learner', the 'authoritative' label to 'the Chinese teacher', and the 'cramming' to 'the Chinese teaching method' (see section 2.2.2), we can see how contemporary Chinese education is understood as a past stage in that of Anglo-Saxon countries. Here Chinese learning is not evaluated based on equal, objective and respectful standards, but by the self-images of Europe's own past. Similarly, the proposal to Westernize and hence advance Chinese teaching, in EFL for example, has been criticized as making a simplistic assumption of pedagogy, which in fact is the continuity about European colonization and domination (Pennycook, 1994, 1998, 2001; Holliday, 2004).

The following lists present phrases that may well indicate this point. Summarized by Holliday (2005), the phrases in the left column stand for 'quintessential American values' (Sullivan, 2000, cited by Holliday, 2005:20), whereas those in right-hand column are selected by Holliday (*ibid*) from texts on non-English speaking Asian students. Both columns seem to indicate how unsatisfactory the Other is and how such an image is projected against the unproblematic Self as a monolithic and normative category (*ibid*). Similar contrasting representations could be found elsewhere (see Jordan, 1996:96; Turner, 2006)

UNPROBLEMATIC SELF	CULTURALLY PROBLEMATIC OTHER
'Native speaker' students and colleagues	'Non-native speaker' students and colleagues
Independent, autonomous, creative, original	Dependent, hierarchical, collectivist, reticent
Individualist	Passive, docile, lacking in self-esteem
Respecting privacy, choice, equality, freedom, change	Reluctant to challenge authority, easily dominated
Modern, Western	Traditional, Confucian, etc.
Analytical, objective, flexible, critical, negotiating knowledge	Uncritical, static, rigid, good at memorizing
Able to manage, research, plan, evaluate, make decisions	Need to be trained, treated sensitively, understood, involved, given ownership, empowered

Involved in genuine teacher-student interaction	Prefer frontal teaching, exam-oriented

(Source: Holliday, 2005:20)

2.3.2.5 Culturalism

Culturalism, or cultural fundamentalism, is a way of perceiving a person as having innate cultural entities based on essentialist views of cultures (see Holliday, 2005, Holliday, et.al., 2004). Dirlik (1996) regards Orientalism as epistemological culturalism because it assigns rigid and common cultural characteristics to different Asian societies. For him, such societies are homogenized both 'spatially and temporarily' (p97). In other words, they are marked as undistinguished parts of a whole 'Oriental', hence 'desocialized'; they are also given a cultural essence which places lived experiences into temporal production and reproduction, hence 'dehistoricized' (pp.97-98). The notable point is that when the on-going cultural activities are denied or ignored, the so-called oriental cultures, according to Dirlik, have no real historicity and no real contemporaneity, since their 'presents' are simply reproduction of their past (1996:98). Based on this point, Dirlik (*ibid*) further indicates that the culturalist representations concern not only rightness or faults, but the problem of metonymic reductionism, which reduces Asia to certain cultural traits and freezes individual society in history.

The same argument is articulated by Pennycook (1998). Based on Foucauldian avoidance of proving or disproving an issue but rather investigating how the issue is constructed, he stresses that his purpose is not to judge whether the images of 'the Other' is negative or not, rather to look at how the stereotypes are produced as a result of colonial power and how these stereotypes remain persistent. Cultural fixity is the major theme of his book. In terms of China, he argues that not only is Chinese culture stabilized or are Chinese learners positioned within such discourses; but their thoughts and behaviours are fixed in these ways and are still in the process of being stereotypically constructed. Therefore, according to Pennycook (*ibid*), it is more important to study how the cultural representation of 'the Chinese' becomes essentialized, how certain images of China circulate and recirculation through different texts.

2.3.2.6 Self-representation

Dirlik (1996) calls to our attention the fact that Orientalism has no distinct geographical limits of use. It can not only relate to the European interpretation of Asian countries, but more importantly, can be extended to the Asian views of Asia. Self-Orientalism is created in such a way that some parts of Western concepts of Asia have been so well incorporated that they become integrated as parts of Asian self-perceptions. He therefore, questions the appropriateness of a notion of Asian 'tradition', which according to Dirlik (1996), is in fact the consequence rather than preconditions of Asian-European interaction.

However, the self-orientalist representations can be consciously produced. It is in this perspective that King (1999) criticises Said, whose work, according to King, exaggerates the passivity of the native and that does not leave room for indigenous people to appropriate and manipulate of Orientalist discourses to reach their own goals. Jensen (1997; see also Ye, 1999:216), for example, identifies two major 'manufactures' of Confucianism in Ancient Chinese society. One was during the *Han* dynasty, when a group of Chinese scholars draw on Confucius to justify their stresses on morality; the other was in the *Song* dynasty, when neo-Confucian scholars sanctified the Four Books and used them in the examination system. Being aware of such a background, we can understand that the Jesuit's codification of Confucianism as Chinese representation, although being established for the sake of European understandings, did help them gain benefits from the feudal bureaucratic elite (Dirlik, 1995).

Moreover, Chen (1992) points out that since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the communist leaders have been trying to emphasise the 'uniqueness' and 'Chinese way of doing things', based on their analysis of the Chinese-Western relationships. The discursive practices of Chinese Occidentalism, in Chen's term, are for the purpose of establishing 'nationalism'; it is also a bi-dimensional process where self-essentialization of the Chinese and the essentialization of 'the Western Others' are interrelating and interconnecting to each other. Similarly, Englehart (2000) claims that the Confucian values are used as means to serve political and ideological ends in Singapore. According to him, Confucian ethics are attractive to leadership in that they

urge people to be devoted to the nation and hence reduce the disagreement caused by economic development. Moreover, to meet these ruling goals, Confucian teachings are consciously selectively interpreted; as such there is always a danger of oversimplified and stabilized 'culture' and of absolute opposition of both 'Oriental' and 'Occidental' (Englehart, 2000).

Furthermore, Dirlik (1995) mentions that in present China, Confucianism could be pragmatically used for commercial purposes, for example, to attract international tourists by hosting theme parks of Confucianism. This is also the point that Holliday (2004) tries to stress. For him, the images of a particular country projected by mass media are always limited. They are likely to exaggerate certain features to ensure economic survival. As a result, an oriental society may be utilised as merchandise, while the 'reality' may be distorted. An instance of commercialization stimulating self-essentialization is Zhang's (2004) research on post-Tiananmen Chinese avant-garde artists. His findings show that the financially insecure artists in present China are highly sensitized to Western aesthetics; they deliberately modify the content and styles of their work to meet perceived Western tastes, and by doing so, attempt to gain acknowledgement in both national and international art market.

Holliday's study (2004) of overseas students may provide further evidence. As revealed by his findings, when in a new and strange environment, people always tend to interpret their home culture in quite different ways from how they perceive it at home. Some particular aspects of their cultural identities are exaggerated while others are neglected. Taking Chinese students in the UK as an example, Holliday indicates that their consensus upon Confucianism as the unquestionable core of Chinese culture may simply result from their difficulties in Western classrooms, rather than the demonstration of their cultural behaviours in China. Therefore, it seems that Confucianism as a discourse is likely to be represented, depending on what the students wish to be perceived in unfamiliar situations.

However, whatever images different groups of Chinese people choose to represent China, Chinese culture or themselves; they pose the danger of homogenizing all

differences across the territory of the nation, erasing the different temporalities of the nation's past. There is also a danger that only the traits consistent with the acceptable national self-perceptions are kept whereas other traits are screened out. As a probable result, they reduce a complex Chinese society into certain characteristics and replace the diverse culture with concepts and ideas traceable from Western standards. For all these reasons, Chen (1992), Dirlik (1995), Englehart (2000) and Yao (2001) teach us that the self-representations of 'the Chinese', especially among nationalists, have a lot in common with those produced by Western culturalists and orientalists. Particularly, they warn us that 'the Occidentalism', by loosely equalizing a reduced interpretation of Confucianism with Chinese culture, deteriorates Confucianism from its origin in order to depict all East and Southeast Asian countries in general.

2.3.2.7 Summary of postcolonial critics

My review of post-colonialist arguments reveals colonial discourses as a site of cultural stereotypes. The Us-Other dichotomy is a key notion stressed throughout the section, which gives insights into our study of the essentialist images of 'the Chinese learner'. Pennycook (1994, 1998) has traced a simple and inferior image of 'the foreign Other' in Man Friday who has to be instructed and mastered by Robinson Crusoe. He, along with others, teaches me how colonial discourses outlive mass political colonialism and keep producing reduced representations of non-Europeans. This part of literature is insightful to my study, in that it theoretically indicates the point that the popular representations of 'the Chinese learner', such as passive learners, rote memorizers or potential plagiarists (2.2.2), are far from reflecting the complexity of individual students' learning behaviours , but the consequences of the cultural construction of colonialism.

2.3.3   Summary of discourse and power

Based on my review of the interrelationship of discourse and power; particularly the power of Orientalist and colonialist discourses, I oppose the practices which depict Confucianism as the dominant behavioural or moral doctrine that has shaped the thought and behavious of all Chinese people for thousands of years, to the virtual exclusion of other influences. With no attempt to deny its influences, I call for attention to the lack of consensus on the interpretation of Confucianism, to the changes in the dominant position of Confucianism in Chinese history, and the in-coming impacts from

other discourses associated with the reforms in Mainland China in the recent past. Moreover, I stress the ideological and formative power existent in essentialist and culturalist views. The overwhelming generalization of Confucianism could reflect lasting impacts of colonialism or imperialism. It can also be a result of the manipulation of nationalists who play a 'cultural card' for political reasons (Dirlik, 1995; Gries, 2007; Wu, 2008). Particularly relevant to my study, it can be a consequence of the self-representation of individual in response to diverse contextual factors.

2.4   Theoretical framework for understanding Chinese learners

In this section I firstly present my theoretical framework in striving to challenge the essentialist views which label Chinese learners with static cultural indicators. My anti-essentialist stance is illuminated by post-structualism, Derrida's deconstruction and Laclau & Mouffe's (Mills, 1997; Howarth, 2000) discourse theory. Based on the theoretical framework, I then clarify a dialectical approach which guides my study of Chinese students in the UK.

2.4.1   *Theoretical framework and Anti-essentialism*

In this subsection, I review briefly post-structualism and the writings of Derrida and Laclau & Mouffe. The stress is on the commonalities these approaches share when dealing with ontological issues, i.e. how they deal with meaning, social reality and subjectivity. The exploration of such issues explains the adoption of social constructionism as the theoretical framework in this research, which helps to oppose a pre-given, determined and definable essence of 'the Chinese learner'.

2.4.1.1 Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism, although taking structuralism as starting point and continuing the line of structualists' thought, modifies and conflicts with the theoretical positions held by structuralism (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). It is an anti-essentialist approach (Pennycook, 2002), and 'in sympathy with much social constructionism' (Burr, 1995:32). The major arguments of post-structuralism are listed as below. These ideas, although superficially dealing with linguistics, concern how thought and reality are bound up with, captured and distorted by language (Parker, 1992). They therefore

illuminate a social constructionist understanding of individual and social life (Burr, 1995).

Firstly, when analysing literature or social practices, poststructualism objects to the scientific stance as adopted by structuralism and criticises the imposition of any stable, unchangeable or organized language structure (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). It instead argues for the endless interplay among signifiers, the 'words which represent the concept of objects' (Bilton, et.al.1996:634). Furthermore, the concept of iterability is adopted to clarify repeatability and alterability, the two characteristics displayed in meaning production. The former refers to the continuity in the meaning of a sign that allows the recognition of its identity in whatever contexts while the latter stands for the possibility that the meaning is modified in different situations. As such language is no longer a closed system; nor a reflection of pre-existing reality. To explore the way in which meaning emerges and transforms, the contexts should be studied first of all. Lastly, post-structuralists attend to the practical effect brought about by using words. Their investigations of the function of texts signify the change in emphasis from language to discourse (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). Following Foucault, it goes beyond a language system or texts but refers to practices where the social world comes into being (Haw, 1996; Horrocks & Jevtic, 1999).

Besides, meaning changes from discourse to discourse. As it is maintained and transformed in discursive practices, it can only be perceived through analysis of the specific context in which language is in use, of the person who is using it and of the time when it is used (Burr, 1995, Phillips & Marianne, 2002). As such, post-structuralism invites us to challenge any practices which seek simple explanations of complex research questions. It, furthermore, warns researchers to attend to the hegemonic sets of power relationships among actors, suggests the existence of a multiplicity of truths and, therefore, argues for the significance of studying diverse perspectives and hearing various voices (Paechter & Weiner, 1996).

Furthermore, post-structuralism foregrounds the discursive construction of social reality and subjectivity. The subject, as indicated by Anderson (2003), cannot stand outside the

statement, i.e. the smallest unit of discourse; rather, it is created in and through discourse, which itself is constituted, reinforced and restricted by institutions and power relations (Horrocks & Jevtic, 1999). There is no pre-given essence; nor is the human subject a universal and transcendental entity (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). By presenting a decentred, fragmented and destabilized concept of identity, the language of post-structuralists, Foucault in particular, provides a corrective to the psychological treatment of self-constructed individuals (Maclure, 1996). Emphasizing the necessity to read social and cultural processes when studying subjects, post-structuralism, therefore, illuminates the point that only when their perceptions and actions are investigated as something socially mediated, can fuller understanding of Chinese students be attained. In this aspect, I stress the research of McKay & Wong (1996) and Parker (1995). The researchers in both studies, influenced by post-structuralism, revealed how identities of Chinese immigrants are formed and reformed in relation to power relations in host societies.

2.4.1.2 Derrida and deconstruction

Derrida is one of most important people challenging the principles of structuralism. He doubts the stability of binaries and criticises the possible acquisition of true knowledge (Gergen, 1999). Derived from his work, deconstruction refers to undoing and dismantling texts, seeking to find out how they present images of persons and society; and how they convince readers of the assumptions they contain (Burr, 1995). It also de-stabilises the familiar and investigates the unfixity of meaning. Particularly, deconstruction can trace how the current discourses and well-accepted representations come into being, how they are sustained and what power relations they underpin (Burr, 1995).

More specifically, for Derrida, if meaning comes from the interplay between the signifier and what it signifies, rather then the representation of innate features of an object or intrinsic connection between signs and objects, as structuralism argues; then there is no fixed meaning at all (Gergen, 1999). He argues that with new supplements constantly added in, the original meaning keeps fading away while the new meaning continuously takes the place of its precursors. But more than this, Derrida introduces a

French term 'differance', the combination of difference and deferral, to illustrate language as a self-referrent system (Gergen, 1999). That is to say, meaning results both from the movement caused by differences among signifiers and from the deferment of possibilities which are not actualised in the system of differences (Burr, 1995, Gergen, 1999). By taking apart the stucturalists' hierarchical binary opposition, such as darkness/light or material/spiritual, Derrida attacks the stuctualists' view that the meaning of one word can be obtained through excluding the other of the binary (Burr, 1995). Derrida argues there is no meaning or truth outside the signs. In other words, signs are just graphic representation, which has no reference to knowledge, truth and culture (Burr, 1995). Thus speech cannot represent the universal transcendent truth nor provide the subject with an access to truth, in that re-representation must take place in any attempt to represent a truth.

Drawing on Burr's analysis, I take from Derrida a critical view on fixed dualism such as individual/society; agency/structure, Western/Chinese. He indicates the danger in ascribing an identity to the object based on what it is not; criticises Western thought abundant in the logic of 'either/or'; and more importantly, warns us of the ideological effect of the hierarchical binary, which can lead the reader to a belief that one side of a pair has more value than the other (*ibid*). On all these points, I strongly agree with Derrida, in that otherwise a Chinese culture would be stabilized, a Chinese people be Otherized and the complexity involved in the interaction between social influences and agency of individual Chinese learners be ignored. Meanwhile, when asserting that both sides of any dichotomy are in fact inseparable, Derrida stresses that to understand one side as a component of a system, a 'both/and' logic should be employed. This point sheds light on a dialectical methodology in my study, which will be discussed in detail later in the section (see section 2.4.2). In short, Derrida's advocacy of instability of meaning and its deferral through the interplay of texts and writing is insightful in studies of Chinese culture and Chinese students' identities. They in this study are treated as plastic, malleable, hybrid rather than fixed entities which can be eternally categorized.

2.4.1.3 Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory

Being viewed as social-constructionists (Burr, 1995), Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory draws heavily on poststructuralism (Phillips & Marianne, 2002; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). It starts from the poststructuralist idea that discourses construct the social world and argues that the individual is situated in a web of discourses, which keep changing and which are always related to each other (Mills, 1997; Howarth, 2000; Haw, 1996). It shows that any Chinese learner's educational experience overseas should be explored as a set of discursive fields, where different even contradictory discourses (not only race and ethnicity, but also age, gender, physical and intellectual ability, language competence, and demographical and subject background) act and interact with each other (see also Haw, 1996).

For Laclau & Mouffe, owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). Since discourse is a never-complete process, society and the identities are instable, flexible and keep changing (Anderson, 2003, Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The formation of a particular identity could be temporarily closed through the exclusion of other possible identification; but there is always great room for changes (Howarth, 2000). The process of change dissolves the fixed identities constructed in the past, whilst opening the possibility for the production of new subjects. Since this construction is perceived as contingent, individual identities are treated as multiple and mobile. As such, my attention is drawn to notions such as 'cultural shock' which, to some extent, run a risk of reading subjectivity as something static and holistic and something one either has totally or lacks completely. Although it is equally important not to ignore problems encountered by a Chinese student in his/her intercultural learning experience, the practice of overstressing such difficulties is questioned, because it may present a danger of 'Otherizing' her/him. For this reason, discourse theory leads me to looking at possible changes, adaptation and development in the Chinese participants' intercultural communication.

Furthermore, in Laclau & Mouffe's writings (Mills, 1997; Howarth, 2000), collective identity is interpreted according to similar principles. Groups are formed through

discursive struggles among different elements, which articulate under certain circumstances. These formations become temporary closures by excluding alternative identifications. Advocating that no collective identities come into being as object, Laclau & Mouffe problematise the either/or dichotomy of 'West' and 'East'. They, in other words, warn me of the danger of interpreting Chinese people against static, rigid or readily measurable attributes. It is more appropriate to perceive the conception of the Chinese students, less as a noun, more as a process, an ongoing process of construction (Parker, 1995).

As such, the work of Laclau & Mouffe, along with that of Foucault and other post-structuralists, provides one philosophical underpinning of anti-essentialism (Parker, 1995). It opposes the practice of categorizing people and is against the idea that all in a certain category share a fixed essence which has been prescribed in advance. Their writings, being anti-essentialist in nature, teach me that there exist no fixed and pre-assigned characteristics of social actions regarding 'the Chinese' or 'the British', for example, as a whole. Nor are there authentic worldviews, personalities or identity when Chinese individuals are concerned. In that individual perceptions are produced and maintained through specific social interactions in specific social environments, to fully understand the Chinese students overseas requires a detailed investigation of their daily communications.

Moreover, the attraction of discourse theory, as other social constructionist theories, is a recognition that all individuals speak from a particular stance, from a particular experience and within a particular cultural and historical context. It therefore, requires research focusing not only on shared features but on specialities. It points out that, for example, when studying Chinese learners, commonalities should be appreciated whilst differences should be taken into account, because the name 'Chinese learners' could have meaning for the people it names but individual Chinese could have specific characters, viewpoints, personalities and experiences. Thus, Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory provides a powerful means to investigate a group of Chinese students as socially constructed subjects.

2.4.1.4 Summary: social constructionism and anti-essentialism

In striving to challenge the essentialist views which label Chinese learners with static cultural indicators, I base my study on interpretations of post-structuralism, Derrida's deconstruction and Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory. The blurred boundary among these approaches has been indicated by Burr (1995), who points out that they share more or less a common theoretical orientation that he calls 'social constructionism' (1995:1). In the following, I summarize what I consider to be the key points of the aforementioned approaches within the social constructionist paradigm, which I employ as the theoretical framework in this thesis. It should be pointed out that by drawing on Burr's interpretation of these approaches as overlapping, I do not mean to treat post-structuralism as synonymous with social-constructionism.

Firstly, all approaches advocate a critical attitude towards the understanding of objectivity (see Burr, 1995). Learning from them, I hold a social-constructionist ontological stance in this research: that is, knowledge of the world cannot be taken for granted as absolute truth; it instead, involves bias in that the process of acquisition always interplays with categorization; it, therefore, is by no means a trustworthy reflection of reality but the product of discourse in the society (Burr, 1995). In addition, writings of Derrida and Laclau & Mouffe, despite their arguments for the contingent, ever changing nature of knowledge and social identities, deny any attempt to picture the social field as anarchic or completely in flux. They on the contrary support that social actions and personal identities are restricted by regulations and social rules. Thus the flexibility societies enjoy is relative (Burr, 1995). Their arguments have influenced my dialectical approach in interpreting 'Chinese culture' and people from China, which is discussed in the next section. Finally and most importantly, the approaches, together with others in social constructionist camp, argue for an anti-essentialist stance in studying the social world (Burr, 1995). For them, there exist no fixed or pre-assigned characteristics of social actions or any specific social patterns. Nor are there authentic worldviews, personalities or identity when individuals are concerned. They hold that individuals' perceptions of the world are produced and sustained by daily social interaction; and the knowledge is subject to particular economic and social arrangements where and when they live. The approaches, therefore, provide me with the

theoretical support to problemtise the stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'. Questioning any fixed, pre-given characters of 'the Chinese culture' or 'the Chinese people', I put forward a dialectical approach to better understand students from China (see section 2.4.2)

2.4.2   Dialectical thinking in understanding students from China

Focusing on a group of Chinese students in a UK university, this study inevitably deals with culture, individual and the relationship between them. In this section I explain how I approach these issues through proposing and applying a dialectical methodology.

It should be noted that in my following presentation, I apply to works of different authors to support my dialectical approach as appropriate, even if some of them are not categorized by themselves as social constructionists. The complexity of human experiences requires me to learn from different arguments in the agency/structure debate. Framing these arguments into a dialectical approach avoids one-sided emphasis on either contextual influences or individual power. It originates from my efforts to minimise pre-assuming or simplifying context-individual interaction before specific data are examined. Remaining open-minded and attending to all possibilities in context-individual relationship, in my perception, will best reveal dynamics and complexities involved in individual experiences.

2.4.2.1 Dialectics and Contradiction

Dialectical thinking concerns non-stop interaction between two opposing factors, through which the contradiction and inconsistencies becomes the driving forces of development (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). It traces back to Hegel, is developed by Marxism and influences Piaget and Vygotsky (Glassman, 2000; Hoffmann, 2005). The latter, in turn, has influences on more recent educational researchers such as Engestrom (2006).

The best-known dialectical tradition in philosophy is that of Marx and Engels (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). At the center of Marxist dialectics are the law of 'negation of the negation'; the law of changes, and particularly, the law of contradiction (Sayers, 1980). Briefly speaking, Marxists stress that everything consists of two opposing sides; everything is in a consistent process of changing; changing takes a spiral form; minor

changes gradually lead to a turning point when one side in the opposing pair overcomes the other (*ibid*). Conflicts are seen as inevitably existent within all things and in the relationships between things, and thus, the root of their development (*ibid*).

Giddens (1979) has applied the concept of contradiction in his study of modern capitalism. For Giddens, a primary contradiction between *private appropriation* and *socialized production* features the modern capitalist world. Whereas Marxist materialism has a one-sided emphasis on economic sphere, Giddens extends his arguments to other aspects of modern societies (Jessop, 1989). Moreover, Giddens' works argue for the possibilities of conscious practices of organizations and individuals. According to him (Giddens, 1979:59), the 'unintended consequences', which 'systematically incorporated within the process of reproduction of institution', often results in the agents' adjustment in their practices.

In more recent educational studies, Engestrom (2006) acknowledges contradiction as the source of personal development. For him, contradiction is internal to all human activities; in fact, any activity system is a *disturbance-producing machine* (Engeström, 1990:11). He stresses that the existence of conflicts does not prevent subjects from reaching a desired goal. Rather, it pushes individuals as human agents to creating innovations and structuring new ways of practicing. Contradictions, in this way, drive changes (Holland & Reeves, 1996).

To summarise, through stressing contradiction, the dialectic thinking views things as changing, changeable and essentially interrelated with each other. In this approach, 'reality' is perceived as dynamic and flexible, while absolute belief on 'objectivity' and 'truth' is questioned. From this perspective, I view that dialectical methodology better matches my theoretical framework, i.e. social-constructionism, as the latter is also characterized by an emphasis on changing nature of individuals and phenomena. In the following, I apply dialectical approach to interpret 'culture', 'people' and 'Chinese students overseas'. It should be noted that the dialectics I present here should not be perceived as a dualist approach. With its stresses on contradiction among all influential factors, it implies dynamics in processes of individuals' socialisation, of changes and personal development and of their identity (re)formation.

2.4.2.2 Culture

Culture is 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1983:87). It is above all a crucial notion for understanding social life (*ibid*); meanwhile, it is hard to define. In my study, rather than viewing culture as comprising pre-given and fixed external realities, I embrace the principles of social contructionism and perceive culture as open and changeable on the one hand, but by no means free floating on the other (Bryman, 2001; Fay, 1996). More specifically, in the research, I abandon the fundamental differences among diverse conceptual schemes. Eastern and Western culture are not to be regarded as encapsulated or independent, but, rather, as interdependent and permeable to each other (Pennycook, 1994). Furthermore, the concept is treated as an ongoing process; a 'verb' in Street's expression (1993) and a form of communication in Hall's (1981). It, on the one hand, is undergoing a constant procedure of transformation, during which certain aspects are affirmed while others are challenged, resisted or redefined. On the other hand, it could be temporarily closed. Otherwise no cultural codes could be transmitted to group members, while all societies have demands of universally similarity. Finally, the social-constructionist understanding I argue for rejects the equation of 'one culture=one society=one set of constitutive meanings' (Fay, 1996:243). On the contrary, all social and cultural orders are multi-layered and complicated (Hall 2001; Werbner & Modood, 1997; Neito, 2002, Gollick and Chinn, 1998). Even in history, apparently isolated societies were marked by significant internal difference, let alone those in an era of global cooperation and competition.

My interpretation of culture underpins my opposition to using the vague term of 'the Chinese culture' or 'Confucianism' to compass all cultural values of Chinese people, no matter where they live. Great social, political and economic differences among geographically diverse areas must be acknowledged and carefully examined. It must also be noted that the differences not only exist but change actively in terms of their extent and composition.

2.4.2.3 People

Drawing on social constructionism (Burr, 1995), I hold a dialectical model in interpreting personal behaviours. On the one hand, I support the idea that basic beliefs and principles of thought are shared among individuals within national or international groups. This, however, is not so much because there is a fixed value system which could be internalized by subjects to perform pre-designed roles, as because the members are more likely to be socialized in a comparatively similar social, economical, cultural and political context (Fay, 1996). On the other hand, I argue that the necessary background similarities should not imply complete agreement on all aspects between any individual members. Holliday (1999) warns us that the uniformity and coherence of one group should not be exaggerated; otherwise, internal 'variation and variability', which function to blur group boundaries, would be lost. Regarding my study, an individual learner in/from Chinese societies bears with him/her distinct educational experiences, strategies of learning and commitment to learning, all of which, correlating with many other social variables, distinguish her/himself from others. Hence, a label of 'the Chinese learner' is problematic and the concept of 'the Chinese' as a homogeneous unit must be avoided.

No two learners with a Chinese nationality are the same. Such a point can further be illuminated by exploring the issue of individual agency, which is also subject to dialectics, i.e. individuals can transform and elaborate social rules when following them (Fay, 1996). Specifically, on the one hand, drawing on a weak version of social constructionism (see Sayer, 1997; Burr, 1995), I argue that people act as conscious agents. They do not blindly memorize, reproduce and follow any fixed, pre-given rules. On the contrary, they are able to reflect on, modify, challenge, reject and innovatively re-construct any imposed cultural beliefs; and based on the analysis, evaluate their actions to meet maximized ends. The point is well illustrated by Parker (1995) when drawing on social-constructionism to study Chinese immigrants in the UK. For Parker, power and knowledge should not be treated as things necessarily entailing each other; otherwise, individual resistance as a refusal to obey dominant discourses will be omitted. In line with his argument, I oppose to seeking in one discourse as an explanation of

Chinese people; or treating the behaviours of one particular Chinese student as representative of all 'the Chinese'.

On the other hand, I advocate that no agent can step beyond a particular society or social context. Social-constructionism, particularly those discourse-focused theories, teaches me that everyone performs activities only within specific social settings, which simultaneously encourage and prohibit their behaving and thinking (Burr, 1995). This is not simply because no one can select the cultural or social system in which one is born. More importantly, certain kinds of actions are licensed within the process through which they learn and become a qualified member in diverse discourse communities (Morita, 2004). In terms of learners – including Chinese students, their knowledge is built in daily interactions; it is socially and discursively constructed abilities that activate their agency. The complexity of agency/structure interaction will be explored in chapter 5 (see section 5.5)

2.4.2.4 Chinese students learning in the UK

When problematising a culturalist and reductionist view of 'foreign others', Holliday (1999) proposes a 'small culture' paradigm. A 'small' sense of culture refers to 'the composition of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping', which can be 'a neighbourhood' or 'a work group' (p247). By introducing the term, Holliday criticises a 'big' culture approach which is always placed around ethnic, national and international entities; instead he attaches importance to specific groups and their activities under particular academic and institutional contexts. For me, the 'small culture' concept is in line with the social-constructionist notion of culture. It offers devices to fulfil the anti-essentialist task in cultural studies and teaches me to attend to contextual factors and emerging behaviours of group members. The 'small culture' paradigm, moreover, leads me to the open and ongoing processes in the formation of national culture and individual identity.

Insightful as it is, the concept has limitations. For me, a 'small-culture' idea could be questioned as one producing an artificial dichotomy (i.e. small/large) in that one can identify her/himself with an almost infinite range of 'cohesive groups' of varying sizes

and it could be misleading to define a certain group as 'small' or 'large'. For this reason, in my research, I learn from Holliday's 'small culture' to stress contextual analysis. Yet, instead of applying it in a direct way, I propose a dialectical methodology in my investigation in Chinese students learning in the UK. In the following, I firstly clarify a dialectal relationship between Chinese students' individual agency and the influences from social contexts in which they find themselves in Britain. I then emphasize a process-oriented approach in understanding the target group's socialization in new learning environments, which dialectically stresses personal change and temporal fixity. Later I describe identity formation and reformation in new contexts, which also involve a dialectical model emphasizing both being and becoming.

2.4.2.4.1 Context and individual

When reviewing the existing studies on Chinese learners (see section 2.2.2), I have stressed the arguments which call for a transferred attention from universal cultural explanation to situated contextual variables (e.g. Clark & Gieve, 2006). In this section, I would like to focus on the issue in more detail. My argument is presented as a dialectical relationship between specific contexts and individual agency.

In the first place, contextual influences on individual learners could be significant. According to social constructionism, it is interactions and communications that stimulate and actualize one's intentions; that encourage or constrain one's activities; and that result in diverse personal psychological experiences (Burr, 1995). In an empirical study, for example, Her (2005) depicts how Japanese students in American universities develop different learning strategies in response to various teaching methods. In the second place, as already discussed, the individual as agent plays an active role in realizing personal transformation. The idea is particularly stressed by a group of researchers known as socioculturalists. Engestrom (2006), for instance, describes how students, by making and using cheating slips, break through the contradictory situation between the constraints of the school regulations and the demand for high scores. He argues that although individuals as social beings cannot be absolutely free from rules or constraining relationships, the agent actions enable subjects to break away from the impossible situations. The point to be noted is that such agent actions usually have

undesirable emotional effects, like tension, resistance, pain, loss and insecurity (Engestrom, 2006:29).

The dialectical perception of interplay between active subjectivity and constitutive/constraint contexts has crucial implications in my study. It leads me to focus on how students mobilize their existing knowledge, beliefs and views, gained from prior experiences, in new environments; how they construct coping strategies across various classes, instructors and subjects; how they think, evaluate and respond to overlapping 'small cultures', which are not only restricted within academic settings, but include neighbourhood, Chinese students' community, groups of friends and work places. Considering together the possible impacts from ethnicity and various social positions, I may then be able to understand not only personal transformations, adaptations or changes, but also the underpinning reasons for these.

2.4.2.4.2 Individual socialization

Social constructionists argue for a process-oriented approach to understanding the human world and reality. To them, there is no static entity, such as personal traits or the nature of society; the aim of social enquiry is not to reveal what a person has but what people do together (Burr, 1995:8). The idea of viewing socialization as a process of personal transformation can be attributed to Vygosky's theory (1978), which draws our attention to the interconnection between the origin and the outcome. Developing from Vygotsky, social-culturalists argue for a genetic analysis in any examination of a certain phenomenon (see Engestrom, 2006). They deem that research should be conducted not on the product of development but the process by which the product is formed; in other words, to study something historically (Engestrom, 2006).

Such an emphasis on process is well documented. Sawyer (2002), for example, has defined 'process ontology', i.e. processes depict the nature of reality; entities can only be derived from or based in processes (Martsin, 2008). As far as learning is concerned, Lave & Wenger (1991) stress a socially situated and interactive process, named legitimated peripheral participation (LPP). This is a process in which apprentices gain increased expertise in the new community. The noteworthy point is that LPP does not

only locate learning in the acquisition of knowledge, but more importantly, in a growing sense of belonging and gradual construction of an identity as master practitioner in the community of practice. Drawing on this idea, Morita (2004) examines Japanese students in a Canadian university. Her study shows that the academic discourse socialization is a process by which L2 learners as newcomers negotiate and become competent members in L2 classrooms. Moreover, Holliday (1999) indicates that 'small culture' is a process of naturalization in which behaviours are socially constructed as routine. Clark & Gieve (2006) advocate a process approach rather than product approach in investigating how Chinese students are socialized in academic communities.

In my study, I follow a process-oriented approach, which is interpreted as a dialectical model, stressing not only changing but the possibility of temporal fixity. To clarify the point, I borrow Engestrom's concepts (2006) of stablization and destablization, and develop them from the studies of cognitive behaviours to my study on intercultural learning experiences. Specifically, the former notion of Engestrom refers to 'a process which takes some phenomenon that is in flux, and draws a line around the phenomenon, so that the phenomenon can enter cognition in a single act of reference' (Cussins, 1992:677); destabilization stresses that the cognitive trial is by no means linear or ending in a closed cognition area, but keeping destablized due to the ever-changing nature of the field where cognitive activity occurs (Engestrom, 2006). For me, the fundamental oscillation between stabilization and destabilization requires attention in examining Chinese students' learning in the UK. On the one hand, meaning can be constructed; socially accepted ways of acting in the new communities could be familiar and natural and maintained for a while. On the other hand, possibility of destabilization always exists which allows new patterns of acting and further personal development. Regarding my study, in that there is always a tendency demanding change in the contexts where participants' learning occurs, no universal schema could be drawn on to depict their cognitive or personal development. For this reason, the focus should be switched from learning product to their socializing process. Only by this means, can the dynamic perspectives of their transformation and adaptation can be grasped.

2.4.2.4.3   Individual identity: both being and becoming

Similarly, in my study, I deal with individual identity using the dialectical modelled, process-oriented approach. On the one hand, I see identity as mobile and in the process of construction. Drawing on social constructionism, I hold that it keeps forming and reforming through interpersonal interaction by different factors in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, role, age working simultaneously together. I hence challenge the essentialist views, as reflected by role identity theory or social identity theory (Martsin, 2008), that the individual has a pre-given, unified and fixed identity. Such an idea is fully discussed by Sarup (1993, 1996), who argues that identity arises from communication among people, institution and practices. Identity, therefore, is featured as fragmented, hybrid, full of contradictions and ambiguities. Similarly, the socio-cultural scholars view identity as a process and strive to capture its changing nature. Holland & Lave (2001) for example, articulate that identity can never be ready; it, on the contrary, keeps forming and reforming.

On the other hand, I interpret identity as something which is only conditionally fluid. It is on this point that I disagree with Sarup (*ibid*), whose books project a rather one-sided emphasis on free flowing and un-determinate re-composition of subjectivity. Social constructionism teaches me that reformations of identities are subject to individuals' interactions with various social and contextual factors. Hence, I agree with Piper & Garratt (2004), who argue that identity involves both being, i.e. what we are already, with its root-free invocation; and becoming, i.e. what we might be in the future as the 'rhizomatic nomad' (p281). A similar argument can be identified in Hermans' (2001, 2003) discussion on the dialogical self, which according to him, is distinctively characterized by a combination of unity and multiplicity, or continuity and discontinuity over time.

2.5   Summary of chapter 2

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature which marks Chinese culture with Confucian values and depicts Chinese students as bearers of such values. It should be noted that my criticism of the widespread stereotypical views found more typically in the earlier literature does not imply my denial of the importance of more recent literature, which has powerfully questioned the practices that see culture as static, simplistic and

deterministic. Rather, the insightful views of authors, such as Kumaravadivelu (2003), Kennedy (2002) and Louie (2005) have encouraged me to explore the complex issues involved in the intercultural experiences of Chinese students overseas.

Despite the increasing anti-essentialist literature, the reasons that I highlighted the stereotypes in this study are as follows. Firstly, there is a whole set of literature which draws on Confucianism as a means to understand Chinese students. Such "individual 'facts' … could reflect stereotypes that are blatantly untrue" (Louie, 2005:17). Secondly, we notice that some Chinese writers themselves stereotype 'the Chinese culture' and stress its distinctions from Western practices (such as Ho, 1998; Hwang, 1987; Lee, 1996). This would tend to strongly confirm stereotypes already held by Western education practitioners. Moreover, as Louis comments (2005:22), this may make such stereotypical beliefs 'so prevalent and entrenched that even the CHC students themselves have internalised these descriptions of themselves'. Thirdly, the rapid expansion of numbers of Chinese student in the UK may 'add in demands of our (teachers') stressful and pressured lives' (Ryan & Carroll, 2005:9). This may have encouraged teachers to look for and pick up 'easy' explanations to handle 'the group' and, in doing so, further popularize the stereotypes. We might hypothesise that this 'emergency response' has given way to the more nuanced understanding of Chinese (and other overseas) students as experience with them has developed, and this is reflected in the more recent literature in this field. It is my hope that my own work will contribute to this growing body of more critical studies.

Following my review of the literature, dialectical thinking is proposed as an appropriate approach in dealing with ontological issues in my study. This is based on the critiques of those existing work, which pictures Chinese students overseas as a homogeneous group. It is also from my reading of post-structuralism, deconstruction and discourse theory. By drawing on social-constructionism as my theoretical framework, I do not intend to argue for the absolute power of social contexts in shaping human beings. Similarly, I do not intend to over emphasize human agency. My stance is that the relationship between agency and structure can be dynamic and complicated which

should not be arbitrarily asserted without referring to specific persons or specific experiences.

As such, social-constructionism provides me with theoretically anti-essentialist means, which instructs me to problematise a crude dichotomy of 'the West' and 'the East' and enables me to critically explore the diversity of a Chinese group. The arguments of different researchers (e.g. Engestrom, 2006; Burr, 1995) in the debate of agency and structure, moreover, bring to light the importance of the dialectical methodology. With the stresses on conditional individual agency, non-linear processes in personal socialization and a 'doing' version of individual identity, the dialectical methodology allows me to read individuals as who they are becoming and why. It opens room for dynamics, changes and complexity and hence puts social-constructionists' assertion on anti-essentialism into practice. In the next chapter I focus on my research methodology, which supports my dialectical approach in understanding the participant's experiences overseas.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe and justify the methodology I have used in my research. The way I present the issues is different from the conventional approach, which reports research processes as linear ones. It is composed of personal narratives in order to reveal the mutual interaction between me and the research (i.e. both the data and the respondents). Specifically, I first discuss my interpretation of educational research, my epistemological stance and my adoption of a qualitative research approach. I then describe the changes in my personal life which impacted my understandings of the nature of research, my implementation of the research and my interpretation of the participants' experiences. Subsequently I focus on sampling, which was characterized as an on-going process and involved both the initial selection of research participants and a set of follow-up decisions throughout the study.

In the next section, I describe how I developed my research methods as an on-going process; that is, how I employed a diary method and how I complemented it with other research instruments. I view the mixed research methods I used as significant, original and distinct from the existing studies of Chinese learners. One strength of my research is that my research methods developed along with the progress of the fieldwork. The adopted methods, therefore, best served the research aims which are to capture changes and reflect the complexity of students' experiences.

Finally I focus on ethical issues. As social process, this research was subject to conventions of social interactions, but was also subject to ethical principles. Given the significance of researcher/participants relationships, I viewed the capacity to reflect critically as crucial: By reflecting what I heard and observed, I was able to protect the participants' rights while seeking the development of professional knowledge.

3.1 My relationship to the research

Having long been influenced by objective methodological strategies, at the start of the fieldwork, I acknowledged the significance of a researcher being detached from those being studied. In this research of Chinese students, right from the beginning, I tried to

maintain my position as an outsider and believed this to be the key to capturing the participants' perceptions and concerns. However, reflecting on my journey over the years, I have become more and more aware that a distanced and objective role for the researcher is nothing but an illusion. Never did I remain completely uninvolved with the participants whom I was investigating. My personal experiences and knowledge, instead, intertwined and influenced all stages of my research.

I therefore question the practices which dichotomize the subjective and objective role of the researcher. My stance echoes Fine et. al.'s (2000) criticism of those extreme practices, which either view the self of the researcher as a contaminant or over-emphasize the subjectivity of the researcher and consequently silence the 'subjects'. Following Fine et.al. (2000), I prefer to dissolve the boundary between these two approaches. It is not an 'either/or' but a 'both/and' option. On the one hand, to fulfil my objectives I interacted frequently with the students. Their activities became an inseparable part of my life over the year of the fieldwork, in which I shared all their happiness, sadness and change. I tried to comprehend their lived experiences and found myself only able to do so by drawing on the capacity that my prior background, training, and skills had given me. On the other hand, I continued to consciously reduce my influence on their learning and personal lives as much as I could. It was not my intention to work together with them to achieve a particular development. Thus, although I admit I was inevitably part of their experience, I stuck to my research aims during the year in which I explored how they changed.

Moreover, my research aim of challenging stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner' demanded that I avoid the above extremist stance. Holliday (2005:305) argues that researchers should consider questions of 'who I am and what my ideological preoccupations are', in that we are actually 'interactants in the areas we are researching in one way or another'. The failure to reflect on these questions, according to Holliday, is at the root of the essentialist discourses of the non-English speaking 'others'; for example, 'the Chinese learner', in Western Anglophone pedagogy. Therefore, I acknowledge that my critical role as a researcher played an essential part in any effort to

achieve my research goals, that is, to explain the participants' behaviours in their own terms.

My past experiences affected my ability with which I would access and analyse the incoming information (see Ladson-Billings, 2000). I have reached a gradual awareness that the attempt to entirely separate myself from my investigation would definitely end in vain (Hollway, 1989). I acknowledge that research is always shaped by researchers' values and interests and socio-historical backgrounds. Thus, in this chapter, I choose to reveal how my personal experiences and values influenced my research, ranging from the interpretation of educational research to the choice of my epistemological stance, the adoption of qualitative research, the formulation of my research questions and the application of my chosen research methods.

3.2   My epistemological stance

In this study, based on my interpretation of the mission of educational research, the following principles characterize my epistemological approach. Firstly, it is interpretative in nature (Gomm, 2004; Bryman, 2001). Many researchers studying Chinese students overseas acknowledge the richness of their experiences. However, some of them have failed to develop their methodology to embrace the breadth and depth of students' experiences throughout their research processes. The linear nature of designing, conducting, analyzing and drawing conclusion is one reason that their research findings have tended to reproduce stereotypes. Similarly, resorting to one or two conventional methods of data collection, typically questionnaires or interviews or a combination of the two), seems to be another cause (see section 2.2.2.4). In contrast, the complexity of the field I am looking at necessitates a cyclical procedure (see also the ethnographic research cycle, Spradley, 1980:29), whereby I study and re-study what I am examining and thus interpret any given phenomena from as many perspectives as I could. Although it is always hard to achieve fullness of understanding, I believe that this is precisely what research means, and where a researcher's obligation lies.

Secondly, I draw on a subjectivist epistemology. To me, research in the educational sphere is value-laden. Abiding by Denzin & Lincoln (2000), I reject the positivist view which measures a piece of research based upon whether it is 'objectivist science' (see

also Kolaskowski, 1993; Wright, 1993). Instead, as previously discussed, I hold that the researcher influences all stages of the research. The selection of subject matter and determination of the research question are not value-free. Nor are criteria governing the soundness and trustworthiness of a certain research instrument or other methodological considerations. For this reason, as reflected by the work of several authors (Janesick, 2000; McCall, 2000; Tedlock, 2000; Tierney, 2000; Beverley, 2000; Miller & Crabtree, 2000), research in education is conducted differently from that in the natural sciences. Particularly, those examining stereotypes, prejudices and social injustice have made it clear that the subject matters can only be conceived and understood within the paradigm held by individual investigators (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000c). Otherwise, 'abstraction, acts, practices, feelings and cognitions are totally lost to the benefit of the correlation of variables' (Alvesson, 2003:167). Therefore, I emphasise in this chapter the value commitment which is transparent in this study and the belief that I myself with my own particular prior experiences would do the research differently from all others working on a similar topic.

Moreover, a subjective epistemology was particularly relevant to my understanding of 'truth' and 'objectivity'. Drawing on social constructionism (Burr, 1995), I support the idea that social realities are multiple and discursively constructed; that knowledge is historically specific and always derived from specific points of view. Therefore, there is no such thing as objective 'truth' (Burr, 1995) and the social science researcher should not expect to discover any 'true' nature of human beings or social life. In this aspect, I am aware of the limitations of social constructionism that have been articulated by other writers. For example, some researchers in environmental social science criticize social constructionism for its viewing of nature as 'no more than a set of culturally generated symbols' (Redclift, & Woodgate, 1997:61). Such a criticism echoes Marx's argument for acknowledging the materialistic conditions on which culture exists (*ibid*). In this study, I draw on a weak version of social constructionism. I question an 'absolute' knowledge or 'objective' perceptions of social reality; meanwhile, I acknowledge the existence of some facts, such as nature and environment, which may exist independently of language (Searle, 1995).

Following this line of thought, I agree with Sears (1992:147) that it is fallacious to 'believe objectivity as the product of precise instrumentation or rigorous controls'. Given the complexity of the subject matters involved in my research, it is simply naïve to assume the quality of empirical materials can be maximized if a researcher keeps a distance from the project and utilizes data-generating tools as rationally as possible. In fact, Alvesson (2003:170), reminds us that social science researchers who hold a neutral position, who practice 'techniques' like the interview but ignore the fundamentally social nature of those techniques, may only obtain a 'shallow, convention-guided and not very honest account'. Therefore, when studying Chinese students' experiences, it is crucial that researchers move their attention from reporting 'truthful' data, or presenting 'objective reality', to creating warmth and trust with respondents. This is not only for the success of data collection, but also from an ethical consideration, particularly, in my challenging of unequal power relationship between researcher and those being researched (see section 3.5.5).

I am aware, however, that doing research which is value-laden could be criticized as being biased. In terms of data-generation, there was a danger that the sharing of personal emotions and experiences might make my own orientation guide the respondents. In terms of data-interpretation, there was also a danger that intimacy might influence my ability to make sense of the respondents' lived experiences. The latter point, in Alvesson's (2003) phrasing, may imply a risk of 'taken-for granted assumptions, blind spots' (p183) as 'one can be less able to liberate oneself from socially shared frameworks' (p184). A more serious concern is that my cultural and experiential closeness to the participants means that to some extent the research is also about me. I admit that interpretation of the data is as much about my efforts to understand my own life as it is about their efforts to understand their lives. My research, therefore, may be criticized for its personal bias.

My defense is that by emphasizing the significance of multi-voicedness and reflexivity, I had attempted to create a certain distance to personal preferred ways of thinking. Thoroughness in organization, depth and breadth in data collection and explicitness in reporting the research process were some of the ways in which I sought to enhance my

research validity (see sections 3.5.4, 3.9). The multiple methods facilitated the creation of a richer picture of the students' experiences but also enabled a minimal intrusion in their normal lives in the UK (see section 3.5.4). In addition, throughout the study, I retained the ability to think critically (see section 3.6). Based on reflexivity, I guided my research, developed my methodology, and consequently captured the changes in my participants. Through these means, I endeavoured to increase credibility of my research.

But more importantly, I argue that it is simply impossible to be entirely objective when the research is addressing human concerns. Sharing commonalities with the participants did not by itself mean the research was less impartial; nor did the growing closeness with the participants. In fact, my reflection on my own life and on the participants' experiences intermingled with one illuminating the other. Likewise, the relationship with the participants determined the quality of data the research generated. Thus, I argue that based on reflexivity, my emotional involvement in the study and my personal relationship with the participants contributed to more credible research findings. With the access to even most sensitive parts of the students' lives, the study, instead of generating stereotypes or prejudices, was at best to reduce the occurrence of personal bias and presuppositions. .

Thirdly, this study embodies a critical epistemology. As mentioned earlier, my stress on humanistic studies – the research with people and not merely on people -- is marked by a concern to reveal the previously ignored experiences of people and interrogate the ability of the texts to represent such experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a; Mies, 1993). I thus challenge the power relationships that are manifested in natural science. Later (see section 3.5.5), I describe how I conducted my research in a way that allowed the greatest respect to the respondents. A non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and respondents, as Christian (2000) stresses, has strong ethical implications (see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This ethical epistemology challenges the objectivist stance of science and prioritises care, moral values and above all, human rights and dignities within the research (Christian, 2000).

3.3 My adoption of qualitative research

Following the principle of 'fitness for purpose' (Verma & Mallick, 1999), the aim of my research, which was to identify, explore and understand Chinese students' experiences in the UK, determined the choice of a qualitative study (also see Denzin & Lincoln 2000a for the definition of qualitative research as being historical-contextual situated; see Bryman 2001, Bogdan & Biklen 2003, Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000 for the characteristics of qualitative research). The reasons are as follows:

Firstly, it is in line with my adoption of social constructionism as a theoretical framework. Social constructionists stress intersubjective understanding, examining the multiple meanings of everyday life and how these are constructed by people within the contexts of their particular language and culture (Burr, 1995). In this thesis, I discuss the participants' changes and development in 'new' environments, particularly 'new' academic culture. I am using 'new' (*xin* in Chinese) in the sense that it was in Britain and not in China, without any prejudgement as to whether it would be different. A qualitative inquiry better facilitated my objective, as it is 'contextual research' and process-sensitive (Ambert, et.al. 1995:881). It helped me to uncover the students' journey towards personal maturity, and the complexity and dynamics of this longitudinal process.

Besides the above, qualitative research centres more on 'probing and interpreting cases of lived experiences than making generalized assertions' (Riehl, 2001:116). Its power to illuminate the lives of a few people in their social contexts well served my research, which sought to problematise culturalist stereotypes. It allowed me to look at each of the participants as interesting individuals, who although sharing similarities with others, had a unique story. Grounding my research in a qualitative tradition, I devoted my respect to individuals' voices, explored their lives in depth and intensity, and appreciated the richness of their personal experiences.

I also adopted a qualitative model because of my advocacy of a subjectivist epistemology. Sears (1992:152) defines qualitative research as 'a state of being: a willingness to engage and to be engaged, the ability to momentarily stop internal

dialogue and to engage reflectively in a search for the meanings constructed by others and ourselves.' Thus, a qualitative inquiry was in line with my belief that only by admitting close engagement with the participants, could the in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences be better achieved. Here, it should be noted that in line with Hollway (1989), I saw an active researcher's roles not only in terms of research skills but also her knowledge of self and of others. Moreover, when I look back on my research now, I am aware of how my interpretation of the participants' lives and the self-interpretation of my own life were parallel. In this respect, qualitative research is better suited to recording how my own self-knowledge developed together with that of my participants.

In addition, having learned from feminist methodology, I valued qualitative research as it was in agreement with my intention to hand over power to the participants and make their voices heard. Critically based feminist research (e.g. Hollway, 1989) taught me to unearth the power relationships, embodied by ethnic, racial and class differences, which featured the students' daily experiences and influenced their meaning-making processes. By revealing the socially constructed nature of reality and stressing the context-situated nature of learning, I was then able to challenge the ethnocentric stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'. However, I acknowledge that I did not apply feminist theory in a broader sense as an analytical framework, although I drew on feminist methodological practices, particularly to handle the participants/researcher relationships in day-to-day running of the research.

I also employed qualitative inquiry because I valued the principle of reflexivity. Sears (1992:152) warns that qualitative research is more than technique: 'While participant observation, unobtrusive measures, interviews, and so forth may be used by a researcher, a person using these tools may not be doing qualitative research'. The key to achieving the soundness of a qualitative inquiry is reflexivity. In particular, the aim of my research could not be fulfilled by the unreflective use of data generation methods. Instead, I needed to allow interpretation to be generated from the initial data, to develop the research methods to produce more data, and to think critically and keep refining the

initial interpretations as the research unfolded (see section 3.7). Qualitative inquiry allowed me to develop my conception throughout the research and guided me to do so.

3.4　My accommodation of traditions of qualitative inquiry in the study

In this section, I focus on case study, ethnography, and some principles of feminist methodology, i.e. eliminating power inequality and honouring the voices of those silenced, and explain how I was influenced by them in my research design. In other parts of this chapter, I clarify how I benefited from biography in doing interviews (see section 3.5.4.5) and grounded theory in sampling (see section 3.5.3.2) and data analysis (see section 3.7). Creswell (1998) singles out five traditions of qualitative inquiry, each of which distinguishes itself from others through a unique history and distinct methodology (i.e. biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study). Despite his advice that the apprentice researcher should rely on one tradition for a procedural guide, I learned from different traditions when conducting my research.

In learning from different traditions, it was never my intention to challenge Creswell's (1998) classification. In fact, I do agree that it is useful to new researchers, like myself, who find clarity with single tradition of inquiry. This would at least have made it easier when starting out. However, such a practice was simply inappropriate for addressing my research questions. Aiming to explore participants' daily experiences, I had to keep expanding and extending the exploration and to attempt an inquiry which learned from various research traditions. To me, only by combining different traditions of qualitative study and employing critically whatever was useful, was I able to reveal the changes, experiences and inner worlds, which were complex and worth every effort to explore.

3.4.1　Case study

My research was a multiple case study in which the life experiences of 13 participants are analysed, discussed and reported together. All cases, following Creswell's points (1998), were treated as historically specific, which means that the participants themselves, their perceptions, behaviours and cognitive development were both restricted by and realized over time. Besides, in accordance with Yin's definition

(1993:1), no single case is 'readily distinguishable from its context', but operates under the influence of complex and interconnected situational factors (Stake, 2000), I supported that certain experiences could only be understood within the contexts in which such experiences took place. For this reason, a wide range of data were gathered and analysed to provide in-depth understanding of students' experiences in various contexts and their changes throughout the courses. Therefore, my case study aimed to achieve a richly triangulated picture of the participants' lives in the UK.

Furthermore, my research contains features of both intrinsic and instrumental case studies (Stake, 2000). Regarding the former, the individual participants were at the centre of the study: their uniqueness was the driving force in my exploration and turned out to be a powerful weapon for my challenging of cultural stereotypes. Using an intrinsic case study, I was able to conduct an intensive and detailed examination of the experiences of each respondent (Gillham, 2000; Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; David & Sutton, 2004). It allowed me to illuminate the changes within individual participants and identify the influences on such changes over time.

Moreover, my research facilitates the understanding of the common concerns among this particular group of students from China. It therefore bears some features of an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000). Specifically, I studied the changes in the participants' attitudes towards formative feedback, their difficulties in lecture rooms, their communication with non-Chinese people, their motivations for taking part-time jobs and experiences at work place. A focusing on such issues, however, must not be seen as an evidence of cultural essence 'the group' shared. On the contrary, there were remarkable differences among the participants in terms of their attitudes and responses to the similar events and experiences. By using different research methods, I was able to compare students' perceptions and reveal the complexity of the issues beneath the superficial similarities.

The commonly articulated weaknesses of a case study regard a lack of representativeness of the cases and consequently the limited generalizability of the findings it produces (see Stake, 2000). This point, however, is under debate. Many

scholars claim that neither representativness nor generalizability should be over-stressed in qualitative research. For example, Stake (2000) maintains that researchers doing case work attend to unique characteristics of the cases; although readers cannot automatically generalise the findings, they can modify them in the light of their own situations through carefully considering the report. Similarly, Henwood & Pidgeon (1992) suggest replacing the notion of generalizability with transferability, and argue that based on a full reporting of case study, the findings could be transferred and applied to contexts similar to the one from which they were originally derived. This argument, moreover, emphasize the importance of contextualised study of the cases.

In this research, I tried to 'go beyond' the particular cases that I was looking at, in order to say something about the wider population of Chinese students in the UK. Specifically, a multiple case study provided me with the opportunity to probe common and recurring themes in the lives of the respondents. It was hoped that the potential for generalizability is increased by examining experiences of several participants, as it is 'reassuring oneself that the events and processes in one well-described setting are not wholly idiosyncratic (Miles & Huberman, 1994:157). Moreover, it enabled me to investigate reasons behind the particularity of an individual case. By illuminating 'how such processes are bent by specific local contextual variations' (Miles & Huberman, 1994:157), my findings may help others think and design their research to question essentialist or culturalist discourses. Furthermore, a detailed report of all stages of my research may enable other researchers to modify and apply the findings based on comparing the situation of this study with that of their own (Schofield, 2002). By these means, my research attempted to exceed the boundaries of the 13 participants to shed light on other research.

3.4.2   Conventional ethnography and self-ethnography

This study bears features of self-ethnography. According to Bryman (2004), ethnography is an approach to studying a culture-sharing group, where the fieldworker is immersed in a natural environment or social setting for an extended time. As a specific form of ethnography (Alvesson, 2003), self-ethnography is a study which is conducted by a researcher who has a natural access to the settings s/he is investigating,

and who is 'more or less on equal terms with other participants'. In other words, while in a conventional ethnography, a researcher enters into cultural settings as a complete stranger, in self-ethnography the researcher is looking at his/her own 'home-base'.

My rationale to learn from self-ethnography to guide my research, firstly, is that it generates rich, novel and detailed empirical data. Like conventional ethnography, the approach rejects broad or statistical information but instead places in-depth investigation at its centre (Creswell, 1998). Through deep familiarity with the participants, it enables the investigation of patterns of behaviours, language and the informants' interaction with other group members (Dyck, 1993). It, more importantly, facilitates the acquisition of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), regarding how meanings are constructed and sustained among the respondents and for what reasons. Previously (see section 3.3), I have justified my adoption of a qualitative approach by claiming that a qualitative inquiry allowed me to read closely the lived experiences of Chinese students. Such a justification is of particular relevance to self-ethnography because it could be more vigorous than other methods in terms of getting close to the participants and understanding them through a close and long-term interaction in their everyday lives (Tedlock, 2000).

Furthermore, ethnography made me aware of the value of a longitudinal design (Chambers, 2000). Staying with a target cultural group for months is the usual practice under this approach, facilitating deepened understanding of the phenomena under study (Bryman, 2001; Tedlock, 2000). I interviewed each of the participants around 15 times throughout one year, with the number of times that informal chat, talk, chance encounters and casual communication occurred being uncountable. The information I had already obtained was always used to guide, prompt and elicit the students' perceptions in each new round of interviews, all of which contributed to my interpretation of the circumstances and experiences of the participants being investigated (see section 3.7).

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier (section 3.1), I benefited from my 'insider' status as a member of Chinese students' community in Bath and from living and learning in similar

settings - if not the same – as my respondents. From the perspective of conventional ethnography, I may not have been seen as an ethnographer because I was not a cultural intruder who studied in entirely unfamiliar settings (Bryman, 2001). However, as a self ethnographer, my position as an insider was recognized, and my experiences, knowledge and access to the social contexts were acknowledged, in terms of facilitating my investigation, particularly those linking to sensitive issues (see Alvesson, 2003).

Fourthly, both conventional ethnography and self-ethnography shed light on my relationship with the respondents. The tension between being close to or keeping distant from the participants is perhaps faced in all qualitative research; how to solve the tension, however, was of particular significance to this study (see section 3.2). In my case, being a 'native ethnographer' (Tedlock, 2000), i.e. a member of the Chinese community, offered me easier access to 'public settings' for information (Bryman, 2004:297). However, I was faced with difficulties in trying to enter more personal and sensitive parts of my subjects' lives. This was simply because my respondents and I had been complete strangers before they arrived in Bath, and because I was neither learning, living nor working with them during their stay in Bath.

Ethnography pinpoints the significance of the researcher-respondent relationships. As Caughey (1982:233) claims, 'the quality of any field work depends on the extent to which the field-worker could pass beyond the role of stranger and establish close relationship with the people he studies'. Such a 'close' relationship, as he further pointed out, 'contrasts strikingly with that which ordinarily obtains between the social science researcher and his subject' (*ibid*). Ethnography taught me that to obtain a fuller picture of Chinese students' lived experiences, great effort must be made so that those 'being researched' turned from strangers to contributors, (i.e. students became willing to share their experiences), and then to full participants, i.e. they talked fully about their personal perspectives, experiences and feelings (see section 3.5.4).

Furthermore, ethnography stresses the significance of being reflexive. The ethnographer warns me that the perceived familiarity with the group may blind me from identifying taken-for-granted ideas. There is also the critique that self-ethnography could imply an

'ethnography of the self'. As a response, Marcus and Fischer (1986:137, cited in Alvesson, 2003:185) emphasise a critical strategy of 'defamiliarization', that is of 'disruption of common sense, doing the unexpected, placing familiar subjects in unfamiliar, even shocking, contexts'. In my research, to get distance from the familiar ways of thinking, I engaged myself in systematic reflexivity. By cross-checking data gathered from different sources, bringing back the initial interpretations to the participants and keeping consulting relevant literature (see also 3.7), I minimised the danger of consciously interpreting data in a personally preferred way.

It should also be noted that the close relationship ethnographers advocate, despite offering insights, seems too methodologically oriented: it serves solely for research purposes and the researchers become the only ones who benefits. This was the aspect of ethnography with which I disagree. To build close relationship requires deliberate effort, which cannot be assumed to happen 'naturally'. For this reason, I learned from feminist methodology which taught me to build close but also respectful, equal and above all humane relationships (see sections 3.5.5).

3.4.3   *Feminist methodology*

Feminist theory aims to expose and correct the male biases existing in the philosophical milieu, research methods, research findings and social life (Olesen, 2000). For feminists, epistemology bears with it political missions (Tedlock, 2000). 'Emancipating, empowering and liberating; against patriarchy, exploitation and oppression; strengthening women's solidarity' are among the key notions of the studies falling in this category (Mies, 1993; Jayaratne, 1993). Feminist researchers try to correct the situation that women are excluded from social research, and become 'the ones in the dark'; meanwhile, they accuse the dominant quantitative research methodology of containing egocentric biases which cannot adequately bring light into the darkness (Meis, 1993:65; Jayaratne, 1993). Moreover, feminism as a critical approach, attending to Foucault's power/knowledge relationship, opposes hierarchical relationships between researcher and participants (Mies, 1993; Jayaratne, 1993). It acknowledges the background and experiences of both investigator and participants, promotes cooperation between them so that those being studied are involved in all stages of research and

views the research practice as a way to emancipate and empower those being researched (Mies, 1993).

The appeal of the feminist approach is the fact that it stresses the voices of the weak or marginalised, whose experiences and viewpoints are not valued, but are ignored or even suppressed in the dominant culture. Being a Chinese student in the UK and being one researching other Chinese students' lives in this country, I was aware of how this group was placed in a linguistically and socially disadvantaged position. My review of existing research depressed me due to its inadequate emphasis on the students' actual voices. Hence, I viewed it as my responsibility, as well as the responsibility of other researchers in the field, to hand over power to the participants, create opportunities so that they can speak of their perceptions, feelings, reasons for behaviours and present their personal stories. Most importantly, we as researchers should strive for opportunities for the participants' voices to be heard and respected. Moreover, feminism reminds me of the danger of 'Otherization'. By attending to multiple voices, I regarded it as my task to problematise the practices demarcating the Chinese from the British or the East from the West, help to popularize a more complete and more tolerant view of Chinese learners, and to facilitate communication and mutual understanding between the minor and the major social groups.

Finally, I learned from feminist methodology, which advocates a non-hierarchical and reciprocal researcher/participants relationship. Such a relationship, founded in the decision to eliminate power inequality and to give voices to the silenced 'others', goes beyond ethnographers' aims (i.e. a learner/teacher or apprentice/master relation), to a more intimate and more humane pattern (see section 3.4.2). From the work of feminists, I learned of the complexities which can be involved in building such a relationship. It is not simply a variable which can be easily controlled by careful methodological design. Rather, it is a complex process which is context-situated; it is socially constructed by all parties and links to ethical considerations (see also Dyck, 2003). Learning from feminist methodology, I determined to establish and maintain close relationships with my participants, which will be discussed in detail later (see section 3.5.5). Moreover, while acknowledging the inspiration that I drew from feminist methodology, I re-emphasise

here that it was not my intention to draw on broader feminist theory for the analysis of my data.

3.4.4 Summary of my learning from traditions of qualitative inquiry

Although Creswell (1998) discusses the various traditions of inquiry as being purely separate, over the long history of social research all the traditions intertwine with each other and are often co-existent in a single application. Hence we have expressions like 'feminist ethnography' (Bryman, 2004:302), 'narrative ethnography' (Tedlock, 2000:460), case studies in 'analytic ethnography' (Lofland, 1995:30). For me the integration of diverse research traditions was a prerequisite to understanding the rich human experiences that formed my research interest. Feminist methodology taught me to honour the voices of my student informants; ethnography showed me the importance of gathering detailed and rich data based on long-term and closed interaction with the target group; similarly, the case study approach indicated the significance of collecting data in multiple forms: Whatever was seen, heard and read can be potentially meaningful, may link implicitly or explicitly to other issues and contribute to my intensive interpretation of individual students' lived experiences, actions and psychological states (see also Hollway, 1989). Moreover, I learned from self-ethnography the significance of reflexivity, which in particular prevented me from being either too close to or too distant with the participants. Furthermore, my construction of a good relationship with the respondents was influenced by feminist methodology and its advocacy of a non-hierarchical and humane research/participant relationship. In all, bringing insights that were gathered from different traditions into my inquiry was a requirement to capture the richness and complexity of my subject matter; it yielded the richest and most satisfying description of my research topic.

3.5   My research and significant matters in my life

I would view it as dishonest not to disclose this part of the development of my research methodology to my readers. I have encountered parallels in Haw's (1996) paper about his work with Muslim students, in which he describes several incidents which he perceives have shaped and influenced the research he is doing.

Specifically, in May 2005 when I was making preparation for data collection, my husband was transferred to a university in Scotland and had to be there for his final year of PhD study. It was a sudden change in my life. After having been in the UK with him for one and a half years, I suddenly had to learn to be more independent. No longer could I immerse myself in academic work. A lot of time now had to be given to shopping, cooking, cleaning, bill-paying, home-renting and other tasks that we had either previously shared or that he had taken on. However, it was not the whole story. One month later, I found out I was pregnant. It was hard to make up my mind whether or not to be a mother. It was much harder to bear both the physical and emotional changes whilst trying my best to keep the research going. Those days were characterized by fatigue, nausea and occasionally unbearable loneliness. These were, however, the days when I gradually realized the dramatic impact that life could have on learning.

My experience may be unique, but I believed this was true only in terms of its detail, not its essence. It made me aware that for Chinese students overseas, love and homesickness; entertainment and working for money; friendship and competition; happiness and depression; all these ups and downs would be the possible themes of their lives, which interweave with their studies and reciprocally influence each other. Time abroad was valuable not only in terms of academic achievement, but also because it was a key step along the passage to personal growth and individual maturity. For this reason, I felt any attempt to understand Chinese learners deeply should not centre only on the learning of a subject while omitting other crucial issues in their off-campus experiences. As such my research aims expanded to investigate both the living and learning experiences of the participants in the UK (see section 3.5.2).

Moreover, my own experiences had a fundamental impact on the way I conceived the nature of the research project, and on the way I carried it out. It was significant that my way of life and the lives of my research subjects became closely linked, and this aided the way in which I was able to make sense of their experiences, emotions and actions. The year I worked together with them was the year I got pregnant, gave birth to my

daughter, learned to be a mother while simultaneously dealing with financial troubles, academic pressure and parental worries. Throughout the year, I enjoyed and valued the participants' company and their friendship. It was by talking with them that I could temporarily forget my own troubles. Their happiness and laughter lightened my life. The difficulties they met and their efforts to overcome these difficulties energized me to face the difficulties in my personal life. I wanted to know them more; and I needed to do so. It was for these reasons my research gradually became a fundamental part of my life. But likewise, my life also became part of the research. My reflection on my life, together with my personal involvement with the students, changed my understanding of the nature of research, which was gradually perceived as a social activity, though, still, abiding by crucial ethical principles. I consequently included as possible ways of knowing as I could (see section 3.5.5). My relationship with the participants also developed (see section 3.5.6), and it was not subject to fixed methodological tenets but faithful to rules of social interaction. With my research ongoing, such rules developed but were still driven by key principles of respect to others and the minimizing of intrusion on their normal lives.

In the following section, I will focus on the clarification and finalization of my research aims and questions, the expansion of my research methodology and the deepened relationship with my participants.

3.5.1 *My view of research design*

A research plan is argued to be of great importance to a successful piece of educational research (Verma & Mallick, 1999; Bell, 1992; Cohen, Mansion & Morrison, 2000). A 'conventional' view of the research process starts from formulating a hypothesis or constructing research questions, reviewing literature, to picking up research instruments, collecting, organising and interpreting data, then ends in a conclusion (Bell, 1992; Cohen, Mansion & Morrison, 2000; Eichelberger, 1989; Verma & Mallick, 1999).

The above description seems to suggest quite a coherent schedule which has distinct stages and is subject to a logical, linear and scientific order. More appealing, it is simple and hence easily adapted to any specific research. However, in my research which

aimed to reveal the complexity, diversity and dynamics of the students' experiences, such a linear process was purely unpractical. Therefore, I propose that to deal with a complicated research subject as I did, no perfect research plan could be pre-designed. Instead, we should allow it to form and reform to adapt to the emergent events; that is, it should come into being in a gradual and circular, iterative process which involved continuous editing and revision throughout the conduct of the research. In the following, I give my reasons for adopting this position by stressing how my research questions, sampling and the selection of research instruments were formed and reformulated in the light of experience of the research process.

3.5.2   *My research interest*

In this subsection I focus on the formation and reformulation of my research interest, based on my theoretical review and my reflection upon personal experiences. It starts from the description of my initial interest. I then give a brief illustration of my theoretical stance. Finally, I clarify my research aims and research questions.

3.5.2.1 Original research interest

My interest in Chinese learners' experiences originated from a small-scale qualitative study which I had conducted for my MA dissertation. The study focused on my Chinese classmates' expectations of an MA programme. The literature I read at that time gave me a feeling that most of Western researchers tended to perceive Chinese culture, particularly the Chinese 'culture of learning' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), in an essentialist way and rarely perceived Chinese individuals as complex agents. Also, much of the previous work suffered from a methodological inability to understand Chinese learners, with little attention paid to the plurality and changing nature of their identity (see section 2.2.4).

Although I had attempted to question a rigid and static view of Chinese learners and Chinese 'culture of learning' in my MA thesis, I was aware of the limited depth and breadth in the findings. From my personal experiences, I knew the issue was much more complicated and diverse than I had revealed. Thus when the opportunity arose to pursue a doctoral degree at the end of 2004, I extended my MA study and determined to explore Chinese students' experiences over a prolonged period of time, involving a

comparatively larger and more diverse group. By the time I handed in my research proposal, the topic for my PhD study was formulated as 'How much does culture of learning count: a multiple-case study of Chinese students in the University of Bath'.

3.5.2.2 Anti-essentialism, discourse theory and the refinement of my research interest

My original research interest was later refined on the basis of my review of theoretical literature. It was in this study and interpretation of post-structuralism and discourse theory that my resolution in questioning cultural stereotypes became fixed and my confidence in being able to reach my goal grew. These theoretical positions have been introduced in detail in the literature review chapter. However, I would like to stress key points here as they were important for me in re-formulating my research aims and questions.

First of all, Laclau & Mouffe (Philips & Marianne, 2002), along with Foucault and other post-structuralists, provide a philosophical underpinning of anti-essentialism (Parker, 1995). This is of great significance to me because it problematises the practice of categorizing people and opposes the idea that all people in a certain category share a fixed essence which has been prescribed in advance. In relation to this study, anti-essentialism taught me that there existed no fixed and pre-assigned characteristics of social actions among the Chinese or the British, for example, as a whole. In that individual perceptions were produced and maintained through specific social interactions in specific social environments, to fully understand the Chinese students overseas required a detailed investigation of their daily experiences.

Secondly, post-structuralists maintain the importance of understanding meanings as products of discursive practices and through the analysis of the specific context in which language is in use (Phillips & Marianne, 2002). I was heartened by the language of post-structuralists, that of Foucault and Laclau & Mouffe (Philips & Marianne, 2002) in particular, because they challenge any practices which seek single responses to complex research questions; suggest the existence of a multiplicity of truths and attend to the significance of diverse perspectives and various voices (Paechter & Weiner, 1996). All these were what I was aiming to do. I was therefore encouraged to read social

processes when studying subjects (Parker, 1995), and was assured that only when Chinese learner's daily experiences in different social settings were focused on and were explored as discursive fields, where different even contradictory discourses (not only culture of learning or ethnicity, but also age, gender, physical and intellectual ability, language competence, and demographical and subject background) acted and interacted with each other, can real understandings be attained (see Haw's suggestions on exploring Muslim students' educational experiences, 1996).

Thirdly, for Laclau and Mouffe (Philips & Marianne, 2002), owing to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed (see also Anderson, 2003). Learning from this theory, I began to reflect on the formation of personal identity and started to interpret it as a never-complete process, one which dissolves the fixed identities constructed in the past, whilst opening the possibility for the production of new subjects. With my deepened understanding of individual identities as multiple, mobile and contingently constructed, I was realizing that my intuitive dissatisfaction with the existing studies on Chinese learners resulted from their practice of reading subjectivity as something static and holistic. Hence, thanks to discourse theory, my attention was given to possible changes, adaptation and development of Chinese students throughout their intercultural communication.

3.5.2.3 Research aims and questions

With a developed understanding of the research based on my theoretical review and on my initial interaction with the participants, when giving a transfer presentation in January 2006, I finalized my research interest as being based in the general experiences of Chinese students in the UK. My research aim emerged as the exploration of daily experiences of a diverse group of Chinese learners in a UK university. Despite focusing on their academic learning, all aspects of their lives were to be examined, with the awareness of the difficulties in separating learning outcomes and everyday life experiences. Specifically, the research investigated: the initial expectations of the participants towards learning and living in Bath; interpersonal relationship and communication; the changes in their attitudes, values and views; the participants' adaptation to the new environment- or failure to do so, and why.

3.5.3   Sampling

In the following, I focus on how I approached the issue of sampling at the beginning of the research and in the follow-up interviews.

3.5.3.1 Engagement of volunteering participants

Aiming to gain an in depth understanding of one year postgraduate experiences of Mainland Chinese students in the UK, I chose to focus on those having no prior experience of learning outside China and those recruited of masters' course in the University of Bath in the academic year 2005-06. The reason I limited this study to those who had left China for the first time was to reduce variables so as to better explore the students' adaptation and transformation in the UK. The reason I had not included any students learning in other British universities was located in pragmatic concerns, i.e. the time and cost of travelling to other universities would prevent me from doing ethnographic study and gaining a great depth of understanding of the students' lived experiences.

Under the help of the English Language Centre and the International Office, I enrolled three students from a 10-week presessional English language course in July 2005; three from 5-week Pre-Msc course/Pre-MBA courses in August 2005; three from a 'mentor program' in September 2005, which was organized by the International Office to strengthen the communication skills among international students; and another four from those starting their masters' study, without taking any pre-course English induction, in October 2005. Thus, my initial sampling took place in three stages, with 13 participants being finally involved. The whole process is displayed in diagram 3.1. Due to space limitation I do not describe it in detail in this thesis.

Diagram 3.1   The sampling process
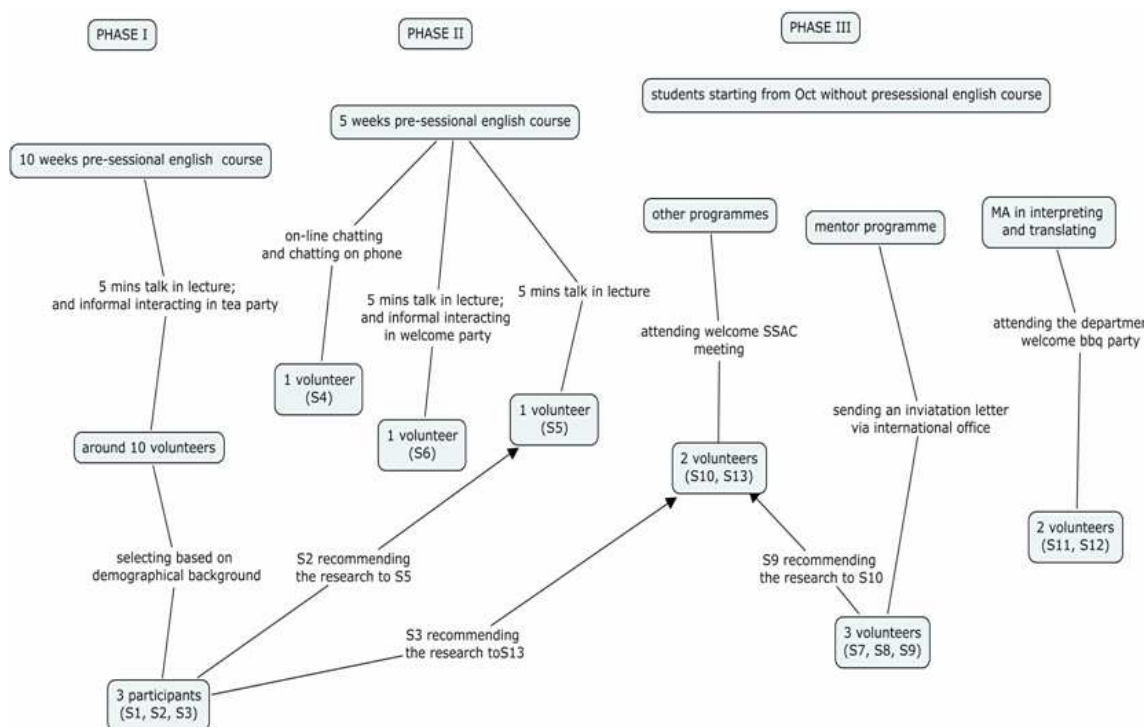
I want to stress that the principle of voluntary participation featured the sampling in this study. Only with students who would be interested in, determined to participate and committed to the research, would I be able to complete my research. Besides, to maximise the variation in my sample, I had to reject some volunteers who did not add extra variation in terms of course, hometown and family conditions.

Apart from these, the process of sampling turned out to be crucial in successful building of a good researcher/participant relationship. Talking with potential participants personally, informally in parties, keeping contacts with them and inviting them for meals showed the students my sincerity and helped to build initial trust in the research. More importantly, the nature of the research required my close investigation into the students' lives. My presence in the informal gatherings to select my 'cases' was in fact a necessity to fulfil the research aims. It further led to the development of my methodology, i.e. a growing emphasis on the establishment and maintenance of a close relationship with all participants and the gradual inclusion of methods as diversity as possible in data collection (see section 3.5.4).

3.5.3.2 Sampling as an on-going process

In this study sampling was on-going and integral to the entire process of research. When talking about longitudinal projects using a mixed method approach, Devine & Heath (1999:13) point out that 'different components of research at various time over the duration of research demands different sampling methods and sampling frameworks'. In this sub-section I focus on how I made sampling decisions after my selection of participants at an early stage.

Firstly, learning from theoretical sampling in grounded theory (see Glaser & Strauss, 1976, cited in Bryman, 2004; Charmaz, 2000; Devine & Heath, 1999; Stake, 2000), throughout the research, I collected, coded and carried out basic analysis of diary data, and decided which data to explore further in interviews, based on the information I had obtained. In other words, by comparing and contrasting students' diary contents, I identified common concerns, recurring issues as well as some particular experiences, from which I carefully chose samples of those I believed were closely linked to my research subject matter and about which my participants have most to say, and probed these issues in successive interviews.

Secondly, regarding the successive interviews, the sampling issues I had considered concerned not only events and phenomena to probe, but a range of decisions regarding time, context, and engagement of supplementary interviewees for specific issues (see Bryman, 2004; Stake, 2000). Specifically, at the beginning and end of the academic year, semi-structured interviews were arranged to explore the participants' expectations and evaluations (see sections 3.5.4.4). At other critical stages in the year (e.g. the end of the first month, during the academic assessment period, during university holidays), not only the main participants but also their classmates or friends were interviewed. Their perceptions helped to shed light on issues of interest and deepened the understanding of the main participants' experiences.

3.5.3.3 Summary of sampling

A detailed justification of sampling procedures has been presented in this section to enhance the strength of claims I made about the data collected and the credibility of my

findings (Devine & Heath. 1999). Rather than a one-shot action, the choice of sampling techniques was carefully considered throughout this research (Charmaz, 2000). At the early stage of sampling, I primarily relied on volunteers. Working with volunteers was not a choice but a necessity, which enabled the building of a close relationship with participants, the success of the longitudinal study and the realization of research aims. In the data collection stage, sampling continued, not only of people, but of the time and location of interviews and the issues which need to be probed in interviews. The complexity of my research subject led to complexity of sampling (Charmaz, 2000).

3.5.4 *The development of research methods as an on-going process*

I originally planned to use personal diaries as the dominant data collection method, complemented by follow-up interviews. However, throughout the implementation of this research, more data sources were identified and employed in the study. The role played by interviews, in particular, changed over time. In what follows, I describe how multiple methods were used in practice to attain my research goals.

3.5.4.1 Why multi-methods?

The importance of integrating mixed research instruments and mixed sources of evidence in one study has been widely recognized (Gillham, 2000; David & Sutton, 2004). Despite realizing the significance of multi-methods at an early stage of the research, I originally conceived of it merely as the simultaneous use of a diary method and follow-up interview. As my research continued, the range of methods I used was widened to include not only diary data but questionnaires, different types of interviews, observation and internet-based materials.

On reflection at the end of the process, it is clear that my use of multi-methods in the research was the result of the demands of the multiple research traditions that I had drawn on (see section 3.4). Each tradition has one or a small number of methods to recommend which the advocates of that tradition feel best fulfill the intended research purpose. My development of an integrated and multidisciplinary inquiry therefore required the involvement of a wide range of means in this study.

Furthermore, this was a requirement of my research design as a qualitative longitudinal multiple case study. As already indicated, diaries alone cannot be sufficient (Waddington, 2005), as any qualitative research is inherently multi-method in nature (Flick, 1998). Triangulation needs to be made possible by involving more data sources, thus enabling systematic cross-checks between different cases, or in the same case but at different times, and hence increasing the validity of the diary method by achieving 'respondent validation' and 'time validation' (Bryman, 1989:164). What is worth attention is Richardson's (2000) challenge to the appropriateness of 'triangulation'; for him, a metaphor of a crystal better reflects any mixed methodological practice in qualitative research, by which he means there must be more than three 'sides'. Fine and her co-workers (2000), from a similar perspective, question the oversimplification implicit in 'triangulation'. As the responses from not only different respondents but the same person may take different forms, there is no information revealing more 'truth' than another. Nevertheless, all the authors taught me the value of multiple methods which focused on the causes of diverse narratives, avoided my missing of even apparently trivial facets of individual life and, therefore, added breadth and depth to the inquiry. They also encouraged my immersion into different, particularly competing perspectives of the context I was trying to comprehend.

But in the end, the adoption of multiple methods was rooted in my research aims, my understanding of the research task and my interpretation of human experiences. Each participant in this study was regarded as a complex individual who had the ability to perform actions as an agent. The experiences they underwent in one year abroad were treated as complicated and multidimensional, with every specific experience being viewed as one having many qualities and layers of causes and effects. Similarly, any particular perception they revealed to me was interpreted as resulting from dynamic and complicated contextual factors and having implicit or explicit connection with their personal experiences perceived more generally. My aim was to conduct the research so as to reveal their experiences across time and contexts and portray them as a panorama rather than a snapshot; to look for the peculiarities of individuals but with equal attention to the commonalities; to hand over power and let them speak for themselves with a special interest in the tension between different voices. All these can only be

realized through utilising diverse data sources. Hence, the larger the range of methods I adopted, the more possible it became that I fully disclosed the complexity of the target groups and effectively challenged the static stereotypical images of Chinese learners in the dominant literature.

3.5.4.2 Demographic questionnaire

In my first meeting with each of the participants, they were invited to answer a short questionnaire, designed to meet Cohen & Manion's (1994) criteria that the items should be clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable. No open questions were included because such questions were to be asked in the first round of interviews.

The use of a questionnaire was driven by the need to gather in the shortest time basic demographic information that would inform my understanding of the backgrounds of the informants (Bryman, 2004, see appendix II for the questionnaire). Consciously excluding basic questions from the initial interviews arose from a concern that the students should have more freedom when reporting in a personal space where they enjoyed greater control, rather than answering questions raised one by one by the researcher (Bryman, 2004).

On the one hand, I was aware that seemingly nuanced demographic differences may entail dramatically differences in experiences (Fine et al, 2000). On the other hand, I was conscious of the dangers in pre-judging findings and stereotyping the students in advance by over-using the questionnaire data, for example, Northerners were like this; those from Shanghai were like that. For these reasons, all questions in the demographic questionnaire were further explored through different methods throughout the year, with the purpose of seeing how these variables had shaped the students to be who they were and had influenced their attitudes towards learning and learning strategies. In short, the questionnaire data provided me with very basic understandings of the participants, to be enhanced later through the combination of other methods, particularly the diary and face-to-face conversations.

3.5.4.3 Diary method

Personal diaries as documentary materials have been originally used in biographical or historical study (Bryman, 2004). In the sphere of social science, it is only recently that the worth of diaries has gradually become recognized (Corti, 1993). Although it has been increasingly used in broader social areas to construct pictures of social realities and to depict behaviours, emotions and other aspects of individuals' daily lives, my reading reveals the lack of attention to this data collection method in educational research (e.g. Sullivan & Gershuny, 2001; Ishii, 2004; Kidorf, et.al, 1995; Totterdell, Wood & Wall, 2006; Waddington, 2005).

The majority of diary based designs in existing research, including those mentioned above, are structured ones, where the participants were asked to fill in diary accounts with pre-categorised activities. The most significant limitation of structured diaries is that they inhibit the respondents from recording their behaviours or emotions in their own words (Corti, 1993). Besides, as they have generally been adopted in large-scale survey projects, they are usually standardized to a single form with a single set of activities in order to save time and other resources. As a consequence, it is usually difficult to acquire in-depth information about respondents' experiences and perceptions.

Hence, my review of previous research using diaries left me dissatisfied. A quantitative-oriented diary method was not what I desired, as it simply could not serve my research aims. Although some researchers (e.g. Almeida et. al. 2002) tried to employ comparatively free format diaries to make their studies more qualitatively oriented, in their research the natural, spontaneous context of diary making was still to some extent distorted.

At a time when I lacked confidence in whether or not I could succeed in my diary design, I encountered a paper by Waddington (1995), in which he argues that to obtain detailed and in-depth information necessitates a completely free text diary method along with follow-up interviews, which uses longitudinal design and hand held, electronic devices. This argument influenced me a lot, offering me crucial theoretical support on

what I had been doing in this study. More importantly, it assured me of the originality and potential value of my work, and drove me to move forward.

Specifically, I planed early in my research proposal before any proper reading on diary methods had been done, that a loosely structured diary method would be adopted, which would produce the main corpus of data in my research. The novel aspect of my design was the use of digital voice recorders in the longitudinal multiple case study. That is, each of the 13 informants was provided with an MP3 recorder at the beginning of their courses and was asked to keep an audio diary on a daily basis throughout a year. They were encouraged to treat the diary as their own and speak about whatever they felt was important during the day, although a focus on aspects of learning and teaching was welcomed.

Follow-up interviews were an important part of my original diary design. Initially, I planned to carry these out once per month, with the purposes of clarifying the meanings of certain points in diaries, developing issues that arose and promoting understanding of the data. The use of follow-up interviews was expected to act as a form of methodological triangulation (Gillham, 2000; David & Sutton, 2004) and an approach to 'respondent validation' (Bryman, 1989:164), to reduce misinterpretation (Stake, 2000). It should be noted that over time, the form and nature of interviews altered, which is explored later (see section 3.5.4.4.1). Moreover, more research methods were adopted, which significantly increased the validity of my interpretation of diary data (see section 3.5.4).

The diary method was of significance because it was easier for participants to talk about their experiences than to write about them (Wilkinson, Wells, & Bushnell, 2005). The distortion of memory could be minimized, as occurs in interviews and questionnaires (Almeide, 2005). Emotional states or psychological conditions can be assessed, which may otherwise be difficult to access (David & Sutton, 2004; Butler, et.al, 2005). More immediate responses to events could be captured; more importantly, the diversity and fluctuation in the participants' perceptions and affections could be identified. The underpinning correlations, causes and consequences, similarities and differences could

be recognized and analyzed (Hodder, 2000; Wilkinson, Wells, & Bushnell, 2005). With 3000 diary entries being produced in all, a fuller picture of students' lives was possible.

Furthermore, my diary method can be justified with respect to my research interest and my theoretical framework. Based on the discussion above (see section 6.3), it is safe to say that the adoption of post-structuralism and social-constructionism as my conceptual framework was best served by the employment of a diary method as the main data source. Since selves were perceived as socially produced, a daily diary rendered valuable opportunities to learn about Chinese students' discursive relationships in which they participate every day. It, therefore, allowed me to explore their possible changes, adaptations and developments based on empirical evidence.

3.5.4.4 Interview

Generally three types of interviews were conducted (For a fuller explanation on types of interview, see Anderson, 1990; Bryman, 2001; Bell, 1992; Drever, 1995; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Fielding & Thomas, 2001; Wragg, 2002; Verma & Mallick, 1999). An initial semi-structured interview was conducted at the beginning of the participants' learning in the university. It recorded their education backgrounds and prior assessment experiences. Monthly follow-up interviews were carried out, which clarified the meanings of ambiguous points in the participants' audio diaries, developed relevant issues and promoted a better understanding. As time passed, in some research cases, unstructured interviews became the major information source instead of diaries. The final interview, conducted at the end of the academic year, was another semi-structured one. This focused on the students' evaluation of their courses, their perceptions of personal changes and their future plans.

3.5.4.4.1   Initial round of interviews

The initial interviews were carried out after the agreement on participation was received (see section 3.8.1). Being the first personal meeting with each student, the interview was of great importance. Not only could it render opportunities to elicit useful information, but more crucially it could contribute to establishing a good, long-term relationship with

my participants. A schedule was devised which guided the interview, provided the framework and maintained consistency across a number of interviews (Anderson, 1990; Verma & Mallick, 1999; Drever, 1995).

As shown in appendix III, the interview schedule consisted of two different sets of questions. The first part was intended to elicit the participants' views and perceptions of their prior education in China, in terms of teaching methods, learning methods, assessment methods, tutor/student relationship; the second part aimed to inquire into why they wanted a postgraduate degree, why they chose the University Bath, and their expectations towards all aspects of living and learning in the UK. Being interested in the students' general experiences and personal development, I tried to understand who the students were at the moment they arrived, through the exploration of their previous experiences and the investigation of their expectations.

3.5.4.4.2   Follow-up interviews

Each participant was interviewed roughly once a month. The specific decision over frequency was made according to each participant's diary entries. Some students' diaries were full of interesting points which, however, were only briefly narrated and merited further exploration; whereas others always gave very detailed descriptions in their dairy of their experiences, feelings and opinions. For the former students, more interviews (every two weeks) were conducted than for the latter (every four weeks). Different interview frequencies also arose at different stages of their postgraduate study. More specifically, during the first month or in holidays participants were more likely to be free for interviews while at the end of each semester they usually experienced greater pressure from their study. Prioritizing the students' willingness and readiness, I conducted more interviews (twice a month for each case), in the former situation than in the latter (one every three weeks or a month). On the whole, a fixed schedule for interviews was not adopted, so as to minimize interruption to the students' normal lives. At any specific time, the decision as to whether an interview would be held was taken on my judgement of its appropriateness and on my understanding of the situation from my past experiences and the student's diary report.

Generally, the follow-up interviews took the form of a conversation, which avoided constraining the participants' illustration of issues of concern, helped to set up an equal relationship between us, and encouraged the interviewee to speak in a more relaxed way. This point is well expressed by Clandinin & Connelly (1994:422):

> 'Conversation entails listening. The listener's response may constitute a probe into experience that takes the representation of experience far beyond what is possible in an interview. Indeed there is probing in conversation, in-depth probing but it is done in a situation of done in a situation of mutual trust, listening, and caring for the experience described by the other.'

Despite welcoming all information in the students' diary, my emphasis on their learning experiences led to a focus on the following topics: difficulties in study and how they dealt with the difficulties; perceptions towards teaching, learning support and assessment; reflection upon their own learning styles; comparisons between Chinese and British academic cultures; motivation for study; interaction with staff; collaboration with other groups of students; personal changes and evaluation of the changes. From the second semester, with the establishment of more intimate relationships with the participants, more sensitive and personal issues were focused on, covering relationships with family, conflicts with lovers, romantic experiences, experiences in part-time working area, worries and personal concerns.

Apart from this, there is an important methodological point to note here. That is that the personal depth that the interviews were able to probe increased as time went by and the relationship between myself and the interviewees developed. This is important as it influences the comparative depth of the data at different stages but also because it makes a general point about interviews that seek such personal information: they cannot easily be carried out 'cold' but require time to develop a rapport and trust.

3.5.4.4.3 Final interviews

Towards the end of the academic year, i.e. the end of August and the beginning of September 2006, another round of semi-structured interview was carried out, which explored students' final evaluations and invited them to offer recommendations (see

appendix V). Specifically, it focused on the participants' evaluation of their courses; on their lives in general terms in the past year; on learning outcomes, language proficiency and integration issues; and on personal development. It also gave chances to them to provide suggestions for the courses, staff and prospective students. This final interview was intended to bring a sense of closure to the longitudinal study.

3.5.4.4.4   Summary of interview method

Interview was one of the two major data-generating sources in this study. It provided me with valuable chances to probe the issues raised in students' diaries, those that emerged from observation and those revealed by other data collection methods. In this section, I have discussed the kinds of the interviews I have employed and why, and the issues discussed in each interview. It is worth noting that being social interaction in nature, the interview helped to build and maintain a trustful and friendly relationship between me and my participants; in turn, a gradually increased mutual trust has led to growing depth of the data the interviews produced. In all, interviews, combined with other data sources, contributed to my understanding of the participants.

3.5.4.5 Life history

Cohen & Manion (2001) refer to life history as a lengthy report of an individual subject's life, which is presented in each subject's own words. According to Todley (2000:459), the first life history in the sociological domain is possibly Thomas & Znaniecki's (1918-1920) publication of *the Polish peasant in Europe and America*. In educational research, although few life history studies have been produced, perhaps due to concerns over time, facilities and finance, Cohen & Manion (1994) stress that they could provide insights into the perceptions of people in various educational settings and contribute to the interpretation of 'public issues', e.g. cultural, historical and social facts, on the foundation of 'personal troubles', e.g. individual lives and personalities.

Because a close and intimate relationship had been established and was maintained between me and my participants (see section 3.5.5), the follow-up interviews gradually tended to change from being semi-structured to being more unstructured interviews, which increasingly embodied features of non-directive counselling approaches (Creswell, 1998:61). This situation was particular strengthened after June 2006. The

completion of all lectures and examinations marked the end of the participants' routine lives, which they had led for the preceding eight months. Having much more free time and comparatively less pressure from study, they were soon busy with part-time working for money, travelling, all kinds of social gatherings and farewell parties, and later with dissertations and full-time job hunting. By that time, half of them reported they either had inadequate time or forgot to keep diaries simply because they were too occupied. Instead, they indicated their preferences for more frequent meetings with me, as 'we are all friends'. By then, interviews were much more like informal conversations, despite my consciously restricted role as an attentive listener and the presence of my digital recorder (see section 3.6).

Since the beginning it had been my intention to invite all students to share their inner worlds with me. Backing up diaries, the interviews were always an important channel through which I could know their personal daily experiences as a progress through their contemporaneous life history, and from time to time the significant events in their past lives, as a retrospective life history (Creswell, 1998:60). Simultaneously with my interviews' turning from being semi-structured to in-depth unstructured, I gradually changed from restricting the responses within what I had explicitly sought by imposing pre-designed questions, to providing my participants with ample opportunities to describe their lives. The benefits were, first, that a more natural bond, as shared by friends rather than a hierarchy of interviewer and interviewee, was built, which resulted in an atmosphere of mutual trust, thus, further encouraging the participants to unfold their private lives in front of me.

Secondly, their stories turned out to be a shortcut but most sophisticated path to their rich lived experiences, to complexity and nuances of self-perceptions, emotional fluctuations and psychological conditions, and to the historical, social, community and other contextual backgrounds to all their stories. They became a necessary preparation for accessing the data I had been seeking to answer my research questions. Thirdly, critical events in the participants' prior experiences, I found, had been repeatedly mentioned and commented on in their accounts. Each telling, however, was not identical but slightly different with diverse emphases and foci. By comparing various

versions of their stories, I was able to study the same thing from different perspectives and hence increased the credibility of my findings. Furthermore, to me, each of the retold versions of a story was as much a reflection of their present feelings about their narrative as a description of a past experience (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Therefore, attending to the differences deepened my understanding of the students.

Finally and most importantly, the students' lengthy accounts of their lives made me aware that all the students wanted to talk. They were self-conscious about their lives and continually reflected on their relationships, behaviours and experiences. They continually sought meanings for themselves, explored themselves and pursued their own development. Understanding this point illuminates the fact that as researchers it is not our task to speak for others, as they already have the ability to speak for themselves, but to make room so that previously ignored voices could be heard.

3.5.4.6 Observation

Drawing on self-ethnography, from the beginning, my research featured 'participant observation'.[1] I have guided my role as a researcher based on general tips for this approach given in the methodological literature. Using this method was not only a choice but also because I was already a member of the Chinese community I was looking at and all my participants were linked with me in a network of various types of relationship. The facts that we all belonged to a large postgraduate Chinese student community in the same university or, in case of some participants, even in the same department and thus, to some extent we all shared a similar subculture, created many opportunities for me to conduct observation in uncontrolled situations and settings. For example, I attended various social events organized by CSSA (Chinese Student and Staff Association) of the university, including the welcome party, induction seminars and the Chinese New Year music concert. I also went to the annual fireworks display and the annual Mayor's reception in Bath. I knew from my experiences that these activities were commonly of interest to the Chinese students. In all these events I did find most of my participants and I was able to observe their activities without necessarily calling attention to myself. Furthermore, as Bath is not a big city and the

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[1] Although the distinction between participant observation and non-participant observation is inappropriate in this research, as should be clear from this account.

university is not a large campus, libraries, university shops, bus stops and the city's high street were among a long list of places where the students frequently appeared and where I was able to interact and converse with them socially (see section 3.5.5.3). Apart from all these encounters, I often invited my participants to my home for dinner (see section 3.5.5.2).

In all the above cases, the participants' words and behaviours were noted and later written down in my research diary. If they were together with others, how they positioned themselves in relation to each other and how they performed in front of acquantances or strangers were attended to which were also recorded in my diary and comprised part of my data. All these helped deepen my understanding of data generated from other sources.

The benefit of participant observation was the well maintained relationships with my participants. When interaction went beyond the comparatively controlled interview environment to more casual, relaxed and public areas, we naturally set up more informal relationships. This point will be discussed in detail later (see section 3.5.5.3).

Importantly, I support Todley (2000), who suggests that it is the time to shift from 'participant observation' to what he calls 'the observation of participation', by which he questions the dualistic practice whereby researcher is engaged in the participants' lives but simultaneously retains emotional detachment. My life and those of the informants were not isolated from each other. Instead, my status as an insider in the local Chinese community, together with my efforts of building the trust and intimate relationship with the participants, gave me access to considerable information. As earlier reviewed (see section 3.5), my fieldwork became an inseparable part of my life; meanwhile, reflecting on my past and my participation in the participants' lives, my life was part of 'the researched'. As such, a detached and emotionless role was inappropriate; rather, this study, my interaction with the participants and I were closely related. Whilst the research inevitably impacted the participants' experiences, the participants had impacts on my approach to the research and my understanding of it. In the end, it was the

personal and emotional involvement, based on my reflexivity which gave me advantages to gain an in-depth understanding of the voices of the students.

3.5.4.7 Internet-mediated method

The rapid development of the Internet is now transforming social science research. It provides thousands of library catalogues, databases and electronic texts (Hewson, et.al, 2003). Not only opening more channels, it offers instant and easy access to individual or institutional information; and hence enables research to be carried out upon physically isolated subjects or among research parties who otherwise may be too distant to cooperate (O'Dochartaigh, 2002). The emergence of various means of visual representation, the World Wide Web and various forms of virtual reality, as noted by Denzin & Lincoln (2000), has marked a new turn in recording and documenting social lives, which goes beyond geographical spaces and time gulfs to connect together diverse cultural meanings, perceptions and viewpoints. In my research, I have used MSN chatting and the participants' on-line blogs as sources of data.

3.5.4.7.1   On-line chatting

My use of MSN started in June 2006 after my husband left for a Scottish university. As a convenient and instant communicative tool it enabled us to talk with each other at any time during the day. Later from my participants' diaries, I found that most of them relied on MSN to interact with fellow students in Bath, keep in touch with old friends in China and chat with their families at home. Our on-line conversations later constituted a vital component of the documents which recorded the participants' experiences in Bath. This method more or less shares the strengths of on-line interviewing. As identified by Fielding & Thomas (2001) and Bryman (2004), the latter is a real-time approach, offers students more time to ponder and frees researchers from transcribing interview data.

Talking on line facilitated my arrangement of interviews. On the one hand, it seemed to me more informal, as it allowed me to decide time and location together with the students, functioning like a telephone. On the other hand, as with email, it could also be asynchronous (Fielding & Thomas, 2001; Bryman, 2004), by which I mean that students could simply ignore my messages or find excuses to refuse my invitation if

they had no intention to talk or be interviewed. In this respect, it was better than a telephone call, which I was worried could possibly force them to make unwilling decisions. Contact through MSN, therefore, was partly a consequence of ethical concerns and partly of my effort to establish a mutually beneficial researcher/participants relationship

Importantly, I perceived an MSN address, like a mobile phone number, as private information. It was different from the university email accounts which were published on the university website. Providing an MSN address could mean the offer of friendship as it implied the giver's tolerance of being interrupted at anytime and his/her permission to view a very personal field. The latter was particularly the case when the participants kept on-line diaries in MSN Space. Hence, I consciously did not ask any of my informants for an MSN address, preferring to wait for them to volunteer it. This was from my determination that the means I adopted for data collection should subject to my advocacy of human dignity (see also section 3.8.2).

3.5.4.7.2 On-line blog

Nine of my participants provided me with their MSN addresses, four out of whom kept diaries in MSN Space. Having been set up as 'friend' in their MSN Messenger, I was automatically allowed access rights to visit their running accounts of their personal lives, thoughts, descriptions of interests and photos; and their links to others' blogs, particularly those of fellow Chinese students in Bath. Since the majority of their blogs documented their concerns and reflections on learning and living overseas, it was a valuable source of data.

It must also be pointed out, however, that most students frankly told me that what they wrote on the internet was only a part of the real story. They generally treated it as a way to let parents and old friends know about their experiences abroad. The content therefore, was not 'as sensitive and personal as I have recorded in MP3' (S11, interview, 10/12/2005). Here seemingly lies one of the evaluation criteria encountered by documentary researchers, i.e. do the participants lie? However, I do not intend to doubt the authenticity or credibility of students' accounts (Bryman, 2004, p382, p391). Social constructionism has taught me to view 'truths' as something contingent and something

subject to contextual varieties (Angrosino & Mays de Perex, 2000). The positivists' interpretation of a document as something objective, which exists externally to the individuals and represents society directly, is simply fallacious (Jupp & Norris, 1993). In other words, there are no unproblematic 'facts' or 'true' tales. Bearing in mind this point, on line diary entries offered me a new chance to study the same phenomenon from diverse perspectives and therefore to enhance my understanding of the participants as complex agents. The online diary data was of significance to me in seeking to interpret the causal relationship between learning and psychological status, and could not simply be ignored.

However, although I perceived all students' descriptions and commentaries in blogs to be meaningful, I acknowledged the challenge to see through surface/literal meanings and to arrive at deeper meanings. According to Macdonald (2001), to meet this end requires interpretative understanding or structural analysis. Difficult as it is, I learned from Macdonald the importance of attending to and evaluating the online data in each individual's context. By comparing and contrasting the blog contents with the data I collected by other more personal, private means, I believe I could maximally avoid confusion and misinterpretation, and particularly learn from the contradictory and competing data.

3.5.4.7.3   Summary of internet-mediated methods

The internet facilitates human contacts. It is in this point that O'Dochartaigh (2002) claims the greatest contribution of the internet to research. In this study, at the literature review stage I benefited by searching on line from lots of electronic papers, articles, official statistics and reports of non-governmental institutions. Later during data collection, I was able to access personal documents in the form of online blogs, the valuable raw materials for analysis which along with verbal diaries and interviews, helped me to gain a richly triangulated picture and enhanced the trustworthiness of my findings. More importantly, interaction and communication were essential to my research. With the aid of the internet, chances to contact with the participants, for both social and academic purposes, were critically enlarged. Eventually, it helped to satisfy the demands of my methodological and ethical concerns.

3.5.4.8 Summary of my research methods

In this section, I reviewed how a multiple-research method was developed in my research, and how I employed different methods -- ranging from questionnaires, audio diary, different types of interviews, observation to internet-mediated ones -- in data generation. My adoption of a multiple research method was required by the breath and complexity of the subject matter I was looking at. It was the means through which I showed respect for the multi-faceted lived experiences I was exploring, which I believed deserve all my energy and which I knew from this study that, once empowered, the participants did like to reveal. Moreover, the adoption of various research methods was from my dissatisfaction with most of the existing research, in which many hidden but vital issues, such as personal concerns, pressures and emotional ups and downs remained undiscovered or at least was not given adequate attention. To correct the situation demanded an expanded conceptualization of research and the inclusion of a much wider range of methods in the practice of data collection. Only when the methods employed were multi-layered, could the in-depth understanding of even the most sensitive life events possibly be gained.

3.5.5   *Researcher-participant relationship*

Despite variations in how they express it, many writers have argued for the significance of good researcher-participant relations. For example, both Christian (2000) and Olessen (2000:144) cite Buber's (1958) phrase of 'the combination of I-Thou' to stress the fundamental importance of interpersonal and reciprocal bonds among research parties. Fine et. al. (2000) voice their concern about the practices which obscure the relationship with subjects in order to gain a secured distance and a neutral stance. Their idea echoes Chambers' (2000) advocacy of a long-term relationship and relative intimacy with research respondents. Discussing this issue relating to ethnographic study, she believes that only by achieving it, can rich and contextualised information be acquired while simultaneously increasing the depth of knowledge. A similar point has also been made in Rist's writing (2000), which calls for an interdependence between researchers and their subjects.

Influenced by these works but also learning from the experience of actually doing the research, I prioritised establishing and maintaining a good relationship with my participants. Only by this means, could I maximally keep all of them within the research and gather data rich enough to understand the target group, as I required. More importantly, the eventual development of a close relationship was a consequence of the growing inevitable linkages between my life and the lives of my participants. In the following section I focus in turn on the fundamental principles I have adhered to, the initial establishment of good relationships with my participants and the tips I have followed in maintaining such relationships.

3.5.5.1 Fundamental principles

Throughout the study, I abided by three basic principles in managing my relationships with the participants. First of all, I held that, despite being the researcher, I had no privileged power. Heeding the call for a research relationship which is reciprocal rather than hierarchical (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Mies, 1993; Jayaratne, 1993), I decided that my participants and I were equal members of the study. Having learned from a feminist epistemology which demands an open and honest negotiation throughout the research (Olessen, 2000), I maintained that all my informants and I contributed jointly to the understanding of the Chinese students overseas as a whole. My interaction with them assured me that they all shared my sense of the urgent need to reveal their experiences, and thus saw it as their task too. Constructing meaning together (Olessen, 2000), we co-operated to make some Chinese students' voices were expressed and heard.

Secondly, no fixed relationship, which had been prescribed in advance, could be drawn on. It was more of a dialogical and contingent procedure rather than a rigid or static one (Rist, 2000). All participants were different and they all changed during the course of the study. The changing nature of our subjectivity resulted in the change of our relationships. If interpreting from the principles of post-structuralism, the researcher/participant relationship altered as discourses shifted over time; it acted as a kind of discursive field, on which diverse discourses, for example age, gender, race, marital status, physical and intellectual ability, education experience and family background, may all have an impact (see also Haw, 1996).

Thirdly, in my work with the thirteen participants, I put deliberate effort on building and maintaining a close relationship. This position, once again, resulted from my acknowledgement of feminist and ethnographical arguments and their application in this study (Mies, 1993; Jayaratne, 1993). Specifically, for example, Fontana & Frey (2000) advocate the emotional engagement of the researcher and believe it to be crucial to establishing potentially long-term, trusting relationships with the participants. Lofland (1995) regards being physically, socially and emotionally close to those under study as the basis for entering into the experiences of interest, which in turn is the prerequisite for gaining deep familiarity and avoiding stereotypes; such an approach is increasingly being accepted more widely in social science. For instance Bryman (2004:478), in the context of using online interview methods, has discussed how mutual trust anticipates the respondents' longer-term commitment to a project. In line with these arguments, in this study I was consciously concerned not to be distant from my respondents; my worry was that I, otherwise, must be kept from and have no access to some parts of their experiences.

However, a close rapport, as Fontana and Frey (2000) state, may turn the researcher simply into a spokesman for the group being studied, in the process forgetting her academic mission. This danger is well known as 'going native', as a result of ethnographers immersing themselves in the settings of their study for a prolonged time (Bryman, 2004:302; Fielding, 2001:149). To avoid this risk, by introducing the term 'conscious partiality', Mies (1993:68) suggests maintaining a critical and dialectical distance between the researcher and subjects. Angrosina & Mays de Perez (2000:679) go further and stress the importance for ethnographers to consciously and actively adopt a situational membership identity. They support the adoption of practices which replace the old problem of 'going native' with allowing oneself to be vulnerable without being too vulnerable. Such practices emphasise the researchers' use of theoretical languages, which not only has the result of helping understanding of the experience, but also of protecting themselves from 'emotional affecting encounters' (*ibid*).

Aware of the suggestions, in my research, I avoided acting as an intruder. Although I acknowledged my effects on their lives, I made efforts to minimize such effects, particularly the negative ones (for example, calling or emailing them frequently or asking for frequent meetings). However, this was more from ethical considerations than the effort to create some interpersonal 'distance'. Here, I had to point out that throughout my research my major concern was always on how to achieve the 'closeness'. The reason was as simple as that each individual was in the end an outsider of the other; we had to admit of the easiness to become overly distant from but the difficulty, if not impossible, to be overly close with each other. This was particularly the case in this research, bearing in mind all kinds of practical barriers to building the closeness (e.g. limited time and limited material resources). Hence, for me, 'a distance', or 'conscious partiality' (Mies, 1993:68), should be something to be achieved by researcher's reflexivity, instead of being manipulated as an excuse of reducing emotional involvement. In fact, in this research, the gradually gained closeness gradually produced the depth of the data I sought, which enabled me to interpret and reinterpret the data from earlier phrases when we were more distant, and increased my ability to critically understand the participants and their inner world.

The third principle echoes my subjective stance as a researcher in this study. As stated previously (see section 3.2), I oppose striving to avoid the emotional involvement with participants, which may be stressed by scientific and positivistic studies. I realized the risks and the impossibility of complete objectivity and detachment. In longitudinal qualitative research such as this, keeping uninvolved with those being studied would prevent my addressing the complexity of their human experiences (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a). And in this study, since I argued that everything can be potentially meaningful, to be completely detached and keep an absolutely objective role was not only an illusion, but had the consequence of damaged research outcomes. My argument legitimated the necessity for all sorts of informal and casual communications, interactions, conversations and chatting, and demands considerable skill in steering my relationships with my participants. As argued by Mies (1993), being involved with participants is not identical with mere empathy. Retaining the ability of reflexivity, I could still maintain social scientific perspectives over the collection and analysis of data.

3.5.5.2 Negotiating access

In this sub-section I focus on how I built friendly relationships with my participants. Jannesick (2000), writing on qualitative research design, reminds the researcher of the importance of access and entry. According to him, the initial interaction is critical as it is the precursor to establishing trust, rapport and authentic communication patterns with the participants. Fontana & Frey (2000:654) similarly discuss the issue of accessing the setting. They invite readers' attention to the point that although researchers behave variously in order to 'get in', ranging from 'being nude to study nude beaches' to 'riding a huge motorbike to study the Hell's Angels', they all share a common prerequisite, i.e. the understanding of the language and the accordance to cultural mores of the respondents. Fontana & Frey, therefore, suggest that learner researchers cautiously locate an insider of the target community who is willing to act as a cultural and linguistic translator right from the beginning.

Initially when I met with the participants, I felt I was regarded as someone more experienced in the host culture. Having arrived in the UK two years earlier, having completed a master's degree and now doing PhD research, I was viewed as the one familiar with and succeeding in the British education system. For this reason, although I was not their tutor or family, I had been positioned in something of a position of authority and was asked from time to time for tips on living and learning in Bath. Despite my intention that, with concerns about the research validity I would not give any suggestions, simply saying 'no' to all their requests was perceived as a threat to a beneficial relationship. Thus, I showed them around; led them to a Chinese grocery and acted as a shopping guide in supermarkets. I also prepared dinners, to which I invited my friends, PhD students in different departments, together with the participants. My intention was that with the presence of my friends, I need not respond to the study participants' questions. Thereby, I managed to avoid giving them my opinions too often, views, information. But they did get answers from my friends, so that their wishes to know experienced students and to be informed about their future learning were fulfilled. As a result of this effort, within the first month, a friendly relationship, where we enjoyed mutual trust, came into being. There was one participant who put my name, when registering, as her emergency contact person; there was a participant who called

me 'sister learner' (*xue jie*); there was another who described all she knew about me (and the research) to her family.

I thus encountered little trouble in negotiating access; our relationship was established easily and naturally. My participants and I were similar in terms of being Chinese overseas. I drew on my own experience of difficulties when I had first arrived in Britain to help me understand what my participants encountered at that time. The students themselves also wanted to talk; being in such an unfamiliar environment, they wanted someone to listen to their worries and share their excitement. I - as one who had been through similar experiences, was attentive to their feelings and, despite my desire to avoid undue influence on them, could provide some kind of help -- became the one with whom they would like to establish friendship.

To summarize in terms of the insights shed by Fontana & Frey (2000): I was already a member of the wider group to which those I was studying belonged, I had no language problems in communicating with them and I shared a basic understanding of the group's sub-culture as being a Chinese student at Bath. I was thus immune from distorted interpretations arising from a need to translate and interpret and had gained some kind of trust from the participants. Benefiting from the early formation of a good relationship, the data collection process started smoothly. Whether or not they had had such a habit before, the thirteen volunteers took diary-making seriously: They not only recorded every day, but were also candid about what happened on each day.

3.5.5.3 Maintenance of a good researcher/participant relationship

Janneside (2000) asserts that the maintenance of rapport deserves continuous attention throughout the length of the research. Similarly, Fontana & Frey (2000) point out that newly established trust can be very fragile. In that there are always possibilities of damaging the relationship, the broken bond, once it occurs, must be repaired quickly. Therefore, not only the establishment but more importantly, the maintenance of a good researcher/participant relationship is of great importance. The latter will contribute to the participants' continued willingness to share everything, so that the researcher can capture even the most trivial meanings of personal experience (Janneside, 2000).

Although I had encountered little difficulty in gaining entry, my concern was how to retain the participants throughout the process. There were always factors which might cause withdrawal at many intermediate stages, especially when respondents were faced with greater pressure from study, needed more time for social activities, got a part-time job or felt fed up with the routine of life and found nothing interesting to report. As pointed out earlier, a key to successful longitudinal research is a well-managed researcher/participant relationship. To achieve this, in the year of data collecting, particular attention was paid to the following aspects:

3.5.5.3.1 The importance of interaction and communication

I felt it was quite unrealistic to give the students a digital recorder, leave them alone for a month before popping along to their room and asking for diaries, expecting them to have been dutifully kept. Nothing was more important then assuring them that I was always being interested in whatever they do and at any time willing to listen to them. Communication could be realized through occasionally sending emails and through chatting for a short time when meeting on MSN messenger. However, frequent email or chatting on line was believed to be of no benefit, because of the danger in pushing the participants too much and in disturbing their normal lives. In contrast, I found it extremely effective to stop to talk with them when we met by chance on and off campus. Such communication seemed more natural, less explicitly purposeful and therefore, helped to keep a more friendly and personal relationship. This was not difficult to achieve; the key was to adopt a 'hanging around strategy' (Bryman, 2004:298). As already commented, we were not studying in a large university (see section 3.5.5.5); hence, walking to the students' shop during lunch time, borrowing books in the library, and other daily activities often created such 'chance encounters'.

In addition, occasionally inviting students for dinner was of particular importance. It meant far more than a chance for interaction. Fondness for high quality food was widely shared by my participants. For them, cooking and eating together were both contents and purposes of social gathering. Hence preparing dishes and inviting them to my home were not only opportunities to communicate, but displayed my sincerity in offering

friendship. The same was true in attending to other social details; for example, writing in Chinese expressing warm blessings in a birthday/Christmas card, buying small gifts when travelling, bringing snacks with me when interviewing, and always phoning them any time they were ill. This fits in with Fielding's suggestion on personal involvement between ethnographer and those being observed (2001:151). Benefiting from all these various behaviours, the bond between me and my participants was initiated and continued to be strengthened, which in turn encouraged the students' frankness in reporting even their most sensitive concerns and willingness to contribute as fully as they could in interviewing and in diary making.

3.5.5.3.2   The importance of follow-up interviews

Initially, interviews were intended to clarify ambiguous points and explore interesting issues in diaries (see section 3.5.4.4). However, it soon turned out to be an effective and essential stimulus to the students' diary-keeping. Interviews provided me with opportunities to show the participants my familiarity with what they had recorded. The pre-designed questions based on it showed that diary data had been seriously categorized, at least roughly analysed and carefully used for the research purpose. The students were usually found to be satisfied when they were assured that their effort was respected and their speech, acts and opinions were sympathetically acknowledged. This helped to confirm the trustworthiness of the researcher in their eyes. Furthermore, such an experience, combined with their honesty and frankness in the diaries, emphasised the point made earlier that all students were eager to be heard and felt able to do so. As a researcher I took the responsibility not to speak for them, but to open up spaces where their voices would no longer be suppressed or ignored.

3.5.5.3.3   The importance of unstructured interviews

In the unstructured interviews where I invited the students to talk freely (see section 3.5.4.4), I consciously restricted my role to that of being a listener: smiling, nodding my head from time to time, continually reflecting on what was being said and posing insightful prompting questions. This showed my attentiveness and my appreciation, and thus ensured an empathetic tone to the interaction which aided the students' expression. It was also because, in order to fully understand the students, I was clear of a need to hear their voices and to avoid asking them to recount their experiences only for my

benefit. Furthermore, the adoption of such unstructured interviews compensated for the limitations of the interview model of questions and answers. In my view the latter suggested and enforced a hierarchical relationship between the respondent and me, which I wished to avoid.

3.5.5.3.4   The importance of finding common experiences

The successful use of a diary method over one year required going beyond a traditional research/participant relationship to establish a more personal and friendly one. In this process, finding common experiences turned out to be important. It created spaces for dialogue through chatting with girls about shopping; with boys about sports; with those having partners about the impacts of love; with those having the same educational background as I about difficulties and joys in the subjects learning; and with those coming from my hometown about the changes in the city and childhood memories. Additionally, our conversations were occasionally interspersed with the exclamations upon financial pressures, one's sense of disorientation towards the future, gratefulness for family support and the stress of living in a foreign country. I was aware that sharing my experiences with the participants might always present a potential danger of influencing their viewpoints. However, to minimize status differences necessitated a display of the researcher's human side (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Showing personal feelings was worthwhile, based on the fact that the expression of my opinions was reduced to a minimum and little of it was related to learning and teaching matters.

3.5.5.3.5   The importance of the participants' partners

Among the thirteen participants, there were two who were living with their partners, with whom I deliberately kept in frequent contact and maintained a close relationship with their partners. They acted as liaisons between me and my participants, they told me more about the participants' recent experiences, concerns and difficulties, and they revealed the participants' personality and characters from their perspectives. More importantly, it was clear from experience in this study that there was nothing more encouraging in diary making than support from loved ones.

3.5.5.4 Summary of researcher-participant relationship

In this section, I emphasize the fact that to serve the interests of the students best demanded the management of researcher-participant relationship with extra sensitivity, critical self-reflection and continual efforts to address emergent problems. Given the danger of participants' withdrawal at some intermediate stages but little precedent research to learn from, the success of this study became largely subject to the development of a set of well-managed researcher/participant relationships. Moreover, this was a requirement of my epistemological stance. The research was not for my own benefit but to serve best the interests of the students I was working with. Only with the building and maintaining of trust, care and sincere friendship, could this study become the space where they freely spoke out for themselves. And only by this means, can it problematise through empirical evidence the stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'.

3.6 Recording, transcribing and translating data

Recording interviews has been commonly viewed as significant in social research (e.g. Walker, 1985; Verma & Mallick, 1999; Bryman, 2001; Walker, 1985). In this study, all the diary entries and interviews were recorded with digital recorders. It provided the real words of the interviewee as well as the way they were said, freed me from writing, and enabled me to focus on non-verbal clues and on the management of the interviewing process. It also allowed the repeated examination of the data throughout the year.

I minimized the possibility that recording might inhibit the speakers' expression (see Anderson, 1990; Bryman, 2001; Verma & Mallick, 1999). Firstly, with the diary, it was students themselves who decided what to record, when to record and whether they would give the recorded diaries to me. The flexibility and freedom they enjoyed were intended to maximally reduce their reservations. Secondly, in interviews, I was using a digital recorder which, like the ones they used for diary making, was no bigger than a match-box and was therefore easily ignored during conversation. Also over time, the participants got used to being recorded and reported an increasing relaxation about expressing personal issues. Thirdly, the interviews were more like a friendly talk in a very relaxed atmosphere, helping to free the students from reservation. More importantly, the gradually established trust made participants more and more open. Not

only recording their feelings in diaries and in interviews, they even invited me to record our conversation on some casual occasions and personal interactions, for example, during the dinner or their social gatherings.

By the end of the study, I had collected more than 3000 diary entries, more than 150 hours of interview, many pages of my research diary and informal talks with the students, including the participants and their friends. All the diaries and interviews were transcribed. Such transcription provided manageable materials, increased my familiarity with the information collected, enhanced the soundness of my research, and facilitated data analysis (Drever, 1995). Partial translation based on paraphrasing of the students' accounts was carried out, but since the time was limited, only the accounts which were discussed in the thesis have been translated in full. Furthermore, since Chinese was the medium of data collection and since there is no strict one-to-one correspondence between English and Chinese, to translate what they said word by word without any changes was not realistic. Regarding other recorded data, since they were mainly used to triangulate my understanding of diaries and interview data – in fact most of the issues exposed in informal encounters had been explored in interviews, they were not transcribed. This decision also reflected time management concerns.

3.7   Data analysis[2]

In this research I have followed a systematic and inductive procedure in data analysis. I learned from reading accounts of grounded theory to manage abundant data through collection, coding and provisional analysis (Creswell, 1998). In the first three months of my data collection stage, I stuck to 'zigzag' processes (*ibid*). That is I collected initial information, categorized and analysed it in as much detail as time permitted, and then returned to gather more information and subject it to further analysis. Later, with the continuation of my research while abundant data kept coming in and accumulating, no

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[2] I have placed the following documents in the appendices as illustrations of the data analysis processes I am going to describe in this section: three pages of participants' diaries (appendix VI); a sample of English translation of diary and interview excerpts on writing and feedback (appendix VII); a sample of the initial categorization of diary and interview excerpts on writing and feedback (appendix VIII); final analysis of data on formative feedback (appendix IX)

clear-cut boundary existed between each episode of data collection simply because there was no time for me to retreat, analyze and generate detailed outcomes.

Despite this, continuous interpreting was still perceived inevitable and necessary. This was because multiple data sources were relied on, which produced huge amounts of daily information. Thus to keep thinking about and reflecting on the data were the only way that I could make sense of them and then design the next step in data collection. For this reason, the processes of transcribing, roughly categorising and familiarising myself with the already gathered data and, based on it, gathering further information, in fact, fused together (see also Hollway, 1989; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1993). It was through a long-term, spiral process that the ideas sparking off in a certain period finally developed into formal analysis of the experiences.

It should be noted that, throughout the data interpretation, I bore in mind Alvesson's (2003) warning that a researcher's 'personal and paradigmatic-cultural blinders tend to shadow some aspects of interpretation than those preferred.' It was, therefore, important that I challenged any direct or spontaneous interpretation of data, especially those based on my personal experiences or 'common senses'. To achieve this, I made the interpretation process a reflexive and iterative one in which the conceptualization of students' lived experiences was continually refined. The longitudinal design enabled me to check my interpretation in the light of newly generated data. Multiple data-collecting methods allowed me to compare and contrast every piece of data with other pieces gathered from different sources. A well-managed relationship with my participants contributed to their participation in data-interpreting – this was also important given the increased closeness produced increased depth of data which led to the growing critical understanding. All these means helped to set up an 'interpretative repertoire' (Alvesson, 2003:186), by which different standpoints inspired my thinking, challenged taken-for-granted interpretations and shed light on my understanding.

Moreover, following the participants' leaving from Bath, I was then able to focus on data interpretation. The conceptual images of students' learning, their concerns and other influential factors which had first emerged from data collected on a certain issue

and refined throughout the duration of data collection, could now be synthesized and analysed thoroughly. The accumulated data regarding all aspects of living and learning allowed me to look at the participants' changes and experiences in a holistic way, thus unifying diverse types of data and increasing the credibility of my interpretation.

Using inductive qualitative analysis techniques, I finally decided to focus on the following themes: i.e. the students' perceptions and experiences in terms of lecture comprehensibility, formative assessment and tutorials (see section 4.2), in collaborative learning groups (see section 4.3) and in paid employments (see section 4.4). All these topics recurred in the participants' diaries and were repeatedly commented on in our interviews. Working on these themes, I studied the students' accounts of various factors that influenced their engagement with learning (e.g. teacher attitudes and behaviours, pedagogy, group dynamics, university support, influences from Chinese peers, family members and their everyday encounters outside campus). The rich data also allowed me to delve into the students' responses to all these influences. Personal changes were the consequences of individuals' continuous interaction with contexts. The complexity of and dynamics within the processes of changing were among the important findings.

Intercultural interaction for recreational purposes was also investigated (see section 4.5). It is partly because the issue was a hot topic in the current literature, mainly because making intercultural friendships was a shared expectation among all my participants, who, however, recorded few such experiences in their dairies. The exploration with the students on the issues revealed complex influential factors. The findings strongly questioned the studies which attributed Chinese students' difficulties in intercultural communication to 'the cultural differences' (e.g. Gao, 1996; Gao, 2000; Zhang, 2006).

Diagram 3.2   Themes of my data analysis
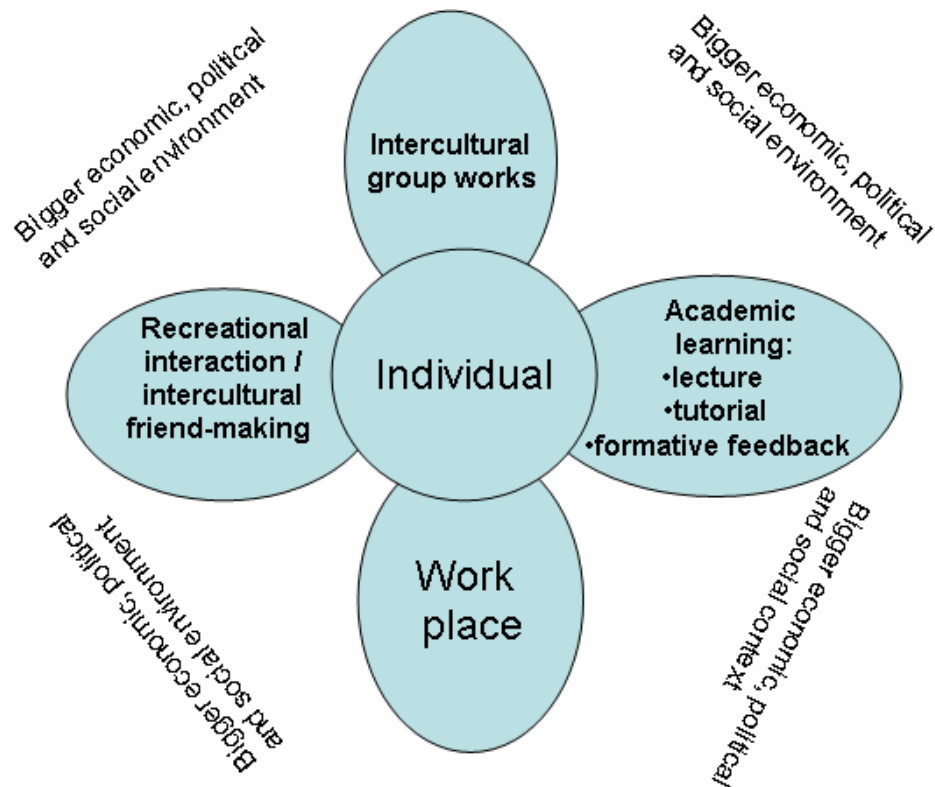
The noteworthy point is that different themes were interrelated. The categories were transcended with progress of the research, that is, the findings gradually revealed a holistic picture of each individual's experiences. As shown in diagram 3.2, an individual locates in four domains, with which he/she continuously interacted. By linking students' experiences in different contexts with each other, this research overcomes the weaknesses of one-dimensional studies (for example, those focusing only on academic environments to explain students' learning behaviours); and contributes to a fuller identification of how students successfully adapted to new academic environments, or alternatively, why they failed to do so.

3.8   Ethical considerations

Anderson (1990) points out that all educational researchers need to consider ethical issues carefully in order that potential harm to participants is minimized while the quality of research is maximized. This is particularly relevant to those engaging in research designed as qualitative, interpretative, longitudinal, and which falls within the tradition of ethnography, because in these cases the researchers' lives are so closely

linked with field experience that 'each interaction may involve moral choices' (Todlock, 2000:455).

In what follows, I centre on the ethical issues which have been addressed in this study. Documenting individuals' experiences over a period of many months, I argue few regulations could capture all the subtleties and diversities of all the contexts with which I was confronted. Conducting a longitudinal ethnographic study had a consequence in some uncertainty over ethical standards, and hence the impossibility of establishing a pre-designed set of rules applicable to each specific situation. For this reason, on the one hand, I adopted general guidelines, including informed consent and respect for people; on the other hand, I acknowledged that no ethical guideline could be absolute (see Cohen & Manion, 1994), and therefore, remained ethically sensitive to the various events and contexts of the research process. My practices have been enlightened by relevant literature (see Anderson, 1990; Eichelberger, 1989; Verma & Mallick, 1999; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

3.8.1 *Informed consent*

This study is subject to the tenet of informed consent (see ESRC Research Ethics Framework, 2005; Cohen & Manion, 1994). At the first meeting with the potential cohort, either in the pre-sesional English lecture or the CSSA party, I gave out the paper work which detailed my research in terms of aims, design, methods, types of data, sample needed, time involved and promises of confidentiality. My meeting and talking with the students who showed interest allowed much time to answer individual questions regarding all aspects of the study. These also turned out to be opportunities to guarantee anonymity and to express my thanks for their interest and for their possible participation. My contact with the students in the mentor programme was different, as they had been informed via email. Specifically, they were all forwarded the letter from the International Office and replied if they wanted to know more. At that time, as they were in China, web mail was the means I used to keep in contact with them, replying to their enquiries and giving further deliberation on this study. The asynchronous nature of communication via email facilitated informed consent from participants (Kralic, et.al., 2004; Fielding & Thomas, 2001). The accessibility to the electronic version of my

paperwork enabled the potential participants to read the details repeatedly, so that the decisions made were not impulsive or made in my presence. Investing time with them through email correspondence also helped a relationship to develop before seeing them individually on campus in October.

However, use of internet-mediated methods could simultaneously violate the criterion of informant consent. Bryman (2004) describes an ethical debate which pertains to the extent an online interactive communication can be used as documents in analysis. The same concern also exists in the way one treats field notes obtained from participant observation (*ibid*). Regarding this research, I did not seek the participants' consent for using our MSN talk or casual face-to-face/phone conversation, since I was afraid this would damage the friendly relationship with the informants. Instead, my ethical decisions included the following: I consciously based few of my findings solely on documentary analysis data; rather the application of them was confined to triangulating the information gathered from other sources, and, in cases where I did use them, I emailed the participants with the textual content and asked for their agreement. By these means, I hope I reached the criterion that 'the means used to achieve the value will not undermine it' (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000:693).

The final point which must be noted is the significance of obtaining participants' informed consent not only at the beginning of the research. Engaging in longitudinal ethnographical research, I was aware that every step was crucial and deserved very careful attention. My concern was that in any case in which a participant doubted that their right to self-determination was not being fully respected, the after-effects would seriously damage the success of my research. Hence at each interview, I asked students for their agreement to the next one. I then contacted them one or two weeks in advance to set up the exact time and place according to their preference. At each of the key stages when semi-structured interviews were conducted, I asked them in advance for their consent to the topic on which we would focus, making changes if required. Otherwise, I informed them that their diary content/recent experiences would be the central focus. It is also worth noting that email was adopted as the preferred means of communication, except for students who had stated their preference for MSN or mobile

phones. This resulted from my consideration that emails minimized the pressure on participants. They could take their time to reply, found it easier and less embarrassing to refuse, and could make any changes if an emergency occurred (see Kralic, et.al., 2004; Fielding & Thomas, 2001; Bryman, 2000).

3.8.2 *Respect for privacy*

Almost all the methodological literature recognises the importance for researchers to respect participants' privacy and asserts that this should be obeyed at all costs in order to protect them against unwanted interference and potential threats (see Bryman, 2004; Cohen & Manion, 2004). Despite all my efforts to achieve this, in this study, I encountered what Cohen and Manion (1994:360) call the 'tension' of social scientists. Setting the in-depth understanding of the target group as my research interest, I intended to seek explanations for the students' activities and viewpoints, which required me to go beyond superficial phenomena to investigate causal contextual factors. My intimate personal relationship with the participants, their friends and partners, the access to their personal diaries, and our frequent and lengthy unstructured interviews gave me abundant opportunities to know the students. However, with their personal lives gradually disclosed in front of me, I began to realise just how sensitive parts of my data could be. The more their private and hidden aspects were revealed, the more critical decisions had to be made regarding the proper attitudes I should hold towards the research, my participants and my dealing with the data. Although all participants were aware that what they told me and let me observe could be used, my concern was that they and I probably lacked clear ideas in the middle of the research of the severity of possible unforeseeable harm that may incur from participation. Thus, I have always considered such questions, particularly the extent to which I should allow myself to delve further and to which I could disseminate the data I had.

Fine et.al. (2000) have discussed the dilemma faced by researchers, between carrying out a moral social study and increasing professional knowledge. In my research I prioritised the former: I viewed my task as to deepen understanding of Chinese learners. Yet I believed in the dignity of human beings. To me it was an unquestionable obligation to protect the welfare of my participants even if it may mean a compromised

research project. They were all my friends, having kindly offered their help and allowing me to read their lives, and I came to love and respect them so much. Their rights therefore must be preserved while the balance between this and my professional responsibility for presenting their experiences must be carefully considered. In what follows, I describe my attempts to fulfill the requirement, which were always based on my comparison of the costs to the individuals and to the research.

3.8.2.1 Safeguarding the anonymity of participants

To protect the participants' privacy, the most important practice concerns anonymity, i.e. all information made public would contain no signifier which may reveal their identity (ESRC Research Ethics Framework, 2005). In this study, pseudonyms were used in any data presented in data analysis. Crude categories of age, hometown and subject background, were applied in accounts of the participants' personal backgrounds (see appendix I). I also presented general information about prior education and family in my findings rather than a specific or detailed account. By these means I tried to maintain the participants' anonymity through deliberately excluding identifying marks from my thesis.

However, I was aware that absolute anonymity was, to some extent, impossible to fulfil. Chinese students were by no means a big group in the university. In the year I was carrying out my data collection, although some departments enrolled over a hundred postgraduate students from Mainland China, in most departments there were only a handful. It means that even from the crude categorization of demographical data there existed the possibility of uniquely identifying an individual. To give a few examples, it was highly possible that only one Chinese student in economics came from a metropolitan city in North China, or that only one had siblings among all those in the MA in Education programme.

Despite these concerns, I could not satisfy myself with giving no personal information other than 'Chinese'; nor could I be at ease accepting Cohen & Manion's (1994) suggestion of using made-up personal details. To me, not only was a certain learning behaviour or experience important, but it was of greater significance to look at how an

individual reacts, responds and develops throughout the process. It was my research interest to try to understand the students as conscious selves who conducted agentic actions under the complex contextual influences; and it was my research objective to challenge the stereotyping images of 'the' Chinese learner. Hence the basic background information was critical in this study. For this reason, rather than presenting none of it in my data analysis, my attention and extreme care went into finding the appropriate balance between releasing more information than was necessary and releasing too little to allow understanding. Furthermore, as my findings will not be made public until after the students' graduation and departure from the university, it would be comparatively much harder to identify them except by those having authorized access to the protected database of the graduates. From this consideration, the breach of participants' anonymity could be maximally reduced. My pursuit of deepened knowledge, therefore, could be achieved based on and without compromising my respect for the students' rights.

3.8.2.2 Safeguarding the confidentiality of data

The second way of protecting the participants concerns the assurance of confidentiality. This principle requires researchers to keep the research data confidential. No information can be disseminated without the permission of the participants (ESRC Research Ethics Framework, 2005). I, therefore, must minimize possible harm to the participants and simultaneously, to balance it with my aim to contribute to a deepened understanding of the target group.

The noteworthy point is that as with anonymity, confidentiality cannot be ensured with certainty (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Therefore, it was important, particularly regarding a longitudinal and intensive study, to reflect throughout the research on possible risks and make efforts to avoid consequent harm. As already stressed, a great portion of my data consisted of sensitive personal information, which related to income, personal attributes, relationship with family and partners, prejudices, gossip and even sexual orientations (see Cohen & Manion's 1994 definition of 'sensitivity'). Meanwhile, living in a small Chinese community, most of my participants knew each other and some were close friends. In fact, as members of the same social network, most Chinese students in the

university knew or had heard of others. Both factors warned me of the danger of leaking any content of personal diaries or interviews, no matter whether it was sensitive or not, to any person other than the reporter her/himself. Any breach of this would have the consequences that the participants would withhold their views from me, or even withdraw from this study; but, more seriously, it would hurt the respondents and violate their dignity and privacy.

In addition, to protect the participants' confidentiality, prior to and throughout the collection of data, I repeatedly informed them that they may possibly be identified, despite my best attempts to prevent this, and hence they enjoyed full freedom to decide to what extent they would like to provide detailed information. By obtaining fully informed consent, I hope to have minimized the threats to the respondents that may result from their participation, particularly regarding those threats which I as researcher was unable to recognize within the study.

3.8.3   *Summary of ethical considerations*

Although abiding by the generally accepted tenets (i.e. informed consent & respect for people), I recognize that in value-laden social science there does not exist a fixed set of utilitarian ethical codes. Many researchers, despite displaying different perspectives, have opposed the definition of research ethics as standardized and abstract criteria (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Here, I am particularly influenced by Lincoln (2000c:204), who questions the formalistic understanding of morality where moral forms of 'university, impartiality and impersonality' prioritize moral content. Her idea that morality cannot be calculated purposefully but should be developed and adjusted within interaction is relevant to this study. Moreover, Christian (2000), Olesen (2000) and Chambers (2000) all call for the interpretation of ethics as an ongoing process of expression and communication. At first I was astonished at their challenges to codes of ethics (i.e. informed consent, deception, privacy and confidentiality, and accuracy), all of which to me had been seen as 'golden rules'. I was then relieved to identify that what they are determined to challenge is the imposition of rigid ethical orders, which I, in agreement with them, did view as being unsophisticated and in need of transformation. I have learned through the experience of this research how ethical issues could be

complex and differentiated. To address them requires one to perceive moral actions as contingent, and to accomplish them in light of the commonly shared moral goods in everyday life, instead of following any pre-designed theoretical position (Christian, 2000; Olesen, 2000).

Moreover, when dealing with the ethical problems of a colonizing discourse of 'Others', Fine and co-workers recommend all researchers, from beginner to veteran, pose questions to themselves 'as they move through the recursive stages of social analysis' (Fine, et.al, 2000:126). In this study, I adopted continuous reflection on each of my actions as a researcher. Continuous contemplation on the social responsibilities that I bore, seemed the most appropriate solution to the emergent ethical problems and dilemmas I encountered. Learning from past experience was also important. Seeing the research as consisting of successive stages, analysing the losses and gains obtained in the present phase and using the experience gained to guide actions and decision-making in the next phase were among the lessons I have learned. It was by these means that unexpected harm could be quickly amended if it occurred; emergent risk could be averted at the moment it is realized; and the damaged researcher/participant relationship could be repaired before it was too late. By these means, this study became morally good, in the sense that informs the above discussions.

Furthermore, I advocated feminist ethics which call for care, love, shared emotional experiences, and held that morality can only be theorized from the I-thou relationship featured by non-oppressiveness, mutual trust and collaboration (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Christian, 2000; Olesen, 2000; Fine, et.al, 2000). Conducting research to empower silenced voices, I gradually put myself in the position of being a co-worker with my participants. I respected all their responses and feelings, and adapted the design of my research on the basis of their suggestions (i.e. what data should be included; which method is more proper at a certain period and what topic should be discussed in an interview). The tension between researcher's professional interest and their responsibility to protect the participants' rights has been commented on (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). However, in this research, I stress the dichotomy between 'research quality' and 'respect for the individual' disappeared. Respect for the

individual was a crucial component of obtaining quality of the research. Only by prioritizing the participants' privacy and dignity was I able to access to the rich details of the participants' lived experiences. The latter led to a critical understanding and the exclusion of cultural stereotyping from the findings.

3.9   Validity and reliability

In the realm of educational research, diverse as definitions can be, there seems to be an agreement that validity concerns the 'soundness', 'genuineness' and 'truthfulness' of the research (Zhao, 2006:69); while reliability concerns trustworthiness and consistency in measurement, i.e. the degree to which a repeated test could lead to similar results when other conditions are equal (Anderson, 1990; Eichelberger, 1989; Bush, 2002; Gilebert, 2001; Verma & Mallick, 1999; Brown & Dowling, 1998; Bell, 1992).

However, these conventional concepts have come under challenge. Many scholars (e.g. Olesen, 2000; Kolaskowski, 1993) and others mentioned below, assert that the traditional accounts of validity and reliability have an origin in positivistic social science, which holds to the existence of an absolute reality and seeks for scientific measurement and techniques to establish credibility of the researchers' accounts. Hence, the original interpretations of both terms, despite being probably suitable in a quantitative paradigm, cannot address the complexity of qualitative research and need to be re-examined.

It must be noted that in this campaign against the conventional standards, as pointed out by Smith & Deemer (2000), conceptual differences emerge between so-called quasi-foundationalists and non-foundationalists. Maxwell (1992) and Hammersley (1990) represent the first group. They both deny a 'God's-eye view', while acknowledging the individuals' roles in representing phenomena and constituting knowledge. Despite this, they stress the correctness of descriptive accounts produced by researchers. Smith & Deemer (2000), therefore, criticize them for being neo-realists who in fact support a reality independent of human beings and hence, ironically, adopt the very position for which they themselves criticise the naive realists.

In another camp, there are a group of theorists who fully accept relativist implications, honour the value of plurality and multiplicity; and as such, critically question the appropriateness of the concepts of validity and reliability. For Janneside (2000: 392), for example, validity is absurd, as no qualitative researcher aims at achieving a single correct interpretation, whereas reliability is pointless, particularly in case study research which stands solidly on its value of uniqueness. Similarly, in a section entitled, 'whither and whether criteria', Lincoln & Guba (2000:179) discuss the controversy around validity. By reviewing works of those scholars who wish to say 'farewell to criteriology', they argue that the key issue is not whether criteria should be adopted or which are more appropriate. In that all criteria are rooted in the nature of the specific social inquiry, it is more significant to perceive and treat the process whereby criteria are established and reestablished as a dialogic one.

Gergen & Gergen (2000) are also among those advocating abandoning the conventional interpretation of validity. They praise Lather's (1993:1032) 'transgressive list', which according to them, most catalytically reframes the concept of validity as ironic validity, foregrounding the inadequacy of language; paralogical validity, which deals with the undecidables, limits and discontinuities in language; rhizomatic validity, which expresses how conventional research procedures are undermined and how the new norms are generated; and voluptuous validity, which links ethics and epistemology together. A further postmodern and poststructural 'trangressive' form of validity is proposed by Richardson (2000). As summarized by Lincoln & Guba (2000), a multi-faceted image of a crystal de-constructs the traditionally coherent, rigid and unified idea of validity and reminds researchers of the complexity involved in searching, telling and representing (Richardson, 2000).

The above views, particularly those on the rejection of reliability and the radical reconfiguration of validity, provided me with the means to defend my own research, which I viewed as a social process, subject to social rules and ethical considerations. The complexity of my research subjects resulted in complexity in the research process. No coherent, rigid and unified standards of reliability or validity could be applied. I, therefore, in line with Smith & Deemer (2000), believed that the issue of criteria was

not epistemological, but purely a practical and moral affair. The list of 'criteria', hence, was viewed as flexible for modification, which was always judged and adjusted based on my considerations on the ethical issues at a given time and place.

With no fixed framework available to follow, reflexivity became crucial. I cautiously steered this study so as to enhance the quality of my findings in terms of their trustworthiness and completeness. My efforts were located in the accommodation of various traditions of inquiry and the employment of multiple methods in my research. The post-structural discourse theory and the social constructionism, on which I have drawn, taught me of the pluralistic, fragmented and contingent nature of my subject matter and of the inability of any single method to reach 'the ultimate knowledge' (Lincoln & Guba, 2000:178). Although a diary method seemed to suit my research interest better than others, to safeguard this study against possible misinterpretations and bias and excessive subjectivity required the adoption and careful management of a collection of research methods throughout the duration of the research. The prolonged engagement, persistent observation, repeated interviews, purposeful contacts and casual communication on all occasions produced voluminous data. They were linked to each other, satisfied the demands of crystallization (Richardson, 2000), and increased the trustworthiness of findings.

Simultaneously, however, I recognized my lack of skills as an 'apprentice' researcher. Hence, a set of strategies was used and believed to contribute to the overall soundness of the study. Firstly, I piloted the interview with two non-informants. Both resembled the participants in key respects, except for their learning in Bath one year earlier than my informants. These helped me to rephrase and re-sequence questions for the initial interview (Anderson, 1990; Drever, 1995; Wragg, 2002); and more importantly they practiced my interaction skills and thus facilitated the initial establishment of mutual trust. Secondly, all follow-up interviews were conducted based on the gathered diary entries. They, therefore, were purposefully guided to be around specific topics and organized by a set of prompting and probing questions. Moreover, regarding each round of semi-structured interviews held at key stages, the schedules were always carefully designed in advance, with interview questions being drafted and redrafted, based on my

supervisors' feedback. Apart from this, in order to prepare data for analysis, my father, to whom my greatest gratitude must go, transcribed all the students' diary entries into texts; I then had adequate time to double check and guarantee the accuracy of the transcripts. One issue rising here was regarding the confidentiality and anonymity. The measures I have taken to safeguard these students' right included a full explanation to my father of the significance of keeping confidential whatever he transcribed. Besides, although my father helped me with transcription, he had no clue whose accounts he was transcribing. Moreover, my father only visited me for five months and after that he returned to China. Therefore, although it was not only I myself who had done the transcription job, the danger of leaking students' diary content or allowing their identity to be revealed was minimized.

Furthermore, applying the suggestions of Lincoln & Guba (1985), I invited the participants to check on transcription and initial analysis. Benefiting from our frequent meeting, I asked for their interpretation of ambiguous data or data worth further exploring. Their explanations deepened my understanding and modifications were made accordingly.

Moreover, regular reflection was stressed. Engaging in the research in which I kept my research methods open for changes and adaptation, it was crucial to retain the capacity of thinking critically and judging throughout the research process. By all the means that I could, I tried to be careful in the preparation, implementation, transcription and analysis of this study. These strategies were a necessity because they defended this study against both explicit and implicit mis-interpreting and therefore, enhanced its validity (Bryman, 2001; Bell, 1992; Eichelberger, 1989; Anderson, 1990; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Drever, 1995).

Lastly and most importantly, having appreciated the value of post-structural feminist methodology, I interpreted a valid study as being one integrating ethical and moral considerations within each step of knowing (see Lather, 1993, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Smith & Deemer, 2002), which allowed spaces for my prior experiences and emotional involvement along the journey of seeking understanding. In the earlier parts, I

have detailed how I, though uneasily, formed and reformulated my research interest and developed my research methods based on personal experiences; how I sailed a multi-disciplinary inquiry to success based on self-reflexivity, which particularly benefited me in the application of a novel research method where few models could be drawn on; and specifically, how I gained trust and maintained a good relationship with my participants. The last point was of great ethical and epistemological significance. It implied care, love and friendship in the study and maintaining a reciprocal equal position with the respondents. The idea was not only to facilitate my data collection in the long run but more importantly originated from my attempts to give power to students and to strive for a place where their voice could be heard. It is also worth noting that, as I suggested earlier, behaving ethically and ensuring valid research implies and demands each other (see section 3.8.3). By connecting what we know and our relationship with our research participants, the validity of my research findings increased (see also Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

3.10   Limitations

Despite the careful design and conduct of the study, I am aware of the existence of limitations. Firstly, I admit that no ethnographical qualitative research could be free from the accusation of intrusion. In particular, a membership-oriented researcher's identity, as Angrosino & Mays de Perez (2000) point out, can be by definition 'intrusive'. Hence, although I tried my best to minimize my influence, my stance as already being an insider and my efforts to establish a long-term rapport may have to some extent intruded into the participants' lives. This in turn may more or less distort the fulfilment of the research objective, i.e. understanding of the students' experiences as they would 'normally' be.

In addition, although all my efforts were put to effect triangulation / crystallization and build my interpretation on multiple sources of data, I recognize the possibilities of occurrence of personal bias. Bearing in mind Rinehart's observation that, 'how we choose to name people and groups – how we categorize them – often tells more about us, about any truth of who we are…' (cited in Tierney, 2000:544), it may be simply inevitable that my selection and representation of evidence were unconsciously affected

by my own background, intuitive thinking and ethical compromises (Sadler, 2002). A similar point has also been addressed by other scholars, who call for attention to be given to factors which may result in prejudices (Charmaz, 2000; Tedlock, 2000; Stake, 2000; Chambers, 2000).

Another two limitations may exist in my attempt to solve the problem of potentially excessive subjectivity. Firstly, there is my accommodation of different traditions of inquiry in a single study. I recognize that feminist methodology, ethnography and case study are continually developing to more complex forms. Hence, I am aware that my interpretation and translation into practice of their tenets were based on familiarity with only a part of a substantial literature in each of these traditions, which could have an effect on my research findings. Secondly, to minimize the errors of judgement and interference, I always invited the participants to give me their own interpretations of their previous behaviours/accounts; this helped the establishment of an equal and joint partnership between us. However, I noted that occasionally even the same student interpreted the same text differently at different times. From a strict post-structuralist perspective, as Tierney (2000:548) commented, all narratives are situated. Hence my method cannot produce the 'perfect' interpretation; any interpretation in fact is always provisional (*ibid*).

As far as the processes of recording, transcribing and translating data are concerned, some further limitations may be identified. Firstly, although all the participants agreed to record on a daily basis, some were better in terms of the frequency with which they made their diary entries, the length of their daily records and the content their diary included. Hence, not all diaries entries were equally informative. Besides, regarding the diary data, without the inclusion of visual data, such as facial expressions, body gestures and other special behaviour, some important clues revealing participants' perceptions might be missed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Walker, 1985). Apart from this, since the translation of diaries and interviews was based on the content, the distortion of information might occur (Drever, 1995).

Last but not the least, there are limitations arising from my ethical and moral concerns. Specifically, throughout the research I tried my best to establish and maintain rapport with the participants. However, knowledge always involves power. Privileged in my role as the one more familiar with the host culture, the imbalanced status between us was difficult to deny, a point that may further influence the generation of data. Furthermore, this study, despite the attempts to avoid unnecessary negative consequences, may cause some harm to my participants. This could result from my research aim of making previously unheard voices heard so as to change the unsatisfactory situation (see Hollway, 1989). By exploring and presenting the students' private concerns in public, even within this limited forum, the study may have influenced the participants and the way in which they reflected on and responded to their experiences.

3.11   Summary of chapter 3

This chapter began with a justification of my research epistemology, that is a qualitative and interpretive approach. Reasons for the adoption of multiple data sources were clarified and details of the data generation process were described. The processes of transcribing and interpreting data were explained, followed by a considerations of ethics, validity and reliability issues.

It should be noted that personal narratives are a key component of the research methodology. I argued that only by acknowledging my personal, emotional involvement can the study produce the in-depth data that is necessary to increase our understanding of the participants' lives in the UK.

4   PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, I work on students' daily experiences in several key social sites including lecture rooms, academic-learning groups and work places; I also document their responses to formative feedbacks and their contacts with significant social others, i.e. academic staff, family and interlocutors in intercultural interaction. My choices of the social contexts which feature significant interpersonal relations are based on the students' accounts – the most frequently narrated ones and the commonly shared focuses are presented and examined (see also section 3.7). Such choices also originated from my determination to locate the documentation of and commentary on learners' experiences within their interaction with various social settings. Moreover, they arose from my recognition of the inseparability between out-campus and on-campus encounters. Only by exploring the students' interpretation of difficulties in academic work and in their personal lives, their coping strategies within specific contexts and their personal changes as being influenced by contextual influences, can we fully capture the complexity of individual development, embrace the diversity among Chinese students and problematise the overgeneralization of essentialist views upon 'the Chinese learner'.

4.1   Background: the course differences

Before moving on to present the findings, I shall outline some general differences among the courses on which the participants were enrolled. This gives background to my later analysis (see sections 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5) which may help comprehension of individual differences in their perceptions and learning behaviours.

Firstly, although lecturing was the dominant teaching mode across courses, there were differences in lecturing styles (see section 4.2). Specifically, in the courses emphasizing rigorous scientific thinking, such as economics, finance and accounting, engineering and computer science, lecturing usually took the form of 'chalk and talk'(see Beard, 1970); that is, lecturers acted as monologue speakers who may or may not explain the information they are presenting with the aid of an overhead projector or PowerPoint

display. It was at such courses that the students' criticisms of incomprehensibility of teaching content were mainly directed.

In contrast, in social science and humanities disciplines, such as education, human resource management and business administration, collaborative teaching approaches were much more frequently used. Lecturers may give a shortened lecture by raising a question for students' consideration and inquiry in groups. Or they may arrange several short discussions during lectures. Although a range of problems rose when students worked in groups (see section 4.3.3), these more interactive teaching methods were reported by students as helping them to follow the main teaching ideas. In these cases, fewer complaints of incomprehensibility were made.

It is also worth noting that the interdisciplinary nature of a variety of engineering and applied science courses seems to have influenced lecturing styles. In the MSc course in computer science, for example, the unit called 'human computer interaction' reflected the subject's interdisciplinary links with management science and sociology. Similarly, the MSc course in environmental chemical engineering, aiming to incorporate chemistry with engineering and legislation, contained modules on environmental control & legislation and on waste management. In these units, group discussions were sometimes used within lectures. Supervision via face-to-face conversation and formative feedback were also distinct ways of teaching noted in this course (see sections 4.2.1.4, 4.2.2.1).

Another interesting case is the Chinese/English interpreting and translating course (I&T). Being a practical subject, it aimed to enhance students' linguistic capacity, communicative skills and professional confidence. The objectives of the curriculum determined that the instruction methods were mainly interactive. In compulsory interpreting units, teachers' instruction of interpreting skills took up only a minor part of class hours, while individual student's performance in exercises were given great attention. The interactive methods were intended to ensure every learner obtained immediate feedback, which, however, was not initially welcomed by the students (see

section 4.2.1.3).

Secondly, apart from in-class group discussion, in some departments students were expected to further their study by working outside classes with other classmates, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds. This approach to learning was emphasized in the MBA programme, MSc courses in management, in the mechanical/chemical engineering and computer science courses, where the graduates' skills to work in a team were stressed (Ashraf, 2004; Chapman et.al, 2006). The issue of group work will be explored in section 4.3.

Thirdly, there were also differences in the assessment methods used. Generally, the more the course was humanities-oriented, the more likely it was that a thesis-based assessment was employed. In education, students were solely assessed by essay writing whereas in other courses there was a mixed use of paper-based tests, course work, interpretation and essay. In section 4.2 (i.e. 4.2.1.3, 4.2.1.4, 4.2.2.1), I will explore how feedback in formative assessment facilitated the participants' learning. In section 4.3, I will investigate students' experiences in group work.

Finally, there are differences across courses in terms of student cohort sizes and nationalities. Specifically, in I&T, the annual intake in 2005 was limited to twenty-five students, with only two being non-Chinese. These students were further divided into groups of six, which was the group size for instruction and discussions. Similarly, in the MBA programme and MA programme in education, the actual number of those attending a lecture depended on the number of students selecting the unit, ranging from 2 to 25. A manageable small cohort was deemed beneficial to build up a stimulating and supportive learning environment, although the students' feedback on this arrangement was not always positive (see sections 4.2.1, 4.2.2.2, 4.3.2).

In other courses, including economics, computer science and engineering, there were nationally well-balanced student cohorts with less than 20% students from China. However, in these courses, in the first semester and in some units the participants

experienced lectures in very large classes, together with undergraduate or MEng students; whereas in the second semester they were taught only with their MSc coursemates, which was perceived to be '*much better*' (S6, diary, 06/02/06)

The situation could be even worse in the MSc programmes in management, where lecture audiences sometimes amounted to over 150, within which almost one third were Chinese-students. It was the participants enrolling in these courses who expressed most criticism on uncomfortable learning settings, incomprehensibility issues, and lack of supervision and emotional support. In all, the design and organization of each course impacted the students' learning which also influenced their intercultural interactions and their engagement in part-time employment. The issue will be focused on in the following sections (i.e. 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5).

4.2 Theme 1: Teaching and learning

Abundant Western literature on teaching in higher education criticizes traditional lecturing as an ineffective teaching method. It is widely argued that didactic lecture limits the students' role to being passive recipients and inadequately facilitates deep learning for real understanding (e.g. Hughes, 1992; Butler, 1992; Felder & Silverman, 1988; Cantillon, 2003, Shakarian, 1995). However, most of such literature is based on research into those learning in their home countries, with insufficient attention to international students learning in a host country (Flowerdew, Miller & Li, 2000).

Research also reveals that feedback as an aspect of formative assessment can exert a powerful effect on learning (Black, 1998; Black and Wiliam 1998a, 1998b; Black et al 2002). But this effect is rarely explored from the perspective of different ethnic or cultural groups.

In the following, I explore the difficulties the students experienced in learning through lecturing and formative assessment; and how they employed different strategies to cope with emergent difficulties. I also focus on the participants' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of teaching practices, the changes in their perceptions and reasons for such

changes. In my analysis, I call attention to individual differences as well as similarities that may be attributed to shared cultural constructs but, most importantly, to students' interactions with various contextual influences in new academic environments..

4.2.1 Difficulties in a new teaching culture: lost in translation?

The findings indicated that most participants came to UK with high expectations of academic achievement. Rather than expecting or wishing to learn 'mechanically', the students manifested a great desire to be able to reflect upon and analyse the imparted knowledge and, based on this, to achieve thorough understanding. However, some students' comments indicated that such an expectation was not met satisfactorily in reality. The causes of their dissatisfaction with the effects of teaching methods are presented below.

4.2.1.1 Linguistic problems

Language weakness is probably the least surprising but the most significant factor which resulted in comprehension difficulties. In my study, for all participants, no matter which subject they majored in, an inadequate command of English inhibited their understanding of teachers' presentation in lectures. The troubles with comprehensibility could reflect the lack of experience of hearing native speakers in the students' prior language learning in China. Moreover, considering the fact that half of the participants had attended pre-sessional English courses, they perhaps indicated that the courses did not allow enough experience of speakers with different accents, or provided insufficient training with subject-relevant listening materials. More importantly, an examination of the contexts in which students experienced listening difficulties reveals that they were closely linked to various speaking habits and teaching styles of individual lecturers, an observation which is discussed later (see section 4.2.2.2).

4.2.1.2 Cognitive problems - gaps in knowledge

Unfamiliarity with teaching content appears to be another factor resulting in the participants' negative evaluation of lectures, as indicated in the following comment:

'…*regarding economics, I have no background in the area at all. Even though I feel*

the tutor has given very clear instruction, I could not understand it…' (S4, diary, 16/10/05)

Ample background knowledge facilitates listening comprehension. However, the majority of my participants studied for their masters' degrees in subjects different from that which they had majored in for their first degree (e.g. S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S8, S9, S13, see appendix 1). Being complete beginners, these students had not only to receive new information but had to receive it in English. Here their language weaknesses and the unfamiliarity of the teaching content combined to increase students' difficulties in comprehending the lecture content. The difficulties were particularly noticed at the beginning of the course, among those transferring from a 'soft'[4] discipline to a 'harder' one (e.g. S4), those having weaker English abilities (S5) or weaker academic performance in their prior education (S2), those having less working experience but studying in a course requiring managerial skills (S1 & S4) and/or reflection on professional practices (S3, S13).

4.2.1.3 Encountering oral comments in lectures

Two of the participants were enrolled in the subject of interpreting and translating (I&T). Most of the teaching hours in this course were arranged for oral interpreting practices and teachers' on-the-spot evaluation. Coming across formative feedback – normally harsh ones -- in public in the presence of other classmates turned out to be a new but bitter experience for the students.

'*… when the tutor criticises us in class, I have to say we could not accept it. The*

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[4]According to Biglan (1973: 201, cited in Tranfield & Starke, 2002), the degree of 'hardness' of a discipline is determined by the extent to which 'a body of theory is subscribed to by all members of the field'. In this study, it is commonly shared among the participants that hard discipline are those relating to natural sciences or applied natural science which focus on mathematical accuracy; whereas soft discipline deal with everyday concepts which are not based on objective explanations and therefore, not so 'hard'. dictates the degree of 'hardness' of a discipline. I am aware that the distinction between hard and soft discipline is under debate (e.g. Checkland, 1985). For example, social constructionists who question the existence of truth and objectivity would doubt the 'real' distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' disciplines.

better one's English is, the harder it is to accept that one's weaknesses are pointed out in front of all others. We think the tutor is too strict and never saved face for us...' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

It has been argued that any attempt to understand Chinese social behaviours cannot avoid the study of *face*, which has been assigned a key role in regulating interpersonal relations and has a key function of maintaining harmony in Chinese society (Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002; Hwang, 1999). As a result of family education and schooling, Chinese individuals internalize the idea that they must protect themselves from losing *face* and that they must consciously save one another's *face* (*ibid*). Bearing this point in mind, it is understandable that the emotional reactions of the participant S11 are mixed. He, on the one hand, felt ashamed as he failed to behave as well as demanded; on the other hand, he was angry, as the tutor did not show any concern about his self-esteem and did not place any importance on his *face*.

Moreover, to check whether or not public feedback had a similar impact upon lower achievers, another student (C5) in the same course was interviewed and was invited to recall her reactions to tutors' comments at the beginning of the first semester. She had originally been rejected for a place on the course which may indicate her English proficiency was lower than that of her classmates.

'...I knew my English was weak. Right from the beginning I knew I was worse than the others... but that is different when tutors pointed it out. I mean, when tutors gave negative feedback -- actually never was I praised here..., my self-evaluation was confirmed. My classmates, who are good in oral English, may not agree with the feedback they got because they are sure they deserve a better comment. But I am different. I know I am bad. But even so, I felt so low. I felt others were laughing at me. I usually took one week to recover from the tutors' comment... sometimes I could not bear the pressure of being evaluated again and played truant...' (C5, interview, 21/04/06)

Unlike S11, C5 did not blame tutors for ignoring *face* saving, nor for commenting on her performance directly in public. But as with S11, she seemed to perceive teachers'

feedback as a summative 'evaluation', which was accepted as an authoritative measure of her performance. Attending too much to the summative function of the comments, she neglected its formative function to assist learning through the provision of information. Aware of her inability to match her initial learning expectations, she imposed unbearable pressure on herself, which resulted in truancy and her study was negatively influenced.

4.2.1.4 Encountering formative assessment

Not only did the students in I&T report to be hurt, but those in education and chemical engineering complained of being discouraged by the tutors' feedback. The following excerpts are a few of the abundant comments indicating how formative comments had shocked these students at the beginning of the course. S3 said:

> '...when I got the feedback, I could not believe it – so many comments! So many grammatical errors! Am I so bad in grammar? I cannot read it, let alone revising a redraft based on it! ...I left it aside and worked on other assignments...' (S3, diary, 18/01/06)

S6 expressed:

> '...so depressed! The tutor gave me feedback. Although s/he said 'generally OK', s/he gave me seven comments and told me my essay was too short!... I cannot do anything tonight. Heartbroken! I spent so much time on the essay. It is true all things written by the students are seen as rubbish in the tutor's eyes...' (S6, diary, 08/01/06)

The interviews revealed that all these participants had primarily been assessed by paper-based standardized multiple-choice tests in their pre-tertiary education in China. Although in their Bachelors' courses those in arts and languages and those studying in key universities had been assessed by innovative assessment practices, there was a consensus among all participants on their very limited experience of formative feedback.

Consequently, we see that the students, as with S10, viewed formative comments as summative judgements of their academic performance. To them, the more comments

they got, the worse the written assignment was. Formative feedback, in this way, was treated as verbal grading which showed no essential differences from the marking system the participants had been used to. Putting the feedback aside and refusing to read it, some students immersed themselves in sadness and self-criticism. Others sought support by comparing their 'comment list' with those of others. They rebuilt their confidence by finding their classmates were given more comments; otherwise they were further discouraged. On the whole, it seems that when experiencing such formative feedback for the first time, the respondents failed to properly perceive its functions. Having no idea that formative comments were intended to facilitate learning and to close the gap between actual and desired performance, it was inevitable that the students felt astonished and discouraged.

4.2.2   Students' perception of teachers' support

With students' encountering various difficulties, teachers' support was crucial in their learning. However, the research presents a very mixed picture: although some students commended the support they got, others criticised that they were simply ignored. The students' comments are the focus in the following sections.

4.2.2.1 Adequate support

Tutors' support primarily concerned academic learning which always took the form of formative feedback. It is interesting to note that over time, although being initially astonished and demotivated (see sections 4.2.1.3, 4.2.1.4), the students increasingly thought highly of their tutors' feedback. To deepen my understanding of the issue, I interviewed five other students from Mainland China who were enrolled on the MA education course in 2005/06. The following excerpt shows that by the end of the first semester, they tended to appreciate feedback:

> '...before coming here, I had no idea of critical thinking. My first draft seemed only to put different theories together. The tutor commented that it was like a 'shopping list'. He told me to add in my opinions... ...I have changed a lot. Before coming here, I could not imagine questioning teachers and doubting ideas in books. But here the tutor keeps reminding us that we must criticize in essays what we have read... Since I

was little, I was taught to memorize the content of books. I believe so firmly that once written in a book, information is correct and unchallengeable. And I also told my own students that it is alright to memorize the textbooks …' (C1, interview, 02/02/06)

It has been argued that Chinese culture is embedded in the teachings of Confucius (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998a). Despite my doubt on the extent to which Confucian doctrines, of which there is arguably no fixed interpretation, remain powerful in shaping 'the Chinese people' (as argued by Watkins & Biggs, 2001), the informant C1 is one who had been taught to respect textbooks and to submit to rules listed in them. To her, a good student must not question authorities, but faithfully copy and reproduce them. It was the British tutors' feedback which guided her to gradually reject the belief in absolute truth and to challenge the view that a written text is a trustworthy reflection of reality. By promoting critical thinking, feedback helped C1 to be aware of the new norms of the host country and gradually to become adept at relevant critical skills.

As well as ways of thinking, tutors played a key role in aiding the participants to a method of citation and attribution acceptable in British academic culture. For example, S1 (interview, 09/03/06) and C3 (coursemate of S3 & S13, interview, 02/02/06) both commented that the feedback referred them to the criteria for correct citation, by stressing the importance of acknowledgement whenever the ideas from other sources were copied and appropriated; and it instructed them on how to construct an academic text on what already exists, which was even harder for non-native English users. In these cases, tutors helped the students to enhance their familiarity with new writing requirements. Their feedback, in the form of written comments and face-to-face exchanges, supported the participants to meet the challenges presented in the new concepts which at first appeared to be alien. It ensured that the norms recognized in British academic culture were followed in the Chinese students' writing and as such freed them from the charge of plagiarism.

In addition, more positive comments were given in the second semester. For example:

'…the tutors here are very strict and always give very detailed comments… perhaps

one year is limited in terms of knowledge being taught. But it provides opportunities to learn from the tutor their serious attitudes towards learning, research and career. This is valuable and we will benefit for our whole life...' (S6, diary, 07/04/06)

This excerpt illustrates that by the end of the course, S6 linked learning and feedback together. Similarly, other participants tended to regard learning as an on-going process in which formative feedback played a key scaffolding role. The responses show that the students were open-minded. They may cling to their traditional values for a sense of security when starting learning in a foreign context; but they did not resist change, and given adequate support, they did appreciate the strengths of the host academic culture and display a willingness to accept the prevailing norms.

Now let us turn to the responses of two students in the interpreting and translating course. As discussed earlier, their attitudes towards feedback are particularly interesting because they were connected to the issue of '*face*'. The following is what C5 told me when we met in the second semester:

'I cannot say that now I don't mind what sort of comments I got – I mean I may still feel depressed if being negatively evaluated in class. But I could recover quite quickly... it is good to get teachers' feedback. Because I know what my level (of English) *is. That the tutors doesn't point my mistakes out does not mean that my English is good now... it is better to have feedback and it is our duty to adjust our mood... we should work hard.'* (C5, interview, 21/04/06)

S11 commented similarly:

'Thus now we don't care about our face – or we don't care about face as much as we care about the actual improvement we have gained.... Time flies by. Everyone is under great pressure to achieve more within a short period. We could judge whether we have done well or badly in class. If we always made similar mistakes, for example, we are too nervous and not confident in interpreting practices, we would blame ourselves, even if the tutor did not say so...' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

Despite the differences in extent, approaching the end of the course, both students no longer placed *face* in such an important position as before. Pressure to achieve may be one reason. Realizing that feedback did not aim at summative judgements seemed another reason. The two factors worked together and pushed the students to go beyond the concerns of *face* and concentrate on learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the excerpts reveal that these Chinese students have strong learning motivation, which may be intrinsic interest, as in the case of C5; or the desire to succeed, as in the case of S11. This motivation drove the students to make full use of formative feedback to close the gap between their actual and desired achievement. Moreover, if the ultimate aim of feedback is to help students to monitor their own study, then, in the above cases, such an aim was achieved, for no matter whether the tutor gave comments or not, the participant was able to locate her weaknesses and accordingly make improvement.

4.2.2.2 Inadequate support

Compared with some participants' (S1, S3, S13, S10, S12) comments on their benefits from formative feedback, in most cases, the students complained about inadequate tutor support. Bearing with them strong expectation of achieving, most participants were noted as reflective and self-motivated learners. Autonomous as they were, there was still an obvious dissatisfaction that they were left alone to fight their own battles in the new academic culture. The insufficient support was represented in ineffective teaching strategy, inadequate feedback on writing and insufficient face-to-face tutorial support.

4.2.2.2.1 Criticism of teaching strategies

Many lecturers were complained about as being ineffective in teaching. The criticism concentrated on the issues of inaudibility, using terminology without explanation, fast delivery speed, a tendency to cram in too much information, disorganization and a lack of interaction. What the participants described as poor teaching would trouble native-speakers; the impacts, however, were so much worse on non-native-speakers, when compounded by language problems.

Specifically, unclear speaking or speaking in a low voice was the first irritating problem the students commonly complained of. The situation was always worsened when the lecture was given in noisy and uncomfortable physical settings which may be *'full of students and terrible in the air circulation'* (S7, diary, 08/10/05) and when tutors did not use a microphone.

Another speaking problem was a fast speed of delivery. Many comments concerned the instruction being given too fast for the students to follow, and hence by no means easy to comprehend. For example,

> *'... the lecturer spoke at such a fast speed that I cannot understand at all. It is different from tutorial or seminar when the needs of international students will be paid particular attention to; it is also different from the face-to-face talk between the tutor and us as they will consciously slow down.... I think he/she may be not aware of the presence of international students. I am the only Chinese in my class and therefore, feel great pressure. However, I asked a Greek classmate and he told me he couldn't understand as well.'* (S6, diary, 04/10/05)

Unawareness of or ignoring the non-native students' difficulties in listening comprehension, as commented on by S6 (diary, 04/10/05), was a possible cause of lecturers' fast speaking speed, which was usually the cases when the number of non-native English speaking students did not take a significant proportion within the whole student audience.

Another frequently mentioned teaching problem concerned the use of terminology without adequate explanation. Whatever the subject was, all the participants reported that unfamiliar registers, professional or vocational language (Halliday, 1973), had negatively influenced their understanding of lectures. In particular, the more basic the knowledge the specialist terminology was associated with, the more possible it was that the lecturer assumed all students had mastered it well and the less likely they were ready to spend time on the explanation. However, students, as shown in cases of S7 (diary, 21/10/05) & S5 (diary, 04/10/05), did require time to link between the English

versions lecturers used and the Chinese terms they had been familiar with. When the imparted knowledge was largely unfamiliar; more time was needed for students to get used to the literal meaning and the implication of registers in English before they were able to absorb the information. With these needs insufficiently attended to, the students' difficulties in comprehension increased.

The third kind of poor teaching practices responsible for students' poor comprehension regarded the use of an obscure structure throughout the delivery. For example,

> '...a new lecturer has given economics today. ...the tutor seems to lack experience, having no idea of what is more important, and always ignores the key points. Maybe s/he is very knowledgeable but just doesn't know how to express it...' (S1, diary, 11/03/05)

Badly organized lectures may not necessarily suggest poor preparation beforehand, but they definitely troubled the participants, who lost track of what the tutors wanted to express. The excerpts show that the lack of order in instruction made understanding, which had already been difficult for Chinese students as non-native English users, even more difficult to gain.

Fourthly, too much information in the limited class teaching time was also a focus of the students' criticisms.

> 'We had a lecture upon database system today. So sad... the tutor is so bad at teaching – s/he spent 2 hours to explain over 100 slides of PPT. We actually have no time to read most of the slides. I really don't know what the meaning of the lecture is if it is given in this way. Probably the tutor hopes to give us more in class to facilitate the self-learning after class. But in my opinion, if so, s/he should make good use of the lecture time to explain the key points. I am so disappointed... s/he just shows us the slides...' (S9, diary, 05/11/05)

Behind the complaints was the students' expectation and appreciation of communication and interaction with the lecturers. Here it seemed clear that the students

were not satisfied with their passive role as recipients doing copious and mechanical recording. On the contrary, it was highly valued if sufficient time could be provided for them to assimilate and comprehend the ideas being imparted. The lack of obvious participation – such as asking questions and making comments – did not mean the students were not participating through reflection or attempted to learn. These were just not visibly displayed. As such, to see Chinese students as rote learners is by no means correct; they may treasure mental involvement, even though they may superficially reveal themselves as vocally inactive learners.

Crucially, it should be noted that whatever the form of inadequate teaching was, the undesirable consequences can be quite serious, and may involve a feeling among the audience of being ignored. As S4 said, '*s/he just enjoys her/himself. (S/he) doesn't care whether we can hear or not*' (S4, diary, 16/11/05). The perceived indifferent attitude of the British teachers hurt the students, distanced them from other lecturers and discouraged them from trying to learn through the lectures.

> '*…Is that what the Master's course demands? We cannot choose the teacher, nor can we make the teacher change for us. We have to accept all ways of teaching. We have to change ourselves…. Anyway, I can read…*' (S4, 06/11/05)

4.2.2.2.2   Insufficient support in writing

Moreover, despite some students' positive evaluation of teachers' support in the form of formative feedback (see section 4.2.2.1), others stated that they did not benefit much, if at all. Illegibility of handwritten comments was one reason, which seemed to be worsened when commentary was given in a pre-designed standard format and in a photocopied version (S1's boyfriend, interview, 09/03/06).

Personal styles of handwriting could be difficult to distinguish by native English users, let alone Chinese learners. A participant (S4) showed the author samples of comments she received. Some words on it looked like meaningless signs with shapes of curves and lines and dots. As discussed previously, formative feedback should function to provide guidance on how to improve. However, if it could not be read, it failed to inform

students of current weaknesses and strengths, let alone aiding them towards further enhancement.

Similarly, opaque comments were the subject of by the respondents. Words like '*ok*' and '*nice work*', as described in the following excerpt, contained little useful information. Such feedback could not in itself aid students in taking steps to improve.

> '*Little mistakes in grammar were pointed out... there was a comment of 'nice work'... on the whole, the comment was very simply and pretty general.*' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

Furthermore, allowing no opportunity to revise assignments reduced the potential benefits from feedback. In some cases, comments given in this way were simply ignored:

> '*...having the feedback in hand, the grade attracted all my attention and I frankly did not read carefully the tutor's comment...*' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

Providing feedback without clarifying its purposes, the tutors may take it for granted that all students know how to improve learning through the comments; or they may assume, if they were aware of the assessing practices in the participants' prior education, that it was the students' sole responsibility to get use to the new mode of teaching in Britain. The consequence was that the students perceived teachers as inadequately supportive; and the feedback as inessential to learning. Attention is also required to multiple pressures from academic learning and from other aspects of their lives in the UK (see sections 4.3, 4.4, 4.5). Having other problems to deal with, it is understandable why the students treated formative feedback superficially when it came along with grades.

4.2.2.2.3 Unavailability of tutor's support

To enable students to tackle their work better, face-to-face tutorials were of importance. It was particularly significant in cases where written comments were not available, illegible or less informative. However, from the students' responses, it seemed that in

some departments, the routine tutorial was not (or ceased to be) a complementary support for lecturing, as shown below:

'...seldom did we have a tutorial. In my memory, there was only one time (in the past seven months), which lasted only minutes. Tutors are busy.' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

In other cases, some students reported that they did have chances to seek their tutors' help, if required. In such cases, one of the factors preventing students from obtaining tutors' support was their limited English proficiency:

'...frankly, even if I had chance to talk with the tutor, I am afraid I cannot understand most parts of what s/he said. So I prefer to contact the tutor via email...' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

Deficiency in English competency in one way or another influenced the respondents' communication with British tutors. From the narratives of most participants, rarely were their academic tutors sufficiently sensitive to the students' anxiety as non-native speakers; nor did the tutors show encouragement or more readiness to offer help.

4.2.3   Coping strategies

The participants employed various strategies to handle difficulties they faced in learning. Autonomous as most of them were, relying primarily on themselves was also a 'have-to' choice to survive and succeed in the host academic culture. It was particularly crucial for those reporting inadequate support from their teachers.

It should be noted, however, that the students varied one from the other in terms of what strategies they used and why. In the following I explore the issue with focus on readiness for peer support, the effectiveness of p/review reading and their determination to explore topics further.

4.2.3.1 Self-organizing study group

Given difficulties in learning and little support from academic staff, many participants (S1, S2, S3, S5, S11, S12) reported using peer groups to help understanding of what was taught in lectures. There were also two (S7, S6) who were good at subject learning and liked to offered help to others. However, for different reasons, no one drew extensively on the self-initiated group learning. The value of peer work in terms of facilitating their learning, therefore, was limited.

Specifically, study groups were held during some critical stages, i.e. the beginning of the academic year, pre-examination periods and when deadlines for course work were approaching. In these cases, students assisted each other in the understanding of course materials, exam preparation and the completion of assignments. For example, S11 talked about his learning pairs with C5 to prepare for final exams (diary, 05/06, date not clear) and S7 commented on self-learning groups with several other Chinese classmates (diary, 16/11/05). From their narratives, we see the students acted as highly motivated, autonomous learners who tried to approach encountered difficulties by working hard and collaboratively. None of the participants seemed to be satisfied simply by getting things done, i.e. automatically memorizing the instructed information or studying only for the sake of exams. Instead, they tried to approach the problems in their complexity, attempting to improve interpreting skills or to find new and diverse solutions. They also supported each other emotionally in face of stress; and there were obvious feelings of satisfaction as a result of working successfully together. These instances challenge a cultural stereotype of Chinese students as passive learners, i.e. the 'tape recorders' (see Biggs, 1996).

Another well-documented conventional perception is that Chinese students, from a collectivist culture, are 'ideal' team members (e.g. Tang, 1996, and see 2.1.2.3). However, it is very dangerous to over-generalise 'cultural' influences. To illustrate my point, it is useful to compare the following comments. S11 was the student, whom, in the above discussion showed an appreciation of group work; S12 was his classmate. They coincidentally commented on the same event:

'This afternoon, I planned to practice interpretation … I asked several other (Chinese) students to practice together. But none of them came. Really unreliable people…' (S12, diary, 08/11/05)

'…S12 is too naïve. She sent us an email and invited us to practice (interpreting) together. Surprising! All of us! Can she not see the struggles among individuals?… of course no one came. What a loser! We all laugh at her. How poor she is… but she is better than *** (another student in the same course)*, who is really nasty. Give you an example. After one interpreting session, I praised her, 'You did good job.' But so surprisingly she answered, 'Oh. Of course, I am much better than you. We are at different levels. Can you not see it? You are just a beginner, I am professional.' You see, disgusting!! No one likes her. But she feels so good. I tell you, she is really smelly on her body. I will never work with her!'* (S11, interview, 11/05)

Chinese students formed a very large majority in I&T in the academic year I was researching (see section 4.1). Within this group, there seemed to be distinct conflicts, as reflected in above excerpts. S12's invitation to group learning received no response; she as the organizer was viewed as '*naïve*', even '*a loser*', because she did not realize the '*struggles*' among the classmates and tried to make everybody work together. Similarly, S10's commendation was responded to by arrogance; the arrogant student was then described as '*disgusting*'.

Colbeck et.al (2000), when studying American university students, identify personality and power differences as sources of conflicts among group members. The same was true regarding Chinese students in I&T. There were easy-going ones, but '*there are always ones, who are very tough, having strong personality, believing their (ideas) are the best…*' (S11, interview, 05/06). Furthermore, there were imbalanced power relationships. In this case, power was related to English competency and professional interpreting and translating stills. The better commander of L2 were more assertive, having stronger egos and hence, tried to seizing leadership in group work.

On the other hand, having passed strict recruitment requirements, most of students in this programme (e.g. S11) thought highly of themselves. The consequently competitive atmosphere seemed to prevent them from seeing each other as potential co-operators. This can also explain the cooperation between S11 and C5, probably the weakest student in the class (see section 4.2.1.3). The difference between S11 and C5 in academic abilities, which was quite unlikely to exist among S11 and other classmates, enabled cooperation. This may be simply because S11 and C5 could not be in direct competition with each other.

The above examples distinctly problematise the cultural stereotype that Chinese students prefer group working because they are not individualistic and tend to sacrifice themselves for the group (see section 2.1.2.3). On the contrary, their willingness or unwillingness to work along with other Chinese students could be subject to much more complicated contextual and individual personal factors, linked to their concerns over time and self-image, their evaluation of benefits and costs, and their conscious perception of fellow students' expertise, motivations and personalities.

4.2.3.2 Preview and review

Except for S2 (see section 4.2.4), all participants reported using their reading skills either prior to the lecture or afterwards to enhance their comprehension of the lectures. However, to what extent they could benefit from text reading depended on their reading skills, which also influenced the participants' effectiveness in further exploring the lecture topics (see section 4.2.3.3).

Specifically, some participants turned out to be disoriented in front of a long reading list whereas others devised their own ways of handling a great amount of reading material. For example, S1, like most participants, suffered throughout the course over how to read effectively to support lecture comprehension. S8, by contrast, had been taught speed reading, with which he not only enhanced his understanding of lectures, but also increased his effectiveness in reviewing the literature when preparing for his thesis writing.

The findings, therefore, stress individual differences. To what extent students can succeed in British education was not only subject to their motivation (see 4.2.4), but also to the study skills they had been equipped with in their prior education. More importantly, tutors' support made big differences, in terms of helping develop study skills. In the case of S7, the subject tutor had given a brief indication of reading skills specific to the given reading materials (diary, 20/03/06). In other cases, such support was missing and the students, even those having taken pre-sessional language courses, felt disoriented: *'... with a book in hand I have no idea which part should be focused on*!' (S4, diary, 23/10/05)

4.2.3.3 Readiness for further investigation

By exploring the previous issue further, more individual differences emerged. When facing double difficulties in reading and listening, some participants stuck to notes and handouts (e.g. S4, diary, 23/10/05). Such materials summarized the teaching content and facilitated the learners' understandings in a direct way:

In contrast, the more motivated students (S10, S8, S5, S7, S9, S6), particularly those expressing clearer career plans (S5, S8, S10, S9), were more likely to explore further by themselves so as to enhance their understanding of lecture topics. As previously discussed, such students were more used to a relatively independent learning style and considered self-study an important supplement to attendance in lectures.

> *'...you may not be satisfied with teachers who teach you. But as long as you like* (the topic) *and you have an interest in it, you can explore by yourself. That is what is required for a Master's student. A lot of things you need to learn by yourselves. The tutor is important, but more important is your interest and your ability to learn on your own...'* (S8, diary, 08/02/06)

When they found extensive reading in academic English was difficult, those students (S10, S9, S8, S5), rather than doing the minimum to pass the exams, tried to discover alternatives to help them understand lectures better. For example, being computer literate, they searched on-line to get more accessible information.

'...we talked about the Beer Game today, which was invented by a research group in MAT studying supply chains. Yesterday I checked on-line, by searching with the keywords of 'MAT' and 'beer game'. There was plenty of information available; it shows the case is very famous. I even found an electronic version. It helps me a lot...' (S5, diary, 07/02/06)

Elsewhere I discuss how students drew on sources in Chinese to facilitate their participation in group work (see section 4.3.4.2). Similarly, when faced with comprehension problems, they tried to find relevant literature on the topics of their lectures, which, however, was in Chinese. In particular, this method was used by S9. With many books on computer science available on line in Chinese, he was able to learn new knowledge on his own. This helped him a lot to further his understanding of the course on programming.

4.2.4 Variation in motivation

Whereas a majority of the participants were highly motivated and employed various strategies to achieve the best in their learning, some seemed to be more examination-oriented. One case was S2. Although in the initial interview she stated that continuing to a PhD course was her target, she evidently lacked motivation to strive for higher achievement in academic learning. S2, early in the course, showed stronger preference for tutorials that addressed explanations of given exercises, with a belief that these would give hints of questions in examination (S2, interview, 07/11/05). For her, as long as the examination questions were anticipated and understood, the comprehensibility of lectures would not matter much.

Moreover, S2, over time, was concerned less with academic learning than with entertainment. Spending less time on subject-relevant studies, she worked part-time, wrote articles for Chinese websites, and engaged extensively in social gatherings. Viewing the postgraduate course as a commodity, she believed to be able to get the degree as a consumer. Without sufficient awareness of high academic requirements, she made inadequate effort in learning until it was too late for her to catch up.

A tendency to focus on non-academic activities was also noticed in other participants. Unlike S2, however, others tried to maintain a balance between study and other life commitments. Specifically, in the second semester, it was found that some participants paid growing attention to non-academic activities, which occupied an increasing proportion of their non-lecture time. Several students (S10, S13, S4, S1, S8) worked in paid jobs for significant hours after class, also then spending more time in bed or in entertainment to recover from physical exhaustion (see section 4.4.4). Two students (S4, S9) travelled extensively during holidays, with the hope of enriching their experiences before leaving. There were also students who started hunting for a proper job, either in China or the UK (S8, S3, S4), or negotiating with their previous employer for a better position (S5). Hence, over time, many participants' primary concerns, to different degrees, switched from academic learning to personal aspects of lives.

4.2.5   *Summary of the comprehensibility issues*

As shown in diagram 4.1, when studying in the UK, participants encountered problems in lecture rooms and tutorials. Their complaints concentrated on their limited linguistic skills, gaps in their knowledge and unfamiliar teaching practices, particularly formative feedback in both oral and written forms. It should be noted that various difficulties were in conflict with the students' initial expectations of academic achievements (as indicated by a red dashed line), which included a good performance in exams, comprehension of teaching content and the satisfaction of internal learning interest. Trying to resolve the conflict, the participants gradually appreciated the value of formative feedback. The need to try to resolve this conflict also compelled them to draw on diverse strategies to facilitate their learning, ranging from peer group to previewing, reviewing and self-exploring.

Diagram 4.1   Students' learning: lecture rooms, tutorials and formative feedback
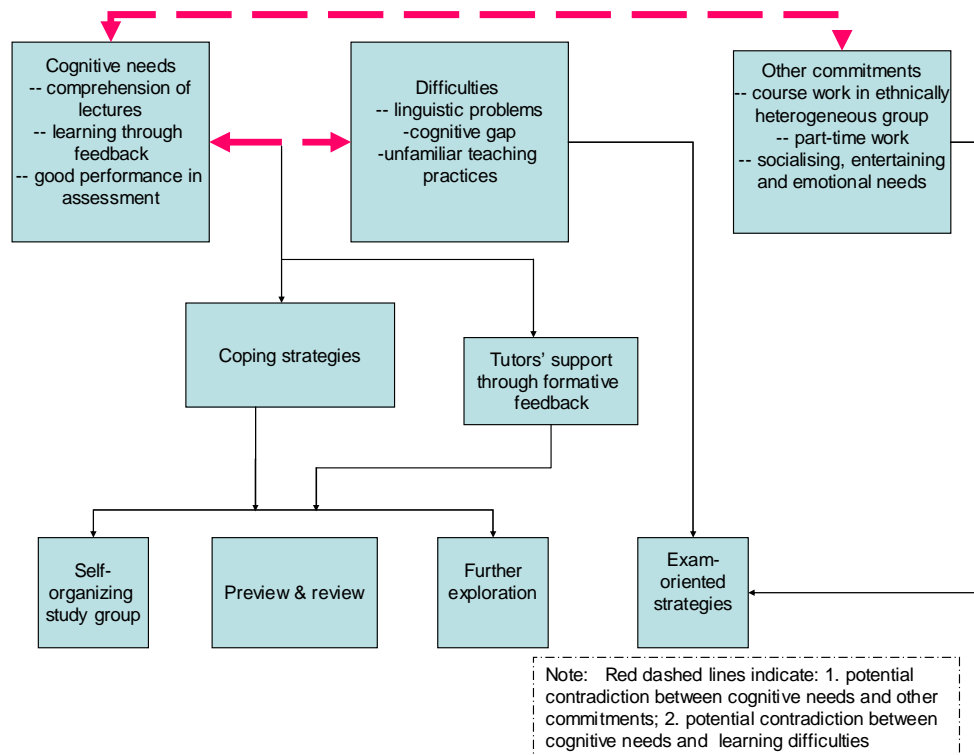
Moreover, it was found that over time some students gradually switched the focus of their lives from learning to other personal commitments, including paid employment, entertainment and job hunting. There were consequently rising conflicts between study and other activities (as indicated by a red dashed line), which I will focus on in the next sections (see sections 4.4, 4.5). With the personal aspects of lives being prioritized, some participants tended to adopt exam-oriented strategies in learning. It is also worth noting that one student (S2) appeared to be inadequately aware of – or inadequately aware of potentially severe consequences of -- the emerging learning difficulties. In this case, facing difficulties but lacking motivation to overcome these difficulties led to her adoption of exam-oriented strategies.

More importantly, the study sheds lights on the contextual influences and active roles the students played in constructing knowledge about the new learning system. The participants' diverse reflection on various contextual factors and their actions in response to contextual constraints allow me to argue that culture is not static or deterministic in its influence. The outcome of the intercultural learning process was as much about the learners' interaction with learning environments, in which they communicated with their teachers, peer students and other university staff, as it was about the cultural values carried from previous education and socialisation (see Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006). Thus, the practices which see the Chinese students overseas as homogeneous and fail to take individual perceptions into consideration would fail to maximise learning opportunities and outcomes.

4.3 Theme 2: Working in ethnically heterogeneous groups

4.3.1 Introduction

Proponents of collaborative learning, such as Wells (1999), hold that students learn better in groups. By working together, the participants can increase their interest, develop critical thinking and enhance the ability to analyze and synthesize (Gokhale, 1995). It is also reported that students understand the course materials more thoroughly through the aid of peers (Skala, et.al, 1997). In the teaching of international students, multicultural group work is recommended (De Vita, 2005). It is viewed as an efficient method which not only facilitates learning but also promotes intercultural communication (De Vita, 2005).

Experience in ethnically heterogeneous groups is one of the most frequently recurring themes in my participants' diary journals. Trying to encompass the complexity of the issue, in the following, I discuss students' in-group experiences based on personal perceptions, emotions and changes. My emphasis on subjective experiences of diversity in team work echoes the assertion of Carcia-Prieto, Bellard & Schneider (2003), who argue that the impacts of group diversity could be too varied to allow generalization; hence, the examination of individuals' psychological and cognitive

experiences and their appraisals of events is important in revealing the dynamics in teams.

4.3.2 *Benefits of group work*

Although only occasionally (seven comments in total), the participants did mention some benefits of group work in their diaries. The most significant category (five out of the seven) concerned opportunities for meeting and working together with non-Chinese students and potentially building friendships with them, which otherwise could be hard to achieve.

For example, sharing views and ideas through collaboration was a benefit mentioned by S4. She, having worked with peers in a workshop which required them to simulate the starting and running of a card-making plant in groups, evaluated the cooperation as a '*very good practice of learning*' (S4, diary, 01/11/05). Different perspectives upon the same issue from different group members facilitated deep understanding of relevant theories that she could not achieve by working alone. However, it should be noted that her groupmates had similar English proficiency level with S4, '*... no British students…due to the limited time and poor English, we always use body language and fragmented sentences. Very interesting*' (S4, diary, 01/11/05). The similarity in terms of linguistic ability and their shared background as foreign students, appeared to produce a more relaxed situation which encouraged S4's contributions in the cooperative task.

There are another two benefits which can be inferred from students' comments. One was that by working together, the participant got to know British students more realistically. For example:

> '*…I am in the same group with two British students and a Thai girl. Very interesting. I used to believe that all foreign students (non-Chinese) are serious, very docile, strictly following what the teachers asked them to do. But this time* (the group discussion) *is completely different. During discussion, they chatted upon something totally irrelevant to the topic. I told them that tutor would examine what we have discussed. They said nothing to be worried about; they could handle it. I cannot*

imagine not doing teachers' assignment. Finally when the teacher came and asked for our conclusions of the discussion, the two (British) *students talked a lot about their own ideas. It was cheating, because we did not discuss at all. This made me think that everyone in nature is the same. Foreign students may cheat as well. It is not particular to Chinese students. Interestingly, they cheat.'* (S9, diary, 25/11/05)

On the one hand, the excerpt indicated that simply setting up group activities did not ensure these activities would be done through collaboration. Group work may not actually be taking place, though the teacher may think it is. On the other hand, this example shows how the participant, by working together, corrected the stereotypes, i.e. British classmates as ideal, 'innocent' students. Reductionism (see section 2.2.3.3) can involve not only stereotyped images of 'the Chinese learner', but also an over-generalized, over-simplified and homogenized image, i.e. stereotyped image, of 'the British leaner', as my Chinese participants had held. At the beginning of masters' courses, several other students in my research (S5, S2, S4, S1, S6) had also described their native-speaking British students as polite, diligent, intellectually capable, dominant and having a serious attitude to learning. It was through the group work that they gradually rectified their original stereotypical pre-perceptions, finding that British students, like their Chinese classmates, may consist of those being dishonest, lazy, shunning responsibilities, lacking basic organizing skills or sufficient technological knowledge, and - more frequently - arrogant (see also section 4.3.3.4). It is noteworthy that my discussion is drawn on the perspectives of my participants. These may or may not reflect the perceptions of UK students (e.g. the two British students mentioned by S9 above) on their experiences of working with Chinese learners in learning groups.

The other recorded change related to learning about learning in groups. In this respect, the participants gained development through a gradual and sometimes extremely painful process of struggling. Although some were found social loafing[5], others made continual

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[5] According to definition in Karau & Williams (1993), social loafing is the tendency that an individual becomes less motivated to contribute in group work. It is usually because he/she thinks that the contributions will not be evaluated or appreciated.

efforts to be legitimate group members. This point is explored in detail in section 4.3.4.2.

4.3.3   Problems of group work

In contrast to these few benefits, complaints about group work filled the participants' accounts. In particular, the findings reveal that the longer the participants worked in heterogeneous groups, the more they suffered and the worse they evaluated the effectiveness of learning groups.

4.3.3.1 Linguistic problems

All of the participants who had worked in groups with native speakers stressed their language difficulties. Being unable to understand seriously hindered their oral contribution to the discussion. This was particularly the case at the beginning of the course or for those having weaker English proficiency levels (S5). For example:

> *'I notice my weakness, that is, I spoke too little. It is not because I do not want to make a contribution; sometimes I don't know what they are talking about,* (so) *fail to make a reaction. Sometimes I am not sure whether my opinion has been mentioned by others, which I simply do not comprehend. All these considerations result in my few contributions...'* (S5, diary, 06/09/05)

With the presence of native English speakers, the participants were to different extents inhibited and appeared silent. Some researchers have tried to explain the situation by drawing on cultural orientations. Wright & Lander (2003), for example, suggest that Asian students value listening skills over speaking skills, because they come from a 'high power distance' culture and have been taught to be tolerant to playing a submissive role (see also Hofstede, 1980). However, it must be noted that in study groups with only Chinese students or other non-native English speaking international students, my participants performed very well, if not too competitively (see sections 4.2.3.1, 4.3.2); they were not only able to make verbal contributions, but were also good at articulating critical ideas, expressing disagreements and challenging the established leadership.

It also needs recognizing that most participants were highly motivated to speak in English. S13, for example, always felt sad after group discussion, in that she was silent and *'wasted so many chances, lost so much...'* (diary, 17/10/05). Also S5 kept urging himself to do so, for *'I need to speak out..* (diary, 28/09/05), as *'it is required by my job... important for my future promotion'* (interview, 30/11/05). The cases warn us that rather than cultural determination as argued by Wright & Lander (2003), the lack of language proficiency, combined with other factors (see section 4.3.3.2), would be a more fitting explanation for their significant decrease in speaking, when they work with native English speakers rather than with Chinese classmates. Poor understanding shakes the foundation of interaction, let alone cooperation and collaboration.

4.3.3.2 Lacking insider knowledge

Communicative competence goes beyond purely linguistic skills, and demands a deep knowledge of the social and academic environment. This turned out to be another challenge to my participants, particularly in the first semester and particularly regarding the participants who lacked a relevant academic background in undergraduate study. For example, S13 recorded in her diary:

'It is the third week of the semester. (I) *always keep silent in group discussion.* (It's) *because I still have no idea of what education research is. Nor could I find the exact word I want to express. Every time was the same. How can I improve my English?... I chose to sit beside a Greek student, it makes me feel better than beside a Chinese or a native speaker'* (S13, diary, 17/10/05)

And S2 commented:

'...they know more...it seems easier for them to get information. I always spend much time and cannot get useful things. They understand well ... they know, for example, a Tokyo regulation made in 1999. I had no idea of it before. I cannot find much on-line (by searching) *in English. I then use Chinese* (to search) *and find some more information. I think it relates to our background knowledge and the manipulation of key words. ...'* (S2, diary, 27/11/05)

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The first instance shows how the incomprehensibility of lecture content, which was a result of the lecturer's speed rate, accent, use of registers (see section 4.2.2.2), combined with limited linguistic proficiencies and impacted on the student's vocal contribution. As pointed out by Duff (2002), a repertoire of academic language and good understanding around discussion topics are prerequisites for the ability to make immediate responses and highly-intertextual interactions. Lacking all these skills S13 inevitably felt inefficient in terms of expressing critical perspectives. It is also worth noting that negative affective impacts could have negative psychological influences on students. In the case of S13, feeling sad due to speaking so little led her to self-criticism, which made her feel even more anxious and under greater pressure in subsequent group discussion. A damaged confidence negatively affected her sense of self as a person capable of articulating her views in front of native speakers. Choosing to work with other EFL students (but not the Chinese) was one strategy to reduce anxiety. It shows that the student was actively seeking a diversity of cultural contacts. The strategy, however, was not effective to free her from being depressed, considering her awareness of wasting chances to speak with natives.

In the second case, the participant's in-group communication was inhibited by her failure to gather enough useful information, due to inadequate searching skills. It shows that sometimes success in group work is built upon insider knowledge of the academic culture. Local students may know the 'Tokyo regulation', for example, either through their school/undergraduate education or from other information sources, which could be library books, public database, mass-media key academic websites, journals, etc., to which S2, as a newcomer, had little access.

As argued by Colbeck et.al (2000), resource interdependence, i.e. each member has a part of the information to share, is one of key elements required for successful teamwork. When the students were unable to provide valuable sharable resources, their role in the group was limited. For EFL students, as already discussed, the situation was worsened by their language problems, which hurt their confidence and accompanied a

sense of being disempowered to speak about their concerns or viewpoints. S2, for example, '*usually have to sit there, with little to say...*' (S2, diary, 27/11/05)

4.3.3.3 Group conflicts and low efficiency

Other complaints concerned group conflicts, the consequent low efficiency in completing tasks and the feeling of lacking skills to handle conflicts when they emerged. This point was stressed by the participants who were involved in long-term teamwork (S5, S9, S6, S4, S1, S2), in that the time was still limited but the tasks were much more complicated than those for in-class discussion. The following are two excerpts taken from many relevant diary entries, which presented participants' worries about the slow progress of group projects and the conflicts emergent in 'collaboration'. S9 said:

'*...in discussion, (I) had different opinions from a British student. It was hard to tell whose (design) was better. Different cultures resulted in different ways of thinking and doing. We cannot persuade each other.* (I agree) *groupwork enhances communication and probably increases our communicating skills. However, it is really inefficient. ...*' (S9, diary, 06/12/05)

Similarly, S5 told me:

'*... I cannot imagine what they are thinking. They seem to lack very basic ideas of teamwork. They don't know that we should have made a schedule at first... it is really a mess. Is it* (due to) *cultural difference? But I don't think so. Because it should not only be the practices of Chinese or Japanese companies – is this (planning) what we are taught about so-called operational culture in Western country? They are just silly...*' (S5, interview, 30/11/05)

In the first case, the conflict emerged when S9 found his British groupmate had: '*different ways of thinking and doing*'. From his diary on the following day, '*the different ways*' referred to the British partner wanting to '*solve all technical problems before moving on to the next step*'; whereas S9 believed that '*we should work out*

something first... then if we have time, we can improve it, make it better.' (S9, diary, 06/12/05)

In the second case, the conflict resulted from different attitudes towards group organization. S5 held that any teamwork, particularly for a large, long-term project like that they were engaged in, should being well-scheduled with clear sub-goals being set up at different stages. Disappointingly, he found his colleagues failed to make good use of group meetings, repeatedly discussing the same issue for weeks, with little progress.

Underlying the conflicts, we see the participants' confidence. For S9, the confidence came from his solid subject knowledge; for S5, it was from his seven-year workplace experience. The crucial management skills, information and expertise, which had been proved successful in prior experience, were naturally drawn on to address the current issues in group tasks.

The self-esteem, however, fuels conflicts. On the one hand, unlike S2 & S13 (see section 4.3.3.2), the participants (S5 & S9) were unwilling to unconditionally compromise with their peers; particularly when they felt the peers were no more intellectually capable or *'with only experiences of working in small local companies'* (S5, interview, 07/06). On the other hand, they lacked the linguistic competency to argue for their opinions. They usually gave up their own ideas not because of being convinced but because there were not many other choices. This fact hurt them emotionally. As S9 complained in his diary after being asked to re-program his software, *'the worst thing is that I don't know how to argue (effectively) in English. I felt so angry but I don't know how to express it. (I) am outraged.*' (S9, diary, 10/12/05)

Another noteworthy point is both students' mentioning of 'cultural differences'. One explanation is that their self-identification to a specific category, i.e. 'the Chinese' as a bound group opposing 'the British', is usually a result of the basic need to restore self-esteem and enhance self-representation (Garcia-Prieto, et. al, 2003:421). Moreover, it could reflect the biases my participants encountered in group work: '…*those being*

especially polarized are especially likely to stereotype' (Pelled et.al, 1999:5). Stereotypical interpretation of '*the other*' - for example, '*the British thinking in different ways*' - gave students an excuse for the difficulties in intercultural communication, and downplayed their damaged self-confidence. The point is further clarified below.

4.3.3.4 Social exclusion

Pelled et.al (1999) pointed out that ethnic minority students are likely to be victims of social exclusion, which is in fact an indirect subtle form of racial prejudice. Leki (2001), through an in-depth analysis of six foreign students' group-work experiences, reveals how the non-native speakers were constructed as 'handicapped' by domestic learners and were muted and silenced in 'collaborating' environments.

Similarly, obvious in my participants' accounts was their being denied participation in the groups, which had been attributed to home students' consciously or unconsciously biased perception. From students' diaries, we see the complaints that little attention was paid to the information the students gathered (S2); the writing they finished was deleted from final report (S5); the role they played in presentations was minimized (S5, S9); or their opinions were simply ignored (S6). Their marginal status, together with their linguistic problems and lacking familiarity with new norms, placed the students in the least powerful positions, which significantly contributed to their reticence.

The following is the description S1 gave of her negative experiences when working with a Norwegian student. It may seem poignant but was not an isolated example.

> '...I have heard that the Norwegian girl holds strong prejudices against coloured races. She just speaks with the whites, never speaks with the Asians. Even when they speak to you, they don't look at you. I did not have any hope (of communication) with that Norwegian girl. They come from North Europe, where English is much better popularized. They speak (in English) very fluently.... Since she came, seldom did we three Asian people speak. They never stop talking, we three become the audience. Because our English is not good, we cannot find a chance to speak. Even to understand what they are saying is too much. ... from the meeting, we have to say,

there is a clear distance between us and them, both in the way of thinking and in terms of language. I don't know how we could communicate with each other afterwards...' (S1, diary, 16/02/06)

At the beginning of group work, students tended to evaluate their co-operators based on observed previous performance (Colbeck, et.al. 2000). By exchanging information with other Chinese, S1 had constructed an image of her new group member. Her 'prejudice' was soon confirmed after the first group meeting, where she found the new members dominant, arrogant and indifferent to her voice. As with S9, the unhappy and dissatisfactory experiences pushed S1 to stress cultural differences. Here the binary pairs she has used, i.e. Chinese/Norwegian (British), Asian/European, non-native speaker/native (near native) speaker, White/coloured race, us/them, must be deconstructed and interpreted as context-specific factors. They should not be viewed as the evidence of any intrinsic or fixed differences between cultures, but as the reflection of power relations in the group. As Garcia-Prieto et.al (2003) argued, the greater the perceived status and power differences, the more likely people attach themselves to a particular social group. Underlying the emphasised 'cultural' differences, as mentioned above (see section 4.3.3.3), was in fact the marginalized students' struggle to protect and enhance their self-esteem.

On the other hand, in line with Leki's findings (2001), British and Norwegian students in S1's group appeared to perceive themselves as being more capable and their non-native groupmates as incompetent or novices whose opinions were not worth listening to (or even pretending to listening to). Let us have a further look at S1's experience.

'...after lunch I went to have a group meeting, discussing a little bit. We planned to work out the topic of presentation and establish the framework. .. In fact, it was the British and Norwegian girl who discussed and gave each other suggestions. We just sit. It is not for us to give the presentation, not important...' (S1, diary, 17/02/06)

She recorded later:

'...we planned to have a meeting at 4pm. I went to the lab, but waiting for a long

time, no one came. After around 15mins, two girls from Thailand arrived. We then waited to 4.30; the British and Norwegian students still did not appear. We thought probably they were in the study room, so went there to find them. As we expected, they were there. And in fact they have already finished the task. They talked a bit about what they had done. ...it doesn't matter, anyway, it is always them who talk during group meeting; we three sit and listen. It is probably because of personality, probably because of language.' (S1, diary, 23/02/06)

Hence the local and Norwegian student consciously or unconsciously separated themselves from their Asian groupmates; in fact they did not treat the latter as equal, or at least not as legitimate participants who could have made potentially valuable contributions to the task. Being marginalized, the three Asian students became the 'audience' for the 'group' discussion. The situation deteriorated further on Feb 23rd when British and Norwegian students did not want to bear the presence of the non-native speakers. They privately changed the time and place of the meeting without any notice in advance or apology afterwards. By then, the three Asian students, including S1, were completely excluded. The British and Norwegian students finished the task, from preparation to presentation, by themselves.

The point could be further illustrated by in the changes in S5's attitudes towards a Chinese classmate. He, when recalling his feelings at the beginning of the semester, was frank that he had a very bad impression of a girl who '*always looked for chances to speak …*'; that her behaviours had been perceived badly as '*showing off and impolite*' (interview, 30/11/05). Here, to interpret S5's response, we must be very cautious not to rush into any 'cultural' explanation, for example, the Confucian teachings of 'self-denial', although this gives us a convenient answer. Rather, we should attend to power struggles among Chinese students. Acknowledging individual difference in their process of adaptation, we recognize that some Chinese students were in a more disadvantaged position, whereas others may suffer fewer barriers in communication, in absorbing new information and in manipulating environments. Underpinning S5's remarks on his 'showing-off' classmate, therefore, can be a fear of being dominated and having a less powerful status among Chinese peers (see also Pellegrino, 1995).

By contrast, S5 commented later '…*now I feel it's quite good because in class discussion we do need such students, we should let the British know we Chinese have some tough people as well. S/he is our pride...*' (interview, Nov.30th, 2005). Feeling he had been silenced in the group, S5 wished the performance of a linguistically more able student could win for Chinese students the recognition of native speakers. Desiring to restore an image as being intellectually capable of making a meaningful contribution, S5 accepted a lower linguistic status in an implicit competition with his Chinese classmates (Pellegrino, 2005). Here, the case, once again, arouses our attention to the emergence of essentialist stereotypes. It was the unfair treatments from English-speaking students that resulted in the biased conception of '*they British*' and '*we Chinese*'. The latter led to a further consolidated group boundary, which contradicted what multi-ethnic groupwork was intended to achieve.

4.3.4 Coping strategy

For Morita (2004), learners are capable of exercising personal agency to negotiate their positions in a discourse community. Despite the difficulties they met in groups, my participants actively adjusted their roles over time. In the following, I focus on the strategies the students adopted. What require attention are individual differences when handling similar situations, and that their responses to group positioning can be context-specific, i.e. the same student could prioritize certain strategies based on their evaluation of specific group contexts.

4.3.4.1 Marginal non-participation

In this subsection I borrow Wenger's (1998) concept of marginal non-participation. Unlike peripheral non-participation, marginal non-participation implies an outward tendency away from the discourse community, which allows neither opportunity nor expectation for fuller participation (Hickey, 2003). Stressing the concept here, my intention is to draw attention to the observation that students could enact their agency in different ways in response to the contexts. Despite some displaying strong motivation to negotiate their participation, others may withdraw.

In my data, there are three cases where my participants consciously reduced their efforts toward a group task. One was S1's unhappy experience with British and Norwegian students. As already discussed, her being denied access to the discussion shows that in some groups there could be no opportunity for learning. After that experience, she consciously avoided working in groups with other English-speaking students (see section 4.5.2.1).

The second case involves S2 who worked in a group project with two British students. Unlike S1, S2 considered her groupmates as friendly, gentle and generous, as they invited her to join the group time and did not give her any pressure when she failed to provide adequate information (S2, diary, 27/11/05, see also 2.2.1). Despite this, the friendliness did not change the situation of S2's non-participation. Instead, she was in fact excluded – it was the British students who dominated and wrote the report, although they politely asked for her ideas occasionally. On the other hand, S2 seemed satisfied with a relatively inferior position of being merely a listener. '*I feel well. My contribution is not much. But I could listen...*' (S2, diary, 27/11/05). Comer (1995) reports that an individual perceiving herself as incompetent is likely to feel it unnecessary to endeavour. This seems to be confirmed in the case of S2. Seldom did she mention a thorough preparation for the group project throughout the project period; instead, as shown in her diaries, most of her non-lecture time was spent in social gatherings, computer games and other entertainments (see section 4.2.4).

The last case concerns S4. Among five units in the second semester, three required group cooperation to produce assignments. However, during the period, S4 had three paid jobs, which occupied a huge amount of her leisure time (see section 4.4.4). She also had to spend much more time in bed or at social gatherings in order to recover from physical tiredness and emotional pressure. As a result, she usually failed to make any preparation for group meetings, feeling self-satisfied as long as she managed to be present at the discussion.

Moreover, S4 seemed to reduce her contribution because she wanted only to obtain a grade with minimal effort and because she felt it could not be identifiable by the marker.

> '*These units were relaxed. Group work cannot be failed. ... I put all my attention on others, which I must work hard to hand in before deadline*' (S4, interview, 05/06).

Non-participation could result from a set of complicated contextual variables. In this case, it can be partly attributed to personal commitments, i.e. a part-time job, and partly from the pressure of individual task assignments. There could also be the influence of the student's belief that the group could complete the task without her contribution (Comer, 1995). Aware of ineffective evaluation of each member's contribution, she was happy to let the others do the work for her.

4.3.4.2 Negotiating participation

By contrast, other students made great efforts to move from a peripheral status towards a fuller legitimate membership. Pellegrino (2005) teaches us that the factors compelling/or inhibiting the students' speaking at a given moment involve their personal evaluation between the costs of their performance, e.g. the endangered self, the troubles in material preparation or in power struggles, and benefits, i.e. the satisfaction of needs in disciplinary study, L2 (the second language) practice or emotional communication. In my research, most participants perceived the benefits as outweighing the costs and, hence, were motivated to perform actively in groups. In the following, I discuss the strategies the students used to enhance their positions in groups. These strategies were many, diverse in different contexts, and dynamic in nature.

4.3.4.2.1 Self-regulation

Self-regulation strategy is closely linked to personal goals (see Volet & Mansfield, 2006). In my study, S6, S5 and S9 had higher expectations for their academic achievement than other participants. To reach their academic objectives, they set up rules and urged themselves to abide by these rules. The most commonly used regulating strategy was autonomy in preparing the task. For instance, S6 said:

'I must write the framework of the assignment tonight so that I could present it tomorrow in the group work... It is not required. But I should let them know we Chinese would like to contribute and be able to do so...' (S6, diary, 24/10/05 & 26/10/05)

S9 also stressed on preparation:

'.... In order to do a good job of database group work, I am reading about a kind of programming language used in website design. (I) *find the more I read, the more waiting to be studied. Knowledge is really boundless. I may feel it is hard now, but I will work hard and I can learn it very well soon'* (S9, diary, 22/11/05)

The comments show that the students were highly motivated to participate. The autonomous role they actively played questions the popular arguments that Chinese students are passive learners (see section 2.1.2). In view of their linguistic problems, preparation in advance helped them to become familiar with the topics, content and relevant registers or expressions of discussion. These may help them overcome anxiety, reduce the negative affective influences and, to some extent, increase their participation and secure an adequate achievement of their communicative goal. Importantly, S6's comment also suggests a desire to stand up for the image of 'the Chinese'. In all, the full preparation put them in a comparatively favourable position, so that they break through the constraints of group contexts and gain a more respectable position in the teams.

Additionally, it seems that when the students could do little to influence the behaviour of their groupmates, they tried to regulate their own behaviour to improve personal performance (see Morita, 2004). Doing extra work was expected to build their images as capable participants in the minds of domestic group members. Stressing a Chineseness, moreover, gave them something to draw on which downplayed the negative impacts of being excluded. These were all means of helping the students re-establish their own self-worth. Here, participation in groups went beyond its being the vehicle for information exchange, to being a social means of self construction.

4.3.4.2.2 Drawing on past experience and resources

As already mentioned, most participants had well-developed study skills from prior education, worked hard and had access to Chinese facilitators, ranging from diverse information, learning resources and social connections. All these variables played a part in their struggles to negotiate an identity as legitimate participants:

> '...three of us are co-responsible to this part. But one from Greece is really lacking ability. Another one is just lazy. No choice I have to do it myself. More than it, I must make sure that before the next group meeting the other two are able to understand my framework in programming and what issues require attention.... The more I work, I more I gain; I believe it.' (S9, diary, 18/03/06)

Benefiting from his technical expertise, S9 gradually established his status as a capable and competent member in the second semester's group project. Not only being able to complete his share of the task, but also he took the responsibility to push the programming progress in the sub-group. Besides, he was always ready to provide technical help when other two members were in trouble (diary, 08/03/06). This is in sharp contrast with his previous experiences in the first semester, when he complained about being disoriented and depressed. It seems that when S9 got used to the norms of new environment, he could make use of his knowledge and win an equal and sometimes leading position in groups.

However, it must be noted that by working mainly on himself, there was the danger that S9 denied the chances for those members to contribute. Seeing others being incapable and 'lazy', he viewed the cooperation inefficient and unbeneficial. His denial of other members' legitimate participation could be very similar with the English-speaking students' behaviours about which S1 had complained (see section 4.3.3.4). It would result in misunderstandings and would do harm to intercultural communication.

Compared with the group tasks in science and engineering which were technically-based (e.g. S9's group work), the teamwork in business courses had higher demands of

linguistic communicative competency. In response, for S5, observation was the primary strategy to strive for a position in the group:

'*…It is my habit to keep quiet when in a new group. The habit is formed… earlier when I worked in company. It allows me time to examine my competitors. I will wait until I am sure I find their each weakness and strengths – I will begin to participate in the discussion when I know them well. … I don't want to be group leader. But usually it is me rather than those actively speaking at the right beginning who win the control at the end…*' (S5, interview, 30/11/05)

To S5, groupwork seemed not for cooperation but mainly about power. Previously at workplace, S5 had utilised the strategy of observing and listening to outperform his colleagues. In the masters' group, using the same strategies, S5 gradually developed his knowledge of his groupmates -- from thinking highly of others as fluent English speakers, to gradually concluding that he had comparative strengths in terms of organizing skills and logical thinking (S5, interview, 07/06, see also section 2.2.1). Thus, although weak linguistic competence never stopped troubling him, the evaluation of groupmates' weaknesses enabled him to fully utilise his strengths and at the same time increase his confidence. Starting from the second semester, he gradually set up his role in the group as information collector and organizer, schedule maker, PPT slide designer and group discussion note-taker. Particularly, his ability to access to websites in Japanese and Chinese, which was unique in the group, and his ability to manage information consolidated his position in power struggles in the group. His participation, therefore, was legitimated.

4.3.5 Summary of students' experiences in group work

In this section, I have looked at the participants' subjective experiences of group work in their master's courses. The findings problematise the arguments advocating overwhelming cultural determination as the source of students' silence. It reveals multiple, complicated and context-specific causes of the participants' seeming reticence. In line with Morita's (2004) argument, the silence related to linguistic issues, learning priorities, personal lives, identity and power.

Diagram 4.2 Participants' experiences in learning groups
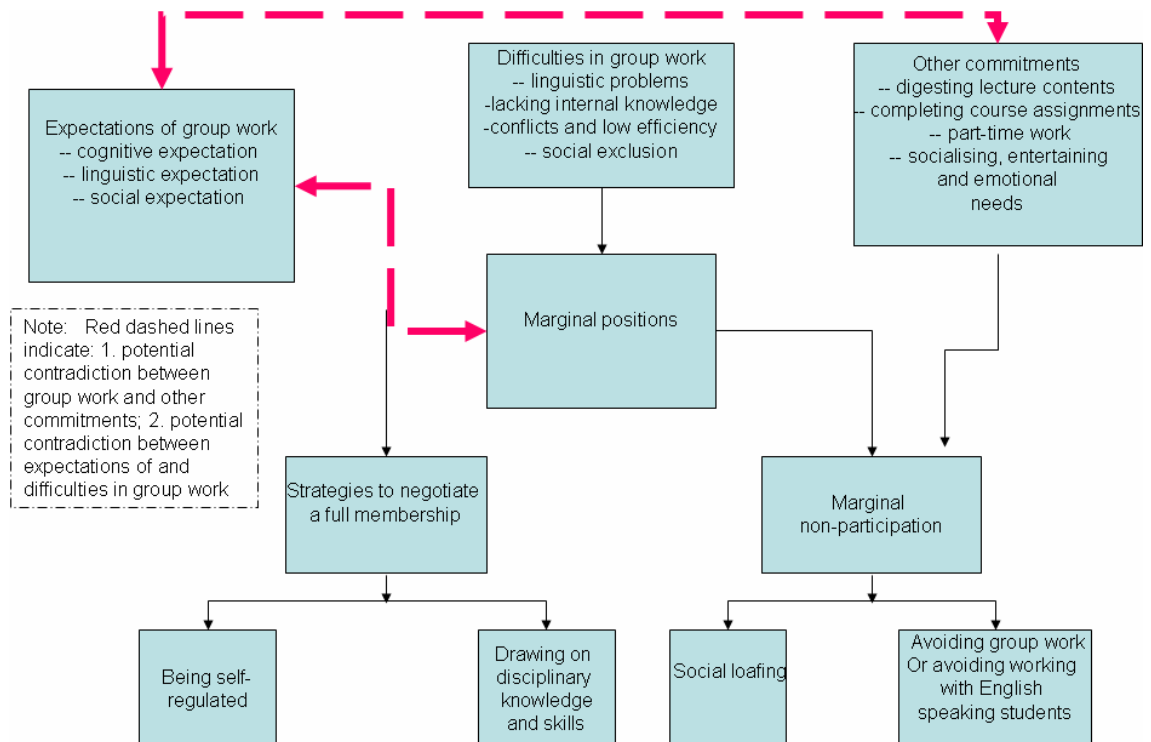
Specifically, as shown in diagram 4.2, in learning groups, the participants were generally marginalized, due to their linguistic difficulties, lack of insider knowledge, facing unfair treatment and social exclusion. The marginalized positions were found contradictory to their cognitive expectation of learning through collaboration, linguistic expectation of practicing English and social expectation of cross-cultural interaction (as indicated by a red dashed line). Given the absence of tutors' support, the contradiction led some students to a set of self-reliant strategies in which they stressed self-regulation, and drew on skills and disciplinary knowledge to negotiate a fuller membership. In comparison, other students tended to accept their marginal positions. They were found reducing their efforts in group tasks (i.e. social loafing), avoiding group assignments or avoiding working with English speaking students. The decision the participants made to accept their marginal positions was based on their calculation of the relative benefits and costs. In a broader sense, it was relevant to their efforts to balance the tension

between group work and other life commitments, ranging from lecture comprehension to examinations, part-time work and social life (as indicated by a red dash line). The dynamics between various conflicts and individual growth is focused on in chapter 5. The analysis in this section supports my argument for an individual-focused and context-based methodology. Significantly, it stresses my advocacy of establishing and maintaining closeness with the participants. Only by the development of personal relationship with the participants, was I able to have access to detailed and even sensitive parts of the students' lives. The emotional involvement, hence, enabled me to capture the diversity and complexity of the participants' experiences.

4.4   Theme 3: paid jobs

In this section, I work on the issue of part-time working and its impacts on learning. The findings of others' research based on English-speaking students have reported the significance of paid employment in students' lives (e.g. Stern & Nakata, 1991). In my study, similarly, working for money played an increasingly significant role in the participants' lives throughout the year. In that none of the respondents had worked part time whilst studying in China, to combine two tasks simultaneously could be challenging. The importance of part-time work, in terms of the hours it occupied and the impacts it had on learning, drove me to focus on the relevant issues in this section. In the following, I intend to reveal the diversity in the students' taking paid jobs. I stress that working experiences varied from individual to individual; they also showed different features over the course of their masters' study; and were coped with by different participants using different strategies.

4.4.1   Who took a paid job?

A recent survey reported by Curtis & Shani (2002) suggests a higher proportion of the students from lower social class background undertake term-time employment; poorer undergraduate students are found engaged more in paid jobs and for longer hours. My study, on the one hand, indeed showed that students with fewer financial concerns tended not to get involved in part-time work. On the other hand, other factors could act and influence the students' decision making.

Specifically, although all participants were self-funded -- which means they were either financially supported by their previous employer (S5) or assisted by their parents (other participants) -- there were differences in the amount of money available to each for maintenance. S5, unlike the other students, was a full-time employee and entitled to normal salary during his year's leave, which amounted to roughly thirty thousand pounds. Moreover, he received extra subsidy from his employer, which covered all necessary daily expenses and course-related costs, such as fees for conference or workshop attendance. With no worry about financial problems, he made study his priority with no intention to work for money.

S9 and S3 came from wealthy families. Their fathers had both started a family business in the first decade of China's economic reform, but wanted their children to be well-educated and find stable and comfortable jobs. Having sufficient financial assistance, S9 neither worked nor stated any plan to work. S3, despite an impulse to work '*as it is a good practice*' (S3, diary, 04/10/05), gave up her attempt soon when she realized it was not easy: '*…I felt very bad after working.* (I) *have had stomach-ache for days. …Perhaps the job is too much to me. I am going to give it up.* (I feel) *a little bit embarrassed because I just worked there once….*' (S3, diary, 16/10/05). Although she said she would try another less demanding job in future (S3, diary, 16/10/05), she never did so. The lack of external forces, e.g. financial pressure, seemed to account for her freedom in choosing whether to work or not, although it was interesting to note that she did feel some obligation to try taking a job.

Comparatively, some participants (S1, S8, S4, S13, S11) were more troubled by financial concerns. They were aware of their parents' devoting all their savings to support their education abroad. S1 once recalled with tears in her eyes how her parents led a simple life, living in a small two-bedroom flat with little refurbishment for 23 years, in order to save money for her education (interview, 06/06). For these students, finding all possibilities to sponsor themselves turned to be a necessity. This was not only to limit the financial risk of study, but more importantly to reduce the burden on their parents. As shown in S4's diary,

'...I should work harder. I am the only child of my parents – if they cannot rely on me, who will they depend on when they become older? I am now at least able to earn the money covering the living costs. I shall make my parents less worried about me.'
(S4, diary, 28/01/06)

But this is not the whole story. The picture is more complicated than assuming those whose parents were private business owners had an advantage and as such did not need to work at all. The case of S12 warns us of the danger of overgeneralization. Although receiving support from her wealthy father, she was required by him to refund all this money, plus interest, as soon as she was able to do so. Her description of her unhappy childhood, lacking parental care and her deep worries about her little brother, who lived together with their stepmother and '*cannot have a new book or jacket*' (interview, 08/06), may help to explain her enthusiasm for working. In fact, among all participants, she started working soonest after becoming settled down, i.e. within the month they arrived in the UK. Moreover, she was the only one who took more than one job right from the beginning.

The complexity can also be illustrated by other cases. As with the group (S1, S8, S4, S13, S11) discussed above, the parents of S10 and S2 were civil servants who, however, held higher positions and had a higher annual income. Specifically, describing their fathers as 'senior managers' in large-scale state-owned enterprises, S10 and S2 both repeatedly express the financial security they enjoyed throughout our interactions. For S2, '*my father earns three hundred thousand* (RMB) *per year; I get enough money* (interview, 02/06)...*I have over ten thousand pounds for living here; I don't need to work* (interview 11/05)'; For S10, '*I think all students learning here come from a rich family. Right? Of course they cannot use three hundred thousand* (RMB) *to get a master* (degree) *if their parents have only three hundred thousand ... money is not a concern for us*' (interview, 05/06). Surprisingly, however, both of these were among the most active students in part-time working. S2 started looking for a job late in September 2005, and worked as a barmaid early in the first semester. S10 worked during both term-time and vacations, and for longer hours than all other participants. Hence we can

see there were reasons, other than financial or social class differences, for students' participation in part-time employment.

4.4.2   Non-financial reasons for undertaking part-time working

Besides material motives, the participants articulated a range of other reasons, ranging from being dissatisfied with routine student life to their desire to speak English and increase their understanding of the host country. On campus, the participants felt they were being marginalized. It was not easy for them to have or keep intimate relationships with local and other groups of international students. The reality contradicted their expectations. Meanwhile, it had psychological affects. The participants were likely to feel bored and suffer from loneliness (e.g. S10, diary, 25/02/06), particularly for those more introverted, at the beginning of the course when subject learning was not difficult to handle, and for those being separated from lovers (e.g. Sl, S4, S10, S9). Therefore, working was seen as offering valuable chances through which they were able to observe and experience the host society from a new and different perspective. Meanwhile, it kept them occupied. As explained by S10, '*I need to make myself (physically) busy, otherwise I keep thinking meaningless things which get myself depressed.*' (S10, interview, 04/05)

Another interesting case is S2. As already pointed out, she had fewer financial worries. Besides, seldom did she feel lonely or having nothing to do. From the diaries, her timetable was always full: playing computer games, writing journals for a Chinese website, organizing Chinese friends' gatherings every evening and going to nightclubs every weekend. Her reason for working, hence, was quite unique:

> '*…my father says I'd better work. You know, others will ask* (how we pay for it)*. It is better to tell them that my daughter earns money herself. My sister worked when she was here for her MBA. Everybody works. It will be strange if you don't work. …it is not about money. I should work…*' (S2, interview, 06/08)

This statement reflects the significance of interpersonal relationships in a Chinese community, at least in a northern city like S2's hometown. One had to care about

others' opinions when making decisions. It may also show a self-denial tendency of S2's father. The dramatically increasing gap between the rich and the poor has resulted in many social problems in China. It therefore seems proper to let the children support themselves, instead of showing off one's wealth. Another hypothesis relates to social corruption, which has increased in the last decade, as China is in transit to a market economy (He, 2000). With the growing, strengthened efforts of the Chinese government in anti-corruption campaigns, the officials holding higher positions in the cadre system, like S2's father, have to think carefully about their actions. Urging the daughter to do a part-time job can be one measure to avoid the accusation of being corrupt. This is important in a situation where sending children abroad is noted by the government as a crucial channel for money laundering, as stressed on the websites of Municipal and Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in China (e.g. zjsjw.gov.cn; aylzw.gov.cn).

4.4.3   Disadvantages of students' working

Part time employment has been associated with the reduced academic performance of university students. Curtis & Shani (2002) report that working students tend to be troubled by working during unsocial hours, low pay and unsafe working conditions. Curtis (2003) reveals a close, inverse relationship between working hours and studying. It is pointed out that the longer the students work, the more likely the employment is to have negative effects on their academic studies. In line with these findings, my research shows tiredness, lack of study time and anxieties were all among the factors affecting the participants' academic study. Furthermore, being foreigners and newcomers to the UK, the students complained a lot about bias and racist behaviour at the workplace. Their responses to discrimination had an impact on their reformation of identity.

Specifically, the majority of the participants were engaged in low-skill manual work. They usually took cleaning as their first job, and later changed to work (or kept two types of jobs at the same time) in retail or hospitality, mainly supermarkets, the university store, coffee shop, sports club, hotel and university canteen. Moreover, over time, they tended to work for significantly long hours. The participants spent a weekly average of 15 hours in the first semester on working; the figure grew to over 30 hours in

some cases in the 2nd semester (regarding S10, S4, S13, S8). Two of the participants (S4, S1) started working on full time basis during summer period in 2006.

Fatigue, drowsiness and exhaustion were repeatedly mentioned in the diaries as results of working. S1, in particularly, started her diary for roughly three months with almost the same expressions i.e. '*I went to work at 7am.* (I) *came back at 11am. Then sleeping, otherwise will have very low efficiency in reading*'.

The following are other extracts, which suggest that the impacts of part-time working could not only be physical but also psychological; i.e. tiredness intermingled with stress, anxiety and pressure. Specifically, S11 recorded his dairy after a day's work:

> '*...Feel really tired, and a bit of a headache. Am I becoming weaker? Exhausted. Immediately on coming into my room, I throw myself into bed. Will not study today.*' (S11, diary, 16/05/06)

S4 was sick:

> '*...finally I am ill. I got cold yesterday, high temperature....* (I) *didn't work in KFC today. In fact I am not so sick and unable to do anything. But I cannot find reasons to work at the expense of my health....I found immediately I decided not to work I felt very relaxed...*' (S4, diary, 13/05/06)

The immediate consequence was a reduced engagement with academic studies. The participants tended to spend less time reading and on self-learning because they needed more time for relaxing and resting right after working. Further effects on learning consisted of hardship in focusing on lectures, lacking time for group work and failing to fully prepare for presentations. The point is well illustrated by S4, who had to rush the work until the last minute. Her unsatisfactory performance in turn damaged her self-confidence and resulted in a sense of regret.

> '*...I am really a loser today. How shameful! When doing a presentation in the morning, I completely forgot what to say, just stood there looking at the others. Probably I hadn't made full preparations. I had to work yesterday until 11pm and*

everybody in my group was waiting for me – therefore we did not start discussion until 12am. I had planned to finish my part of the PPT right after the meeting. However, I was so drowsy and fell asleep in front of my laptop, and then went to bed. So astonished when I woke up in the morning, (realising) PPT had not been prepared but I had fallen asleep! Anyway, I rushed to finish my PPT, with no idea what I wrote on the slides. So shameful I gave such a bad presentation!' (S4, diary, 13/03/06)

Adding to problems caused by working long hours, particularly late in the evening, some students had to sacrifice lectures for part-time jobs. They reported selecting the modular units based on their own availability, i.e. picking up only the ones fitting their working schedule. In other cases when working and a lecture clashed, some of them chose to be absent from the latter. This always took place when students were required to work at very short notice, and when they found it impossible to negotiate with their employers. S1, for example, when working in a restaurant which employed only students as breakfast waitresses, often received calls from her employer or her colleagues, asking her to cover the shift on the next morning. Sometime she refused, but most of time she had to offer to help. S10, similarly, had his third job in retailing in the second semester. To him, the comparatively better working environment outweighed the disadvantages -- he had to miss all lectures of a unit throughout the semester to fit in the fixed working hours.

The pressure from study multiplied when assignments were due or examinations were approaching. During these tricky periods, the adverse effects of employment became apparent, as shown in the following excerpts.

'...one presentation after another; one essay after another – 6 days I need to work out 2 essays, it means I must produce 1000 words per day. Three presentations within one week! How can I make it? I have three part-time jobs! I am driven crazy! I think next week I must tell the manager that I need a rest. Working for paid jobs indeed influences me. My life has become a mess! I don't know what I am doing every day. The only feeling is busy busy busy. I rush to the lecture room, and then

rush to do my cleaning job, and then rush back for a group meeting, and then rush to
KFC for the second job. God, it could turn out a disaster... (S4, diary, 11/05/06)

The comments were given at the end of the second semester. Having no exams, S4 needed to give presentations and hand in essays as required for her units' assessment. Being occupied by paid jobs, she postponed doing assignments until the moment the accumulated academic work became so much to handle. She found herself in an even worse situation later during summer time when she was expected to research and write her dissertation. Having got a nice office job and placing it as a priority, she paid less attention to the academic work. Lacking the necessary preparation, in terms of background information gathering and interview question designing, she lost the trust of her interviewees and hence missed the chance, which she had highly valued, to examine the operation of the human resource department in a local furniture manufacturing company. Furthermore, losing potential participants, she had to rush to redesign her research and finish her dissertation within three weeks. The impossible mission was finally completed by inventing a small-scale research study and data. The deception having not been identified, she finally gained a passing grade.

The working place, furthermore, could be a place where students encountered harassment. In my study S8, S10 and S4 referred to their interaction with white British staff, which shows their awareness and resentment of unequal treatments. For example,

'...Annie is always in a bad mood. I know sometimes it is very busy... However,
every time in such a circumstance, she shouted at me... it seemed I was inferior to
her. It has happened several times already; exactly today is the fourth time. I really
wanted to argue with her. If in China, I would have slapped her. But I controlled
myself. ...being a foreigner here, we always face unequal treatment. But you can do
nothing, you have to bear it unconditionally. But it is really too much – I hate the
way they behave as if they are superior; they should at least show respect to us. It is
important, the bottom line. It makes no difference whether you are the manager or
the rich. When you are a member of a powerful dominant group, you shouldn't bully
the weak minorities. You should treat them equally, kindly, unbiasedly.' (S8, diary,

19/05/06)

Although modesty, moderation in action, and even self-denial have been identified as a valued personal characterisation marking social personality of the Chinese (see section 2.1.1.1), we see here these characters were contextually conditioned rather than culturally specific. The student responded to the verbal abuses with tolerance, which seemed the only option, due to his lack of English competence and the lack of confidence that, given the chance, he could argue in favour of his own case. At the moment of conflict, therefore, keeping silent and being self-controlled became the only means to protect his dignity.

As with S8, S10 usually chose to absorb biased treatment at work although he suffered a lot. However, he was changed when encountering the obviously racist behaviour of his British colleague. The incident happened after a day's working in a retail store, when S10 was in a lift with his Chinese friend and two British staff.

> '...I bought several bags of food yesterday. Every day they check and sell to staff the food nearly reaching its expiry date at a very cheap price. I bought a lot yesterday because my friends asked me to go shopping for them... in the elevator, I found the British staff staring at me, having very strange facial expressions. They laughed and spoke something. My English is not good, but I heard they said something like 'the Chinese are greedy'. I was not sure but kept thinking about it on the way. I cannot sleep in the evening and finally called my friends asking whether she heard something. She was an English major; she said yes the British people said we were greedy... I was outraged. When I came to work today, the first thing I did was to ask the manager whether there was any limitation for staff to buy reduced priced food. The manager said no. I then told him what happened yesterday. I declared loudly that those saying we were greedy must apologize in front of all the staff. All colleagues blame those two people...' (S10, diary, 10/05/06)

Here the student fought for his rights. Instead of keeping quiet, he defended himself against racial abuse with great efforts to create an image of being equal with the locals. The noteworthy point is that responses to prejudice and discriminations always have a

consequence in the formation of identity (see Parker, 1992). In both cases, the sense of self was pulled down by linguistic inadequacy. The sense of national identity, however, was consolidated. The participants distinguished and distanced themselves from the British. They strived to prove they were not inferior. An emphasis on being Chinese, as such, became a means to protect their source of pride and source of power, which seemed crucial, particularly when taking into account the serious exclusions they faced on campus.

4.4.4   *Advantages of working*

Although taking part-time jobs could impact the students negatively, it did not result in a life completely shadowed by complaints and tears. Instead, most participants went though the academic year with positive perceptions of working, expecting to enhance their professional skills and potentially increase their employability. S4, for example, worked very hard in her office job even when under great pressure from her dissertation. Despite being on a short-term contract, she could make her CV much better, which she hoped would help her get a permanent job in this country. Similarly, S11 and Sl were both asked to do some translating jobs for their tutors during the very busy pre-examination period. However, neither of them refused the offer, not only because of the good pay but because '[tutor] *will correct the final version. It is a very nice practice to see my weaknesses*'. Here we see an example of deliberative, active agency on the part of the students, involving considered comparison of advantages and disadvantages of their actions. The decision to work was always one in which they deemed the benefits could outnumber the drawbacks. The noteworthy point is that a temporary subject-relevant job was neither available for every working participant, nor permanently available to those who occasionally obtained one. It was because of their scarcity that the students treasured the chances and were prepared to sacrifice learning to some extent.

By contrast, in most cases, students had to take on physical work, as already discussed. The benefits in these cases mainly arose from using English and meeting with the local people, despite the opportunities being very limited. For example, S10 talked about how the interaction with local workmates, who used non-standard English with a strong

accent in non-academic environments, made him aware of his inadequate English proficiency (diary, 23/03/06). This also illuminates how, despite their expectation to improve their English communicative proficiency, the participants found this difficult to realise on campus, given limited interaction with host students or staff. It was from this consideration that part-time employment achieved greater significance to them.

Furthermore, interaction with colleagues at work, which may or may not be a pleasant experience, presented students with a more realistic view of the host society outside the shelter of the university. S10, for example, used to perceive the British as polite and helpful. He, after the encounter with racist abuse, told me that everywhere there could be rude and less educated people; Britain was not an exception.

It also needs noting that in their cooperation with colleagues who came from various backgrounds and held different values, the participants were likely to think deeply and learn through the reflection upon the differences. S13's comment is one instance among many:

> '...I had training for the part-time job from early morning today. They talked a lot about skills of handling cash, issues of security and other things worthy of attention. ...They are very serious. In China, I don't think there would be some one patiently teaching you and repeatedly reminding you of the key issues – you are expected to find out by yourself. It is better here – helping the young learn more efficiently, avoiding the waste of time' (S13, diary, 25/03/06)

Similarly, S8 told me:

> '...I worked together with a Japanese boy. He is very hard working; he did not take a rest like us. When finishing the assigned job, he asked the manager for more. I told him it's unnecessary. I said it was unfair as full-time staff wandered around, doing nothing... So we could clean the room slowly; we don't need to do everything ourselves. But he said he cannot do it. As long as he was paid, he must try his best. I was astonished (by his seriousness). .. it is indeed we should learn. Right after the second World War, the industry of Japan was totally ruined. But it recovered quickly

and the country soon turned into a developed one. There were political reasons...but more importantly, they have industrious workers. We must learn from them...' (S8, interview, 06/06)

Here the students reflected on the differentiation between China and economically more advanced countries. It was a distinct feature of students' accounts, both in diary entries and interviews, reflecting upon the strengths and weaknesses of Chinese practices, social systems and values. They in this aspect went beyond the intention of improving themselves to the desire to contribute to the mother country.

The point is well illustrated by students consciously or unconsciously locating a sense of self into a collective 'us'. A national identity, as already mentioned, provided them with pride and self-esteem which seemed of significance when they found themselves being excluded and experiencing bias in foreign environments. In that it tended to be stimulated by particular situational causes, it is misleading to identify a popularly presented Chinese identity as something fixed to all Chinese participants or something linked to an essentially defined cultural origin. Instead, the students talked a lot about memories of humiliation in contemporary Chinese history, or stressed improper policies and insufficient national education as causes of the existing gap between modern China and developed countries. As such, a sense of being Chinese could be linked to a complex of factors, including politics, history and emotional patriotism. It can also be just one component of many facets of their identity. Defining all learners from China with a cultural image is simply fallacious.

4.4.5   Coping with work and study

As discussed above, working for long hours in paid jobs could have adverse effects on academic learning (see also Curtis & Shani, 2002). However, Moreau & Leathwood (2006) suggest that full-time learners could develop a set of strategies so that they can well handle the conflicts of two tasks. Highly motivated students with efficient self-management skills could be more effective in their use of time, in that working pushes them to be more focused when studying.

In my study, the strategies which the participants adopted in coping with study and work were diverse. Their struggle to achieve the balance between often contradictory demands was distinctively marked by an active agency, which, however, was also regulated by contexts. Specifically, S1, who worked almost every weekday as a breakfast waitress, selected only modules for study in the afternoon. It enabled her to sleep for hours before attending lectures. By this means she could be comparatively efficient in reading and listening, and hence make better use of non-working time. She later quit the job, with a realization that despite her efforts, the job still negatively influenced the academic work. S1 did not work again until the dissertation writing stage, when she felt less pressure from study. Similarly to S1, some students (S8, S7, S12) tended to work less in term-time or work only in writing-up periods. S11 temporarily stopped working, when he found subject-learning required full-time effort and must be given priority.

Another strategy was to try to find physically less demanding work. This appeared among the students who started work earlier in their course; so that the accumulated experiences made it possible to make a change. S4, as mentioned, originally worked as cleaner, then cashier in KFC, and then an office clerk with the NHS. Similarly, S12 had three different part-time jobs in hospitality in October 2006. She later worked as 'library marshal', a job in fact involving little actual work.

Other noteworthy cases were S10 and S13, both of whom kept reflecting on self-controlling strategies to balance the tension between work and study. For example:

'…I admit I am under great pressure. The more time I use in part-time jobs, the less time I may be able to work on subject learning. I should therefore make full use of every minute – study efficiently and effectively. (I) *have to do two things at the same time.* (I) *must gain and maintain a balance between them. This point I must be carefully attentive to in future. Balancing two sides so that neither of them will be done at the expense of the other.'* (S10, diary, 26/02/06)

Having been worked for a significant number of hours, sometimes over 30 hours per week, both students were under great pressure. Urging themselves to be good, both as students and as employees, they never allowed themselves to do less at work to reduce physical stress, as S8 or S12 had done; nor did they go to pubs or join friends' gathering for relaxation, as S4 did. Instead, they attempted to perform their best in both roles, with a strategy to reduce all unnecessary social activities so as to '*make full use of every minute*' (S10, diary, 26/02/06). This persistence and perseverance, on the one hand, enabled them to stick to academic study, at least for a certain period of time. On the other hand, it resulted in a severe loneliness and a sense of isolation. Lacking emotional support, the accumulated mental anxiety and pressure could be disastrous. S10, having been stressed for a long time, wrongly remembered the examination time of a key unit in the second semester; being absent from the final exam, he lost the opportunity to graduate with distinction. For S13, the consequence was even more bitter. Trying to resolve all tension herself, she refused to ask others for help. The mental pressure finally accumulated to an unbearable degree which put her on a verge of breaking down. She did not get the degree until the next year (see section 5.0).

4.4.6   *Summary of the students' experiences in paid jobs*

I started this section with a discussion on the motives which pushed participants to engage in part-time employment. My data shows that financial concerns remained the most distinctive influential factor, although some students needed money for extra expenses whereas others wanted to be financially independent and to share their parents' burden. Most of the working students undertook lower-skilled jobs; some of them tended to work for long hours. The consequently negative impacts included missed lectures, rushing to finish assignments and selecting less interesting modules to fit into the working hours. The issues of prejudice and racial discrimination were particularly worth noting, which contributed to a reformation of the participants' sense of self.

Lastly, I focused on the strategies adopted in balancing the conflicting demands of a paid job and academic study. Most of participants exhibited active agency, trying to maximize the benefits out of the two tasks. They worked as autonomous self-controlling

learners, taking full responsibility in managing the combination of learning and working. However, the dramatically increased stress may sometimes become out of control. S4's cheating in research, S10's missing final examination and S13's extension of the course may be extremes but serve as warning instances.

4.5 Theme 4: Intercultural interaction

The literature emphasises the significant roles that adequate intercultural communication play in international students' adaptation in host countries (e.g. De Vita & Case, 2003; Volet & Ang, 2004; Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2006). Being a heated topic in educational research, the issue of intercultural interaction is examined in this section, with a stress on factors influencing intercultural friendship formation. It should be noted that such a theme did not permeate most of the participants' diaries, which is different from other themes in this thesis. In that meeting people of other nationalities was a prime expectation of all the students before their arrival in the UK, I am driven to explore why the mismatch between the hope and reality occurred in some cases, but not in others.

Diagram 4.3 Students' intercultural communication: the change over time
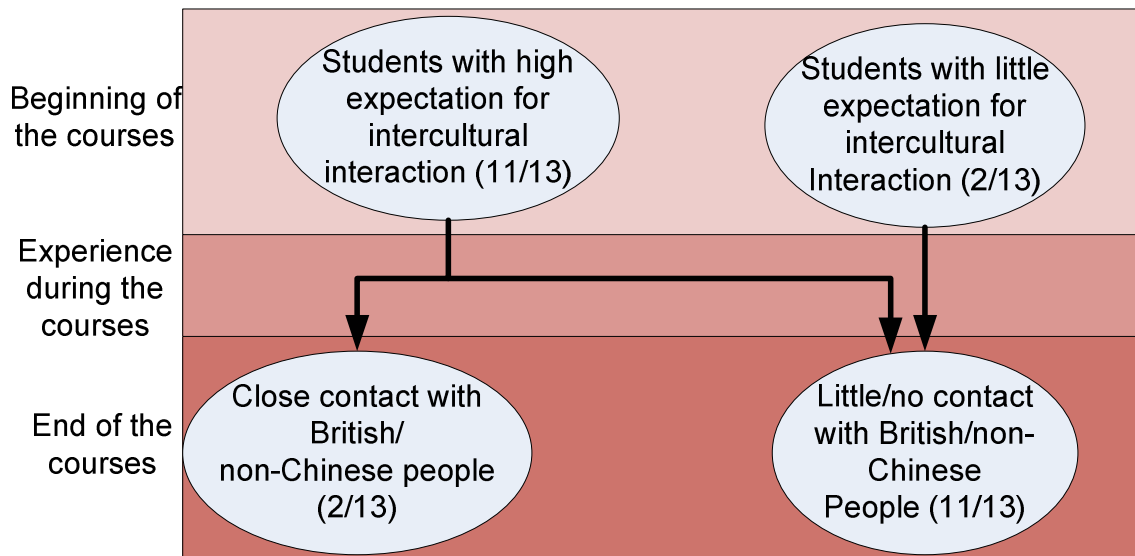
Drawing on the students' narratives, three groups are identified (see diagram 4.3), that is, those having few contacts with other nationalities and showing no obvious motivation to do so; those actively initiating intercultural communication at the beginning but then retreating to co-national social networks; and those establishing close relationships with non-Chinese students. It must be noted that within each group, there were variations among students in terms of specific contextual impact, how they perceived it and how they responded to it. So my focus is not to propose a general model but to draw attention to the possible interrelationship of contextual factors, the students' agency and the combined effect on participation in intercultural interacting.

4.5.1   Group 1: participants not actively seeking intercultural contacts

Among my participants, two did not seek actively the contact with students from other countries in their diary (i.e. S1, S10). Both were self-disciplined learners, either family or him/herself holding high expectations of their academic achievement; both had a stable relationship with a girlfriend/boyfriend; both described themselves as a bit introverted; both had taken part-time jobs and both had reported prejudiced treatments in their lives. In the following, I focus on the two cases to explore reasons inhibiting them from intercultural communication.

4.5.1.1 Case study of S1

When I explored the issue in an informal interview with S1, the reason was given as follows:

> '...I think it is largely because of personality. I am not the type of person who could easily pick up a topic and talk with strangers and then make friends with them...' (S1, interview, 07/12/06)

Personality could be a factor underlying the intention of individuals to be engaged in social interactions. As reflected in the above comment, S1 seemed uneasy about initiating a relationship and less likely to affiliate with the locals. This is in agreement with the findings of Ying (2002), who by examining social networks of 155 Taiwanese

students in the United States confirms that introverted participants are more likely to withdraw from intercultural communication.

Moreover, S1 came to the UK with her boyfriend. Living together and studying together in the same masters' course, S1 spent most of her time with the boy. On the one hand, an intimate relationship helped to reduce a sense of insecurity and loneliness. The company of the boyfriend provided comfort and crucial emotional support, which eased S1's adaptation to the new social environment. On the other hand, it created difficulties in making friends. At the beginning of the course S1 had tried to interact personally with other female Chinese students. Her attempts, however, ended in disappointment as she found they all felt uncomfortable about taking up her time when she was supposed to be together with the boy. To a great extent, living with her boyfriend inhibited S1's construction of a broader social network with her Chinese classmates, let along other international students.

In addition, cohabitation was morally unacceptable to S1's parents. Consciously hiding the fact from parents made S1 feel guilty and constantly blame herself for dishonesty.

> '… This is the first time I did things contrary to what they like – they don't know I have a boyfriend. And if they know I lived together with him, my mom will beat me to death. At the first month, I felt so depressed, so guilty. I never cheated them before. I always had dreams in the evening that my parents suddenly appeared, finding out I was together with **. It scared me and woke me up…' (S1, interview, 07/06)

S1 had been the pride of her parents and a model for other children in her neighbourhood. Outperforming her peers in all subjects, she went to the best local schools, studied in a top Chinese university and was learning in Britain right after getting her first degree. In her parents' eyes, all these marked S1's excellence and they felt it reasonable that their daughter should marry a person from a wealthy background. Finding herself disagreeing with her parents, S1 did not defend her dating for fear of hurting those who had already contributed so much to her education. Having suffered a lot in struggling between parents and her boyfriends, S1 kept expressing in her diary the

feelings of disappointment, anxiety and depression. Hence, S1 could hardly be in the right mood to initiate and maintain a proper friendship with international or British students.

Moreover, being hard-working and self-disciplined, S1 was generally confident in her academic study. Relying primarily on reading, S1 had no pressing needs to interact with English-speaking students for the purpose of learning. Having little contact with other international groups or British students, on the one hand, held the danger of her developing stereotypes. On the other hand, the stereotypes were constantly reconfirmed in her daily encounters. One distinct instance of such encounters was her negative experiences when working with English-speaking students in a learning group (see section 4.3.3.4). Prejudiced treatments significantly reduced her interest in communicating with 'different' students. After that experience, for example, she either avoided group work or worked with Chinese students only. Her reaction, however, could confirm one aspect of the stereotype that had perhaps driven the English-speaking students to behave in the way they had at the beginning.

4.5.1.2 Case study of S10

S10 shared a similarity with S1 in terms of having no frequent or regular contact either with Chinese or non-Chinese persons. For S10, it was simply impossible to form a stable and deep relationship with others in the UK.

> '…*I wanted to distinguish between friends and 'brothers'. I think I can have friends here; but no 'brothers'…*' (S10, interview, 06/06)

By 'friends', S10 referred to his Chinese classmates, flatmates or acquaintances who can provide necessary information and give advice, but not the ones, 'the brothers', to whom he could feel emotional attachment. To deal with his unfamiliarity with British customs and regulations, S10 saw other Chinese students as convenient and quite reliable information sources. To contact with them was a necessity, considering the difficulties he faced from many aspects of living in the UK; however, expecting a close friendship could be too much because '*everyone is busy and under pressure*' (S10,

interview, 06/06**).** Following this line of thinking, to make contact with other international students or local people were not so important as long as he could get all the information he needed from Chinese friends.

To further explore the issue, several points are worth noting. Firstly, like S1, S10 maintained frequent contact with his girlfriend. Although living apart from each other, every day they chatted for hours by telephone or via internet messenger. In fact, most of the emotional support S10 obtained came from his girlfriend. He, therefore, felt less need to make friends to release his worries or to share his happiness with. Also, S10 consciously reduced interactions with female students throughout the course. His self-regulation to show loyalty to his girlfriend in China restricted him from going to pubs or nightclubs, thereby further reducing his opportunities for communication with the locals.

In addition, having graduated from one of the top Chinese science and technology universities and continuing to study in the same subject in Bath, S10 had little trouble in academic learning – throughout, he managed to excel in his course. Therefore, as with S1, S10 usually had no particular cognitive needs to know other international students.

In addition, with his study major being in power systems, none of the units he chose was taught by interactive teaching methods; few provided him with opportunities to work or discuss together with others students (see section 4.1). The design of the course further limited communication among students with different nationalities.

Moreover, S10 worked for significantly long hours in paid jobs each week (see section 4.4.6). As most of his spare time was taken up with work, he had often to miss the social gatherings which would have boosted intercultural interactions, or chose deliberately to do so to gain more time in learning (see section 4.4.6). Moreover, doing primarily manual jobs, S10 generally had little spoken interaction with local employees. Even worse, the work place could be a place of harassment. His encounter at the workplace, as described earlier (see section 4.4.4), was far from a truly humanistic international experience based on mutual understanding and recognition of human

commonality. As with S1, undesirable social encounters resulted in his strengthened stereotypes of the unfriendly and prejudiced British. Perceiving the arrogant attitudes as prevalent among the British, S10 tended to see a deep intercultural relationship purely impossible. Distinguishing and distancing himself from 'the British' or 'the native speaker', over time S10 reduced his effort to make friends with host students.

4.5.2 Group 2: participants motivated, but failing to, establish close intercultural relationship

The majority of my participants (9 out of 13) fall in this group. They came to the UK with strong expectations of meeting different people and enriching intercultural experiences. They all actively responded to the social events organized by the university and actively initiated friendship with host or other international students. Despite this, they all failed to develop such a close relationship and gradually withdrew into their national group. In the following, I focus on their experiences in both formal and informal social settings.

4.5.2.1 Formal contacts

For the participants in this group, the findings show that their contacts with non-Chinese people, if they did occur, were largely formal. By 'formal contacts', I mean meeting other people at the university orientation programme, department welcome party and Christmas dinner, residence gathering and the activities organized by a local church for international students (see also Kudo, & Simkin, 2003; Gareis, 2000). In most of the contexts, the participants were excited about talking to people of other nationalities, but such contacts seldom continued after the events – in fact, none of them developed into a close friendship.

4.5.2.1.1 Parties

Although being highly motivated to participate, it was found that the participants were to different extents reserved in the parties or formal gatherings. Compare the following two excerpts. One is from S6's dairy:

'...the resident tutors of Osborne House organized all residents to have dinner

together in the parade bar. (I) *feel Westerners like Canadian students have prejudices against the Chinese. The Palestinian students or our 'black brothers' are comparatively very friendly to us. 'Black brothers' are in particularly kind. In all, all Chinese students sit together, eating and chatting. Black brothers and Palestinian students would come and talk to you; but Canadian or Australian students seem to have no interest at all. Probably they feel they are too different from us...'* (S6, diary, 11/10/05)

The other is from S7:

'...we had a party today. ... It was interesting to talk with others but we still have troubles in communication. My classmates, particularly those from Greece and Italy, have a strong accent, which makes their expressions difficult to understand. And on the other hand, they may feel that we have a strong accent and are hard to be understood as well. So in the end it was still Chinese students sit together with other Chinese, or at least Asian students. I feel we have more common topics with other Asian students, perhaps because our background is a bit similar. It is different regarding European students, to whom we just asked several key questions and then we don't know what to say.' (S7, diary, 08/10/05)

In both cases the students were not active in initiating communications, particularly with native English speakers. In the first case, S6 seemed to keep himself in a Chinese group. Expecting different nationals to come and start talking to him, he may not notice that all the Chinese sitting together could intimidate other people. In the second case, S7 seemed to have tried to talk with others. But a different accent, the lack of topics of common interest and background similarities pushed her back to the co-nationals or '*at least Asian students*' (S7, diary, 08/10/05).

The interesting point reflected in these two cases is how the perceived 'similarities' and 'differences' impacted on intercultural communication. Asian students were '*similar*' because they came from the same geographical area; 'black' students were '*brothers*' because they came from developing third world countries which used to be believed to be allies of China in the era of Mao. In contrast, Italian and Greek students were

different due to the lack of similar cultural backgrounds; and Canadian and Australian students who spoke English as mother tongue were '*too different*' (S6, diary, 11/10/05).

Therefore, although providing chances to speak with people, the 'formal' occasions did not adequately allow Chinese participants to know other nationals as individuals, to find out their interests, personalities and values, all of which were crucial for the formation of a good friendship (see Kudo & Simkin, 2003). It is also noteworthy that as newcomers, some Chinese students, like S6, could be very sensitive to occupying a marginalized position in host environments. Once they perceived they had been marginalized, for example from the indifferent attitudes of those at least seemingly more proficient in new situations, the stereotypical views of 'the others' from 'different' cultures could be confirmed while further efforts to initiate intercultural communication withered.

4.5.2.1.2 Mentor program

I invited three applicants to a mentor programme (S8, S9 & S7) to participate in the research. Organized by the International Office, the programme aimed to help new international students settle down and enjoy their study and life in Bath. Free of charge, it introduced a British student to each of the successful applicants; the former acted as a mentor, with whom the latter had opportunities to chat and discuss and attend social events together. The mentees may also get academic advice and tips about living or travelling in the UK.

S7 expressed her opinion that the communication with her mentor, a British undergraduate girl, did help her initial adjustment. The following is taken from S7's diary after her first meeting with Joanna (pseudonym), the mentor.

> '…*I met with Joanna today. …She looked like a boy, but very warm. We had tea together and chatted for an hour. She said my English was good, which was really encouraging. She told me she in her spare time did a paid job and worked part-time as a volunteer. She also told me how she changed her major recently and why. We decided to meet each other every week in the future.*' (S7, diary, 08/10/05)

In the later months, S7 met with Joanna for four times, either on campus or in town. The chatting was generally described as an interesting experience, where S7 knew from the mentor about the functions of the student union, processes of application for volunteer jobs and the academic pressure that a British student faced. Joanna also showed her pictures of her family and shared with her the happiness of getting engaged. Although speaking in English was '*a bit strange*' for S7 because she felt unable to '*chat as freely as in Chinese*' (S7, interview, 25/11/05), her anxiety was reduced when finding her interlocutor well understood her linguistic troubles, was encouraging and made great efforts to facilitate their communication.

However, the contacts did not develop into a long lasting friendship, as hoped by the programme organizers. It ended with the ending of the programme.

> '*...If you are active enough, you could become good friends with your mentor, and probably integrate into their lives. But I gradually reduced our interaction – we are just too busy. It is a good chance – at least you know a local. But gradually we all give up.*' (S7, final interview, 16/09/06)

For S7, cross-cultural contact was the only secondary aim of coming to the UK. In her perception, a year in postgraduate course should be the year for education achievement. With the increasing academic pressure over time, which could be overwhelming in pre-examination periods, she had to prioritize academic work so as to survive and success in the new academic culture. This could also be because that she had paid so much for the masters' degree. That would be a loss of money and of face if she went back without one. Thus, to fulfill academic demands, she deferred the interaction with host nationals.

Among the three participants in the mentor programme, S7 was the only one who continuously gave accounts of her mentor. When I explored why the other two did not comment anything upon the programme, one said that no one had contacted him (S9, final interview, 09/06); the other laughed as he could not find out who his mentor was when going to the meeting place as arranged (S8, final interview, 09/06). This shows

that despite aiming to aid intercultural interaction, organizers may not have provided basic training for their mentors or were poor at programme management. Moreover, other participants said they had not heard of the programme. It seemed the international office failed to adequately inform students of the service during their pre-arrival period.

4.5.2.1.3 Host programme

As introduced in its website (hostuk.org.uk, 2007), Host UK is a scheme funded mainly by the British Council, which aims to offer international students a chance to gain insights into British culture and tradition. Participation is free of charge and through application on line, international students can spend a weekend or Christmas holiday with a British family at the latter's home.

Among my participants, three had joined the programme (S7, S5 & S13). S7, for example, spent the Easter weekend in Oxford with an elderly couple. During the three days, she visited the university where the host couple used to work, attended Easter service at a local church, and celebrated the male host's 70th birthday with all the couple's relatives. The following are her comments after going back to Bath:

> *'...very nice; I've experienced how the British lead their lives. They look after the guests but never treat us as the centre of their life. This is very good. They look very happy. Although retired, they keep a very busy schedule, going out with friends or staying at home reading. Neither do they suffer pressure nor feel bored. This is really a nice experience. British family life seems not to be very different from Chinese family life. Probably we are different in some habits, but we all enjoy time with families. Worthwhile* (experience)...' (S7, diary, 18/04/06)

Travelling and exploring different local cultures were among expectations of most participants of their stay in the UK. The host family programme, as stated by the organizer, enabled the students to visit historically famous cities and small towns; meanwhile, it provided students with opportunities to acquire valuable insider experiences of the hosts' life style.

However, living with hosts, who had been complete strangers before meeting, could be a source of anxiety as well. All three participants reported that they were troubled by communication problems. S7 was worried about her English competency. S13 kept being embarrassed because '…*in the middle of chatting, we suddenly did not know how to continue and fell into silence*' (S13, diary, 27/12/05). According to Locke & Velasco (1987, see Maundeni, 2001), the ability to communicate required both the students' English proficiency, which was already problematic for non-native speakers, and sufficient communicative skills, such as a sensibility to find out other's intentions and the readiness to explore similarities and mutually interesting topics. All these might not be easy for Chinese students coming to a completely new environment. The difficulties, to some extent, hindered effective interpersonal communication.

It should also be pointed out that in some cases the reported communication problems was in fact due to the lack of an adequate 'cultural' knowledge. For example, S5 was shocked when the host couple were frank on their married life. Here the barrier to communication was a lack of shared norms and customs, that is, talking about the private lives had been not acceptable in S5's previous experiences. Despite such intercultural experiences sometimes causing discomfort, it was just such experiences that the students had initially sought on arrival.

Bearing the participants' difficult in communicating, the attitudes of host family became crucial. In the cases that the host members were not good communicators, were less tolerant or were unwilling to make a greater contribution to boost communication, the attraction of host programme could be reduced. One such negative instance was the second host experience of S5. S5 had spent a weekend with a kind and welcoming family in Bristol in the first semester, which gave his wife and him a very happy memory and made them apply for another host family during the Easter holiday. However, the latter turned out to be unsatisfactory.

'…*they did not provide us enough food, or the time for us to have lunch. We got up in the morning, having a little breakfast. They then drove us to a place and handed us over to an information tour. Nothing interesting, just hungry… I heard before that*

some host families join the programme just because they could get money from the organizer. I suspect we encountered one of these families. You know we had to wait an hour for dinner at the end of the day. And do you know what the dinner was? Just a supermarket sold beef pie with mash potatoes.' (S5, interview, 05/06)

Although S5 was astonished by his talkative host couple in Bristol, who '*kept talking of their marriage life for an hour*', he had been very excited by the friendship he enjoyed at that time. In sharp contrast, the second experience in a host family left him no memory of companionship or communication but the feelings of '*being hungry*'. In that the advertised benefits of host programme largely lie in the opportunities to interact with non-student British residents, S5's experience could damage its reputation. On the one hand, it may to some extent be 'genuine' cultural experiences if we take food to be part of culture. On the other hand, the careless, indifferent attitudes of the host cannot help the students acquire social skills. It, moreover, could result in cultural stereotypes of 'the British', and adversely impacted the participants' further attempt in intercultural communication.

4.5.2.2 Informal contacts

In other circumstances, most participants (except S1, S10 & S11) were highly motivated and created chances for intercultural communication in diverse informal situations. Their efforts were intended to facilitate the use of English and enlarge multi-cultural understanding. More importantly, they wished to forward the 'one-shot' type of formal meeting to comparatively continuous contacts.

For example, due to unsatisfactory English proficiency, S5 viewed it as a great pressure when he had to speak on formal occasions, for example, in group work (see section 4.3.3.1). By contrast, he liked to have drinks with non-Chinese classmates, usually not his group members, in the university bar every weekend, not only for the relaxation but also for chances of practicing English.

'...I find it is much easier for me to speak in L2 after drinking some alcohol. Usually I avoid interrupting others and shouting out my views. However, with a glass of beer

in hand, all these seem possible... I am happy if someone comes in the bar and chats with me. You know, they will not judge you if you say something wrong and even if they make some judgement, it doesn't matter because you know you will hardly see him again. It is different from speaking in the group. ...' (S52, interview, 30/11/05)

Elsewhere Pellegrino (2005) argues that individuals are always aspiring to construct an ideal self with the wish to maintain their social status. The relaxed atmosphere in bars and casual chatting with insignificant others, even strangers, seemed to effectively lessen the threats to an ideal self-image. There was also a minimized danger of a reduced in-group position, as they had faced in learning groups. This case, furthermore, is in line with the 'alcoholic hypothesis' in SLA (e.g, Guiora et al., 1972), which argues that drinking alcohol can help to sooth anxiety and improve oral skills in language learning. In all, by talking in bars, S5 increased his intercultural interactions.

For my participants, university accommodation provided a sociable atmosphere where they met and made friends with international or host students. An interesting case involved S6, who recorded in his diary for weeks how he made an effort and gained success in breaking the initial icy relationship with his defensive Mexican flatmate:

'I have invited the Mexican guy for dinner this weekend to reduce unfamiliarity...' (diary, 01/10/05)

'Feel at the beginning he is hostile to us. We should make effort and gradually diminish his prejudice, if he has any. ... we will live together for a year, communication is necessary.' (diary, 02/10/05)

 '...the Mexican guy just came in and asked me where he can get a ticket for the ballet performance. He is so funny, knowing nothing about the uni's activities...' (diary, 09/10/05)

'...he (the Mexican flatmate) is so capable. I got some problem in study which he explained to me. He is studying for PhD in Chemistry, similar with mine (in terms of the study subject)... but he seems to know everything. ... I think I can learn a lot from

him in the future…' (diary, 11/10/05)

'..that turns out to be good we have invited him for dinner… now he sometimes joins and chats with us (S6 & another Chinese student in the same flat) *when we are cooking in the kitchen... he tell us quite a lot about his country. He says they never use mobile phones in Mexico. Unbelievable.'* (interview, 10/05)

The distinctive aspect of this case lay in S6's active initiation of interaction and self-assurance in maintaining the relationship. As reflected in the excerpts, it was the similarities with the Mexican flatmate, i.e. an economically moderate advanced home town and the unfamiliarity with the new cultural/social environment, that increased S6's confidence in successful communication. From this perspective, it was the commonalities that established the communication. Secondly, the need for interaction, in these cases, went beyond the purpose of speaking English or having company, to conscious wishes to increase intercultural understandings and the desire to receive help with academic learning. It was the multiple stimuli that pushed the students to build and maintain the relationship.

However, it should be noted that, despite the students' efforts, none of the cases I discussed here resulted in a close friendship. Instead, with the growing pressure from academic studies or part-time work, all the participants retreated to a Chinese social network. This was in sharp contrast with S8 and S12, both of whom have developed close friendship with non-Chinese. The two cases are discussed below.

4.5.3   Group 3: participants with intimate intercultural relationships

In my study, two participants developed a close friendship with non-Chinese, with whom they felt comfortable to alleviate stress and share happiness. As with those in the previous group, the students in this group were generally extroverted individuals and were quite confident with their subject learning. However, in contrast to the others, they were more keen to meet non-Chinese students and looked for more social channels to

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know the local or other international students. In the following, I focus on these two cases to see how intercultural interaction was facilitated.

4.5.3.1 Case study of S8

S8 was an extroverted, self-assured and very talkative young man. He liked to meet people, and was among the most active participants seeking chances to interact with non-Chinese students. He lived in a university residential hall, sharing a flat with a Japanese female student and three male students who came from China, Ireland and America. Like most Chinese science graduates, his spoken English was not very good. Although he was able to express himself, it was not easy for him to freely share his thoughts or highlight points when speaking.

Since the beginning of the course, S8 had made an effort to communicate with other nationalities. As with S6, most of such contacts took place in the shared kitchen in the university residence, either when he and his flatmates made food together or when S8 cooked Chinese dishes and invited others to join in.

Proximity is suggested as a key factor facilitating intercultural communication (See Gareis, 2000). Sharing a kitchen and having dinner together increased the frequency of S8's interactions with other international students. However, proximity alone did not necessarily lead to friendship formation. On the contrary, S8 complained that his relationship with the flatmates was quite shallow:

> '...it is still not easy to form a close relationship with them. For example, my
> American flat mate always asks me 'how are you' when he meets me. Very warmly
> but always the same. It is very embarrassing. There seems no other thing to talk
> about. We just routinely ask each other. In addition, every time ** (S8's Chinese flat
> mate) and I made some special Chinese dishes, we invite him. But never did he make
> something in return. We feel he doesn't have desire to communicate with us, or at
> least not as strong as we have...' (S8, diary, 17/12/06)

Realizing that his attempts to show friendliness did not result in the expected close friendship, S8 gradually gave up the efforts: '*this cannot always happen; we cannot always cook dishes and invite them to have dinner together*' (interview, 12/06). Their contacts further decreased in the second semester, when both S8 and his flatmates faced growing pressures from academic study. Seldom did they meet, let along talk and socialise.

The turning point came at the end of the second semester when S8 got a new part-time job in the university restaurant. Unexpectedly, at this workplace he built a friendship with Carlos (pseudonym), a PhD student from Mexico, whom S8 later described as his 'best friend'.

> '*For Carlos, things are different... both of us by chance got a job in* ** (university restaurant) *and because we all have many shifts, it seemed for several months we had seen each other every weekday, sometimes for 5 or 6 hours one day...*' (S8, final interview, 12/06)

His accounts confirmed that a high frequency of contact was an influential element for friendship formation (Kudo & Simkin, 2003). However, S8 was not the only one having a part-time job; nor was Carlos the only colleague he worked together with. To further explain their friendship, the following excerpt is worth noting.

> '*...we talked everything together. I told him about my girlfriends and he told me about his marriage... ...I think it is important that you share something in common with another one before he/she could be your friend. I have very similar views, attitudes, ways of things doing as Carlos.*' (S8, final interview, 12/06)

There are two noteworthy points in this excerpt. Firstly, sharing personal concerns and private lives contributed to the establishment of friendship**.** Lee (2006:13) stresses that mutual self-disclosure pushes relationship closer because it shows the interlocutors are '*trustworthy, non-judgemental and capable of keeping a confidence*'. In case of S8, sharing inner feelings with Carlos gained him advice and crucial emotional support. The

by-product of the openness was an increasing understanding of each other based on the well-identified similarities.

However, we need to be careful about the point. There were situations where such openness about personal matters resulted in embarrassment, like the elder couple S5 met with on the host programme. There could be other factors underlying a successfully-formed and well-maintained relationship, for example, the context restrictions and the personalities of the individuals.

The individual-based similarity was the second noteworthy point. It was different from earlier discussed commonalities, regarding S6 and his Mexican flatmate, which mainly concerned backgrounds (see section 4.5.3.2). In this case, it seemed that the close friendship had an emphasis on the nature of the individuals. Carlos was not simply seen as a 'Mexican', a representative of an ethic group. Instead, for S8, he was unique, a person having similar *'viewpoints, attitudes and ways of doing'* (S8, final interview, 12/06). The perceived similarities blurred perceived differences. They became the foundation of the friendship.

More importantly, S8 stressed a chance of doing business together as key to the formation of their friendship. The following excerpt shows that in S8's perception, to form and maintain a close relationship required instrumental stimuli; the friendship did not entail compassion or trust only.

> *'... Friendship is related to benefits. I mean it is nonsense that someone is responsible for helping you because you are her/his friend. You need to give something in return, something material. In case of Carlos, if we don't have the same interest in starting a business and potentially I can help him earning money, we cannot be such good friends as we are now. It sounds as if we make use of each other. But in fact this is the reality.' (S8, final interview, 12/06)*

To S8, a successful interpersonal relationship was subject to reciprocal material benefits. Although mutual trust and similarities could help the two partners get over social

distance and reach a deep level of friendship, it was the potential economic return which kept the friendship going. In this case, we could see a fading belief in interpersonal emotional attachment but traces of materialism, utilitarianism and individualism.

A reciprocal rule, the 'Chinese traditional code of brotherhood' (Su & Littlefiend, 2001:201) is argued to confine friendship among Chinese, a more intimate form of *guanxi* (i.e. 'social connection' in English). Here we should be aware of a debate on how to understand the nature of *guanxi*. Bian (2002:118) indicated that in the pre-revolutionary China, *guanx*i tended to be understood as 'a web of sentiment and familiar obligation'; but recently it is usually 'maintained and mobilized for instrumental purposes'. Bian's argument reminds us of the multiple interpretation of discourse of the Chinese culture and of the changing nature of culture. For these reasons, it is dangerous to describe a Chinese student's behaviours based on any certain 'cultural explanation'. In my study, S8 can be one instance who sought intercultural friendship for instrumental purposes (see also Wang & Liu, 2006). In contrast, S12's experiences of intercultural friendship, as I discuss below, was marked by the pursuit of support, care and love.

4.5.3.2 Case study of S12

S12 was an outgoing young female student. Very socially active, she spent her leisure time in diverse extracurricular activities. Keen on interacting, she had many local contacts, and established very intimate relationship with several British people. It was also noteworthy that as an English major and a student in the professional interpreting course, S12 had good oral and listening English skills.

Throughout the year, S12 held a very active attitude toward making friends with the locals. Her motivation, at least at the beginning, was highly English-learning oriented. Aiming to become a professional interpreter, she reminded herself of the importance of '*keeping speaking in English*' (S12, 19/10/05). Informal conversations with native speakers, in particular, was believed to be '*a necessity*' because '*fluency and accuracy cannot be simply acquired in class*' (S12, 19/10/05). To improve her English, she looked for and successfully found a language partner with the help of the English

Language Centre. This British girl, who had a great interest in things about China and desired to know more about China, became S12's first local acquaintance.

S12 was also well aware of the harm caused by spending too much of time with other Chinese. In fact, '*sticking to the Chinese*', as some of her Chinese classmates did, was seen by S12 as '*purely a shame*'. This, for her, inhibited English improvement and cultural assimilation. (S12, 19/10/05). Hence she consciously avoided interacting with co-nationals and gave preference to communication with the locals.

However, a single linguistic need cannot explain why S12 successfully formed intimate friendships. A closer examination of her experiences exposed several more noteworthy points. Firstly, S12 had a great passion for dancing. Her love of dancing can be traced back to her college days in China, when she had a title of 'dancing queen' and spent almost all her evenings in the college dancing hall. In the UK, by becoming a member of a salsa dancing society in the university, she had many more opportunities than other participants to get involved with the locals, who were engaged in different careers. In S12's words, it enabled her to '*develop a cosmopolitan view of the world*' (S12, blog, 06/10/06). More importantly, it was in the society that S12 met with Simon and Mat (pseudonyms), both of whom were long-time members of the salsa club and had been her teachers. S12's interest resulted in her insistence on salsa throughout the year; the latter in turn enabled continuous contacts with Samon and Mat. In fact, as S12 gradually developed her dancing skills from a beginner to a very advanced level, her relationship with Samon and Mat was deepened, from student/teacher to dancing partners and to intimate friends.

Secondly, among all participants, S12 was the only one who visited pubs and clubs. It should be noted that her attitude towards pubbing and clubbing was not very positive at the beginning.

> '*Last evening at around 10 o'clock,* (I) *received a call from Amy* (pseudonym; S12's language partner)*, saying a party was being held in the Physics Dept. I went there but, my goodness, found the place was like a hell. So many people crowded into a*

small room. So noisy. The floor is dirty damp. And boys and girls kiss each other just after saying several sentences. A boy held two girls in his arms. I cannot believe it. How will they feel when meeting each other on the next day? Wouldn't they feel embarrassed? And I saw a boy wanted to kiss a girl. He was refused. But immediately he turned around and kissed another girl. What a hell! It was really a disordered primitive society! I will never go there again!' (S12, diary, 21/10/05)

The point is very interesting in terms of getting to 'know' customs and entertainments of the host people. In spite of the desire for closer integration into the host culture which has pushed her to the UK, the initial experiences of attending students' parties shocked S12. On this occasion she was surprised by the loud environment, wild behaviour and young people's casual attitudes towards issues of relationships and sex. Such ways of relaxing and enjoying oneself seemed to S12 a waste of time, meaningless and perhaps immoral.

Although finding clubbing to be something she did not like initially, SL gradually shifted her opinions. The change was partly due to her local friends who kept encouraging her to adapt to the new lifestyle; partly due to her love for dancing. The latter turned her to be greatly interest in clubbing, where she found she could dance all night as she did in discos in China. There were also impacts from her strong determination to fully participate in the host culture. Having agreed with her local friends that pubbing and clubbing were parts of the British life, she believed it necessary to get involved in the activities. Otherwise '*you don't need to come to the UK; you should have taken a long distance course and studied in China.*' (S12, interview, 07/06)

Foreign students' negative opinions of the British drinking and pub culture are believed to be an obstacle to their successful communication with the locals (see Gao, 1998). Therefore, S12's acceptance of the new lifestyle, which she further commented on as a '*very relaxed way of life*' (S12, interview, 07/06), made it easier for her to have host friends. In fact, since the end of the second semester, going to pubs and clubs became S12's main form of entertainment. With preparation for lectures and exams unnecessary,

she spent a considerable amount of evening time in this way throughout the whole summer. It was also during this period that her contacts with salsa friends dramatically extended while her relationship with several locals (including Samon and Mat) reached their intimacy.

Lastly, the examination of the case of S12 reveals sexual attraction as a catalyst in intercultural interaction. The four people with whom S12 had most frequent contacts were male. All of them maintained a relationship with S12 which was located somewhere between good friends and lovers. The point is consistent with the argument of Gao (1998), which indicates that female Chinese students in Australia are more likely to be sought after by the local students and hence make friends more easily than male Chinese students with the local Australians. This brings in a very interesting gender dimension which is potentially very complex, based on the expectations of gender roles and appropriate gendered behaviour.

Moreover, what I want to stress here is S12's life story. She had very limited contact with her mother and father when she was young, with both of them - in slightly different ways - 'abandoning' her. Specifically, her mother left her after giving birth to her younger brother, whom she has seen infrequently in the first several years but then '*lost all contact in the recent 4 or 5 years*' (S12, interview, 06/07). Her father remarried and had another two daughters. Spending six years in a distant boarding school and then four years in university, S12 had little communication with her father. Occasionally she went home but only for the purpose of seeing her little brother.

S12's adolescence and young adulthood were characterised by alternate bouts of intimacy and isolation as she made and lost intimate relationships with boys; but in between these she found no source of emotional comfort in her family. In our conversations, she described for several times how she had been seeking love and emotional support from the opposite sex since her teens. Her early relationships with boys, when still in her teens and at school, are unusual amongst Chinese girls and may indicate her search for emotional support and intimacy.

S12's earlier behaviour continued in the UK in a series of intimate relationships with English boys. She appeared to be seeking emotional support and love during her stay in the UK. However, S12 seemed to lose confidence in Chinese boys: '…*they feel too good about themselves. They put their career at the first place. They will not make any sacrifice for a girl.*' (S12, interview, 06/06). This may explain her acceptance of British males as her potential mates.

In all, by actively building and maintaining contacts, S12 managed her intercultural interactions to achieve her linguistic needs, i.e. improving English, social needs, i.e. having an intimate relationship, and cognitive needs, i.e. facilitating disciplinary study and understanding of other cultures.

4.5.4   *Summary of the students' experiences regarding intercultural communication*

In this section I have analysed the participants' experiences and perceptions of intercultural interaction and friendship formation. Supporting a holistic view towards the understanding of Chinese students, the findings reveal diverse factors which impact on the participants' experiences in the UK. These factors ranges from participants' personalities, potential interlocutors' in/tolerance and im/patience, their un/interest to build friendship, to the impacts from family members. Within various social contexts, those factors restrict students' learning and social activities in some cases but facilitate them in others.

Specifically, regarding the students in the first group, we notice a lack of linguistic need, emotional need and academic need for intercultural interaction. By contrast, in the second group, the participants, despite appearing reserved in formally organized parties, were active in interacting with other nationalities in casual contacts. Particularly, assisted by the commonalities, when interacting with other international students they seemed more confident with their language skills and intellectual knowledge, felt more secure and had higher self-esteem in relation to what they can achieve. Actively initiating and maintaining contacts, they managed their intercultural interactions to satisfy their linguistic needs, i.e. improving English; social needs, i.e. lessening social

distance and building an equal friendship, and cognitive needs, i.e. facilitating disciplinary study and understanding of other cultures.

However, for students in the third group, the intercultural friendship was not only for pragmatic purpose, like the improvement of English or practice of interpreting skills, but to meet their expectations to socialize in the new environments. For S12, in particular, it was to satisfy her desires for company, for care and for love. The internal needs for support attributed to their successful building of intercultural friendship.

4.6   Summary of chapter 4

In this chapter, I consider the participants' intercultural learning experiences by exploring their perception on formative feedback, and their experiences in lecture room, learning groups, at work places and venues in social interactions. The themes that I have worked on emerge from the students' accounts. Yet, a focus on communities the students participants in is in line with social constructionists' stress on contextual influences (see Burr, 1995), which argues that learning activities are context-situated and subject to contextual variables, such as physical settings, specific regulations and power relationships.

Meanwhile, locating my study within multiple contexts, I am able to reveal the students' human agency in their struggles to overcome contextual restriction: for example, how they draw on different strategies to maximise learning outcomes, how they balanced the pressure from various social commitments, and how they coped with unequal or racist encounters, and managed to keep their interest, confidence and sense of security to act in diverse social settings. The dynamics between human agency and contextual influences are further addressed in the next chapter.

By focusing on both on-campus and off-campus encounters, I am tending to present a holistic picture of Chinese students' intercultural experiences. Being able to access and assess how participants interacted with diverse contextual influences, my analysis highlights individuals' differences, in terms of motives, personalities, coping strategies

and changes. My findings, therefore, provide a corrective to the over-emphasis of cultural differences and to the reductionists' interpretation of 'the Chinese learner' as undifferentiated product of 'the Chinese culture'.

5 DISCUSSION OF RESULT –- SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIONISM, CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented my key research findings about the students' intercultural experiences. In this chapter, I integrate all these aspects into a more holistic analysis. To study the participants' learning experiences, I draw on the dialectical interplay between active subjectivity and constitutive contexts (see section 2.3.2). By using social constructionism, I stress that all students, whilst continuously interacting with a dynamic network of diverse social contexts, experience British education in personally distinct ways.

The essence of this chapter is about the interaction between individuals and contextual factors. I am going to present how the processes of learning and developing are refracted through social contexts. By social contexts I mean physical settings as well as interpersonal relations which are also subject to values, norms and beliefs. Being able to study what happens in specific contexts provides me with a powerful means to resist essentialist discourses which stereotype 'the Chinese learner'.

Specifically, I first concentrate on students' learning experiences in various contexts. I then stress how the participants made sense of themselves through interacting with these contexts. In this section, asymmetrical power relations are emphasised; changed statuses in new power systems are viewed as significant social and contextual factors to the participants' formation of new identities. Finally, I present a model indicating the dialectical relationship between agency and structure, based on my findings. Here, by reflecting on social constructionism and the critiques of it, I argue that individual agency and structure are not dichotomous elements but are united (see Lane, 2001). The dynamics of this interrelationship and mutual influences have resulted in the differences in my participants' experiences in the UK.

5.2 Social constructionism, contextual influences and anti-essentialism

In chapter 2, I reviewed social-constructionists' critiques of essentialism. Essentialist discourses and practices define and categorize people as having fixed essences. They over-generalize in-group commonalities, erase inter-group similarities, conceal the complexity of human beings, neglect variations and suppress differences (see section 2.2; also Sayer, 1997; Modood, 1998). For these reasons, social-constructionism is emancipatory. It shows the essentialists' interpretation of 'the Chinese student' to be socially constructed, rather than a 'real' reflection of essential features of the group (Burr, 1995). It underlines the significance of observing individual actions in specific social contexts and listening to singular voices. These practices help to avoid dangers of reductionism, such as interpreting Chinese culture in a fixed way (e.g. by Confucian doctrines) or interpreting Chinese learners as identical products (e.g. of 'Confucius Heritage Culture', Biggs, 1996) (see sections 2.2.2, 2.2.3). To clarify my point, in the following, I study contextual influences on students' learning. My focus is on how individual participants interacted with diverse contextual constraints and how they perceived contextual constraints and their influences on their lives.

5.2.1 Social contexts

The influences of contexts on learners' behaviours and learning outcomes have been the focus of much educational research in recent years; for example in studies using ethnographic longitudinal approaches (e.g. Duff, 2000; Morita, 2004). The stress on contextual analysis, which highlights individual differences, is insightful in my study in terms of identifying and problematising cultural stereotypes.

The participants' experiences in these specific social settings were discussed in chapter 4 (see also chapter 6). Based on that discussion, I am now able to model my students' experiences in the UK (see diagram 5.1). At the center of the diagram the individual is located at the nexus of four influential domains of their lives, as identified in this study. The significant constituents of these four domains are then amplified in the surrounding 'satellites'. As presented in the diagram, my findings illustrate how learning outcomes are inseparable from social, cognitive and psychological variables which, by themselves,

are associated with participants' practices in a variety of social contexts. Sitting in a lecture theatre or performing in a group project, as well as attending social activities, playing sports, interacting with flatmates in accommodation or doing part-time jobs, are all integrated parts of their personal lives.

Diagram 5.1   Model of students' experience in the UK: social contexts
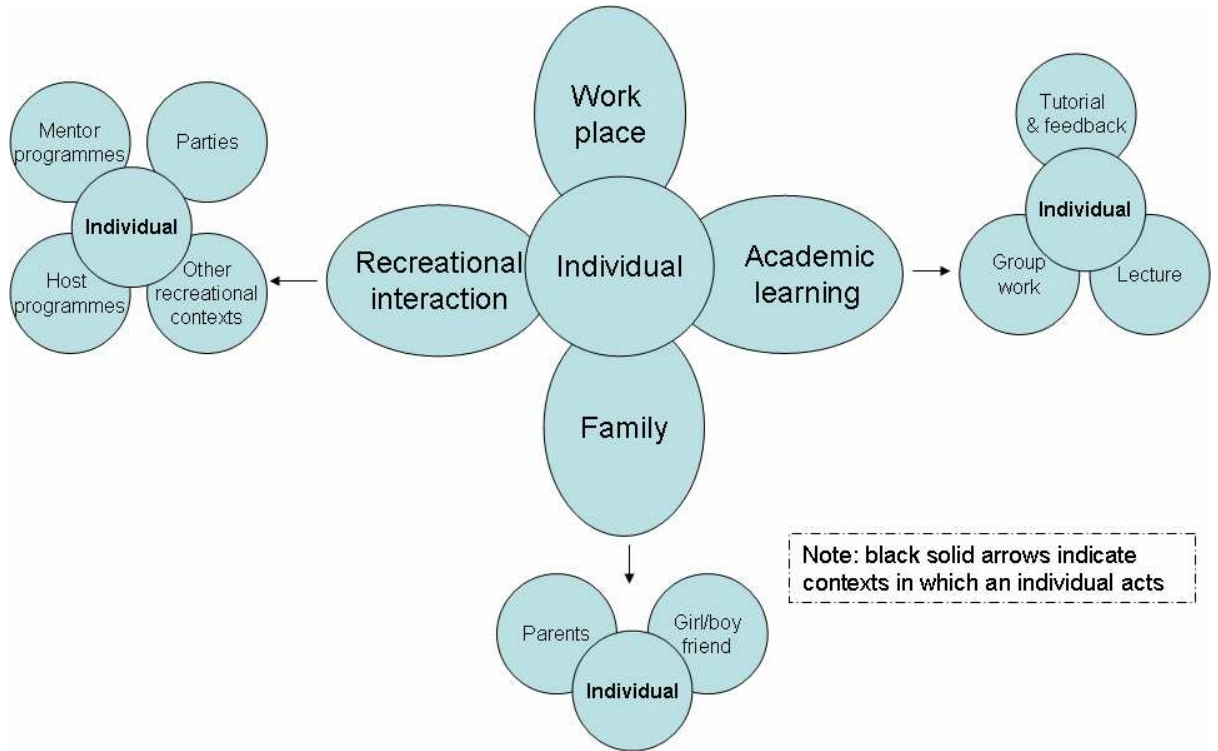
5.2.2   *Social networks*

According to social constructionism, individuals define themselves and are defined by inescapable relationships with others. In the following, I focus on several key relationships, i.e. the relationship with family, peer group, workmates, tutors and other British staff. Developed from diagram 5.1, diagram 5.2 indicates these social relationships of the individual in each of four influential contexts within which he/she acts. These networks are the means by which individuals come to define themselves and, therefore, to evolve their understandings of themselves. These relationships allow for flexibility but simultaneously create socio-cultural barriers for personal development (Luo, 2006). They may help the individuals become capable of coping with changes and

challenges. But at the same time they may be present as social constraints to personal changes and development (see sections 5.3, 5.5). In the following sub-sections, I consider the crucial social relations the students reported (i.e. parents, lovers, peer groups, university staff and workplace colleagues)

Diagram 5.2   Model of students' experiences in the UK: social relations
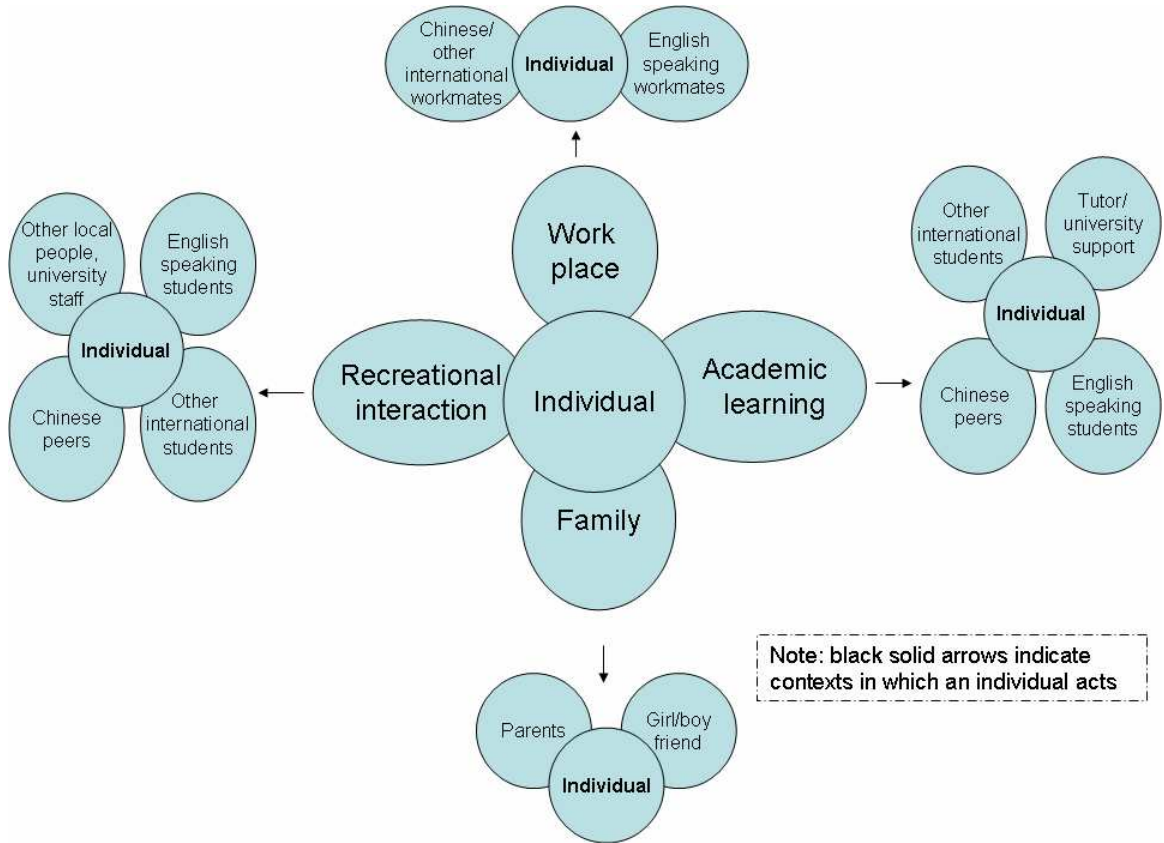
5.2.2.1 Parents

Students' accounts about parenting practices and parental expectations share a common focus on the importance of education. The majority of the participants (except S12 and S3) described how their parents attended to their academic performance and encouraged them to get a higher qualification abroad. The contributions and sacrifices that most parents made so that their sons and daughters could obtain higher education overseas was well illustrated in S1's descriptions of how her parents gave up luxuries in their lives to pay for tuition fees and living costs in the UK.

In chapter 2, I criticised the literature, which reinforces stereotypes of Chinese reverence towards education, and hierarchical parent-child relationships in Chinese families (Chao, 1994, 2000). I also reviewed the research findings on Chinese home education which stressed the socialisation of traditional moral codes (e.g. Xu, et.al., 2005). In addition, I criticised the practices which saw Chinese students as ideal learners due to their internalization of Confucian principles (e.g. Chao, 1994).

My concern is that the ready availability of explanations based on 'Confucian teaching' has prevented us from researching further possible explanations for this valuing of education. This is not to deny that many parents who send their children abroad to study do put up with considerable personal sacrifice in order to do so, which does reflect the value that they place on education for their children. However, parental concern for their children may arise from more pragmatic origins. Historically, Chinese society has been the one in which forms of social security are lacking or minimal and parents may have to depend on their children (mainly sons) to support them in their old age. At that time, education became a way – through the imperial exams system (Cleverley, 1985) – to achieve upward mobility and greater material security. Therefore, it made very good sense, in terms of their own as well as their children's future welfare, for parents to ensure that their children did well academically. Nowadays, in China, education is still seen as a route to success and upward social mobility. In that an offspring's elevated social status – whether rewarded materially or not – could to some extent be reflected on to the parents, it remains a desire to help them get the best education. Hence, despite claims for the pervasiveness of a 'Confucius-inspired' respect for education, it is significant to explore other rationales, such as an acquisition of a desired social status or material return, for this valuing of education.

This pragmatic concern for education is reflected in my findings. For example, parents of S3 and S12 objected to their daughters' decision to study abroad. Being private factory owners who did not have higher education themselves, they considered the cost of a master's course as purely a waste of money. These present evidence that challenges a deterministic view of 'Confucianist Chinese culture', or over-simplified notion such as 'the Chinese way' of thinking, or 'the Chinese way' of doing.

Moreover, in one of these cases (S12) the impact of the parents' broken marriage also came into play, indicating the interplay of multiple factors in the formation of attitudes. There would also appear to be a gender issue in such decisions. To some extent, my data agree with that research conducted in Western settings which presents findings about the complexity of family issues and the significance of differences in parenting styles (e.g. Harris, et al's 1999 research on the correlation between homework progress and differentiation in parents' involvement; Dornbusch, et al's 1987 research on various parenting styles and general adolescent academic performance). However, given the small sample size, I do not intend to generalise this finding to comment on the role of gender, parental influences and family education in a Chinese context.

Secondly, for several participants, emotional support from their parents helped them settle down, reduced their loneliness during holidays and encouraged them to reach their full potential in their academic study. Particularly, families' understanding was of significance at critical periods when unplanned events happened. For example, chatting with parents helped S7 to calm down and relax when she was suffering from chicken pox. Similarly, care and encouragement from her family enabled S2 to get through her depression after failing in final examinations.

But I cannot claim that such parental support is distinctively or exclusively a Chinese phenomenon. I am sure we could find similar examples of parental support among students of other nationalities, include the 'home' students. In other parts of the world there are parents who offer a lot of support at various times and in various ways to their children when they were at university and throughout their lives. Additionally, Chinese students are similar to others in their need for emotional support and the sources of such support that they turn to.

For these reasons, I avoid using 'filial piety' in interpreting my participants' response to their parents' influences. This term simply means respect for parents and their advice/ideas, and the love for parents. This can be found in other societies, although it may be more common in some than in others, or manifest itself in different ways. The

existence of 'filial piety' within accounts of CHCs may lead us to believe that respect for parents is something exclusive to CHCs. Again, the use of this convenient label simply adds to the stereotypical image of 'Chinese people'.

Thirdly, parental influences are identified in cases regarding the choice of career (S3, S4, S6, S9) and dating behaviour (S1, S4, S6, S8, S12). Having been socialized through family education, the participants have accepted some of their parents' ideas, naturalized them as 'facts' and internalized them as parts of their own belief systems. As such, when students were unable to live up to their parents' expectations (e.g. S1's cohabiting with her boyfriend and S4's inability to get a job in the UK), they were found to be under pressure. A sense of guilt was noticed, which sometimes was intense when the students came from salary-earning families and were well aware of the financial burden that their parents were bearing for their education (S1, S4 & S8).

However, the students were not passive and docile. No participant treated his/her parents as a sole authority and abided by the parents' will unquestionably. Instead, they measured the advantages and disadvantages of a given situation and, ultimately, made their own decisions. The findings show that although most participants owe commitment to their family, how to exercise the commitment to gain self-development is still a personal choice. Here, the issue of human agency is important and will be discussed later (see section 5.3.2).

5.2.2.2 Boyfriend, girlfriend and spouse

Although not discussed in detail in this thesis, the research did show that relationships with partners significantly influenced the participants' lives in the UK. However, different from parental support which the majority of students (12 out of 13) viewed as being crucial, the roles the partners played were mixed. They were seen as sources of support, although such support was not perceived as being so secure (see sections 4.5.1, 5.3, 5.5).

5.2.2.3 Peer group

The findings suggest that communication with other Chinese people is of great importance regarding personal adjustment to the new context. This supports previous studies which argue that individuals are likely to seek support from others who have experienced the same transitions (see Suitor, Pillemer & Keeton, 1995; Suitor, 1987). Strong ties with Chinese friends provided the participants with comfort, security and emotional support. Academically, Chinese classmates were always the ones on whom the respondents relied to deepen their understandings of the content of lectures and with whom they collaborated to complete course projects. In their daily lives, Chinese students exchanged necessary information with each other, such as the availability of private accommodation, job opportunities and the location of good Chinese restaurants. Thanks to all this information, they coped better with problems emerging in their daily lives in new social environments.

My participants were generally motivated to establish network relationships with other nationalities, although some were more active than others. Intercultural interaction was perceived as important for enhancing English language competency, and for reducing anxiety and uncertainty in the unfamiliar environment. It was also viewed as a valuable opportunity to meet local people as so to broaden their understanding of local customs and traditions (see sections 4.5.2, 4.5.3).

Despite the awareness of benefits, most participants failed to develop a circle of non-Chinese friends. According to Spencer-Oatey & Xiong (2006), a mono-cultural network is important for close friendship, while socializing with members of the host country is critical in performing well academically and meeting essential personal needs. My participants' extensive integration with mainly their own ethnic community had negative influences on language learning and on personal engagement with other communities (see section 4.5). Although most of them were aware of such unfavourable impacts, the factors preventing them from intercultural interaction included personality, organizational problems and attitudinal issues of local people, whether perceived or real (see section 5.5).

Here I wish to stress that I collected no first-hand data on the attitudes of members of the host country. In some cases, my participants may have approached situations with their own pre-judgements, or where they interpreted certain behaviours for themselves and imputed attitudes. In these cases, it was the *perceived* attitudes, such as unfriendliness, arrogance, shyness, unwillingness to make friends, which inhibited Chinese students from intercultural communication.

5.2.2.4 Academic staff

Although eventually most of the students were able to deal with challenges by themselves, with some students being very successful at this (see sections 5.3, 5.5), the findings of the research show that better support from academic staff could have eased the process and enhanced learning outcomes. This confirms the arguments of previous researchers, which stress the significance of tutoring, mentoring, and training for lecturers to understand students' needs in order to facilitate overseas students' adaptation into the host academic culture (e.g. Cruickshank, et. al. 2003; Scherto, 2005; Durkin & Main, 2002).

The crucial roles the academic staff played are mainly evidenced in the formative feedback they provided on coursework, the willingness to help the students to attain the British learning criteria, and the care and empathy they showed in the process of learning. The findings reflect the significance of formative feedback in the process of learning (see Black & Wiliam, 1998a,b). Specifically, teachers' feedback helped students to master the new writing criteria, from structure and language use to citation and attribution. It also familiarized them with subject-specific concepts, which at first may appear alien. Particularly, it was through drafting and redrafting according to the guidance of tutors' comments that the participants were increasingly able to write in the expected critical way and to address their own points of view, with the support of evidence (see section 4.2.2.1).

The significance of staff was also demonstrated in the facilitation of comprehension in lecture rooms. Students (S6, S9, S10) favourably appraised a set of methods of delivery, such as the combination of abstract knowledge with practical cases; the involvement of

examples which were internationally based and for which they could draw on their prior experiences to understand; and the introduction of cutting-edge research. Furthermore, well structured content, clear and slow speaking and the use of visual aids were all welcomed and viewed as indicators of the tutors' concerns for students' language problems and their readiness to facilitate students' comprehension.

However, the study also reveals that many British academic staff were less aware of international students' difficulties. They followed routine practices with little consideration of pedagogy: speaking in a low voice or at a fast speed, using terminology without explanation, cramming in too much information and being disorganized in presentation were all characteristics of poor delivery. Little attention to handwriting, vague comments and lack of approachability after classes inhibited students from learning from formative feedback. When tutors assigned group work with little guidance or supervision, this often resulted in limited benefits from the processes of multi-cultural collaboration. All these inefficient modes of teaching could be an obstacle to students' efficiency of learning. They put Chinese students (and other non-native learners) in the most disadvantageous position (see sections 4.2.1, 4.2.2).

De Vita & Case (2003) call for a culturally inclusive curriculum, in which they argue for adequate consideration of pedagogical issues, so that courses could be designed to reflect the students' intellectual abilities without cultural bias (also see Absalom & Vadura, 2006; Bates, 2005). My findings go further and stress that the outcome of the intercultural learning process is as much about the learners' interaction with their teachers and learning environments, as it is about the discussion of any cultural values shared among Chinese students (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006), if such values do exist.

5.2.2.5 University support

The study confirms the value of support from the university administration and student-support offices. Specifically, pre-sessional courses provided by the English Language Centre were highly valued by the participants. According to them, the courses helped them reach the language proficiency requirements for enrolment; introduced and allowed them to practice learning skills such as speed reading skills, proper citation and

referencing, note taking and academic writing; and more importantly, facilitated the initial settling-down through a range of social programmes they offered. Despite this, the findings show the courses were largely ineffectual in equipping students with adequate English proficiency specific to their subject learning. The reasons range from the comparatively short duration, greater emphasis on IELTS, a lack of teaching staff specified in diverse subjects and limited cooperation with academic departments.

In addition, students received support from the international office and departments to make friends with other national groups. This support took the forms of the host programme, mentor programme and various recreational parties. It embodied the university's determination to establish an image as international-minded community and its objectives to develop all graduates' intercultural communicative ability and their abilities to work and live in international contexts (bath.ac.uk, 2007).

However, these aims were not achieved in practice to the extent expected. Regarding the host programme, although feeling excited about living with a local family and viewing it as valuable, the participants reported anxiety and a lack of common topics for conversation with their host family. There were also complaints about poor quality of food and lack of hospitality of the host people, suggesting that the university should be more careful in its selection of host families. As to the mentor programme, only one student (S7) out of three applicants met with her mentor at all. Furthermore, for this student (S7), the contacts with the mentor gradually reduced owing to growing academic pressure and other personal commitments. Here could be a discrepancy between the university and my participant in terms of what the mentor programme was for and how it should be operated. The university may have organized the programme only to assist international students in the early stages of their stay; yet the students had more expectations of it (see section 4.5.2.1.2).

More importantly, my data show that in most party venues, Chinese respondents developed a sense of being excluded, either due to the apparently aloof attitudes of local students or unfamiliarity with the drinking and dancing culture in the host country. Such a feeling was also entangled with self-consciousness arising from unsatisfactory

linguistic competency and an intention to maintain ideal self-images (for example as an intellectually and linguistically capable person) when such an image had been challenged by language problems. Moreover, there were daily encounters where the students were 'foreignized' and 'Otherised', on or off campus (e.g. at the work place and in learning groups). Responding to bias and prejudices in their daily lives, they, despite the desire to interact, were often forced back to Chinese friendship circles. With their apparent failure to see the complexity involved in the issue, it was understandable why the University's effort to boost intercultural interaction ended in very few positive effects.

5.2.2.6 Workplace colleagues

Working on paid jobs opened another window for the participants to experience the host society. Although limited, their interactions with local British workmates made students aware of their inadequate English speaking proficiency. This, to some extent, motivated them in language learning (see section 4.4.4). Moreover, working in paid jobs provided chances to build close relationships with colleagues from other countries. For example, S8 successfully built the friendship with a Mexican work mate (see section 4.5.3.1).

Despite this, as a result of interacting with colleagues at work, an emergent, greater sense of self as a part of the collective 'Chinese' was observed (see section 4.4.3). The feeling of being excluded was apparent among those who were sensitive to the 'Otherising' treatment (e.g. S1), and those who had encountered biases, either real or perceived, in lecture rooms, collaborative groups or socialising activities (e.g. S8, S10). This had backwash effects on the students' willingness to engage in intercultural interaction, both for learning and recreational purposes. This also negatively impacted on their evaluation of their learning experience in the UK. The issue will be discussed later (see section 5.4.1.2).

5.2.3   Summary of contextual influences

In this section I stress a range of contextual factors, in particular interpersonal relationships, which have affected the participants' learning and living experiences during their stay in the UK. The discussion illuminates the fact, which can easily be

ignored, that a students' experiences cover a complex range of areas (CUBO report, 2008), while all these aspects are interrelated and combine to influence students' learning outcomes as well as their sense of identity (see section 5.5).

It should be noted that the impacts of social contexts can be both negative and positive. It is through the continuous interaction with contextual constraints and facilitators that the individual makes personal changes, which again can take either a desired or undesired form. A context-based analysis reveals differences in individual experiences. It, therefore, attacks the cultural determinism, the approach which entails a uniformity of response to contexts and hence fails to capture students from China as distinct and different individuals. The issue of dialectical relationships between individual changes, agency and contexts, which is the center of this chapter, will be addressed in more detail in the next section.

5.3   Social-constructionism and individual changes

Social-constructionists criticize essentialism not merely because of the latter's stress on essences, but because what it stresses is taken to be unchanging and eternal. Revealing how students develop throughout their masters' courses, my findings endorse social constructionism and question the practices which homogenize 'the Chinese learner' and deny individual ability to act and change within various contexts.

In the following, I explain the inter-relationship between the participants' changes and social contexts. Specifically, I focus on how my participants coped with challenges they encountered and how in this process they changed and adapted. Stressing the conflicts existing in all aspects of their lives abroad, I argue that, given adequate contextual facilitators, it was through reflection and their efforts to resolve conflicts that the participants achieved development.

5.3.1   Contradiction and changes

During the students' stay in the UK, contradiction existed everywhere in their lives. In diagram 5.3, I use red dotted lines to indicate three levels of contradictions between and within each domain in which the individual acts. I argue it was through the process of

identifying contradictions and resolving contradictions that these Chinese students achieved individual change and development.

Diagram 5.3   Students' experiences in the UK: conflicts and individual changes
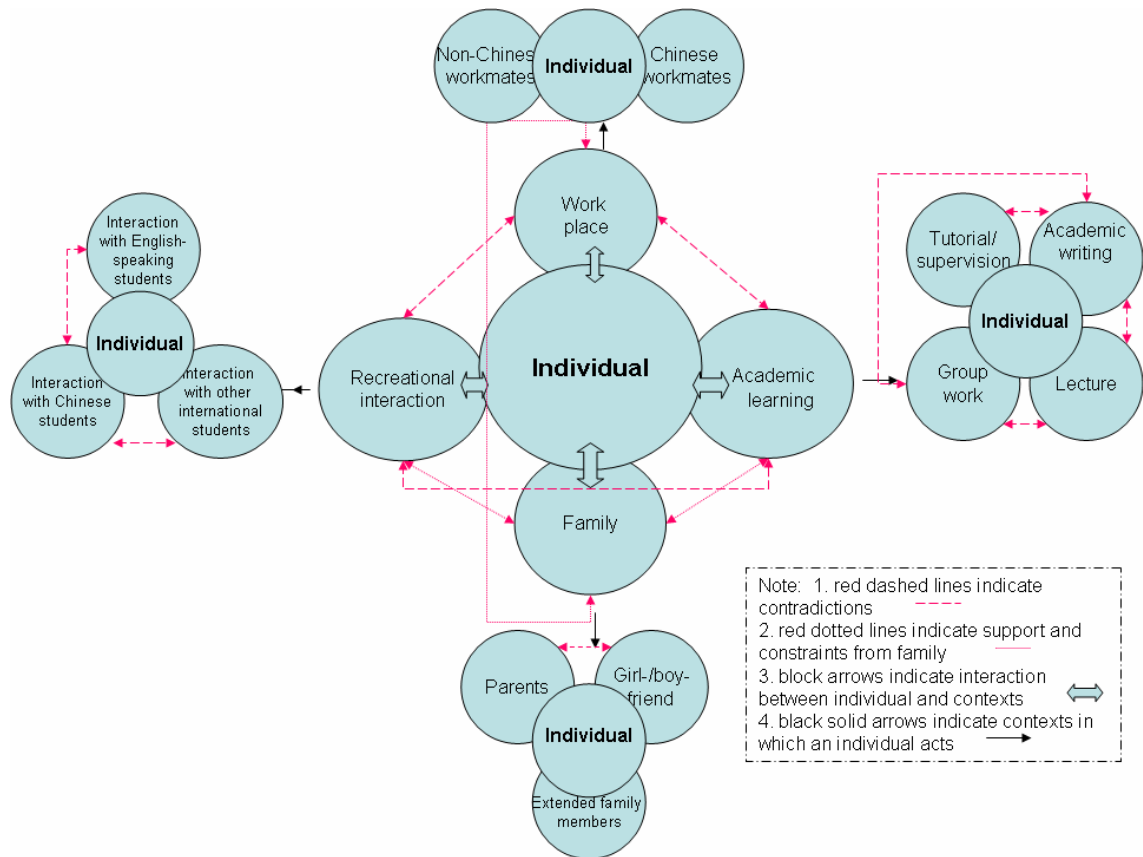
To be specific, the first level of contradiction may arise among the multiple objectives the participants had for their learning in the UK. For example, they expected not only to acquire a foreign degree, but to accumulate knowledge, improve their English and enrich their experience through travelling and meeting people from different countries. In addition, even before arriving in the UK, some of them had planned to take part-time jobs to partially fund themselves or to increase their employability for the future career market. The existence of multiple commitments is potentially a source of contradiction.

The first level of contradiction also regards the conflicts between students' objectives of learning in the UK and the difficulties they faced. Specifically, participants encountered a range of difficulties, including inadequate English proficiency, gaps in knowledge, encountering formative feedback, inadequate support from teachers, unfriendly

attitudes of potential interlocutors as well as biases and racist encounters. These troubles were against almost all their expectations of learning abroad, from academic learning in the lecture room, participating in collaborative learning groups, performing well in assessment, to interacting and communicating with English-speaking people. These experiences also conflicted with their need to maintain positive self-images as linguistically and intellectually capable persons, as constructed in their prior education.

The second level of contradiction emerged within different aspects of their lives. That is, there were potential conflicts between different activities they performed in academic learning or socialising; or regarding their relationship within family. Specifically, in terms of academic learning, the participants had to manage their time between group projects, reviewing and previewing, academic writing and preparation for assessment. Increasing pressure from one activity at a certain time may only be managed at the expense of other activities. For example, when there were writing assignments or when the examinations were approaching, students were found to spend little time on previewing teaching content, to reduce their efforts in group working and be absent in lectures. The situations were worsened when the participants perceived the teaching content was less challenging, tutors were less helpful or groupmates were dominant and arrogant.

In terms of socialising, students were interacting with Chinese friends but also hoped to form friendship with non-Chinese. Socialising primarily with Chinese people, in most cases, was contradictory to their initial expectation. Although it, in some cases, was a consequence of negative experiences they had, an increasing in-group tendency might also discourage English-speaking people who in fact had interest in intercultural communication. For those students who did have non-Chinese friends, there was a tension in terms of managing different circles of friends. I have not discussed this in detail in my findings because of space limitation. But the case of S12 suggests that, with the increasing intimacy with British friends, there was a decrease in the interaction with Chinese classmates, partly because of a lack of time, partly because of changes in her priorities and recreational activities. Also, in my conversations with the participants, it was not rare to hear gossip about other students, particularly females, who had a close relationship or dated with British people. The fear of losing Chinese contacts might

discourage some students, especially girls, from building a close relationship with people from other countries.

Moreover, family relationships and demands were also observed to be a source of conflict. They may be demonstrated, for example, in a tension caused by the parents' academic expectations and the students' inability to live up to these expectations. In these cases parents turned out to be sources not only of emotional support but also of anxiety and pressure. In other cases, family relationships were a source of interpersonal conflicts, such as in the difficult relationship between partners and parents. Although both of these provided crucial emotional support, having a boyfriend / girlfriend whom the parents did not like could be a source of mental pressure. It could also lead to a sense of guilt, as shown in case of S1, who had to hide her cohabiting with her boyfriend because the behaviour was morally unacceptable to her parents.

The third level of contradiction arises when academic learning, working and socialising compete for the students' time and attention. Since any individual is located somewhere in a network of such social contexts (as shown in diagram 5.3), contradiction is inevitable during his/her transition from one to another. This can be used to clarify the tension the participants have experienced between academic study and working for money, between learning and entertaining, and between working and friend-making with non-Chinese people. It was from the struggle to maintain balance among these contradictory pairs that the participants, to varying extents, gradually achieved their personal growth and individual maturity.

It should be noted that the contradiction we mentioned above is dialectical in nature (Allman, et al, 2000). A dialectical relationship, which emphasizes the interdependence of oppositional phenomena, gives room to individual agency. The conflicts in lives caused trouble but simultaneously stimulated the students' adaptation to the new learning contexts. Students were not passive actors responding to the contextual influences. The learning strategies they adopted were results of their combination, comparison, selection and reflection upon the available contextual resources of learning and surviving. This point, therefore, supports my anti-essentialist stance that learners from China should be understood as having agential capacity to change, although the

change is also subject to contextual constraints and agency has to be enabled by contextual facilitators. It must be noted, however, that the students often experienced pressure, anxiety and depression particularly in situations where they failed to satisfactorily resolve the contradictions (Engestrom, 2006). The issues are further explored in the next section (i.e. 5.5).

5.3.2   Agency and change

In this study individual students were perceived as social beings who acted in multiple social settings. Aware of various conflicts, the participants adjusted themselves to attempt to reach their multiple goals of learning abroad. Individual agency manifested itself as a set of strategies which enabled them to deal with some seemingly impossible problematic situations. In diagram 5.4, the individual, again, is located at the centre of four different influential contexts. The strategies he/she developed are listed in the central bubble. In the following I discuss how the students devised such strategies to survive and succeed in British academic and living environments. It should be noted that the personal changes that took place were by no means problem-free procedures. They were restricted by contextual constraints and depended on the availability of various resources. For this reason, we should attend both to the participants' pro-active tendency to adapt to gain full membership and also to the regressive tendency to withdraw the effort of participating in a certain activity (Wenger, 1998).

Firstly, as mentioned, a low level of English proficiency was frustrating to almost all expectations the students held towards learning in the UK. All the participants were conscious of their language inadequacy and the negative impacts it could have. To improve their English, various strategies were adopted. The receptive strategies included memorizing new words (S6), watching English TV programmes (S5) and movies (S1, S7, S2), and consciously exposing him/herself to English input in daily lives. The productive strategies consisted of speaking English with a partner (S5); finding and communicating with language exchangers (S12, S5) and increasing interaction with native speakers (S12). Due to the contextual constraints (that is, the pressure from subject learning, being overloaded in paid jobs and encountering unfriendly English-speaking interlocutors) most participants failed to develop English

communicative skills to the extent they had expected; however, their efforts in language learning enabled them to gain the best from the least unfavourable situations.

Diagram 5.4 Students' experiences in the UK: agency and personal changes
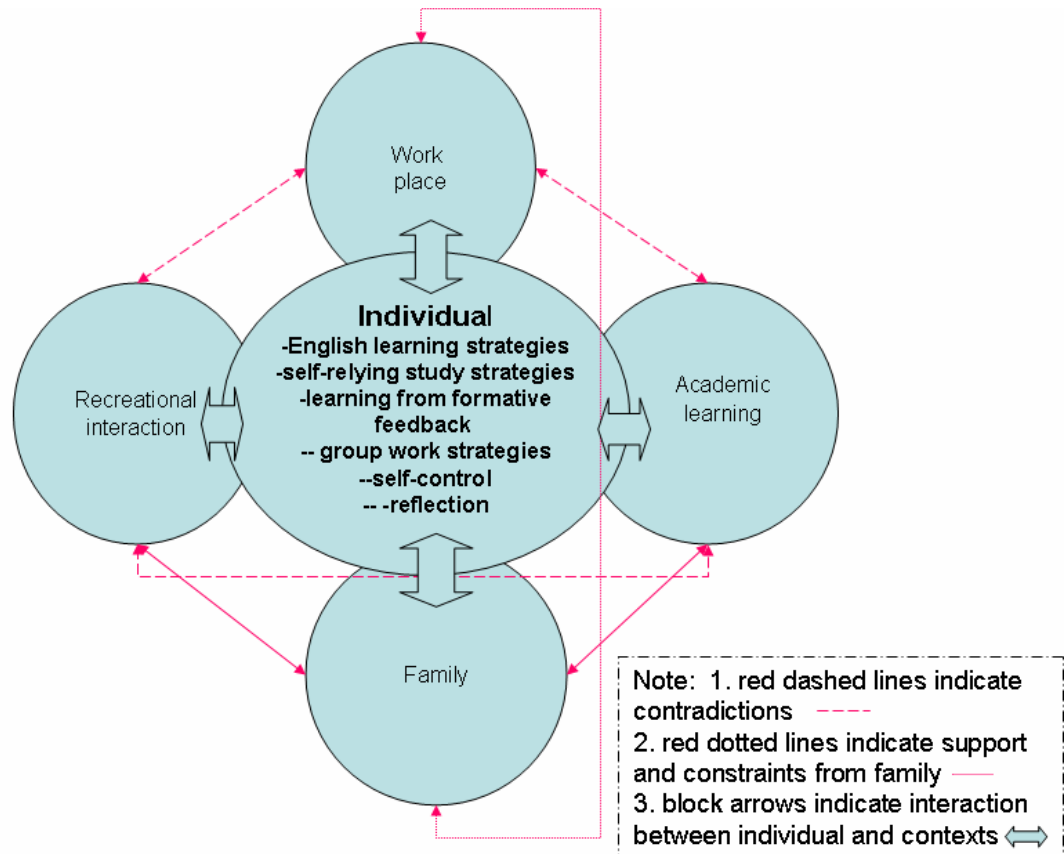
Secondly, to support their academic learning, many strategies were developed. Specifically, in order to improve lecture comprehensibility, the strategies the participants frequently drew on comprised previewing the subject by reading the reference books or handouts before the class; reviewing lecture notes after class; reading learning materials in Chinese first and then reading those in English; asking for peer support or using tutorial time to clarify the confusing points. Some sought tutors' help; for example, S7's enquiry about clarifying lecturing content, which met a response that blamed her for failing to understand during lecture. This case, along with others (see sections 5.2.2.4, 5.5), shows that learning might have been facilitated, given more support from tutors and universities.

Another strategy students developed was to learn from feedback. Although firstly perceiving copious feedback as an indication of poor performance, some of them, at least, were able to change this view and saw formative feedback as it had been intended. Participants in the interpreting course, for example, viewed teachers' feedback as the most important means to identify their weaknesses in language usages and interpreting skills, so as to better their performance. Students in essay-assessed courses, moreover, mixed library resources with teachers' feedback. They (S3 & S13) were found to read books for idea mapping; then based on feedback they revised their structures, identified key books or journal papers for more information, added or deleted evidence or refined arguments. The changes in students' attitudes shows the participants, despite arriving with a particular set of interpretations of a phenomenon based on a different academic culture, were able to adapt to the demands of the new academic culture and use it to good effect, particularly when a supportive learning context was available.

Their exertion of personal agency was also represented in responses to group work. Most participants were found to actively negotiate participation in team work, by drawing on subject knowledge, on diverse resources for gathering of information (such as Chinese websites, Chinese reference books and social networks in China) and on personal skills (such as note taking, organizing and time managing), for which they had been equipped through previous experience. However, although some participants tried different strategies to gain full membership to the group, others gradually chose to withdraw their efforts. Behind the differences were contextual factors which concerned power relations and the impacts of the students' self identity.

In other parts of their lives, we see students exerting agency to reflect on and react to conflicts. In terms of intercultural communication, they were aware of the lack of interaction with English-speaking people, which was contrasting to their expectations. So they actively joined in different societies, social programmes and parties, which were organized either by the university or local communities. Not only did they seize the opportunities provided, but also they created chances to know non-Chinese people. The latter was distinct exemplified by S5 who invited his Mexican flatmate for dinners so as

to 'break the icy relationship'; S13 who looked for English-speaking housemates; S4 and S6 who worked part time to know local people. However, at the end of the course, only two participants succeeded in building a close friendship with non-Chinese people, whereas most of them failed to do so despite their initial efforts (see section 5.2). Again, the reasons were complicated and will be focused on later (see section 5.5)

Similarly, the participants were aware of the conflicts between them and their family. In this respect, they all tried to behave as independent and mature persons who, while respecting the wishes of their parents, managed to achieve personal goals. Here we saw the participants (S1, S6, S8) pursue personal happiness although their parents objected to their relationship with boyfriend/girlfriend. S1, despite knowing her behaviour was morally unacceptable to her parents, lived with her boyfriend. There were financial concerns and the need for emotional support behind this decision. Also the participants planned their careers despite their awareness that their plans did not match parents' expectations.

Thirdly, the research has shown that most participants had a propensity to control their own efforts and work out solutions. The point is well illustrated by their efforts in balancing study and other life commitments, such as paid employment (S10, S8, S7, S11, S1), relationships with family (S1, S5, S4, S6, S8) and social activities (S12). They took personal responsibility for regulating the way in which they approached their studies. Underpinning their active and strategic behaviours were motives like curiosity, enthusiasm, willingness to learn, a sense of responsibility for family and a determination to achieve personal goals.

Specifically, over time, the students developed strategies when facing the growingly complex conflicts between various social activities. Self-control was commonly adopted, with S10 and S8 as distinct examples who sacrificed personal recreation to maximize learning time when they also had to work long hours to earn money. But apart from these, we saw the tendency among some participants to become more strategic in learning: they drew primarily on self-learning skills because working in paid jobs resulted in their absence from lectures or group work (S10), or focused only on the

learning materials relevant to their assignment topics (S3 and S13), rather than overall comprehension of teaching content (S5 and S4). It should be noted that the changes were not necessarily indicators of their reduced motivation in learning; as discussed, they signified the growing pressures from other life commitments. Beneath these changes could be the participants' efforts to balance their multiple objectives of coming to the UK so as to gain the optimal overall benefits (see section 5.5).

Another point to be noted is that such agential action usually had undesirable emotional effects, such as '*tension, resistance, pain, loss and insecurity*' (Engestrom, 2006:29). As discussed in the last section (see section 5.3.1), when handling intensive masters' courses, the students had to work hard to overcome various difficulties emerging from their personal lives and cope with the trauma of 'being Otherised' both on and off campus. All these had physically and psychologically adverse impacts on their studies, despite their conscious efforts to minimize such effects. This point is particularly significant for the process of the participants' construction and reconstruction of their identities, which will be focused on in the next section (see section 5.4).

It is also worth noting that not all participants were able to manage well a work/life balance (see sections 4.4, 5.5). S2, after finding the course content too difficult to comprehend, indulged herself in computer games and then failed four units at the end of the first semester. S4, because of working for significant hours in paid jobs, failed to carry out her dissertation research and then had to fake the data to complete the thesis. Similarly, S13 extended the time to complete her dissertation partly because of working too long in a part-time job, partly due to the difficulties encountered in academic writing. In these cases, students found themselves under great pressure and overwhelming stress. None of them tried to talk about their troubles with university staff, having no idea to whom they should speak and with the uncertainty of whether they can relate their problems to English-speaking tutors. They also kept their problems from friends or family, with a hope the problems could be solved sooner or later and also with a desire not to make others worried about them. The students chose to cope with the troubles themselves; however, their failure to do so shows us that to conquer contextual constraints the availability and adequacy of contextual facilitators are crucial.

5.3.3 *Summary of contextual conflict, individual agency and personal changes*

In this section, I have discussed the conflicts the participants encountered when learning in the UK, how they coped with these conflicts to maximize learning outcomes and how some contextual factors restricted or smoothed their adaptation. It should be noted that these aspects are not presented as distinct issues but as being interlocked and interrelated. My analysis has drawn on social constructionism which advises of the significance of social contexts and their impacts on an individual's development. My analysis has an emphasis on contradictions, in the form of troubles and difficulties that characterize students' diverse experiences; and its emphasis on individual agency as enabling them to reflect on the conflicts and leading them to ongoing growth and development; and that no agency is 'free' of contextual influences. Attention should be paid, therefore, to elements within the environment that are open to manipulation. Further discussion on this issue appears later, in section 5.5.

5.4   Social-constructionism and identity

Social constructionism questions humanistic theories of identity as an essentialist self (Burr, 1995). It illuminates the interrelationship between one's conceptualization of self and the socio-cultural contexts in which one finds oneself (*ibid*). Advocating that identities are constructed in social interaction, social constructionism emphasizes that individuals interpret and re-interpret their identities at the intersection of complex socio-cultural and historical contexts (*ibid*). Drawing on social-constructionism, I stress that Chinese students overseas continually define their sense of self through daily interactions with various contexts. The process is in particular characterised by individual perceptions of emerging conflicts and demands, their reflection on contextual constraints and their efforts to adapt to the new environments with the aid of contextual facilitators. If expressing in a formula, a new self is constructed as a consequence of individual / context communication:

Self + Contextual Factors + Personal Coping Strategies = New Self

In this section, I discuss how my participants formed and reformed their identity. Employing the conceptualization of subjectivity as a site of struggle (Peirce, 1995), I focus on the conflicting contextual factors, particularly the relations of power, and their

influences on the students' identity. Throughout the discussion, emphasis is placed on the changing and multiple nature of identity, based on my identification that, despite difficulties, all participants kept constructing new identities in a web of social relationships so as to survive and achieve in the new contexts. My participants, hence, are conceived of having at least partial agency. They are '*not completely subject of nor completely subject to the power systems within a particular site*' (Peirce, 1995:15). The mutual influences between individual and contexts are presented in diagram 5.5, with the reformed identity (listed in the central bubble) as consequences of social / personal interaction.

Diagram 5.5   Students' experiences in the UK: social / personal interaction and identity formation
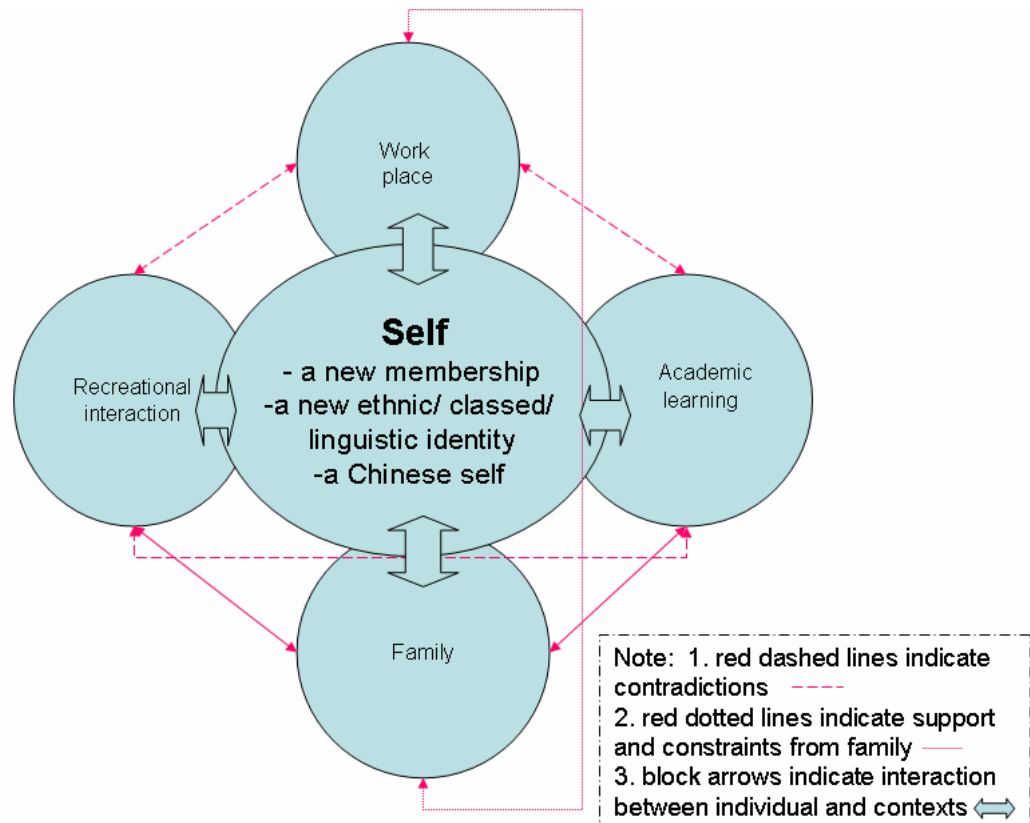
5.4.1   *Asymmetry of power systems and changing self*

Previously, I discussed the challenges the students encountered in the UK. The social contexts in which the students practiced were not peaceful or ideally collaborative; on the contrary, various conflicts arose (see sections 5.3.1, 5.5). In this section, I stress

distinct hierarchical relations of power, and how subject positions shifted within power dynamics.

5.4.1.1 Asymmetrical power system

My study of the participants' lived experiences shows association between identity changes and the financial difficulties, emotional depression and social injustice. Firstly, participants experienced a painful loss, though with variation in degree. All of them were from middle-class or upper-middle-class families in China. Their parents either held high social status or owned a family business, and had provided them with good education and comfortable lives in China. In the UK, however, they had to meet their own daily needs: to cook, wash and shop for groceries, for example. Most of them had to work part-time to support themselves, although the reasons for working could lie in concerns other than the purely financial (see section 4.4.1, 4.4.2). The gap between their lifestyles at home and in the host country led to their nostalgia for the past, although this was sometimes balanced by a certain sense of freedom.

Moreover, all students were Han Chinese, an ethnic group which constitutes over 90% of total population of China (US Department of State, 2008). Before coming to the UK, most of them had been insensitive to racial issues, due to little interaction with minority Chinese groups. This was even true in the case of S11, the only participant growing up in an area where Tibetans are the majority population. In his accounts of his childhood, it was easy to identify the privileges he had enjoyed due to his Han background. When in the UK, the degraded material conditions and social status, which interacted with each other, forced the participants to reposition themselves in new social power network, where they found they were not privileged but members of a coloured, non-English speaking minority. A set of unfavourable emotional responses has been identified from such changes, which included loneliness, anger and hurt pride.

Particularly, their shifted sense of self resulted from experiences of being 'Otherised'. Previously (see section 4.4.3, 4.3.3.4), I presented findings regarding the participants' lived experiences of social exclusion at the work place (S10, S11), in group work (S1, S5), in sporting venues (S9) and in other social gatherings (S6). In such negative

encounters, students' subjectivity was positioned as outsiders and non-member 'others' in the host country, at least in the participants' perception. Here it should be noted that it is the participants' perceptions that matter, whether or not it reflects any 'objective' experiences. My analysis of students' inner voices revealed their suffering, anger, pain and loss when failing to maintain the more favourable images they held in China. It was also one reason why the longer they stayed in the UK, the more the participants missed home and the stronger their decisions to return to China became.

The perceived discrimination and unfair treatments forced the participants to be aware of their marginalized status. This hurt their self-confidence and damaged their positive self-images (see sections 4.3.3, 4.4.3, 4.5.1, 4.5.2). Other consequences were that some of them increasingly separated themselves from 'the British others', based on their perception of essential differences, such as biological characteristics, language, race and 'culture'. In some cases, the formed and reformed stereotypes resulted in a marked tendency towards self-closure and withdrawal into Chinese social networks (e.g. S1, S10).

This point further illuminates our understandings of the issue of reticence. Chinese students are depicted as passive, quiet and timid 'by culture' (e.g. Jordan's depiction of Confucian and Western values as they relate to academic lectures). However, close examination of class teaching contexts, group work and other settings of intercultural communication suggest that silence is often a result of social interaction structured by unequal power relations. Cultural determination is hardly convincing as an account here, as some participants had been active in discussion and oral communication (e.g. S12, S9 and S5) and group work could be very competitive even when there were only Chinese members (see section 4.2.3.1). Neither is silence necessarily an indicator of lack of interest or desire to participate, simply because most students were, at least initially, keen on contributing to group projects or initiating an interaction (e.g. S9, S1). The example of the student (S5) who had worked in Japan is particularly interesting here. His response to group working was in fact one in which he devised means of asserting his own power. That is, he directly and in a calculating manner engaged with the power

relationships, which inevitably emerge in groups, to his own advantage (see section 4.3.4).

The noted point is that although an individual student could be silent for specific reasons in a specific situation, the portrayal of Chinese learners as culturally reticent is an essentialist stereotype. Similarly, other imposed identities are also essentialist expressions, such as seeing the students as incompetent English users, lacking intellectual ability, lacking intercultural understanding and lacking prior teamwork experience. As shown in the findings, these biased labels, real or perceived, marginalized the participants, restricted their activities and discouraged them from participation in learning groups and recreational activities. Moreover, if the labels indeed reflected the situation, they would represent in a particular form racism, which differentiated a group based on fixed cultural characteristics, considering such labels were always assigned to the students by their more powerful interlocutors who were usually the white, native speakers and enjoyed full community membership or dominant leadership in interactions.

5.4.1.2 Negotiating a new identity

The last section discussed how students' favourable self-identities were endangered when facing exclusion from the white mainstream in their daily lives. It should be noted that, as I pointed out in my discussion of the Han / minorities situation, these favourable self-identities have often emerged from a situation of unequal power relationships in China, where the students had enjoyed an advantaged status. In the new contexts, the participants were not passive victims seeing their previous selves being denied. Instead they made every effort to gain control of the power dynamics so as to reposition themselves more desirably, although such attempts can never be completely free from contextual constraints. The following discussion focuses on subjectivity (re)construction, in line with social constructionist arguments for a non-static and changing identity. It also highlights my stress on individual-context interaction, i.e. when students exert agency to negotiate a more favourable self position, their options are always based on their identification and interpretation of the limits of a particular context and their employment of contextual facilitators.

5.4.1.2.1   A new membership

The students show their capacity for agency in negotiating fuller membership in diverse socio-cultural settings. Although their agency was always limited and subject to organizational and institutional constraints, some of them were found to react to their new environments more positively than others. As previously discussed (see section 5.3.2), through using a variety of resources and strategies, they became more proficient. The majority of the participants (11 out of 13) managed to obtain the degree at the end of the course, with one of them graduating with distinction.

Individual differences are worth noting in this context. When facing exclusion, some students experienced more pain than others during the process of redefining themselves. Some withdrew from group discussion, social activities or paid employment whilst others worked much harder to gain recognition in the various communities (see section 4.3.4). There were also some who resisted the bias in more radical ways, by fighting for their own rights (see section 4.4.3). Behind individual differences lies a complex of factors, which comprises curricular, social and psychological elements (see section 5.5). Relevant here is the emphasis on contextual and individual-focused analysis, which reveals how individuals exert agency in the study of the (re)construction of personal identity, and why the differences emerge.

5.4.1.2.2   A Chinese self

Individual identity was multi-layered, with a Chinese self as an important constituent. A year abroad provided chances for students to experience a dual process of learning: an enhanced understanding of the self and an enhanced appreciation of their mother country from a distance. The latter phenomenon included two aspects; that is, the students increased their ability to critically examine Chinese society but meanwhile, increasingly defended themselves from a position of national pride, by criticising the host country from a Chinese perspective. But none of them refused to adapt, or unconditionally stuck to their previous ways of thinking and acting as they had been in China.

Specifically, travelling, shopping and working appeared to be eye-opening experiences. Contact with banking systems, councils, employers, laws and regulations of the host country stimulated the participants to re-evaluate those practices in China. Learning in the UK offered valuable opportunities for them to examine Chinese society from the perspective of outsiders. For instance, S6 and S13 were surprised at the safety training in their part-time jobs and felt the protection of employees' health and rights was something Chinese companies need to improve; others commonly commented on issues concerning the large population, unsatisfactory national education level, widespread corruption and a pressing need to improve the legislation and justice system in China. Regarding academic learning, S8 expressed worries about the Chinese authoritative and examination-oriented teaching, particularly in English learning and at the pre-tertiary level. Some students, particularly those who benefited from formative feedback (S5, S13, S3 and S1), appreciated an emphasis on critical thinking and strict referencing practices in British academic culture, the latter of which they thought should be introduced to China, because such practices show respect to authors. All the points could not have been identified or examined to such an extent if they were still in their former social context.

Yet, in other aspects, students developed a deep appreciation of their homeland when facing hardship in the UK. A strong sense of national pride was noticed among all participants. For example, the participants were encouraged by the growing prosperity of China (S11, S9 and S3). They made comparisons between China and Britain and identified many unfavourable aspects of their lives in Britain. Also, students in scientific disciplines, such as engineering (S10), computer science (S9), finance and accounting (S8), were not satisfied with the teaching content of the courses which they felt was merely at a level of undergraduate education in China.

Overall, the students' identity as being Chinese was strengthened in the UK. This is partly because they were in frequent contact with Chinese people and also entertained themselves mainly, if not only, with Chinese media. The contact and media provided a context within which the renewed national pride emerged. But these were not the sole causes: if the students had remained in China they would have had even more contact

with Chinese media and people, but their sense of national pride may not have developed in the same way.

An enhanced appreciation of motherland was a mechanism for maintaining a sense of self-esteem or self-worth (see Parker, 1992). It was a significant tool for survival in the UK. To respond to the differences between their racial and ethnic status in China and in the host country, they tended to assert the superiority of their mother land in whatever ways they can find. It was by locating themselves in certain aspects as being superior to English speaking British students and by finding something to be proud of, that they gained confidence and then were able to engage with difficulties throughout the year abroad.

This helps to explain why there was always a dramatically enhanced sense of national identity when the participants were facing unfair treatment, exclusion or racism. For example, it was after being shouted at by British managers for no perceived reason that S8 commented that 'the Chinese people' were good at enduring hardship without complaints; it was after being unable to communicate effectively in group work that S5 categorized 'the Chinese' as more intellectually able than other nationalities, although having language problems. Repeated expressions like 'we Chinese' and 'other British/foreigners' reflected more their intentions to regain strength and self-confidence so as to survive those biased experiences. These observations support Dirlik's (1995) and Holliday's (2004, see also section 2.3.3.6) arguments about self-stereotypes, which are manipulated by individuals, depending on how they want themselves to be perceived in a certain situation.

5.4.1.2.3   New ethnic/ classed/ linguistic identities

In the previous section I presented extra difficulties the participants were faced with in lecture rooms, in group projects, at workplaces, in job-hunting and in initiating as well as maintaining intercultural, interpersonal relationships (see section 5.3.1). Above, I discussed the students' stress on a Chinese self, which arose partly from their resigned recognition of an assigned unequal social status from their 'Otherised' experiences,

mainly because of their efforts to negotiate a more comfortable space in the web of asymmetrical power relations.

Similarly, students developed new ethnic/classed/linguistic identities, which were also both a 'have to' and 'would like to' choice. For while the identities were partly indicators of inferior positions as ascribed by privileged but prejudiced members (e.g. non-native speakers, less experienced group members, quiet and passive nationals, inactive and physically weak people and so on), they also emerged from students' determination to escape their marginalized positions, to survive and achieve despite these 'Otherisation' treatments.

One instance is that in spite of generally limited intercultural interaction, the participants found it easier to initiate a friendship with other international groups, particularly those from Asian countries, from 'third world' countries and those who were non-white or non-native English speakers. In particular, they felt they had been socialized into value systems similar to those from CHC countries and regions. The sense of common 'cultural roots', in terms of reverence for education, being hardworking and valuing filial piety, was believed to bind them together with Taiwanese, Japanese and Thai students whilst distancing them from mainstream British students. It is noteworthy that in such cases the participants were adopting the cultural essentialist, stereotyped labels for themselves. The self-essentialism could confirm the cultural stereotypes held by host people, which would strengthen intercultural misunderstanding and further impact intercultural communication.

Moreover, holding a similar status to other EFL learners and 'foreign' students, the respondents had more in common with other international groups and felt more comfortable to start, develop and maintain closer relationships, bearing in mind their desire for intercultural communication and a willingness to practice English (e.g. S8's business partnership with a Mexican colleague, S4's friendship with her Nigerian flatmate and S13's preference to sit beside Greek classmates in lectures and her choice to live with non-native, foreign students). The study shows that by emphasizing and participating in this sort of interpersonal interaction, the students constructed an ethnic

identity as Asian people, a classed identity, as foreign and as inferior students and a linguistic identity as ESL learners.

The findings hence question the essentialist conceptualization of collective/social identity as a shared quality which emerges from fixed physical or psychological attributes, or unified and unique group experiences (Cerulo, 1997). It confirms the social-constructionist idea that an ethnic boundary is socially negotiated and continuously revised, both by the choice of the individuals and by the ascription of others; and that group identity is built on visible artefacts like language and appearance and cultural practices but always centres on invisible power distinctions (Nagel, 1994). The creation of meanings of 'us-ness' (the Chinese, Asian, foreign and non-native speakers) and 'them-ness' (the British, white, English speaking students) particularly reflect the interface between agency and larger social structures (see section 5.5). Students draw their boundaries as either a defensive or achieving strategy and redefined their selves based on perceived cultural affiliation or demographic similarities; meanwhile, they were subject to external pressures in social and economic factors (such as educational policy, hiring practices and immigration control and so on) that kept forming and transforming their definitions of group categories (Nagel, 1994). In all, their interpretations of collective identities are situated and fluid, moulded and mobilized in accordance with their perceptions of contexts and their comparative power positions in the web of variable relations.

5.4.2   *Summary of contextual influences and students' identity*

In this section, I explored the subtle processes by which the participants negotiated and renewed their identities: learning abroad becomes a turning point where students underwent dramatic changes to their understanding of selves in social contexts which were different from those to which they had been used. More specifically, higher education in the UK provided valuable opportunities for self-exploration and self-development: they lived far away from parents, met different people, came upon new ideas and experienced diverse life styles. These pushed them to examine themselves and negotiate an appropriate relationship with parents. Simultaneously, the students suffered a lot when their previous identities were redefined with unfavourable elements like

linguistically incompetent speakers, ethnic minority people and academically less experienced learners. The losses and pains can sometimes be severe when they encountered explicit raced and classed prejudices inside or outside campus. In response to unfair treatments, they differentiated 'us', the Chinese and the foreign students, from 'them', the British, Westerners, white, English native-speakers, with a consequent growing national pride in their homeland. Although being a crucial survival strategy in the UK, the 'us/them' boundary they drew further restricted their integration in the host country.

Hence, such a response to biased treatments would counteract the aims of intercultural communication and the internationalized higher education if the participants go back to China with a newly developed racist attitude, such as the Chinese should be the superior race. But it would be positive effects if they could reflect on their experience and learn something that goes beyond their own sense of discomfort, for example, by using their experiences to reflect on issues of social inequality in China.

5.5   Reflection: social-constructionism, agency and contexts

To conclude the discussion, I shall state my position in dealing with the issues of agency and contexts. Both are extremely complex concepts upon which debate continues. My attempt is based solely on my study of Chinese students in the UK and the findings I have obtained.

To understand Chinese students' experiences in the UK, I had to deal with the issue of human agency to investigate how personal development is achieved under different circumstances. On the one hand, social constructionism, with its stress on contextual elements, provides me with critical tools to problematise essentialist views of 'the Chinese learner'. On the other hand, I am aware of the criticism against social constructionism, which has been questioned for its inability to address the issue of human agency.   The criticism arises from the fundamental conception of social constructionism; that is, if human beings and the social world are nothing but the demonstration of various discourses, then individuals would have no opportunity or capacity to change their situations.

One such critique comes from Archer (2000), who has called for the avoidance of so-called *downwards conflation* in social science studies. Downward conflation refers to the post-structuralist stance, in which people are perceived as entirely social beings, constructed through discourses and hence having no real power of agency at all. For Archer, the danger of downward conflation is as serious as upward conflation, i.e. the tendency to over-emphasize individual power but ignore the influences at the social or cultural level. Social constructionism, in particular, is blamed in that it 'impoverishes humanity, by subtracting from our human powers and accrediting all of them –selfhood, reflexivity, thought, memory and emotionality- to society's discourse' (2000:4). Advocating the recognition of human powers throughout her books, Archer tries to theorize human agency in a way which stresses both a socially constructed self and a non-discursive coherent self. Without necessarily denying the discursive power of society, she argues for the 're-emergence of humanity' (Archer, 2000). Individuals, as she presents them, are agents who have real properties and powers, and who can exercise such powers (one exercises powers rather than properties) to act reflexively in the world, evaluate their social contexts and bring about the transformation.

My understanding of social constructionism differs from that which Archer portrays, however. I argue that social constructionism, particularly its weak version (see Sayer, 1997), always allows room for the power of human beings. As such her criticism is only applicable to an extreme form of social constructionism, which, however, is 'denied by social constructionists who are concerned with change' (Burr, 1995:90). According to Burr, even Foucault, whose conceptualisation of human beings has been criticized as 'the death of the subject', could possibly be being misinterpreted, in that for him, the subjects are still able to analyse discourses critically and use them for their own purposes. Similarly, Potter & Wetherell's (1987) concept of 'interpretative repertoires', (i.e. a collection of linguistic devices), equips the person with a power of agency, since those who share a language can choose particular forms of representations and construct accounts to reach their immediate goals. Moreover, Gergen's notion of 'discourse-users' (see Burr, 1995) describes individuals as those who are able to choose among competing discourses so as to present events and themselves in a more desired way.

Therefore, changes, according to social constructionism, are realized through personal agency.

In addition, drawing on deconstructionism, the social constructionsim I hold up is one which dissolves the binaries of agency/structure. Burr (1995:108), for example, by using Sampton's (1989) concept of 'individual/society as an ecosystem', suggests a unity of individual and structure as a solution for the problem of agency. Similarly, Gergen (1999b) argues that the concept of agency can only be realized and must be perceived within social relations. By dissolving the dichotomies, agency and structure are bound up and, as Burr points out, one is as important as the other. Adopting this line of thinking, the arguments of Archer (2000) can be in fact seen as compatible with social constructionism. This is because the former stresses that structure and agency as well as objectivity and subjectivity are inextricably intertwined, that is, 'human subjective power only emerges through our embodied interplay with the objective world' (Archer, 2000:312) and 'referential reflexivity in which we ponder upon the world … is and should be within it' (ibid, p315). My argument echoes Lane's (2001) position in the agency/structure debate. The latter points out that both Archer and social constructionism, for example, the work of Berger & Luckmann (1971:294), reject both '*determinism*' which emphasises structural influences and '*voluntarism*' which stresses contextual agency; in other words, they share an aim towards the integration of the human agent and system structures.

More importantly, my point is supported by my findings. Previously, I have proposed a dialectical approach in my literature review towards a deepened understanding of the society / agency relation (see section 2.4.2). At that time, by the dialectic, I refer to the method which equally stresses the power of context and individual agency. As shown in diagram 5.6, contextual factors have influences on individuals, while individuals as autonomous agents can always be able to act on social influences. Hence, social phenomena are not purely formed by individuals; nor is an individual completely formed by society.

Diagram 5.6 Individual / context interaction
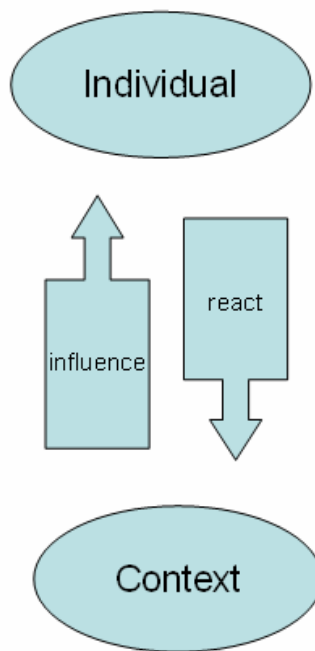
However, simply admitting a dual effect between agency and structure is not satisfactory. It by itself cannot adequately explain the distinct individual differences in terms of personal changes over time. It is for this reason that this diagram needs to be developed. Drawing on previous discussion, I propose the following model which may better explain the interaction and interconnection between the individual as an agent and contextual constraints, when considering a specific context at a certain time.

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In this developed model, any behaviour of an individual in reaction to a given contextual factor is perceived as comprising two steps: the internalisation of external constrains by reflexivity and the externalisation of the internalised knowledge about the context through action. In previous discussion, we have talked about how individual students commented on the various constraints in the contexts they worked, which were presented as English being a language of instruction, unfamiliar norms and educational practices, unfamiliar subject knowledge and insufficient tutor support; and how these factors conflicted with their expectations (see section 5.3.1). Also we have discussed how individuals, based on their recognition of the conflicts, developed strategies and skills to cope with the difficulties (see section 5.3.2). The dialectical relation between

internalisation and externalisation, in which I have been influenced by Vygotsky (1978), Berger & Luckmann (1971) & Bourdieu (1977)[6], helps to reconcile structure and agency.

Diagram 5.7 Dialectical relationship between individual agency and contextual influences

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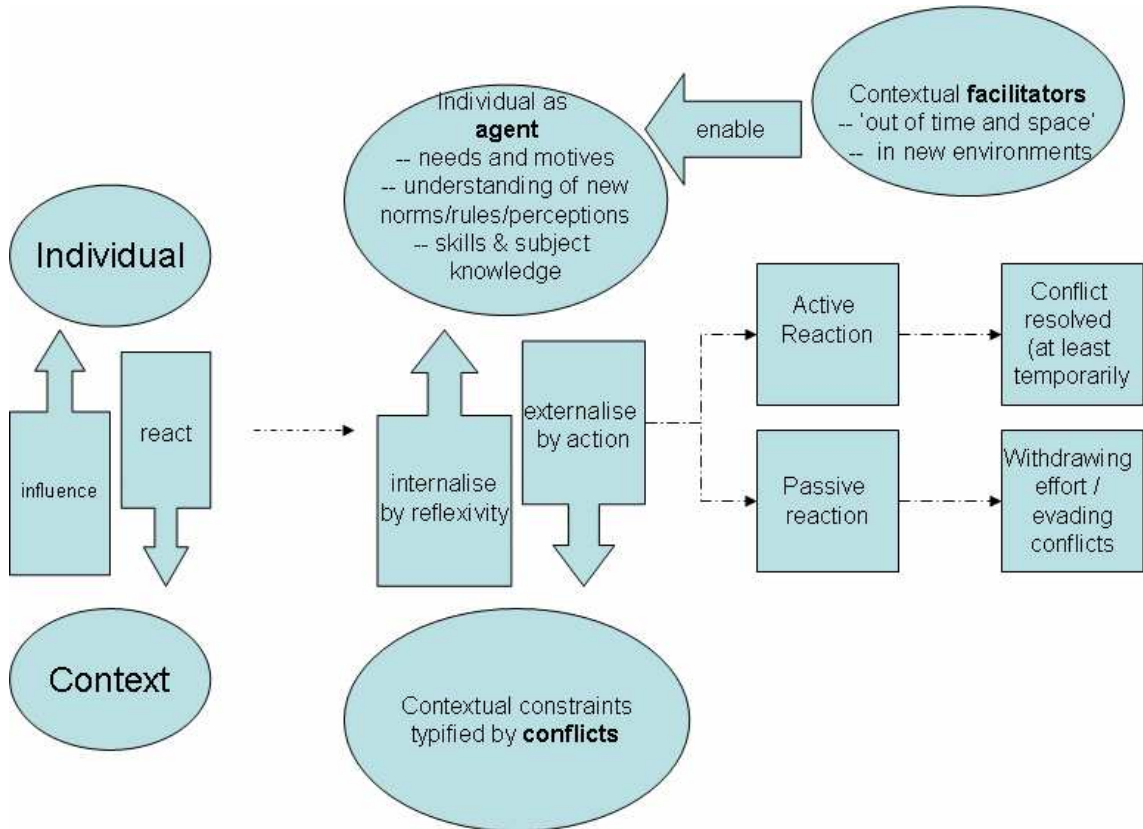
[6] Vygotsky (1978) depicts internalisation and externalisation as a general mechanism underlying mental process where human beings internalize cultural meanings and externalize novel ideas through social interaction; Berger & Luckmann (1971) dissolve the agency/structure dichotomy by presenting an on-going dialect process (Lane, 2001), that is, *institutions control human conduct by setting up pre-defined patterns of behaviours* (p72); the social world becomes *objectively real* by internalisation while individuals *simultaneously externalise their own being into the social world* (p149). Similarly, Bourdieu (1977) rejects both subjectivism and objectivism, which view the world as reproduced either by structure or by individuals. In his work (1977) individuals internalise external structures into the *Habitus*, a set of knowledge and dispositions, and externalise interpersonal interactions into *Field*, a network of social relationships where strategies are used for resources (see Lane, 2001).

Then in this model, I stress three key elements which, in my research, have decided to what extent the participants effectively worked on contextual constraints and achieved personal goals. The first element is the existence of conflicts, or the recognition of such existence. As already discussed, I hold that it was not only the difficulties themselves but, more significantly, the conflicts between the difficulties and the students' needs that stimulated the changes. Conflicts at different levels featured contextual influences and stimulated individual reactions. The second element is diverse sorts of facilitators existing in a given context. In other words, the contexts both constrained and facilitated individual actions. This facilitation may be presented as various sources, such as Chinese textbooks, websites, money, university facilities. It can also be embodied as various social relations, such as those with lovers and family which provided emotional support, with Chinese peers and British staff which gave academic support, with university authorities which gave logistic support, etc. It should be noted that some relationships could be across 'space-time' (Giddens, 1984), for example family support, or attached to the given new context, for example the support from a British tutor.

The third element concerns the individual's inner world. It combines an individual's biological nature, psychological condition – for example personality – and more importantly, the individual's ability to think, analyse and reflex. My findings are in line with Berger & Luckmann's (1971) stress on the reflexivity-mediated internalisation. That is, individual participants internalised the 'external' based on the existing understanding of social rules and norms through prior socialisation and the already acquired skills and subject knowledge from prior experiences. Reflexivity produced new understandings and interpretations of the context. The findings are also in line with Gidden's (1984) argument that due to the application of reflexivity a person's action based on new understanding became diverse and unpredictable.

Bearing these three key elements in mind, I argue that only when the conflicts exist in the context, when the student has sufficient drive and adequate knowledge (in terms of skills, subject knowledge, language proficiency and the familiarity with norms and

value systems), and when sufficient contextual facilitators are available that he/she could powerfully act / react on the context and realize personal goals.

Now we are able to explain the individual differences we have noticed in various contexts. That is, why some participants reacted passively to the negative contextual influences while others managed to engage more actively. My interpretation is that for the former, one or more of the three factors enabling individual change may be missing: there is no awareness of the conflict, appropriate facilitators are unavailable or the individual's capacity for self-agency is inadequate. For example, the students maintaining concern about lecture comprehensibility, such as S1, S6 and S8, had obviously stronger expectations of academic achievement than those who did not, like S2 & S4, and hence faced a more radical conflict regarding their academic-related expectations and the learning difficulties they faced to achieve it. These conflicts forcibly energised their human agency. Moreover, some participants, noticeably S5 and S9, had been equipped with more adequate subject knowledge, effective teamwork skills and more material resources to draw on, for example, Japanese websites or Chinese equivalent reference books; they, hence, were more capable to improve their comprehension or to negotiate a fuller membership in a heterogeneous learning group (see section 4.3.4).

Apart from the discussion focusing on an individual's handling of a certain conflict in a certain context, I want to stress that any individual, as already revealed, is actually situated in a network of various social contexts typified by various conflicts, as diagram 5.8 indicates:

Diagram 5.8   Network of conflicts and individual changes
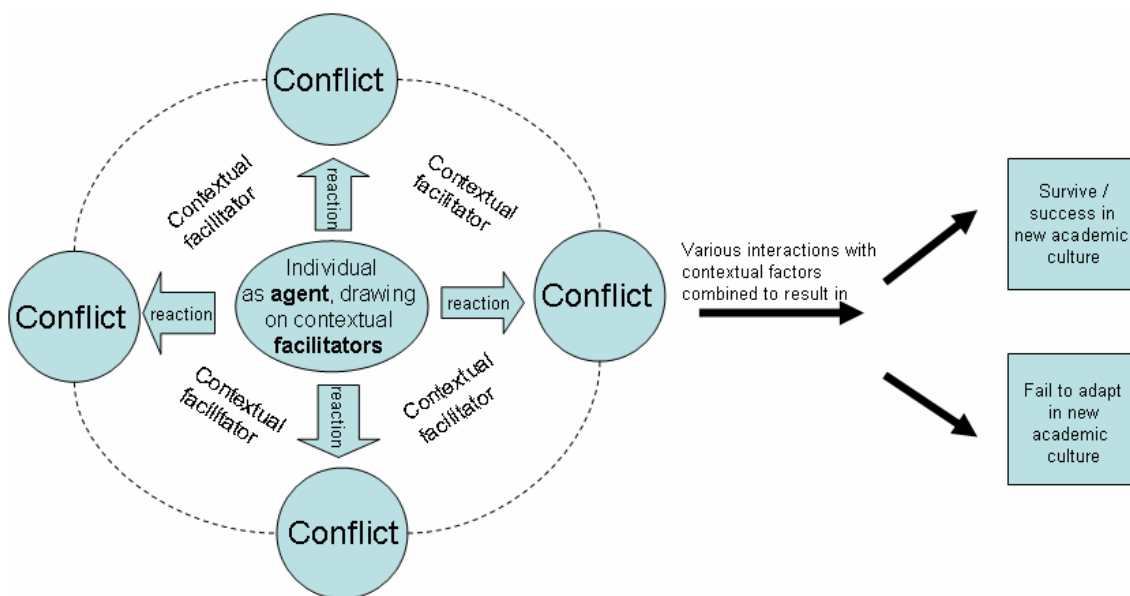
Previously we have discussed a range of conflicts one may encounter in one's continuous interaction with various social contexts (see section 5.3.1). Simultaneously dealing with various conflicts, one may act more actively in one context but comparatively more passively in another. In my interpretation of events in this research, this is because all conflicts did not bear equal significance to any individual participant; that is, at a given time, some conflicts were perceived to be more crucial and, therefore, became the priority for the individual to cope with; over time different conflicts can be treated as major conflicts to which a participant's main attention turned. It was also because in some contexts more contextual facilitators, in terms of both material resources and supportive social relationship, were more available and accessible than in other contexts; hence the agency was better enabled in such situations than in others. In all, throughout the courses it was the accumulated affects of one's efforts to seize the available facilitators to resolve different conflicts, particularly the dominant ones, which led to an individual's changes.

This then gives explanation for individual differences among the participants in terms of academic achievement and adaptation to lives in Britain. Specifically, we saw S12's

success in learning and in intercultural friend-making. As already discussed, it was because of her need to make non-Chinese friends matched her cognitive and linguistic needs as a professional interpreter and her emotional needs, given little love from her split family. On the other hand, her better language skills, her personality and even her hobby of dancing enabled her exertion of agency, for example, to play an active role in various socialising contexts. Hence, in this case, personal motives, capacities and contextual facilitators interweaved congruently, all of which contributed to her successful resolution of different conflicts.

In contrast, for some participants (S3, S6, S7, S9), the conflict between academic expectation and the difficulties of learning remained the primary concern throughout the course. The need to resolve this dominant conflict stimulated the students' effort in learning. Besides, despite the generally inadequate staff support, these students were able to draw on self-study skills, Chinese peer support and Chinese learning references, which enabled their agency. By contrast, in recreational interaction venues, they were found to be more vulnerable. They lacked English proficiency and familiarity with the new social norms and, more importantly, their participation depended mainly on the attitudes of potential local interlocutors. Hence, although these students engaged actively in academic learning, they were more reserved and less motivated in terms of socialising. They easily gave up in their efforts to initiate intercultural friendship, when faced with difficulties in doing so.

In other cases, the students (S1, S4, S5, S8, S10, S11) stressed equally the needs of academic achievement, English learning and intercultural interaction at the beginning of the course. However, their efforts to practice English, to take part in team work and to make non-Chinese friends were gradually reduced. This was, however, not only due to the growing pressures from lecture comprehension and assessment, but also because they worked for significantly long hours in paid jobs. That is, for these students, over time the primary conflicts switched from balancing study and intercultural communication to balancing between learning and working for money. Drawing on themselves to reduce various tensions, they became consciously or unconsciously strategic in learning, for example, learning for the sake of examination, and also

compromised their needs for intercultural communication; they also withdrew their efforts in group work and in building new friendships. Given little support and advice, it was a survival strategy in the new living and learning environments.

Although the majority of the participants managed to succeed or survive in the new environments, two students failed to complete their masters' course (see section 5.3.3). In these two cases, we saw various conflicts between academic work, paid employment and academic learning which intensified over time and became overwhelming in the end. Specifically, S2 was troubled by subject learning and unlike the others, she did not work very hard. Despite her awareness of potentially negative consequences, she was found to evade the conflicts by hiding herself in socialising and computer games. This was partly because of her lacking motivation to exert agency: thinking of herself as the consumer of the British higher education commodity, she took it for granted that she would never fail the course. But also there were few contextual facilitators available to her, such as one-to-one supervision by her academic tutors or warnings from peer students to help her build more realistic perceptions of the British academic standards, until it was too late.

In the other case, we see a student who was hardworking, highly motivated, very determined and extremely self-disciplined to achieve. Being introverted, however, she avoided social gatherings with Chinese classmates. Also, aiming to be independent, she seldom made phone calls to her parents. Hence, she lacked emotional support which was crucial to cope with conflicts (see section 5.3.2). Moreover, unlike others who were more strategic, S13 tried to focus on different life commitments and forced herself to engage actively so as to succeed in all contexts. The pressures from part-time working, from learning in a new subject, from speaking English and interacting with non-Chinese interweaved with each other. Over time conflicts became growingly severe with none of them being effectively resolved. This finally pushed her to the verge of breaking down. In all, S13's failure to resist contextual constraints effectively was due to a lack of skills and knowledge (for example, subject knowledge, interpersonal skills and pressure management skills) to facilitate the employment of agency, to psychological factors which may in turn relate to personality and the capacity to exert individual agency to

resolve severe conflicts – the aspect of mental health was not a focus of this thesis but deserving of further research – and then to a lack of care and emotional support which could have help to reduce her depression and anxiety.

5.6   Summary of chapter 5

Drawing on social-constructionism, I have tried to understand Chinese students' learning experiences and their identity formation (and transformation) by stressing the dialectical relationship between contexts and human agency. My discussion supports my advocacy of an individual-focused and context-situated approach (see section 2.2.4). Such an approach helps to identify various conflicts which an individual faces when interacting with contexts. I also argue for attention to the multiple factors which influence whether the individual can effectively break through the conflicts and realize personal goals. Such factors include whether an individual has strong motives, adequate knowledge and sufficient contextual facilitators. My findings oppose extreme emphasis on either human agency or system structure without referring to a specific individual at a specific time or place. I also argue that in following this line of thinking, the arguments of social constructionism and its critics are in fact united.

6 CONCLUSION: SO WHY IS 'THE CHINESE' LABEL ERRONEOUS?

To maintain their appeal to the Chinese market, British higher education institutions are now under pressure to deepen their understanding of students in / from China. However, driven mainly by market concerns, the research conducted by British academics generally starts from an over-simplified interpretation of Chinese culture and ends in arguably ethnocentric and cultural stereotypes of 'the Chinese learner'.

Recently a non-essentialist perspective based on post-structuralist discourse theory and cultural studies has been stressed by educators in their attempts to re-interpret Chinese learners' learning behaviours (Grimshaw, 2007). Seminal work includes that of Holliday (1999), Kumaravadivelu (2003), Clark & Gieve (2006) and Stephens (1997). Bearing a distinctly anti-essentialist core, this research challenges the practices which categorize learners on the basis of geographical origins or ethnic background, thereby generating an opposing binary pair of 'the Western/British' and 'the Eastern/Chinese' student against fixed cultural scripts. Aware of the inadequacy of a fixed interpretation of Chinese culture, these researchers call for situated study to explore individual Chinese students' learning experiences. However, their arguments need to be demonstrated in empirical studies, as I have done in my study. Only through a close examination of everyday lived experiences can the misperceptions of Chinese students be effectively illuminated and challenged.

My thesis has therefore centred on the daily experiences of 13 postgraduate Chinese students, with the objective of presenting a corrective to the stereotypical labelling of 'the Chinese learner'. My starting point has been the social constructionist's understandings of culture, which is perceived as open and changeable and with Eastern and Western cultures being interactive and inter-permeable. I also began – and maintained throughout – a perception of young Chinese students as distinctive individuals, who act as agents to change, develop and negotiate subjective positions

based on their personal interpretation of the learning contexts in which they are involved.

To conclude the thesis, I summarize the findings in this chapter. Following this summary, I suggest a model to facilitate better understanding of students from China. It must be noted that I do not intend to create a mold to shape our knowledge and interpretation of the experiences of all Chinese students. It is my firm belief that no such mold exists; otherwise stereotypes would emerge from its application. I do hope, however, that my framework will provide an alternative tool for examining Chinese students' learning behaviours in the UK and can contribute to future study in the field.

I then go on to reflect upon the dialectical framework which I put forward in chapter 2. Drawing on the findings, I discuss how I catch the processes of learning and changing through a simultaneous analysis of individual differences and shared commonalities, how I reflect dialectically on individual identities and finally, how I approach the concept of 'culture'. Finally, I stress methodological issues. I argue that context-based, individual-centered and process-oriented methodologies will problematise cultural essentialist discourses and will contribute to deepened understandings of students from China.

6.1   Participants' experiences in various contexts

During their stay in the UK, the participants were found to perform in a variety of social contexts, ranging from lecture rooms and learning groups to recreational parties and work places. It was through the interaction with all these contexts on a day-to-day basis that these students gradually constructed their understanding of the host society. To start this conclusion chapter, I briefly recap on the experiences of the participants in these contexts, which have been presented in detail in chapter 4 and analysed synthetically in chapter 5. In particular, I call attention to the interrelationship between different contexts. The influences from various contexts combined and affected the participants' learning and led to the changes that took place in themselves.

6.1.1 Academic learning

When these students learned in the UK, they were exposed to a mixture of teaching practices, including lecturing, collaborative group learning, tutorials and teaching via formative feedback. Among all the challenges, insufficient English language proficiency appeared to be the most commonly reported. All participants complained that they were troubled by inadequate language skills, although to different degrees. Specifically, they were found struggling to understand the delivered information in lecture rooms and also were confronted with communicative difficulties when working with native English speakers in learning groups. To make the situation worse, exposure to new information, concepts and knowledge caused problems. In addition, to those who encountered formative assessment, the learning practice was a new and, to some extent, a shocking experience. The formative feedback, both in written form on students' academic writing and in vocal form such as the teachers' on-the-spot evaluation of interpreting performance hurt the participants, at least at the beginning of the courses.

It should be noted that although acknowledging the students faced academic challenges, my data leads me to disagree with the arguments which advocate absolute differences in conceptualizing learning between the West/UK and the East/China (see also Scherto, 2005). Some authors, such as Cortazzi and Jin (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a,b; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998b, 2006a), advocate incompatible and opposing cultures of learning between the UK and China, with the former stressing novelty, self-exploration and a critical approach and the latter centring on repetition, memorization, recitation and reliance on authority (see also Scherto, 2005). The findings in my research show that such dichotomous description of British and Chinese educational values, as these authors suggest, are simply essentialist stereotypes. They cause as many problems as they might resolve, hence must be cautiously analysed. In my findings, for example, we see the students learning in the science and engineering departments were mainly taught through lectures, characterised by a 'chalk and talk' style, which was similar to what they had been used to in China. Also some participants reported the familiarity of the teaching content and consequently felt dissatisfied with it. In addition, while those

assessed by writing might have been hesitant to write in a critical manner, particularly at the beginning of the course, this was simply because writing critically was less acceptable in China or it was less demanded in their prior education. When in the UK, however, the students gradually adapted to this, learning what they needed to demonstrate in order to succeed. Hence, a reluctance to write critically should not be interpreted as indicating these students were incapable of critical reflection; over time the participants were able to do so, particularly with support in the form of formative feedback. The findings reveal their adaptability to the requirements of the particular academic context. All my participants, in fact, were aware of the conflicts between their weaknesses and their academic expectations in the UK; given a change in that context and sufficient facilitators, they were able to adapt to that change (see sections 5.3, 5.5).

It also deserves noting that, although some students were supported by formative feedback, in most cases they commented on a lack of tutors' support, either academically or emotionally, or both. Despite their emphasis on autonomous learning, all of the participants suffered from pressure and anxiety, only differing in degree (see sections 4.2.2.2, 4.3.5, 5.3.2). In most cases academic pressure linked with the pressure from other aspects of their lives, for example, paid jobs and interpersonal relations, all of which combined and affected the students' engagement in learning (see sections 5.3, 5.5). This interrelationship of experiences and behaviours leads me to recognise the need for a holistic view of students' lives in order to interpret their perceptions of and participation in learning and forms the basis of the model that I tentatively propose and discuss later (see section 6.2).

6.1.2   *Work places*

In the research, most of the participants worked on a part-time basis in their spare time. The reasons for engaging in paid employment ranged from financial concerns to a desire to speak more English and meet people. In addition, in one case (S2), working for money was required of her by her father, despite his being a senior manager of a big state-owned plant in China. This suggests that the reasons for taking on a part-time job may be related not just to personal financial concerns but to complex, social and

political factors, given the situation that the Chinese government is taking harsh measures to control corruption (see sections 4.4.1, 4.4.2).

The workplace experiences did have some positive influences. According to the participants, part-time employment provided chances to work together with local people so as to observe and experience the host society from a new perspective. In fact, it was in a paid job that one student (S8) made friends with a non-Chinese workmate (see section 4.5.3.1). Moreover, this enabled them to support themselves financially, at least partially, which was seen as a critical step to self-dependence. In addition, they interpreted the hardships they experienced in workplaces as contributing significantly towards their personal maturity (see section 4.4.4).

The negative influences cannot be ignored. In some cases, work significantly impacted the students' learning performance and their sense of being. Relevant to my thesis is the conflict they experienced between working and studying. Working for significantly long hours, some participants absented themselves from lectures, rushed assignments and reduced their efforts in group study. Besides, they complained more about physical tiredness and were found to need longer time for sleeping and social gathering for recovery (see section 4.4.3). Although most participants did managed to balance different demands, these students, to different extents, had reported emotional sufferings. Two students in this study failed to do maintain the balance. The reasons were complicated, ranging from individual personality, inappropriate interpretation of academic standards in the UK, preferences to gain working experience which would enhance their employability, to the availability of academic and emotional support (see section 5.5).

6.1.3   Recreational interaction

Drawing on its holistic perspective, the research reveals the significant contextual influences on students' intercultural interactions. Three patterns have been identified. In the first group, we see the students who were more introverted, under pressure from either long hours in a paid job or family expectations of their academic performance and marriage behaviours. Busy with part-time work or subject learning, they did not have

spare time to communicate with local or other international students; relying on self-learning methods, they lacked the cognitive need to cooperate with other nationals; having a stable intimate relationship with a Chinese partner, they did not face emotional needs that might have encouraged them to build intercultural friendships. Such students who had little contact with people of other nationalities were likely to develop cultural stereotypes. Once their stereotypical views were confirmed in daily prejudiced encounters, they were likely to bind themselves more tightly to Chinese social networks (see section 4.5.1).

In the second group, by contrast, we see the students who brought with them expectations of developing English proficiency and getting to know people from different backgrounds. For these students, the channels to initiate an intercultural friendship included social events organized by the university, mentor programmes organized by international office and informal contacts in the university accommodation. However, on most of occasions, they were troubled by their lower competence level in English, and were also inhibited by the perceived indifferent attitudes of native English speakers. Given the increasing pressure from the academic study, they gradually withdrew their efforts and communicated mainly with Chinese students (see section 4.5.2).

The experiences of students in the third group (comprising just two students) are consistent with research on relationship development; they confirm that frequent contact, self-disclosure, personal similarity and empathetic attitudes of other nationals can play key roles in developing intercultural and interpersonal closeness (see Eiko, 2006; Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Moreover, the social settings in which these two students participated helped to propel them into significant intercultural interaction. For S8, as a major in banking and accounting, his friendship with another international student was facilitated by their mutual interest in business. Given that she was learning in a professional interpreting course, S12 had more insistent and pressing needs to speak English and understand the target culture; her salsa enthusiasm, opened more channels to meet local people, including joining the salsa society, pubbing and clubbing; growing up in a split

family, she felt stronger emotional needs for love and care. All these factors combining together pushed her to initiate and maintain intimate relationships with British people (see section 4.5.3).

In summary, the participants did not learn in a vacuum when in the UK. They bore with them multiple objectives for their experience of learning abroad. Their daily experiences in the UK were characterised by their constant transferring between different contexts, their reflection on difficulties and their determination to maximally achieve their objectives, but they were faced with diverse contextual constraints. To what extent they could powerfully re-act on the contexts was subject to various factors. The dialectics of contextual influences and individual agency, and how the dynamics resulted in the participants' different learning outcomes have been explored in detail in chapter 5 (see section 5.5). Relevant to this section is my argument that only by analysing the dynamics of the interrelationship of students' experiences in various social settings can we free ourselves from an essentialist viewpoint and can we interpret in their own terms the students' perceptions, behaviours, changes and personal development. This issue is focused on in the next section through a model, which is proposed as a means to help us interpret the experiences of students from China.

6.2   A model: towards an understanding of Chinese students

Based on my findings, a model is proposed (see diagram 6.1), which enables a better understanding of students from China. It is founded on a research methodology which is individual-centered, context-situated and process-oriented, and which replaces methodologies that have relied on a one-dimensional identification, i.e. cultural origin, to interpret individual experiences. In being so founded, this model minimises stereotypical reductionism and contributes to intercultural understanding.

Specifically, in this model, an individual is perceived as a social being, making meaning of reality via interactions with a network of contexts. Context here refers to social settings where the individual acts and communicates with others. It hence simultaneously implies materialistic elements, such as places, events and material

resources, as well as social elements, such as interpersonal relationships, and values, beliefs and norms legitimating social behaviours. For any individual, to act in a context requires a dual procedure, i.e. internationalisation of the existing contextual constraints, and externalistion of the impacts by acting on the contexts with the aid of contextual facilitators (see section 5.5).

Diagram 6.1 Model to understand students from China
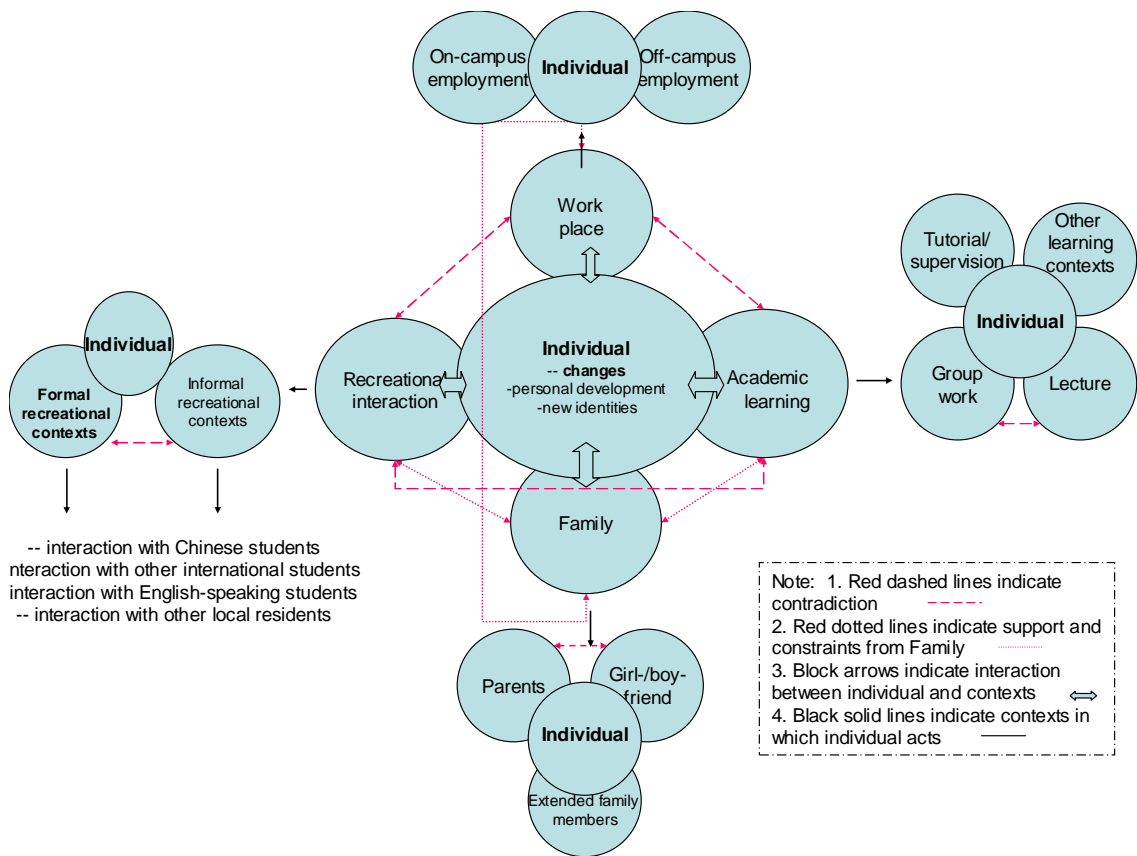
Based on my research, I stress influences from family and the social contexts for academic learning, for recreational purposes and for working for money. In these contexts, individual students act and interact with others (see also Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1991, for their modelling of the interrelationship between students' family, school and peers). I would like to refer to these categories as context systems, because within each category, there are various specific settings where students may work. For example,

for academic learning, students may participate in lectures, group work, tutorials and other supervision settings. For recreation, they may attend formal or informal socialising venues, both of which can be further divided according to the origins of the majority of those present: Chinese people, international students, native English speaking students and other local people. When engaged in paid work, students may be employed by the university but also by other employers. In those places, they may primarily work with Chinese peers, other international students or local people. Different groups of workmates can have different impacts on their intercultural communication; they hence deserve our attention.

Family is also included as a key context system. This is because in my findings family has turned out to influence the participants' performance in almost all other contexts. By family, I refer not only to parents, but also partners, boyfriend/girlfriend, and members of the extended family. These persons can ease the process of learning, for example, by providing financial or emotional support and by acting as advisers. But family can also be a source of pressure, especially when students find it difficult to live up to the expectations of those people they love. All in all, in this model, an individual student simultaneously acts in various context systems; all these contexts interlink and have impacts on his/her actions.

The key elements of the model, as discussed in section 5.5, are conflicts, contextual facilitators and individual agency. As my findings reveal, conflicts exist everywhere in a student's life (as indicated by red dashed lines in diagram 6.1). They may arise within a certain context system, for example, between their needs to prepare for exams and to participate in group work. They may also exist between different context systems: one example is the students' need to work for money and their objective of achieving academically. Sometimes, the conflicts may not necessarily involve students in a direct way, but be between a student's lover and his/her parents or between different friendship groups. However, in these cases, the student would still be under pressure and suffer from anxiety. It is through their desire to cope with the conflicts that individuals start to change and undergo personal development.

Moreover, in the model, individuals are perceived as active agents who are able to recognize various conflicts and to react based on analysis of the situation and reflexivity. However, not all students can break through all the constraints in any given situation. To what extent they can act powerfully is subject to various factors, including the students' personality, motivation, skills and knowledge that have been mastered in their previous education and socialisation. It is also influenced by the availability of contextual facilitators, ranging from material resources to academic and emotional support.

The model is intended to enable us to understand how different contexts interrelate and combine to affect the students' behaviours and perceptions on a daily basis (see also Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1991). A student's action in one context is not independent from actions in another. Instead, performances in the lecture room, group works, parties and paid jobs are interwoven. A failure to notice this can easily end in misunderstandings. For example, silence in group work can be simply attributed to 'cultural' factors, if we concentrate solely on the setting of group work. A 'cultural' explanation provides convenient answers, which, however, disguises other features that contribute to the silence, such as physical tiredness from paid job or from socialisation, pressure to complete writing assignments or achieve in exams, unhappy interaction with English-speaking persons from prior experiences and the consequent bias against 'English-speaking others'.

In this model I address only four domains, as they emerged from the data. I acknowledge that further research might suggest modifications to this model to include other social contexts with which the students interact. I would argue that the model is useful, however, for both highlighting the need to understand diversity among the students from China and for providing a framework for doing so. It offers us a more holistic view so as to fully recognize how students successfully adapt to new environments, or alternatively, why they fail to do so. Such a model is important in the current situation of widespread cultural stereotypes that perceive students' behaviour

based on a one-dimensional identification, which has blocked our understanding and impeded our attempts to serve better their educational needs. It can be an effective anti-essentialist weapon, revealing the complexity of students' behaviours and contributing to the in-depth understanding of Chinese participants.

6.3   Reflection on individual differences and collective commonality

In chapter 2 (see section 2.4.2), I described my dialectical methodology for interpreting the relationship between collective commonality and individual variety. By using a dialectical process at the literature review stage, I referred to equal attention being paid to both components of the pair. My aim was to keep myself being open-minded and to accept the students' experiences as I found them, rather than trying to pre-judge what these experiences might be so as to embrace the participants' experiences as what they would turn out.

From the beginning of the research, however, I found myself in a dilemma. I could not even satisfy myself when I tried to describe my participants as a whole. Certainly I could not agree to use a term such as 'the Chinese student', simply because it, in contradiction to my anti-essentialist stance, erased the individual differences that existed in terms of family, gender, age, subject studied and working background, amongst others. However, when I first wrote down the expression, 'students from China', I was also quite hesitant. The words themselves seemed to present an essentialist category. What did I mean by saying 'student from China'? Did it imply a group bounded by an ethnicity or geographical origin, for example?

On the other hand, I could not simply abandon the attempt to locate the students in a category. Otherwise, how could I defend my research? Why did I work with these students but not others, such as anyone from anywhere who happened to volunteer? There must have been something in my mind already.

The dilemma persisted throughout my research. Despite the individual differences being disclosed as the research progressed, there was simultaneously revelation of similarities

among the students, especially regarding their struggles in the unfamiliar social and academic surroundings. Seeing it as my responsibility both to address individual variety and to expose the common difficulties and shared needs, I found myself torn between two distinct directions: one pushing me towards the heterogeneity at which my research aimed, the other pulling me back to homogeneity, with the very danger of essentialism that I had been determined to problematise.

A similar dilemma is recorded by Parker (1995) in his study of Chinese immigrants in Britain; again there is an anxiety of how to describe the groups he looked at. To him, the question of 'so what is being Chinese about?' is by itself an essentialist expression. Stressing hybridity, however, he has to admit that he is running a risk of essentialising when using such words as 'cultural needs', as they would actually imply a pre-given essence.

Parker (1995) is honest that, as his research progressed, he became less 'purist' in his anti-essentialism as he was at the start of the research. Instead, he suggests researchers be open-minded: allowing an essentialist description as a starting point but arguing that as long as the description is not fixed, it is still possible to escape from essentialist dangers. Although I concurred with him in terms of how to resolve the dilemma, Parker (1995) did not give me further clarification of how to maintain the challenge to the 'initial essentialist description'. In other words, the research process was still a black box – how to avoid cultural reductionism in ethnically-based research remained unanswered.

In my research, the tension between commonalities and individual differences among responses was addressed through my contextually-situated analysis. Specifically, it was as the research progressed and with the distinct individual differences beneath superficial similarities being revealed that I gradually feel less worried about my description of 'students from China'. All these students shared commonalities, which might not have been so obvious or so numerous if they were of diverse national/ethnical origins. However, there were marked differences in how they behaved in the face of

difficulties and why they succeeded or failed in overcoming them. Thus, when I look back now, whilst I am aware that 'students from China' is still a unifying and hence potentially homogenising category, the expression by itself does not imply any fixed, static features which are uniformly shared by 'the group of students'. It is simply a 'starting-point' – I agree with Parker (1992) in this respect -- which enables me to investigate the students' experiences, including the commonalities and individual peculiarities that the research reveals.

Thus, in agreeing the possible existence of differences, at a group level, between students from China and those from Britain, I am by no means agreeing to a homogeneous conception of 'the Chinese'. Instead, I hold that the students in my study may be legitimately referred to as 'Chinese' because they have been socialized in a particular set of economic, social and political contexts, which is different from those experienced by British students. The similarities they have experienced at the macro-level, however, cannot predict conformities at the more micro-level. It is hence different from cultural essentialism, which not only assumes all Chinese learners are very similar to each other, but also uses such similarity to predict the learning behaviours and learning outcomes of 'the Chinese student'.

For this reason, I believe a more appropriate methodology to understand students from China should combine the study of contexts and individual students -- a methodology which enables us to fulfil Parker's assertion in practice. As represented in my model, such a methodology has enabled me to perceive each of my participants as a bearer of a distinct story and to examine how such personal differences contributed to the differences in their learning attitudes and outcomes. More importantly, it has offered me opportunities to reveal the changes that take place in the students throughout their year abroad. Acting as an anti-essentialist weapon, the methodology has illuminated the students' behaviours and attitudes as being the outcomes of the complex processes of 'internalising' and 'externalising' the situations they encountered in British higher education. The changes and personal development were not due to 'cultural determination', but attributed to the recognition of various conflicts, the reflection on

individual strengths and the employment of the contextual facilitators (see section 5.5). 'Cultural essentialism' is erroneous as an account of this process, as further explicated in the next section.

6.4   Reflection on cultural essentialism and 'the Chinese learner'

At the early stage of my research when I reviewed the Western literature on 'Chinese culture' and 'the Chinese learner', I was dissatisfied with the essentialist stereotypes which are widespread (see section 2.2). Until now, it is still easy for us, for example, to draw up a list of characteristics of 'individualistic Western culture' such as 'independence, autonomy, self-reliance, equality, personal control, directness; and another list of 'collectivist Chinese culture' featuring problematic issues of dependence, silence, being traditional and backwards, plagiarism and cheating (see Holliday, 2007). Moreover, such essentialist description does not appear in academic discourse only, but more frequently in everyday conversation -- I have noticed how often native-born British people talk about 'their' culture or 'the Chinese culture' in a very similarly essentialist way.

A determination to present a corrective to the essentialist and culturalist discourse stimulated me to conduct this research four years ago and also to maintain a passion for it throughout my research journey, despite many difficulties. Now when I try to conclude my thesis, I would like to propose a tentative explanation for the stereotypes, which at this moment I shall call 'Western' stereotypes just to differentiate them from stereotypes noticed as being held among students from China. The issue of 'self-essentialisation' among Chinese students is explored later (see section 6.5).

One explanation is a lack of contact or exposure to Chinese people. Parker (1995), when reviewing the history of Chinese immigrants in Britain, points out that only since 1945 has there been large scale migration from Chinese societies, and despite this, most Chinese immigrants remain regionally dispersed within the UK. My review of literature shows that in British higher education the dramatic increase in students from China is a more recent phenomenon (see section 1.1.1). Also, most of the universities these

students study, as shown in this study, the staff-student communication is far from satisfactory. More importantly, there has been a lack of research on these students, although I did notice an increasing amount of the study in the recent years (see section 1.1.4). Thus, in many Western educators' eyes students from China were 'an enigma' (e.g. Cooper, 1994), and for those who were trying to explain learning behaviours of 'the Chinese learner' in terms of Confucianism, the efforts could only end in 'paradox' (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 1996), 'confusion' (e.g. Shi, 2006) and strengthened essentialism (see section 2.1.2).

A more serious concern is that the cultural essentialism can entail a new form of racism. Holliday (2007) warns us that underlying the perspective of cultural determinism is a deep 'center-periphery inequality': that is, it is always the Centre-West which defines the images of East, the Periphery 'Others'. In chapter 2, my review of Western literature has revealed how Chinese educational practices have been homogenized and Otherized as being traditional and even problematic for 'cultural' reasons. If in the classic racism superiority and inferiority were embodied in race, in my study of students' experiences, we see a danger that presently such differences, as reflected in stereotypes in the literature, tend to be expressed in terms of 'culture'. This is in fact the concern of those advocating warning of 'neo-racism' (e.g. Balibar, 1988; Taguieff, 1990). Those who essentialise cultural differences, as pointed out by Grillo (2003:163), 'would have talked about racial difference if they were free to do so'.

Therefore, I believe the key to correcting 'Western' essentialist stereotypes is to observe what the students experience in specific contexts and to listen to their interpretations, their explanations and their feelings, as shown in my framework. Instead of looking for any easy answer from simplified images of 'the Chinese learner' or simplified features of 'the Chinese culture', researchers should respect students' voices and make their research the places in which these students can speak for themselves. Only by this means can the research achieve understanding of each individual as complex as they are and interpret their behaviours as changeable rather than pre-determined by culture. Here I am in agreement with Grimshaw's (2007:308) suggestion that: '…we should not allow

ourselves to be led by our own preconceptions, but should instead pay attention to what those students actually do and say. Rather than accepting explanations of Chinese students that are based on exotic stereotypes, we should seek to relate to them first and foremost as people, with all the complexity that entails…'

6.5   Reflection on 'Chineseness', the emerging identity among students from China

In chapter 2 (see section 2.3.2), I assert my interpretation of individual identities as being changable but also as being only conditionally fluid. My reading of social constructionism taught me that although identities can be temporarily 'fixed' and hence possibly captured and examined, they are constantly tending to be constructed and reconstructed under diverse influences within social situations.

However, despite a determination to be open-minded with respect to the students' experiences and development, I found myself challenged when the research revealed how a new 'Chineseness' was formed and consolidated during the participants' stay in the UK. This was because, when starting my research, I aimed to problematise the 'Western' stereotypes, and hoped that, by focusing on individual participants' experiences, the study would suggest how diverse the participants were (see section 6.3). It was completely unexpected when my findings revealed a shared 'national mentality' emerging among most of the participants. This suggests that the essentialist stereotypes are not only popularized in Western literature or in everyday conversation among 'Western' people, but also exist among Chinese students in a 'self-essentialising' form.

Why this happens is a question that must be answered in order to avoid the observations being viewed simply as evidence of the existence of some biological/ethnical/cultural essence of being 'the Chinese'. This would be even more dangerous than 'Western' stereotypes because a self-recognized Chineseness would conceal the multiple identities and disguise the very fact that the students' sense of being is continually reforming, despite being able to be stable at a given time.

Based on the research findings, I am now able to assert that this self-essentialism is, rather than being a reflection of any fixed cultural essence shared by Chinese learners, closely linked to the participants' experiences in local contexts in Britain, particularly the attitudes and behaviours of people with whom they interacted in the host society. In chapter 4 I have discussed how a new 'Chinese' identity emerged (see sections 4.2.2.2, 4.3.3.4, 4.3.4.2, 4.4.3, 4.5.2.1). Although previous socialization in China may also take a part in the formation of a collective 'Chineseness', the research shows that it was within the social contexts with which their subjectivities interacted that the students increasingly built their sense of belonging to their motherland. Their Chinese identity would not be expressed so overtly in such a distinct way if they had not left their home country to study abroad.

6.5.1   *Distancing from British people*

Evident in students' narratives is their distancing from the lives of their British hosts and neighbours. For most participants, their lives in Britain were routine: every day they commuted between classroom, library, accommodations and perhaps workplaces. They also went shopping, attended formal parties and travelled around, but generally these activities did not effectively increase their communication with English-speaking people. After initial efforts, most of them gradually withdrew to Chinese groups for socialization and interaction.

Regarding academic learning, the students drew solely or primarily on themselves to counter various difficulties. Despite the help from informative feedback, there was generally a lack of tutors' support in terms of lecture comprehension, group projects, exam preparation and thesis writing (see section 4.2.2.2). This might be due to an emphasis on autonomous learning in postgraduate education in Britain; however, it left the participants alone in their efforts to survive and achieve their academic goals.

Given the intense nature of masters' courses and the few chances available to interact with local people, tutors might have been expected not merely to be knowledge instructors, but also important mediators, linking lecture room to outside world. Their attitudes and responses to the students could easily be taken – in the relative absence of

other 'native' contacts – as representing the attitudes of the host people in general. By being caring and supportive, they could have helped the students build a sense of belonging. Alternatively, they could hurt students' self-confidence, which had already been limited as newcomers in an English-speaking society, in intercultural communication. In the worst scenario, a tutor's indifferent attitude, real or perceived, contributed to an 'us-them' division in the minds of some of my participants.

Similarly, we noticed the university provided a range of services and programmes to facilitate intercultural communication but, despite the initial excitement, eventually few participants thought highly of these programmes (see section 4.5.2). This may reflect students' unfamiliarity with those services, their anxiety over using English in socializing or for discussing personal issues and the growing pressure from academic studies. Nonetheless, there are clearly issues for the university's provision and organization of these activities and services so that they do address the concerns of Chinese (and other overseas) students more effectively. The lack of interpersonal communication with host people, which by itself was contradictory to their expectations, led to the sense of isolation.

6.5.2 Drawing on Chinese resources

The lack of connection with British people was accompanied by the participants' reliance on Chinese resources. For example, Chinese resources were used by some participants to ease their subject understanding. Spending spare time watching on-line Chinese TV programmes and film DVDs was an activity common to all. In addition, families and Chinese friends remained providers of crucial emotional support. The latter were also a significant source of information for living and surviving in Britain (see section 5.5).

Thus, feeling lonely and being isolated in the new environments on the one hand, and relying on Chinese resources, from textbooks to media to personal relationships, on the other, it is understandable that the students gradually constructed – both deliberately and sub-consciously – an enhanced sense of the self as being a part of 'the Chinese'. The emerging strengthened national/cultural identity provided them with a sense of

belonging which was also significant for protecting their intensely endangered perception of self-worth in the new environments. This issue is further explored below (see section 6.5.3).

6.5.3   Other social factors

The isolation the students felt on campus was interconnected with what they felt in wider society. Chapter 4 discussed the students' experiences at work places and how a distinctively increasing sense of national pride was provoked by social exclusion and discrimination that they encountered, which in turn resulted in the participants' awareness of their sharply changed social positions, of the race, class and ethnic hierarchies in the UK and of their unfavourable status in the power networks. Being non-native speakers, newcomers and marginal members of the wider society, most participants lacked the power or facilities to actively resist unfair treatments, but had to absorb or accept prejudice. Biased treatment was one of major reasons for the participants' retreating from intercultural communication and withdrawing to co-national groups for entertainment. As discussed above (see section 6.5.4), interacting primarily with Chinese peers satisfied their emotional and cognitive needs, whilst contributing to an increasing sense of being Chinese.

The construction of an enhanced sense of 'Chineseness' can further be linked to the position of Chinese people in Britain more widely. The absence of long-established Chinese communities in Britain (Parker, 1995) and the very recent nature of the huge growth in Chinese students have already been noted (see section 1.1.1). Additionally, the participants lived in a social environment where Chinese actors seldom appear in live TV shows, Chinese musical forms are missing in British popular culture (Parker, 1995), and Chinese voices are generally ignored or believed to be ignored, as argued by Chinese students in their May 2008 demonstration against BBC, which was accused of 'distorted' reporting on issues relating to Tibet and the Olympic torch relay.

In such a social context the formation of a collective identity could be encouraged. Facing difficulties in Britain, students easily developed nostalgia and an enhanced love for the mother country from a distance (see also Parker, 1995). When shared

experiences of social exclusion and unequal treatment were communicated among the students, a sense of being a part of a unique cultural group is fostered. It should be noted that by attaching themselves to an immutable unity, whether imaginary or not, the participants gained personal empowerment that enabled them to feel more potent in an environment where they felt powerless. Given the difficulties they faced and the fact that they received little of the support they desired and felt they deserved, an affiliation to a Chinese identity was important, which as a self-soothing strategy downplayed the unfair treatments the students had experienced (see also Parker, 1995). It also presented their struggle for self-confirmation so as to protect their endangered sense of self-worth and vulnerable self-esteem as consequences of border crossing. However, despite being a survival tool, we must be aware, as pointed by Parker (1995), that such a self-identification can be dangerous as well. By stressing a 'true' Chineseness, the students in fact strengthened the boundary between 'cultures', nations and ethnicities. It would lead to a consolidated stereotype of 'the British' among Chinese people and also a confirmed stereotype of 'the Chinese' among Western people, which, in Parker's term, is a retreat into 'ethnic exclusivism' (Parker,1995: 225)

To summarize, like Western stereotypes, self-essentialism is bound up with race, nation, culture and class in a complex way. Grillo (2003:168) has called for ethnographical research to explore how 'these process are refracted in specific national and local contexts and why a particularly politics of culture emerges in specific situation'. My research is just such an attempt. It reveals how contextual factors significantly influenced students' stress on an essence of 'the Chinese' and their essentialist distinguishing of themselves from 'the British others'. The study also supports the social constructionist position that individual identities do not consist of pre-given, unified or fixed constituents, but are continually being defined within daily communication and interpersonal interaction. A context-based methodology, therefore, is an effective means to question essentialist views, no matter whether they are grounded in a lack of intercultural communication, neo-racism, a need to survive in the new environments, or a mixture of all these factors. It, therefore, helps to reveal the fluid and plural identifications which characterize the students in Britain.

6.6   Reflection on the concept of culture

In this study of Chinese students, I am inevitably dealing with a notion of 'culture'. Drawing on social constructionism (Burr, 1995), I advocate a dynamic and anti-essentialist conception of culture. Culture in my interpretation is not static but constantly subject to change as a consequence of interacting, exchanging and integrating with other heritages (see section 2.4.2.2).

By problematising an interpretation of culture featured by essential unity and fixity, I recognize the internal differences within social groups. People, in this perspective, do not homogenously absorb their sense of being; nor do they identically acquire their feelings, ways of thinking or behaving within the community they were born to. As evidence for these anti-essentialist views, in my research all participants, despite coming from one geo-political region, were impressively different – they were distinguishable from each other in terms of their learning styles, skills and learning outcomes as well as their ambitions, needs, interests, personality, family background and prior experiences. Also instead of absorbing an identical sense of being, they behaved as active agents who were, at least partially, capable to negotiate their identities (see section 2.4.2.3).

However, when analyzing my participants' experiences, I have to admit that these students share commonalities, which might not have been so numerous if they were of various national/ethnic origins. By acknowledging the existence of such similarities, I acknowledge the existence of 'Chinese culture' as a geo-political and social category. Although questions remain regarding what specific elements comprise 'Chinese culture', I would like to approach it as a totality of lifestyles, language, education, political system which have been standardized in Chinese society as well as the shared historical, social experiences and practices which have been internalized, for example, by my participants pre-arrival in the UK.

Therefore, although rejecting cultural determinism, I do not intend to reject the existence of 'culture' in general and 'Chinese culture' in particular. Adopting a social constructionist position while admitting the commonality among my Chinese participants, I draw on a particular position in the debate on the relationship between 'culture' and cultural members; that is, I view human beings neither as being determined by their culture nor as remaining unaffected by it. Consistent with this line of thinking, cultural resources, such as moral principles, narratives, education, upbringings, should be viewed as something available and employable, rather than something determining (Holliday, 2007). For Grillo (2003), this perspective is a third way of interpreting 'culture': a mid-way position combining features of modernist and post-modernist, of 'old' and 'new'.

A further question we need then answer is in which particular form we are situated in a certain 'culture'; in other words, how we specifically relate to this 'culture'. It should be noted, as revealed in my research, that such forms can be different as all individuals are different. To be specific, firstly, our actions and response may be influenced – but not determined - by cultures. This has been shown in my research in the students' initial responses to formative feedback; the criticism that they have not been accustomed to in China results in a set of emotional affects such as shock and discouragement.

In addition, instead of being passively influenced, students can intentionally employ 'culture' to deal with life changes. The most distinctive example is my participants' use of a set of stereotyped 'Chinese values', such as 'self-denial', when facing prejudiced treatment. The stress on these values, in those instances, was a strategy to downplay negative impacts as the students lacked the ability effectively to resist unfairness and bias. Another example of self-essentialising occurs in the consciously expressed sense of family responsibility in the participants' common use of '*xiao*', generally translated as 'filial piety'. In my research, the stereotyped interpretation of 'Chinese culture' has been employed as a resource that helped the students through times of emotional difficulty, such as loneliness.

Moreover, the relationship with 'culture' may be represented in acts of rejection of aspects of this Chinese culture. This is particularly the case when students move out of the mother 'culture' to a host 'culture' and then are embedded in new social contexts and under new social influences. This movement may lead to the rejection of previous practices because they are no longer useful in the new context. One example is the students' responses to criticism in formative feedback. Initially there was the shock of unfamiliarity. But for some respondents at least, the 'Chinese cultural responses' were rejected and alternatives were sought in order to succeed in the new situations.

Apart from these, for me, a more critical question is not about how we interpret 'culture' but what we can learn from investigating the existing interpretation, particularly the essentialist statements. Stimulating my consideration is the idea that culture is politically and ideologically constructed (Holliday, 2007). As discussed previously, cultural issues have been so closely interwoven with other issues such as 'class' 'race' and 'ethnicity', that it would be difficult or simply impractical to decide what precisely 'culture' means (Grillo, 2003). Therefore, I am suggesting that instead of treating a certain definition of 'culture' as the focus of attention, we need to think over the questions of why this definition emerges, what purpose it serves, under what circumstances it is popularized, who has the power to define a certain culture and who have been defined. For example, it is of importance to find out how essentialist presumptions of difference are exercised within unequal power relationships. This may give reasons for the emergence of essentialist views and, despite the counter accounts, their continued widespread occurrence in both academic discourse and everyday conversations.

In Grillo's (2003) words, culture is no longer an analyzing tool; rather, it itself is the object of analysis. By analysing the discourses on Chinese culture, we are better able to identify reasons why individuals are allocated to pre-given cultural categories, and are more able to avoid essentialist views in our practices. To problematise the culturalist stereotypes, as shown in this study, we need to interpret the experiences of participants

in their own terms, with full attention paid to contextual and personal, as well as global, historical, economical and social factors (Parker, 1995).

6.7   Rethinking methodology

In chapter 2, I discussed the methodological inadequacies of the studies conducted by some influential researchers working with Chinese students (see section 2.2.4) and the implications for their arguments. Keen to correct 'deficient' misunderstandings of Chinese learners as they may, it is frustrating that the predominant use of questionnaires or single-round interviews by those researchers have produced another set of misunderstandings centred on 'the hardworking learners' coming from a special 'Chinese culture of learning'. Methodological weaknesses of those researches have been pointed out by Clark & Gieve (2006). However, there is still a need for empirical studies using alternative research methods to understand Chinese learners, despite some good examples in recent years (for example, Grimshaw's (2007) ethnographic research conducted in universities in China).

Throughout my study, an emphasis has been placed on methodological issues. The methodological approach I have adopted bears the characteristics of being individual-focused, process-oriented and context-situated. Specifically, an intensive multiple-case study of thirteen students enabled me to examine variations among learners from China. The rich and in-depth data it produced presented a fuller picture of each participant's life in the UK. The findings, hence, helped me to challenge the homogenized images of 'the Chinese learner' and enabled me to give a corrective to the ethnocentric stereotypes existing in much of Western literature.

Additionally, a year-long longitudinal design fulfilled my purposes which are not only to record students' performance at a given time, to report their previous socialization in China so as to seek explanation to their attitudes and behaviours in the UK, but to reveal the processes of personal change over their accommodation to British academic culture and living environments, and to investigate the reasons for such changes.

Furthermore, I pay attention to contextual factors. A close engagement with everyday lives across a range of social locations and the examination of a web of social relationships are prerequisites for decoding the participants' actions, attitudes and personal changes. The key contexts I have worked on in this study are those in which students most frequently report their participation. These include lecture rooms, subject-learning groups, workplaces and various venues where social interactions took place. Also significant are their contacts with family and their communication with staff via formative feedback. Examination of specific situations in which the participants acted enables me to interpret how their behaviours were influenced by the new environments, with their own perceptions of restrictions, support and power dynamics.

Despite my stress on students' experiences within diverse contexts, how to best catch such experiences has been a challenge to me. The crucial methodological questions I had to solve included how to approach the participants' experiences within various sites in greatest detail; more importantly, how to reveal their concerns and worries; identify their coping strategies as responses to particular situations; gain access to their feelings and fluctuations in emotions, locate the reasons and discover the impacts? To answer the questions demands a research method enabling the exploration of multi-dimensional human experiences, both internal and external. In this study, this has been innovatively approached by the use of an audio-dairy method in which the participants recorded whatever they felt to be important on a daily basis. This method hands over power to the participants, whose voices are therefore adequately captured and available for sensitive interpretation

Additionally, the use of follow-up interviews, mainly in the form of informal conversations, provided further opportunities to probe the respondents' narratives from a position that affords them a more equal status with the researcher. It should also be noted that with the progress of my research, changes took place in the nature of interviews. With the rapport established between me and the participants, the interviews turned from being semi-structured to be more like chatting between close friends. Besides, to several participants, with the growing academic pressure, interviews became

the major data sources particularly approaching the end of the course. In these cases, they tended to be longer and conducted more frequently depending on the availability of the students.

Moreover, apart from a diary method and follow-up interviews, more data sources were employed which had not been planned before the research. These methods included observation, chatting on line and visiting the participants' blogs. The mixed research methods I have adopted contribute to the originality of the research, as they were not restricted by any research plan designed in advance, but developed during the process of data collection, with the existing methods being edited and new ways of knowing being incorporated. While this process was to some extent opportunistic and certainly eclectic, it was not random, being guided throughout not by a detailed plan of data collection methods but by the aim of accessing as rich a body of data as possible. In other words, the research design was a continuous, on-going process, extending from the first stage of the research to the whole procedure of data collection. The flexibility this allowed matched the complexity of the research subject I looked at. The approach became a necessity, with my aim to reach a richly triangulated picture of the participants' lives. A further benefit was its contribution to the researcher/participant relationship. The flexibility in design, which enabled me to adjust the research methods to the availability and preference of the participants, helped to build a closeness which could not otherwise has been attained. In all, a non-fixed research method, which has gradually developed as an 'organic' process, best served the research objectives of maximally capturing the breadth and depth of human experiences.

Another noteworthy point regards the subjectivist epistemology I have drawn upon in the study. My personal experiences have influenced me throughout the research process. My initial conceptualisation of the study was based on my dissatisfaction with the mismatch of culturalist stereotypes to my own experiences – and, indeed, to myself. Besides, the methodology I adopted, which featured an open and flexible research design, originated in my determination to listen to the participants' voices. More importantly, my personal stake and emotional involvement in the research contributed

to the successful establishment and maintenance of close relationships with the participants, which played a crucial part in ensuring the richness of the data produced and my ability to interpret them. It should be noted that to challenge the stereotypes, I started the research with an aim to observe 'objectively' what was happening. However, 'being objective' should not be equated with the denial of personal interactions; nor should it end in a fear for warm interpersonal relationships. Objectivity, in my perception, denotes minimal pre-judgements and personal biases. To achieve it requires, not the necessity of distancing myself from the participants, but continuously distancing myself from seemingly habitual thinking and familiar explanations. This significance of inner reflexivity gives further credence to my subjectivist stance as being, perhaps paradoxically, truly objective. This is because the quality of the reflection that can be achieved relies at least in part on the quality of data collected, which in the ends depends on my closeness to the participants and my access to their inner world.

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In short, my personal experiences as a Chinese student overseas and my involvement with other Chinese learners in Britain highlight the theoretical questions of what is the most appropriate way to understand the group. The open methodological approach I have developed helped me to clarify my understanding of the process of students' changes and their inner world by the novel use of diary methods and the inclusion of as wide a range of information sources as I could manage. I hope my attempt will encourage future research in this field to scrutinize methodological issues so as to better understand individual behaviours. For example, following Grimshaw & Wang (2008a), I hope future researchers in the field conduct cross-disciplinary studies, which flexibly draw on 'anthropology, sociolinguistics and semiology'. Moreover, having adopted a subjectivist stance, I encourage other researchers engaged in ethnographic studies to be honest over personal involvement in the research. Having provided narratives of my subjective experiences in this thesis, I also hope other researchers will more honestly articulate their own research processes. Borrowing the words of Eloise (2006:158), it will be beneficial if we make our papers have 'a feel of fresh reality', in which 'nothing is hidden'.

6.8   Limitations of the study

In this final chapter I deem it important to reflect critically on the whole study. In the following, several points will be focused on: the limited possibilities for generalization, unexplored gender issues, the trade-off between insider/outsider stance, power issues in interaction with the participants and the unresolved Chineseness/individual balance.

Firstly, this study focused on thirteen postgraduate Chinese students learning in the UK. It represents these students' intercultural experiences primarily from their own perspectives. This may naturally result in a limitation as far as generalization of the research findings is concerned. The research design adopted, of a longitudinal multiple case study, is bound to reveal the idiosyncracies of each participant, as was the intention. This would make it inconvenient, if not impossible, to apply the research findings directly to other studies. Such a limitation, however, is reduced by giving a detailed report of the research process and a rich description of students' actions and perceptions. By providing adequate information, it is hoped that other researchers, based on an in-depth understanding of my participants' experiences, may be enlightened to conduct their studies under a similar theme. Although the particular findings are idiosyncratic and non-generalizable, therefore, the adopted methodology's capacity to reveal in-group differences rather than emphasizing between-group differences is transferable to other contexts and groups.

In addition, I deliberately chose participants from all the volunteers to maximize the variation in my sample. In going for diversity of students, I admit I may lose depth and the ability to identify important influential factors. A focus on a less varied sample and/or a more specific experiential context, such as students in the management school and their experiences in group work, might have enabled me to conduct on-site observations and more semi-structured interviews and, hence, fuller identify the impacts of multiple specific influences in that specific learning context. Nevertheless, such a choice may also bear the danger of inadequate attention to individual differences as responses to various learning and teaching contexts. Here I want to note again that a study such as the one I have carried out is almost bound to focus on differences rather

than similarities. It is seen, however, as a necessity to a challenge the essentialist depiction of 'the Chinese learner'.

Another problem brought forth by a small sample concerns the limited investigation of gender differences in intercultural interaction. Although, for example, one case did suggest the potentially significant finding that female students are more likely than their male counterparts to establish an intimate relationship with host people of the opposite sex, the scale of this study did not allow me to explore the issue in a broader sense. This is because – despite such 'hints' - in all themes emerging from the data, no great differences were noted between male and female participants,

A limitation of the research also emerges from the one-sided perspective it reveals. With the focus being exclusively on the participants' perspectives, what is missing in this study are the perceptions and views of other parties in intercultural communication; for example, those of tutors, host students and other international students. Acquiring another side to these stories would be very worthwhile in facilitating our understanding of the intercultural learning process in general. However, it is simply not feasible to deal with all these aspects in one thesis. More importantly, a focus on Chinese students' perspective is required for my theoretical and methodological concerns, with my determination to give voices to these students and to reveal the individual complexity they display.

Moreover, I faced considerable difficulty in the building of trust and rapport with the participants. In this study, I view a clear-up distinction between an insider and outsider stance to be an inadequate and oversimplified reflection of the reality of such a study. To me, the relationship between the definitions of the two stances, i.e. 'who is an outsider' and 'who is an insider', is contingent and dialectical. I oppose a practice which stresses a rigid distancing of the researcher from the research site or subjects to achieve 'objectivity'. However, with my effort to build and maintain closeness with the participants, I admit that I myself had to continuously adjust my position in a continuum, which at one pole is a feeling of being a natural insider and the 'illusion' of familiarity;

while at the other is an awareness that everyone in the end is an outsider of the other. There was always the dangerous tendency that I assumed the trust gained from the participants and became satisfied with both data collection and data interpretation. Despite my continuous efforts, I admit there were difficulties in terms of maintaining a distance from my habitual thinking. It should be noted that this limitation is rooted in the complexity of human interaction. It would not be simply resolved, for example, by employing a 'scientific approach' or being more 'distant' from the subject. On the contrary, it requires even more effort to be closer to the participants and to obtain richer data, so as to be more capable of reflexivity and a conscious distancing from the familiar.

A further criticism may concern the extent to which I achieve 'the feminist ideal' in this study. Inspired by feminist methodology, I stressed a non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and the researched. Recognizing and respecting the participants' desire to speak, the study has the explicit object of making their voice be heard. However, although I invited the students on a frequent basis to comment on my initial interpretation throughout the data collection year, we failed to continue to do so following their departure from Bath. It was primarily I myself who finally completed the data discussion and presentation although, in my defense, this was mainly due to practical constraints of time, distances and material resources.

In addition, the research may have limitations in terms of the extent to which participants benefited from the research. Having designed the study to minimally intrude upon the students' lives, I reduced my role to primarily one of a keen listener and careful observer. However, my purposeful avoidance of giving advice may also imply limited positive influences of the research on the students. For example, I could have facilitated their personal changes by encouraging self-reflection, organizing peer group discussion, giving more emotional and academic support, or assisting them in seeking professional advice when necessary. My inadequate assistance may have negative implications, not only methodologically but also ethically, with the dangerous

consequence that my advocacy of 'reciprocity' deteriorates into merely paying lip-service to that principle.

We need also bear in mind that individuals are continually changing. I recognize that this study is only a snap-shot of the participants' lives and they would very possibly perceive them differently if they were to look back at them today. Besides, China itself is experiencing continuous change, as are the host institutions in the UK. The study is only a record of a particular historical moment in terms of the broader contextual background, both locally and globally. Therefore, its wider temporal application may be questioned, although I view my methodology as having longer term applicability.

Finally, to some extent, the Chinese-individual balance remains unresolved in this research. Explicitly, the study set out to explore individuals as individuals. Implicitly, the longitudinal design, combined with in-depth data collection methods and the close researcher-participant relationship achieved, results in the revelation of distinct individual differences in the findings. Despite this, the study does also reveal certain shared features in the group. It should be noted that these commonalities are not necessarily described as 'Chineseness'. Some may be from the cultural influences, for example, students' shared interest in and desire for familiar food. Others are likely to be common to other groups, such as the school graduates starting their university lives or British learning in non-English speaking countries. There can also be common reactions to certain experiences, such as exclusion and racism. Individuals are different but they belong to an ever-widening circle of humanity.

6.9   Suggestions for future research

In this study, I set out to look at the lived experiences of a group of students from Mainland China in a British university. I aimed to move from a cultural stereotypical labelling of 'the Chinese group' towards a more individual-focused, process-oriented and context-based accounts. To explain the participants' changes and personal development, I stress the need to creatively use multiple research methods, such as observation, interviews, demographical questionnaires, diary entries and internet-based

data sources. However, I am aware that my purpose to correct essentialist views on Chinese learners is broad and ambitious and a more complete addressing of this purpose calls for further research.

Firstly, my research participants are mainly self-selected volunteers and as such are by no means representative of even the limited target group of students from China mainland in the UK for a masters' degree. The more important absences include mainland Chinese students studying at other levels, i.e. foundation courses, undergraduate courses and PhD courses, in various British universities. Arriving in the UK at younger or older ages, enrolling in less intensive courses and spending a longer period of time in the country are factors which could increase the diversity (and hence the broader representativeness) of the research, result in very different findings and add extra power to the questioning of stereotypical homogeneous image of 'the' Chinese students. I would stress the point, however, that my target group of students who have never left China before and are in the UK for only a short period of time is one that provides the most telling test of culturally deterministic models of Chinese student behaviour. This is because they are culturally 'less contaminated' and have less time to adapt.

The scale of the research also prohibits my exploration of students from other Chinese or East Asian communities and my comparison of such students' experiences with those from P.R.C. contexts. Widespread in the literature is the depiction of learning strategies and learners' characteristics from CHC backgrounds, where the essentialist labels go beyond 'the Chinese learner' to 'Confucius' heirs'. Expanding the research samples to students from other CHC societies is important for breaking though the essentialist views to a broader extent.

Secondly, I acknowledge that in this thesis I focus exclusively on voices of Chinese students and see the host people's behaviours and attitudes through the participants' eyes. This is the first step in our attempt to challenge essentialism. To complement this

study and to extend the challenge, there is a need for a 'mirror' research of home students and British staff to present a fuller picture.

Thirdly, the research reveals the participants' changes and personal developments throughout the year in Bath. However, an important absence is the exploration of the social and economical consequences with the participants' obtained British qualifications, the changed attitudes and viewpoints. It could be my future research interests to focus on the students' experiences in Chinese labour market and its interrelationship with their educational experiences in Britain.

I also encourage other researchers to set up their studies deliberately to investigate a wider variety of experiences than those my participants went through and to explore these in depth by innovative and integrated research methodologies. It is through all such efforts that a fuller picture of Chinese students overseas could be presented.

Moreover, in this thesis I did not explore gender issues in any depth. The scope and nature of this research does not allow this issue to be addressed meaningfully, but it may be a focus for future research addressing gender issues explicitly.

Similarly, the vast amount of data generated from this research suggests a range of interesting issues, including their motivation in choosing to study in the UK; learning issues relevant to academic writing, final projects and summative assessment; students' relationships with their relatives in the extended family); their relationship with loved ones who remained in China during their study abroad; their perceptions of peer students from the countries/regions with which China has a controversial relationship, and their overall mental health during their stay overseas. Again, constraints of space do not allow investigation of all these issues in any detail and I call on other researchers to study them, so as to understand the lives of Chinese students learning abroad more fully.

Finally, although my study stresses the dynamics between contextual factors and human agency and the students' adaptation, changes and developments as consequences, these

are not fully discussed or theorized. Based mainly on the participants' accounts, my study of power struggles are one-sided, without access to the behaviours, views or attitudes of British staff, students and host people. Hence there is great need for future studies based on intensive and longitudinal in-site observations of the crucial learning, working and social interaction settings, so as to acquire a fuller story.

6.10   Summary of chapter 6

With widespread stereotyped images of 'the Chinese learner' in Western literature (e.g. being dependent, passive, docile, reluctant to challenge authority, collectivist and reticent), it is so easy for educators to perceive their students from China on the basis of such images. Although I admit possible commonalities shared by those students due to being socialized in comparatively similar social contexts, the one-dimensional emphasis on fixed cultural elements, such as a certain interpretation of Confucianism, is obviously misleading. One consequence of an over-generalized essentialism is a reduced sensitivity to the variation within the group we are studying. Other problems are the neglect of contextual affiliation and denial of individual agency, whereby individuals are seen as no longer able to interpret, reflect, criticise and modify the features with which they are ascribed.

In this study, by deep engagement with the experiences of the participants, I am able to counteract the essentialist depiction of 'the Chinese learner' originating either from biased colonial discourse or a naive national pride. Individuals have complex identities. These arise from the combination of diverse subjective positions resulting from their interaction with various contextual factors. Only through intensive situated examination are we able to distinguish the various contextual factors, to interpret students' actions and feelings in their own terms and to fully understand the differentiation within 'the Chinese learner'.

My work therefore encourages others to appreciate culture as complex and changeable and also to attend to the reasons an essentialist interpretation of culture is articulated; besides, to appreciate the dynamics between context and individual agency, and

consequently the uncertainty of individual actions and perceptions. My proposal of a research methodology which is process-oriented, context-based and individual-focused and a model based on it will hopefully contribute to the discussion on Chinese learners in the UK. However, to fully problematise the unified, static and fixed representations of 'the Chinese student' requires the involvement of more researchers, who explore learners' experiences following principles of openness, closeness and a commitment to the legitimacy and authenticity of the participants' own voice in describing their worlds.

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Appendix I Demographical information of the participants

Table1: Demographical information of 13 participants

Code	Gender	Age group	Hometown	Ranking of the university for the first degree（２００５）	Subject in Bath	Working experiences
S1	F	20-25	*Middle area of Yangzi river Provincial capital	n/a	Management	No
S2	F	20-25	*Middle area of Yellow river Provincial capital	n/a	Mechanical engineering	No
S3	F	20-25	*SouthChina Middle-sized city	Provincial key university	Education	No
S4	F	20-25	*Northeast of China Provincial capital	Provincial key university	Management	No
S5	M	30-35	*NorthChina Metropolis	A Japanese university	MBA	7 years full time in Japan
S6	M	20-25	*EastChina; Middle-sized city	Top 5	Chemical engineering	1 year full time
S7	F	20-25	NorthChina Metropolis	Top 5	Economics	No
S8	M	20-25	Middle area of Yangzi river; Middle-sized city	Top 10	Accounting and finance	No
S9	M	20-25	*NorthEast of China Provincial capital	Top 10 in Economics	Computer science	No
S10	M	20-25	SouthChina; Small town	Top 10	Electronic and electrical engineering	No
S11	M	20-25	*Southwest of China Provincial capital	Top 10 in Social science	Interpreting & translating	No
S12	F	20-25	Southwest of China; Small town	Provincial key university	Interpreting & translating	One year part time teaching experience
S13	F	20-25	SouthChina Provincial capital	Top 10 in Social science	Education	No
S1's boyfriend	M	20-25	SorthChina, Metropolis	n/a	Management	No

Table2: Demographical information of 5 classmates of the participants who were also interviewed in this research

Code	Gender	Age group	Hometown	Ranking of the university for the first degree （2 0 0 5）	Subject in Bath	Working experiences
C1	F	25-30	*Northwest of China, Provincial capital	Top 5 in Foreign Language Study	Education	2 years full time teaching experience
C2	F	20-25	*SouthChina Middle-sized city	n/a	Education	No
C3	F	20-25	*Southwest of China, Provincial capital	Top 5 in Foreign Language Study	Education	No
C4	M	20-25	*SorthChina, Metropolis	n/a	Management	No
C5	F	25-30	*Northwest of China, Provincial capital	n/a	Interpreting & translating	2 years full time in Medication

Note: * NorthEast of China includes Liaoning province, Jilin Province, Heilongjiang province
* NorthChina includes Beijing, Tianjian, Hebei province

* Middle area of Yellow River includes Henan province, Shanxi province, Shaanxi province
* EastChina includes Shanghai, Jiangsu province, Zhejiang province
* SouthChina includes Fujian province, Guangdong province, Guangxi province, Hainan province, Hangkang, Macau
* Middle area of Yangzi River includes Hunan province, Hubei province, Jiangxi province, Anhui province
* Southwest of China includes Chongqing province, Sichuan province, Guizhou province, Yunnan province, Tibet
* Northwest of China includes Gansu province, Qinghai province, Ningxia province, Xinjiang province

Appendix II Questionnaire

- Where did you spend most of your time before 18 years old?

- Are you the only child of your family?
- If not, how many siblings do you have?

- What are the occupations of your parents?
- Father: ---
- Mother: ---
- What are the highest educational qualification held by your parents?
- Father: ---
- Mother: ---

- Could you give me your date of birth?

- Where did you attend college or university in China?
- Could you give the name of the college or university?
- What was your major for the bachelor degree?

- Did you receive master's education in China?
- If possible, could you list your qualifications as below?

- Have you worked in China?
- If possible, could you list your working experiences as below?

- Is this the first time you left China? Or have you travel abroad before?
- If yes, where   did you go and when?

- What is your English level?
- When did you begin to learn it?
- How many hours did you have English class in college?
- How many hours did you spend on English learning?
- Which kind of international English proficiency tests has/have you taken, for example, TOFEL, ILETS, GRE?
- How about the result?

Appendix III First round interview question (two parts)

PART 1
1. Why did you choose UK for a masters' course?
2. Why did you choose Bath for a masters' course?
3. Why did you join in a presessional English course?
4. Where did you get the information to make the above decisions?
   Do you think all information you got at home is adequate for you to make such decisions?
5. Till now, have you met with any difficulties, regarding your application for a postgraduate degree, visa, your preparation in China, and living these days in Bath? Are these difficulties in or out of your expectations?
6. What are your major concerns at this moment?

PART 2
7. What was the way you learn in your past learning experiences?
   What is your preferred way of learning?
   What was the way you thought you were expected to learn in Bath when still at home?
8. What was the way you were taught in your past learning experiences?
   What is your preferred way of teaching?
   What is the way you expected the teachers would teach in Bath when still at home?
9. What was the relationship between you and your teachers in your past learning experiences?
   What is your preferred teacher-students relationship?
   What was kind of relationship you expected you could have in Bath when still at home?
10. What were the characters of a good teacher in your past learning experiences?
    What was the way you expected the teachers would teach in your future study in Bath when still at home?

Appendix IV Interview question regarding informative feedback

1. What kinds of assessment methods have you experienced in China?
2. What kinds of feedback were you used to in China?
3. What kinds of feedback are you getting here (written/oral; with/without the presence of other students; comments only/ comments with marks; handwritten/printed out)?
   Regarding: -- in-class presentation;
   -- in-class group work;
   -- lab demonstration;
   -- assignment, particularly in form of essay writing
4. In your perception, what are distinctive features of feedback you get here?
5. According to your memory, how did you respond to formative feedback, which is negative/positive evaluation of your performance, in pre-sessional course/ in the 1st semester? Imagine you were given a similar feedback now, what would your reaction be?
6. In you opinion, are there any impacts of formative feedback (on learning, emotional status, personality)? If yes, what are they? If not, why?
7. Are all types of feedback you have received having similar impacts on you? If not, Why? Particularly, which form of feedback is more effective to facilitate your learning? Why?
8. In your opinion, are similar feedbacks having similar impacts on your classmates; on Chinese students in particular? If not, why? Does someone benefit more than others? Why?

Appendix V Final interview question

1. How do you evaluate your course on the whole?
   Specifically: How do you think about teaching quality in the course?
   How do you evaluate teacher/student relationship in the course?
   How do you evaluate your learning outcome?
   How do you evaluate teachers in the course?
   Have all these / any of these met your expectations?
   Besides: What expect of the course best meet your expectations?
   What expect of the course worst meet your expectations?

2. How do you evaluate the past year in general?
   Specifically: How about your English competency now?
   How do you evaluate your interaction with local people, with other international students, and with other Chinese students?

3. In what expect do you feel you have changed?
   In terms of   -- personality
   -- communicative ability
   -- intellectual capacity
   -- self-dependence
   And: how do you evaluate these changes?

4. If chance is given, what is the recommendation you would like to give to:
   – presessional language course
   -- mentor program
   -- teaching staff
   -- administrative staff
   -- course manager
   -- university student support staff

5. What is your plan for the future at this moment?
   And: why?

Appendix VI A sample of Participants' diary transcript

1月13日　　星期六

记半上8点起床，结果10点才起。和别人上山，李如昌上去了多美，一共1500多，
买了700多，还剩1800多块。中午在山上吃饭，早上可以机钟
自己不早床。聊天还总聊到聊。最后，不知所谓44，我做的唯一工作就是
用自己的话逆出来。如练多。一分一句用的句子就模那种感觉。觉得化不总配
多的。下午写一次交了AC的论文。又是一身轻松。

Watching video

下了山，来了趟趄轻松的。俩人一块吃了饭，说咱上如如什是伴多。野
猪大翻多看的快显了，就刺一集了，还在看，唾乎还没什么看。说唾上早
睡，结果又两点多了，明天还行好多多。

1月14日　　星期天

说总复习，又没忙复。
reflection
起野绪大改整看显了。上午起来都10多了，太晚了，一件一事所做过，我给黄红
relationship with friends
打了电话，说了半天的机切味，买些化妆品时什么的，我觉得挺重要的，可来写不知心多想，
无距太多了。来到明明显。拿了我两手机打的电话，找着和黄红打电话，基本上半日都
在打，和自己没上时多。多给黄红打电话，我俩大吃一顿。唾上也没和多，来了
Watching TV
给我逆著手机。和我一起把"艺优回忆录"看显了，我俩挺恐惧的，明天说"你
金铺"电影有多多，决定去看点。

1月15日　　星期日
assessment
中午爬起来去看了"金铺"，马上友要考试了，18号考茅门，我还恐惧恐惧
也去看金铺。
movie
"金铺"确定很好看的。剧情很精彩，从金铺别的隔开始，的就坐不住了，
花那么多钱看电影。还稳不下心来看，我给来了多多西来短似，她回多来后就不
理我多了，我突然觉得自己很孤单，电影吸引着我的注意力。看到金铺死的
时候，我流泪，不是为电影而哭的，如果我自己也有伤心的感觉。
回事时多是多了，也没和多，下午想给家里打电话，也打不成多，还有时多多
Relationship with friends
过要时间，她都冷掉显了，心里挺难受的。来了也总的，我让你行的，你也来
所听什么唯。
studying
唾上看了会书，也只看电去。和小凯交流了交流，还不错。得去看复习多。

1月16日　　星期一
今天不错，虽也唾睡早起，精神不所多如，还总复习都了，虽也没看多。
但能看电去了。给爸爸妈妈打多电话。有多整时间了。下午和小凯去

VOC001

对于上一周的生活做个总结。上一周发生了很多事，我觉得是很充实的一周。

用二，用三去外面玩也觉得累的ashan，他ashan的经历受的...斜还也记忆深刻。希望将来的人生也，还有哪么多状...对它起谢，它笑笑告之后，很受感染，还觉很高兴，我觉得红色很多，我们的工不是很有病，有人有间还智一下，指一下脸，开始己却不害怕，Led排掌如，一个时候的英圆如火，对她们是有己的...希望到，拿也很眼红，要是我拿比也好了。明年如果回国我之外，我家还可...到拿到英国拿也�

（更多内容不清晰）

用三参加了外方招待会，从来也有过多...我们记忆多，纸头人，女生大多穿的很多外方，我穿的...中圆姓...我穿的很得体，大家请的纸隔意...

用...中国学联办的中圆教育..会，西心不错的。还有...自...好吃，去了那么多人，气氛很好，台上台下...这么纸布...民歌...红...中国人...凝聚力接...

还有好，是用有很多深刻...心里...有的..还有手机，在多纸头，取的可...还有...笑..记一下...

VOC002

Appendix VII A sample of English translation of diary and interview excerpts on writing and assessment

Interview samples from S1 and S1's boyfriend

'Tutors do provide feedback... They may comment like 'you should write more in this part; or you should give more examples in that part…' seldom did they comment on grammar. I think they focus on main ideas and the use of language seems not their criteria for the marks' (S1's boyfriend, interview, 9th March 2006)

'…hardly do we read the feedback; simply because we cannot tell their handwriting. On the cover sheet of essays are the pre-printed lines which tutors fill their feedback in and which I think are not spacious enough. To make things worse, original cover sheets are kept in the department and what we get is only photocopies, which are even harder to read… we guess together and hope to figure out what a word is; but we always fail… seldom did they mark in the margins… although we want to know our weaknesses, it does not matter (even if we cannot read the feedback). Because we have got the mark and cannot do anything about it – I mean we have no chance to re-draft it or revise it anyway.' (S1's boyfriend, interview, 9th March 2006)

Diary samples from S3

'… there are so many comments. It seems that the essay should be rewritten… however, I have to say all the comments are reasonable – they indeed expose the limitations of my first draft…' (S3, diary, Feb 1st)

'…I should carefully make correction on my first draft… rewriting is very difficult, but should be beneficial. I could learn from it… it is not good to just hand in a paper and then get a score of it…' (S3, diary, 19th Jan 2006)

'…in the feedback, the tutor pointed out that I should criticize what I had cited. …today I suddenly have some ideas upon critical thinking. So happy… I think it indeed needs time to improve the ability of criticizing. Feel so good…' (S3, diary, 4th February 2006)

'… when writing the first draft, I followed the structure, which I used to in China, i.e., I simply used other's arguments. … In the feedback, the tutor pointed out that I should criticize what I had cited. A little bit confused…' (S3, diary, 2nd February 2006)

'…today I got the feedback. Unluckily, I am required to re-write the essay. When I handed it in, I have thought I have completed one assignment and could focus on others. But now I have to write it again. And it is hopeless to get a higher score on a rewritten essay, I am afraid. But actually I donot mind what score I could get at this moment, as long as I can pass… I feel I am so poor…' (S3, diary, 18th January 2006)

'I received the feedback of another essay today. 14 pieces of comments… the tutors says I may fail if I would not correct the draft based on his/her comments. I donot think the consequence could be so bad. As long as I try my best, I should get a pass…' (S3, diary, 31st January 2006)

'When writing undergraduate thesis, I had many chances to communicate with supervisors. They were always available. But they did not provide written feedback, which is different to British tutors. We only met and talked…'

'…when I got the feedback, I cannot believe it – so many comments! So many grammatical errors! Am I so bad in grammar? I cannot read it, let along revising redraft based on it! …I left it aside and worked on other assignments… the tutor not only corrected my grammar errors, but also pointed out the problems in writing style, structure and the organization of ideas. S/he particularly stressed the accuracy of referencing. Very strict!'

'…this semester I feel I am improving in writing skills, such as the linking of sentences and paragraphs. I have a clearer idea of how to compose an academic paper – but it does not mean that assignment become easy, because we have to spend time on the content…'

'…in lectures, tutors are more likely to ask English-speaking students for their opinions. It is easier for them communicate, I think. But it is difficult for us (Chinese students) to follow their conversations– sometimes my Chinese classmate asks me what they are talking about.'

Diary samples from S5

'... rarely did I talk to tutors. It is my fault. I mean, it is because my English is not good. So if I talked to the tutors face-to-face, I am afraid I would not be able to understand…but in fact I prefer face-to-face communication. Some of my classmates went to see tutors once they have questions. It is very good. And tutors are nice and happy to help us. The pity is that I fear to do so due to my poor English…' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

'But written comments on essays, to me, are of little use. They are given together with marks – there is no chance for us to re-draft it. To make things worse, they are simply not recognizable– not only (students) ourselves, but also the British tutors and secretary cannot distinguish the comments. I remember last semester, when the course director handed out the comments, he said that he himself cannot recognize the tutors' handwriting and suggested us to go asking the tutors …' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

Diary samples from S8

'…most of tutors gave us their email addresses or told us their office numbers but never did I contact them for learning advices… I feel it is unnecessary – there is nothing too difficult to be solved by ourselves… I think we should not blame tutors on not providing the chances of tutorial. It is ourselves, who never make full use of them…' ' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

'…from reading papers, I can only have a rough idea of academic genre. Although I have tried to imitate, I am afraid what I wrote does not follow the British academic style… besides, there are too many theories. All cited in the literature review of my essay must be noted with the references… the trouble is that I read a lot and used a lot in my essay. But when I finished writing, I forgot where I cited them from… I always spend a lot of time on the references… so bothersome. …when I worked on my undergraduate dissertation, it was totally different. We wrote without the consideration of citation and references. We were only required to list references at the end of the essay rather than at every place of citation within the writing…' ' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

'… I think the independent learning is encouraged here… I have read an article written by a successful Taiwanese businessman. It is about enterprise strategies and it mentioned that a good employee is expected to solve all problems by himself. They should not knock the door of their boss for no good reasons. Always asking for advices is deemed as a sign of low capability… I think the same is applied to students. There are always other ways to find solution, if you are diligent enough. You should not bother your tutor because there are always other options…' ' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

'Frankly, I was very disappointed when starting my college life. I felt all my effort in high school was not worthy – I have worked so hard and suffered so much for the examinations … my class director in high school talked to us almost every day, emphasizing the importance of CEE and the significance of receiving the higher education. It made me so nervous… I have been in great anxiety that I could not fall into sleep during the exams… as a result, I performed badly and missed ** (top 1 Chinese science and technology university). I cannot forgive myself for the failure and tried for the second time in the following year. But the same thing happened. I was even more anxious and failed again… after that, my confidence was totally lost. It took two years for me to step out of the shadow of the failures. This thanks to a relaxed atmosphere in the university.' ' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

Interview samples from S9

'For all assignment, we handed in two copies. It is said that one copy would be returned later so that we could see the feedback. But in fact among all course works we have done, we got only one back… some of my classmates seemed to have made quite a few grammar errors, which the tutor corrected. Mine was better. A few mistakes in grammar were pointed out, but there was a comment of 'nice work'… the comments also contain sentences about the strengths and weaknesses of my essay. On the whole, it was a very simply and pretty general comment. In addition, with the feedback in hands, grade attracted all my attention and I frankly did not read tutor's comment carefully …' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

'… Dropping in the tutors' office and asking questions seem welcomed in my department. There are also time slots allocated for problem-solving in classes. Therefore, regarding course works, it is easy to get the tutors' help… but never did I go and ask them questions. Because I feel everything is clear and all could be done by myself. It is unnecessary to ask tutors… and I think that is important we complete course work by ourselves. Could tutor give comments in the process of writing? That is

not good. If we get comments and make revise, the final version would not reflect our own ability… ' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

Interview samples from S11

'At first when the tutor criticized us in class, I have to say we cannot accept it. The better their English are, the harder they accept the fact that their weaknesses were pointed out in front of all others. (s/he usually pointed out what sort of information we missed and failed to interpret. s/he directly said 'you are so bad today' or 'you are not in a good condition'…) We think s/he is too strict and never saves faces for us… (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

we found s/he is really kind and indeed considerate. The reason s/he blames someone is not because s/he has a bias towards him but because the students make mistakes and should work hard for improvement. *(*S11, interview, 08/04/06)

Thus now we do not care our faces – or we do not care face as much as the actual improvement we have gained…. Time flies by. Everyone is under great pressure to achieve more within a short period. We could judge whether we have done well or badly in class. If we always made similar mistakes, for example, we are too nervous and not confident in interpreting practices, we would blame ourselves, even if the tutor does not say so.' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

…by the end of last semester, after the release of the scores of the final exams, two of my classmates did not perform well and were not able to continue study as ** majors. The tutor arranged to meet them personally. She comforted them by stressing ** was also a good choice. She made it clear that if they stick to** , they may have risks of losing their degrees. My friend told me, when she first heard it she felt so depressed, but the tutor was right. S/he is an expert and s/he could understand us. Also, s/he knows how much we spend in order to study here… (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

Diary samples from S13

 '…although not clearly stated, there are so many pieces of comments in the feedback. I was astonished when reading it. How striking! I kept asking myself: am I such a bad student; is my writing so poor…? I am completely discouraged…' (S13, diary, 18th January 2006)

 'I got the feedback of **. When I read the first sentence, which is that I could pass, I was so happy. But after reading through the draft, I found the tutor was not very serious – some originally correct expressions have been changed by him/her into grammatically incorrect ones. But it does not matter. As long as I could get pass, it is wonderful. The less I have to revise, the better…' (S13, diary, 18th January 2006)

'(I) got the feedback of **. The whole draft has been corrected and it is full of red marks. There are 11 pieces of comments in total. (I) donot want to read them through. Too discouraged…' (S13, diary, 10th January 2006)

'I got feedback on the draft of **. I also had a talk with tutor about it… according to the tutor, the essay will definitely get a score of pass. If I could make some revisions, the

mark can be higher. But the tutor also said that if I was not quite sure how to improve it, I would better leave it except correcting grammar errors. Her/his words made me very confused. On the one hand, I lack confidence to make the writing better; on the other hand I feel guilty if I lose the chance of gaining a better mark due to putting no effort in…' (S13, diary, 6th January 2006)

Interview samples from C1

'In the feedback of **, there is a comment that what I has discussed is outdated. I emailed to the tutor saying my writing is based on the reality of Chinese English teaching. His response, out of my expectation, is 'feel free to disagree'. So surprising! According to him, I could insist on my idea, as long as I could support it with sufficient references. So surprising, we are allowed to challenge teacher. He is so nice…' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'…before coming here, I had no idea of critical thinking. My first draft seemed only to put different theories together. The tutor commented that my writing was like a 'shopping list'. He told me to add my opinions in the essay. I doubted and asked how I can convince others with my opinions. He said it was not the key of the critical thinking. Not only should we put the ideas of A or B, we must point out why we prefer A rather than B and how we evaluate them. That is critical thinking.' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'…but the tutor giving such bitter comments, I believe, is not to torture us. As ** told me, he would like to achieve improvement through redrafting…' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'…with the feedback in hand, I felt so bad that I cannot keep myself from crying. I even cried in front of the tutor later in his office. I cannot control myself. I told the tutor I was extremely depressed. As an English teacher myself, how can I wrote such a bad essay? I told him I was so sad… He is very kind, I have to say. He kept comforting me. (He) even took out a pack of tissue from his drawer and handed it to me. …' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'… in the process of redrafting, I kept asking the tutor questions whenever I met problems. I remember on a Sunday, I sent him several emails… he is indeed serious, as he responded to my emails one by one rather than putting all answers in one letter…' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'… in my previous education experience, seldom did I ask teachers questions. If I did ask, I would think a long time to make sure the question not a stupid and simple one. But here I push myself to ask whenever I have a problem. I told myself to do so even though it may be a stupid question because I should find out its answer. Otherwise, why do I spend so much money to study here?' (C1, interview, 2nd February 2006)

Interview samples from C2

'…I am thankful to **, although his feedback is bitter and revising the essay based on his comments was so painful. The tutors of another two modules are less strict, but I don't think I have learned from their feedbacks as much as from his… ** told us that

writing essay is to play language game – 70% of your essays is based on other's arguments, so you should know how to summarize and paraphrase... although I have written a lot in my college life, I had no clear idea of how to write in a proper way. My undergraduate dissertation is full of direct quotations from books or articles without any references. It was therefore the combination of others' ideas and it was not my own writing at all.' (C2, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'...there were a lot of long quotations in my first draft. You know, I did not read carefully about the criteria of references in academic writing. ...I did not think it was troublesome until I got the feedback – the tutor pointed out that I have committed plagiarism. I was so scared by the feedback and thought I may fail in this assignment...' (C2, interview, 2nd February 2006)

'... the hardest time I have experienced in writing is the period after I got the feedback of **. Before it, I have to say I fail to recognize the difficulty of writing. In college, if I could write something to show good English skills, it was good enough. Here since I have read so many books, I think the draft handed in should get a good score. However, when I got the feedback with bad comments on it, I lost all my confidence. Even under such situations, I had to calm down and work on the second draft... it is really difficult...' (C2, interview, 2nd February 2006)

Appendix VIII A sample of the initial categorization of diary and interview excerpts on writing and Feedback

Difference in previous experiences in assessment

'…in my college life, we were assessed by means of paper exams for all units, except one tutor, who I think is not responsible, asked us to write an essay instead.' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

'…I cannot say I am unfamiliar with essay as a form of assessment. In my college life, many units, like philosophy and literature, were assessed by essay writing. In those units assessed by paper tests, with Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading as an exception, not only multiple choice questions but also so-called subjective questions were contained… some of them, such as translation, solely consist of essay questions…' (Interview, C2, 2nd February 2006)

Group assignment

Problems of collaborative work

'There is no progress achieved today regarding the assignment of ** (which is a group work)… in the group meeting this afternoon, a student did not turn up. It seemed he met some technical troubles in the part he was responsible for. He insists on solving the problems before moving on to other parts… noticing other groups have almost finished the assignment, I feel bad. On the one hand, I have to say that being serious is a merit of British students; on the other hand, I think they don't pay sufficient attention to the deadline – should we keep waiting him until the problems are solved? What will we do if the problems will not be solved forever? I think firstly we should work out a framework; then if we have time, we could find ways to make things perfect. In this way, at least we could guarantee to get a Pass… all other members seem to be quite confident without worrying about the deadline at all…' (S9, 9th December 2005)

'This afternoon we had another meeting about the assignment of **. (I) expressed different opinions from the British student. He is so rude… he might feel himself very clever and therefore he despises all the others. I don't think he is any better than me. What he has done could be accomplished by us as well… I am so angry but I donot know how to express this in English…' (S9, 10th December 2005)

Tolerance to individual differences

'The student asked me whether his behavior made me unhappy yesterday. I think he is good. We had been chatting together until 10pm. … We should learn how to communicate with others. Everybody has weakness and therefore we should be tolerant. It is normal that different students have different opinions towards the assignment. According to the tutor, the communication among group members is also an objective of the assignment. We should practice expressing ideas and persuading others to accept these ideas…' (S9, 12th December 2005)

Individual Assignment

Task assigned

'…in semster2, except ** assessed solely by a final exam, the final scores of all other units consist of 30% of essay grade and 70% of exam grade.' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

Working on task

CASE1 – S2

'…a fruitless day… indeed it is difficult to write the essay. The trouble is that (I) really cannot understand what I am reading. No improvement was made today…' (S2, 12th December 2005)

'Yesterday, I have slept for only 4 hours. However, still no progress has been made on my essay. |(I) still have difficulty in understanding what I am reading. .. I feel I am almost driven mad. I feel that I am dying… I should have worked harder during the semester. …I am going to bed now. (I) could sleep for 3 hours today… hope I work harder these days…' (S2, 13th December 2005)

'Only slept for three hours… (I) still cannot understand what I am reading. I keep myself from distraction, but always feel so hard to calm down and to focus on reading… (I) drink a lot of coffee to keep myself focused...' (S2, 14th December 2005)

'It is the early morning on 16th, I finally finished the essay… it seems I just put all ideas together and the essay reaches 4000 words. You could imagine how bad the essay is… it is my fault.' (S2, 15th December 2005)

 CASE 2—S7

'It is difficult to decide the topic of the report. Selecting a good topic is very important, as it will direct me in literature review – if I read extensively based on a topic which turns out later to be infeasible, plenty of time would be wasted. It will be a great trouble… I did not study hard on the unit. As a result, my understanding of the knowledge is not thorough or in depth at all… I have a rough idea of the structure of the report; but donot know how to write it…' (S7, 7th December 2005)

'Today I read the chapters of **, based on which we will write the report… they (Chinese classmates) all feel difficult and would not like to read. But I think the more difficult it is to comprehend, the more effort we should put in…' (S7, 9th December 2005)

'After the preparation of these days, I started writing (the report) today. I benefit a lot from reading. It makes me have a clearer idea of what I would write. Particularly readings during these days finally help me to finalise the topic. A proper topic is very important, as a good beginning is a prerequisite for a final success…' (S7, 10th December 2005)

'…so troublesome… I finally handed it in last night. However, when coming back to my dorm, I noticed an error in the report. At first, I though it does not matter since the report had been submitted. I took a bath and wanted to sleep. Lying on bed, however, I cannot stop myself thinking about it. I then got up and rushed to the department. I put my arm in the mailbox, took the report back, corrected the error, printed it out and then put it back again into the mailbox again. I came back… however, when getting up this morning, I realized another error in the writing. Then (I) had to take the report back again and corrected it for a second time. By then, I felt completely relaxed… when I washed my hand, I found several bruises on my arms, which must be made when I took the report out of the mailbox. So strange – (because) I did not feel anything when I was doing it.' (S7, 10th January 2006)

CASE 3 – S6

'The report is finally finished. Last night I did not go to bed until 10pm but woke up at 12am. (I) then started to work and finished the report. (It is) 5000 words in total. (I) feel good – it looks like a standard academic writing. I think it contains most of the key information… this week I have been under great pressure until today and I finally finished writing. …So beautiful sunshine. So nice feelings… (S6, 6th January 2006)

'(I am) extremely depressed. I got the feedback from the tutor. Although s/he said the report is generally OK, s/he made 7 comments on the report. The worst one is that the report is too short. S/he thinks 30 pages is a proper length. (I) met with a classmate and s/he said that the tutor is a type of person who will be extremely strict to those handing in their reports earlier than others. I am so stupid … (I) cannot encourage myself to work on reports any more. During the whole night, lying on bed, I was not sleepy at all, but felt hurts. I had thought my writing is good, but it turned out that student writings (no matter how good it is) seem to be rubbish in the tutor's eyes… it is so hard to get a Master's degree…' (S6, 8th January 2006)

'Last night I handed in the second draft of the report. (I have) added some information to make the report more than 20 pages… including introduction part, there are totally 6000 words. Hope it is alright… the tutor have asked me to write more on the part of experiment. I think tutors here hold very serious attitudes towards research, which Chinese should learn from them …' (S6, 9th January 2006)

CASE 4 -- S13

'…during these days, I have been working on the draft of another assignment, which is about foreign language learning. The tutor has given very positive feedback on the outline. He commented it was clear and achievable. Even with the outline, I find that writing an essay is not easy at all. Once again, I have troubles in putting different parts together. Besides, it seems all influential factors on language learning are closely coupled to each other. It is difficult to separate their impacts… I feel terrible and feel what I have written is just rubbish.' (S13, 21st December 2005)

'Today I finish the draft of **. When I wrote it, I felt it's totally disordered although I followed the outline. However, after I finished the draft, I read through it on a whole and found the structure is alright… it may be problematic since my argument seems

superficial. But it does not matter. Drawing on my opinions, I think, is much better than being accused of plagiarizing others' ideas'…' (S13, 30th December 2005)

Dilemma faced in process of writing

1. Quantity vs. quality

'… I think there is no difference between essay and ITLES writing. The later requests candidates to write 400-600 words per hour… I think as long as I could read some books, writing an essay is not a problem at all. In other words, if I make sure to write 300 words per hour, in 12 hours I would write 3000 words and thus, an essay could be completed in 18 hours… at this moment, I should hurry up to finish reading… the problem is that I just simply don't want to start, for no good reason. I always waste time…' (S2, 9th December 2005)

'…since I get up quite late every morning, (I) only work in the afternoon and evening. I therefore, could write 800 words per day. In this way, I could finish an essay in 5 days. Not bad…' (S3, 7th January 2006)

'…I almost finish the second draft of the essay. (I) only need to write another several hundred words. Because of the requirement (on the minimum words of an essay), I feel sometimes I write for quantity rather than quality. It is not right, but anyway, I almost finish the essay. Feel relaxed…' (S3, 22nd January 2006)

2. Help others vs. help each other

'… ** always ask me stupid questions and this annoys me so much. Why does not she work on herself? I myself have a lot of problems to solve… Hope I could get a Pass on the report. I don't expect a higher score. A Pass is good enough…' (S7, 8th January 2006)

'** stayed overnight in my dorm yesterday, doing her report. It seemed she had not studied at all. She always hopes I could tell her everything and give her answers to all questions. Why does not she think and work out the answers by herself? I have a lot to do as well… I decided to turn off my mobile today. Yesterday there were so many calls (from my classmates) asking me questions. I spent a lot of time to get the solutions which they don't want to be bothered with… I am always the one being asked for help. I hate it. Comparatively, I like to study with **, because we learn from each other and help each other…' (S7, 10th January 2006)

3. Relaxation vs. study

'… every time when I think about going home (during Christmas), I feel I am facing a dilemma. I don't know why. On the one hand, I am so happy to get together with my parents and to have a really good relaxation. On the other hand, the reports, which I must hand in right after the Christmas, and final examinations make me so upset… I should work hard, because I cannot have access to reference books once going home … it seems most of my (Chinese) classmates have similar feelings. For students, a long holiday before final exams is meaningless. Although we can take a break, we cannot

completely relax during the break. We cannot keep ourselves from thinking about the exams…' (S7, 17th December 2005)

4. Preparing for exams vs. writing assignments

'…this morning I worked on the report. …So depressed. There will be final exams. … Although the books I brought back home are not many, I don't think I could finish reading them. … From time to time, I almost fall to cry. (S7, 30th December 2005)

Support in the process of writing

1. Peer support

'It is very interesting that no matter how late in the evening, all of us (Chinese students) show on-line status on MSN messenger. In late nights, we usually encourage each other.' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…talked with ** about assignments. S/he says that writing essays is actually not very difficult and the most important thing is reading. Once reading has been done well, writing would be easy… this gives me confidence…' (S2, 9th December 2005)

2. Self-encouragement

'… studying abroad is my own choice. No matter how hard it is, I must carry on. Even though the pressure is great, I must work hard. I cannot force myself to produce perfect writings and it is unrealistic. But I should work hard and do my best.' (S2, 14th December 2005)

'… in my previous education experience, seldom did I ask teachers questions. If I did ask, I would think a long time to make sure the question not a stupid and simple one. But here I push myself to ask whenever I have a problem. I told myself to do so even though it may be a stupid question because I should find out its answer. Otherwise, why do I spend so much money to study here?' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

3. Tutors' support

'…in one unit, the tutor not only assigned essay topics, but also listed 10 questions which we should answer in our writings. The objective is to help those with no experience in essay writings … British students of course do not need to read it whereas we have to follow these to make sure we have addressed all key issues in our essays.' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'…before coming here, I had no idea of critical thinking. My first draft seemed only to put different theories together. The tutor commented that my writing was like a 'shopping list'. He told me to add my opinions in the essay. I doubted and asked how I can convince others with my opinions. He said it was not the key of the critical thinking. Not only should we put the ideas of A or B, we must point out why we prefer A rather than B and how we evaluate them. That is critical thinking.' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

'… in the process of redrafting, I kept asking the tutor questions whenever I met problems. I remember on a Sunday, I sent him several emails… he is indeed serious, as he responded to my emails one by one rather than putting all answers in one letter…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

IV. Causes of difficulties in process of writing:

1. Unsatisfied subject knowledge

'*** is the unit, in which I had most troubles, I planned not to work on the assignment of this unit unless all others have been completed… in the case of ***, the more I read, the more depressed I felt. It is a unit which I cannot understand anything either through lectures or readings. (We) have different backgrounds and lots of cases given in the books are based on the practices in British companies which I cannot understand...' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…the economical part of the unit is comparatively easy to handle. Lack of mathematical knowledge makes it particularly difficult. In other words, to do the calculation, a solid knowledge of Matrices and Probability is required, which I almost forget despite having learned in my undergraduate study…' (S7, 9th December 2005)

'…this morning I worked on the report. I cannot understand the result of the calculation I have done. …so depressed.' (S7, 30th December 2005)

'The draft of ** was completed today. (I feel) so suffered. It requires the application of statistical knowledge, which I have almost completely forgotten. It is impossible to be reviewed in a short time… although I have finished the draft, I myself cannot understand what I have written. It looks really like a mess…' (S13, 8th January 2006)

2. Limited sources

'The books, which I borrowed from the library, have been booked by other students via 'place holding' in library system. It means the books have to be returned in 7 days – therefore, I wrote it (the essay of **) rather than the essay of **…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

3. Troubles in reviewing literatures

-- Unsatisfied reading skill

 'Reading is difficult -- (I) always cannot fully understand books and articles.' (S2, 10th December 2005)

'…indeed it is difficult to write an essay. The trouble is that (I) really cannot understand what I am reading. No improvement has been made by far …' (S2, 12th December 2005)

'Facing a huge amount of books, I do not know where to start…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

-- Uninteresting topic

'The assignment of ** requests to write an essay based on a given article… it is the most difficult article I have ever read and I cannot focus myself on it for more than 10 minutes. Not only does it make me sleepy, but also sick…but I have to read. There are no other options. The essay must be finished…' (S9, 1st January 2006)

'I like to write something relevant to my previous working experiences. Comparatively, I hate reading. I am fed up with reading materials listed by tutors… (The content of) some books, I have to say, is meaningless with reference to Chinese context. We cannot apply it to China… (for example,) one book about otherization, which is recommended by my tutor, is so difficult to understand and I don't believe anyone in China is studying the same thing…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

'… I hate reading. With so many books in front of me, I always feel irritated because I did not know when I could finish them. I love teaching and I therefore, like to read the parts beneficial for my teaching practices, such as handbooks for EFL teachers. Pure theories like the history of teaching methods are useless which I cannot see any use in my future job and which I have no interest in reading…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

4. Troubles in writing

-- Unsatisfied writing skills

'Our English is poor. (We) lack knowledge to express ourselves in proper ways … There should be a variety of words, phrases and sentence patterns to express a same meaning, which we either simply have no idea of or don't know how to correctly make use of. …as my (Chinese) friend says, our English is so poor; if we want to beat native English speakers under a competitive situation, we should reply on intelligence. The problem is that we are not more intelligent than them either; or even in cases that we know more (on the topic), we don't know how to express it in English – sometimes what we express in writing is deviated from what we want to say… my English is so poor. I am so depressed. I hope tutors could be tolerated. Anyway, it is inevitable for us to make (grammar/spelling/language use) errors and usually we just don't realize that we have made errors. (S1, 4th February 2006)

'A process of working on assignment is a process of suffering. Usually it is not assignment itself which causes troubles. Language is the biggest problem. Take programming for example. The tutor asked us to provide a full description of the programme we designed. Some students could write quite a few, 40 pages more than others. (However) I cannot. In my opinion, a concise instruction is much better than the one full of redundant information. But if I just write several pages, tutor is likely to think I hold a less serious attitude towards the assignment… of course, writing a lot will benefit us in English study. However, if I could choose, I would like to do programming only. It is much easier for me than writing a program instruction.' (S9, 10th January 2006)

'Despite the outline makes the structure clear, I have encountered difficulties in organizing sentences and paragraphs. (I) had to spend lots of time on organizing words and phrases… Besides, the topic I worked on is about the cooperation between Chinese and English expressions. I am not sure whether the tutor could understand my translation of the Chinese words…' (S13, 18th December 2005)

'… It seems only one argument is raised in writing and it is repeatedly mentioned in different parts…' (S13, 18th December 2005)

'… I feel all stages in writing are difficult. Synthesizing a general idea from book, which I have read, is not easy. Nor are structuring an essay and putting arguments together. Nothing is easy…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

 -- Unfamiliar with British academic writing requirements

'… we don't know tutors' intention (to require us to write in this way). We are not familiar with such a tradition (in academic writing). (The British way of writing) is therefore so difficult for us to master…   ' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…When writing the essay, I usually feel disoriented – I just write down whatever I think -- I don't know any principles, which I could follow to organize my writing…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'Why should we write such a report? … No one understands. Perhaps British students in our class are clear about how to write it. None of Chinese students know. We are all confused…' (S7, 8th January 2006)

'(I) am always confused by tutors' requirements…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'There were so many essays I have to complete and hand in (before the end of this week). If I had made preparation earlier, things would have been different… the topics of *** has been assigned at the beginning of the term; so do those of **. … at the time (the assignments were given), I felt there would be plenty of time (to work on them) – (I) did not realize all units would require essay writing as a part of assessment … therefore, when all essays were assigned and were required to be done in three weeks, I felt extremely suffered …' (S1, 4th February 2006)

 '… the hardest time I have experienced in writing is the period after I got the feedback of **. Before it, I have to say I fail to recognize the difficulty of writing. In college, if I could write something to show good English skills, it was good enough. Here since I have read so many books, I think the draft handed in should get a good score. However, when I got the feedback with bad comments on it, I lost all my confidence. Even under such situations, I had to calm down and work on the second draft… it is really difficult…' (interview, C2, 2nd February 2006)

'…one of my previous colleagues is on a masters' programme in China. I ask her/him how s/he writes essays. S/he says 'going on line, finding articles on the similar topic, and cutting useful parts and pasting them together'. That is all. In China, it seems lack

of resources for social science study – according to her/him, few relevant books are available in library… here in the UK is much better. We can find lots of books in our library on whatever topic we would like to write…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

'…there were a lot of long quotations in my first draft. You know, I did not read carefully about the criteria of references in academic writing. …I did not think it was troublesome until I got the feedback – the tutor pointed out that I have committed plagiarism. I was so scared by the feedback and thought I may fail in this assignment…' (Interview, C2, 2nd February 2006)

6. Insufficient tutorial

'I feel tutors in my department are not very responsible…we of course hope we could have more time on tutorial. But they all seem busy. It may be because there are too many students; but I feel as experts in **, they probably have other jobs… unless you go and ask, do not expect them to arrange time for tutorial… we have an tutor who even tell us that she is too busy to answer any question after lectures… they may hope us to learn by ourselves – but they are too irresponsible: there is only one teaching session per unit per week… so bad…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

7. Insufficient diligence

'Last week my classmates from Thailand and Vietnam finished all assignments. They seemed to have started literature review for writing long time ago. (I) find students from Thailand are more diligent than our Chinese students. (I can) feel that all Chinese students postpone writing until the last minute…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'The tutor of 'Energy and Environment' requires that we should keep reading for 49 hours and then we could start writing. But I think I have read less than 10 hours before starting the writing. (I) knew so little (about the subject) and thus, how can I write an essay containing my opinions?' (S2, 12th January 2006)

'…The topic of assignment was given long time ago. However, I had kept postponing the writing, although I was aware that I must finish it before 16th (when I will go home)…' (S2, 15th December 2005)

9. Insufficient relevant experience

 '…I always find the ideas in books. But without teaching experience, I have no idea about teaching practices in (Chinese) reality. My writing would only be based on the books I read or on the suggestions tutors give. It therefore, has negative impact on originality of what I write…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

VI. First reaction to feedback

'… when writing the first draft, I followed the structure, which I used to in China, i.e., I simply used other's arguments. … In the feedback, the tutor pointed out that I should criticize what I had cited. A little bit confused…' (S3, 2nd February 2006)

'…although not clearly stated, there are so many pieces of comments in the feedback. I was astonished when reading it. How striking! I kept asking myself: am I such a bad student; is my writing so poor…? I am completely discouraged…' (Interview, C2, 2nd February 2006)

'…with the feedback in hand, I felt so bad that I cannot keep myself from crying. I even cried in front of the tutor later in his office. I cannot control myself. I told the tutor I was extremely depressed. As an English teacher myself, how can I wrote such a bad essay? I told him I was so sad… He is very kind, I have to say. He kept comforting me. (He) even took out a pack of tissue from his drawer and handed it to me. …' (Interview, C1, 2nd February, 2006)

'I got the feedback of **. When I read the first sentence, which is I could pass, I was so happy. But after reading through the draft, I found the tutor was not very serious – some originally correct expressions have been changed by him/her into grammatically incorrect ones. But it does not matter. As long as I could get pass, it is wonderful. The less I have to revise, the better…' (18th January 2006)

'(I) got the feedback of **. The whole draft has been corrected and it is full of red marks. There are 11 pieces of comments in total. (I) don't want to read them through. Too discouraged…' (S13, 20th January 2006)

'I got feedback on the draft of **. I also had a talk with tutor about it… according to the tutor, the essay will definitely get a score of pass. If I could make some revisions, the mark can be higher. But the tutor also said that if I was not quite sure how to improve it, I would better leave it except correcting grammar errors. Her/his words made me very confused. On the one hand, I lack confidence to make the writing better; on the other hand I feel guilty if I lose the chance of gaining a better mark due to putting no effort in…' (S13, 6th January 2006)

'…today I got the feedback. Unluckily, I am required to re-write the essay. When I handed it in, I have thought I have completed one assignment and could focus on others. But now I have to write it again. And it is hopeless to get a higher score on a rewritten essay, I am afraid. But actually I don't mind what score I could get at this moment, as long as I can pass… I feel I am so poor…' (S3, 18th January 2006)

'I received the feedback of another essay today. 14 pieces of comments… the tutors says I may fail if I would not correct the draft based on his/her comments. I don't think the consequence could be so bad. As long as I try my best, I should get a pass…' (S3, 31st January 2006)

Outcome appraisal

I. Impact of essay writing:

1. Benefits

-- facilitating learning

'However, I believe I should have learned a lot. If without assignments, never would I have carefully read books. I did not know how to look up e-journals before whereas I am very good at it now. But the process of writing is too suffering…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…I am thankful to **, although his feedback is bitter and revising the essay based on his comments was so painful. The tutors of another two modules are less strict, but I don't think I have learned from their feedbacks as much as from his… ** told us that writing essay is to play language game – 70% of your essays is based on other's arguments, so you should know how to summarize and paraphrase… although I have written a lot in my college life, I had no clear idea of how to write in a proper way. My undergraduate dissertation is full of direct quotations from books or articles without any references. It was therefore the combination of others' ideas and it was not my own writing at all.' (Interview, C2, 2nd February 2006)

'…in the feedback, the tutor pointed out that I should criticize what I had cited. …today I suddenly have some ideas upon critical thinking. So happy… I think it indeed needs time to improve the ability of criticizing. Feel so good…' (S3, 4th February 2006)

-- facilitating interaction among students

'In the process (of writing essays), we (Chinese students and the foreigners) communicate much more with each other. It may be because we now have a common concern. When we meet, we ask each other's progress in assignments. Very friendly. … (I am) so jealous of British students. They seems always the last ones starting writing, but the first ones finishing it… the students from Thailand are very diligent, from whom I feel great pressures…'(S4, 4th December 2005)

2. Negative influences

-- Physically

'(I am) exhausted. (I feel) so tried after working overnight on assignment of **. I need rest and adjust myself to a regular timetable. These days I feel I become dull-witted; (I) cannot think clearly. … Every day I feel extremely sleepy after suppers. (I) dare not go to bed because I am afraid it will be very difficult to get up. I usually rest my head on the table in front of the laptop and then sleep for an hour. It makes me feel much better and very efficient in working afterwards… the trouble is that I am always too sober to fall in sleep later when I finished work.' (S4, 18th November 2005)

-- Negative impact on class learning

'I think I paid a lot of time on the assignments – I mean because I always got to bed late these days, I have been in such a bad condition in lectures. I cannot be concentrated. I feel as if my head belonged to someone else. Sometimes I simply cannot hear what tutors' say, just seeing their lips move… take today's lecture of Accounting for example, I did not have time to read handouts in advance. Without reading, it is impossible for

me, who had no background at all, to understand the tutors' instructions. Compared with final exam of the unit, essay is not so important – the later counts 40% of final score whereas the former takes 60%. If I focus too much on essay writing and thus, cannot be effective in learning in the lectures, I may possibly fail the exam. The result will be disastrous.' (S4, 29th November 2005)

'…no unit has been finished and I am lack of sleep overnight. We have to go to lectures in the daytime. Some of my classmates began to play truancy. No matter how sleepy I am, I attend all the lectures of compulsory units. I have spent so much on the courses. How can I miss any of them? ... However, I have to give up the less important ones such as **, **and **… the effect of learning in classes has been so bad. I found some of my classmates fell into sleep during lectures. Although I try to keep myself awake, I feel I simply cannot think – my brain seems not working at all. Besides, when you are engaged in an assignment of one unit, it is so difficult to focus on the lecture of another. I mean, I cannot keep myself from thinking the essay on ** when I am having a lecture of ***…' (S4, 2nd December 2005)

'I have played truancy in many lectures to finish essay writing…'(S1, 4th February 2006)

-- Emotionally

'From the status (of my Chinese classmates) appearing on the MSN messenger, their (emotional) conditions could be guessed. In the evening, many my fellow students appear on line – in fact, the later the night is, the more classmates appear. But most of them show with a status of 'AWAY'. Clearly they are all busy with writing… Every time when I cannot continue working in the late night, I would open the MSN. Seeing my classmates on line, I would know they are still writing. This pushes me forward … besides, it is very interesting to see the changes of their nicknames on MSN messenger. In the first week we wrote assignments, 'working hard' was a popular name; later there were names like 'depressed', 'suffered', 'writing essay is like giving birth to baby – sometimes the delivery could be extremely hard; sometimes a natural birth is impossible and thus we need caesarean'. Such names, frankly, have encouraged me a lot. They make me realize that I am not the only one struggling with assignments and no needs to feel lonely …' (S4, 6th December 2005)

'In the past three weeks, I, for the first time, realized how hard the study could be. From the age of 6 (I started my school education) till now, I did not expect such great amount of works to be completed in such short time. But it is here and I feel much more pressure. … Such great pressure! Day and evening make no difference for me. It would be very early for me if I could go to bed at 2/3AM. I also suffered from insomnia – lying on the bed, I cannot help myself think about essays. In such cases, I felt so angry – because it is a waste because time has not been spent on writing or sleep… Never did I study overnight before coming to the UK; but this Thursday I continued writing for 24 hours – I stopped at 7AM just because I had to work on a part-time job starting at 7.30AM. So depressed… I have to work on a part time job and have to study as well… such great pressure… sometimes I even had an idea of giving up'(S1, 4th February 2006)

2. Rethinking upon the choice of studying in the UK

'…We (Chinese students) all ask ourselves why we spent over 100,000RMB to come here and suffer so much. We are all under great pressures, both economically and psychologically…' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…it seems I have been away from the goals I am pursuing. Perhaps after this year, I will only learn that I am not suitable to learn and live in the UK…' (S2, 13th December 2005)

II. Perceptions and evaluations of different aspects of academic culture

1. Feedback

'Tutors do provide feedback, which I think is the ground for our marks. They may comment like 'you should write more in this part; or you should give more examples in that part…' seldom did they comment on grammar. I think they focus on main ideas and the use of language seems not their criteria for the marks' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'Hardly do we read the feedback; simply because we cannot tell their handwriting. On the cover sheet of essays are the pre-printed lines which tutors fill their feedback in and which I think are not spacious enough. To make things worse, original cover sheets are kept in department and what we get is only photocopies, which are even harder to read… we guess together hoping to find out what a word is; but we always fail… seldom did they mark in the margins… although we want to know our weakness, it, however, does not matter (even if we cannot read the feedback). Because we have got the mark and cannot do anything on it – I mean we have no chance to re-draft it or revise it anyway.' (interview, S1's boyfriend, 9th March 2006)

'… there are so many comments. It seems that the essay should be rewritten… however, I have to say all the comments are reasonable – they indeed expose the limitations of my first draft…' (S3, Feb 1st)

'…I should carefully make correction on my first draft… rewriting is very troublesome, but should be beneficial. I could learn from it… it is not good to just hand in a paper and then get a score of it…' (S3, 19th Jan 2006)

'…but the tutor giving such bitter comments, I believe, is not to torture us. As ** told me, he would like to achieve improvement through redrafting…' (interview, C1, 2nd Feb 2006)

2. Plagiarism

'…none of those we know was accused of plagiarism (in feedbacks)…we dare not. They are strict for it… we have no experience. Those taking undergraduate education here may know how to copy others' while not being identified by tutors, like my friend in **. However, for us coming here for a one-year degree, we will definitely not take such a risk. Even if we cannot get a pass, we will not cheat…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'…If citations and references occupy too much in writing, I am worried to be accused of plagiarism; however, if too little, what I have written may not be good as well – I am afraid my own expression is much less concise or to the point while my own opinion may be very naïve. In short, the process of writing is a process of suffering. …' (S13, 18th December 2005)

3. Citation

'…tutors always emphasize the importance of the proper citation. They don't mind how many references we have looked up – but once we have used other's ideas, we must give references…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'Here we must cite references to the essay we write. It seems the longer the reference list is, the better the essay you write. The length of reference list, I feel, would show how much the effort I have put in… we are not allowed to copy other's (writings)… Thus, although time is so limited to complete the assignment, we have to spend days on reading…' (S1, 4th December 2005)

'… when I wrote the essay of **, I felt so difficult. It seems we have to put the arguments of different authors together and summarize them into one idea. I cannot understand why we should write in such a way and why we should have to have references – they are not ours. The essay we write is just like a collection of summaries of different books… when I wrote 1000 words, I cannot find more relevant literature. I instead used my personal experiences to add another 1000 words … we don't know tutors' intention (to require us to write in this way). We lack the familiarity of such a tradition (in academic writing). (The British way of writing) is therefore so difficult for us to master…   ' (S1, 4th February 2006)

'…I feel what I have done is to paraphrase others' writing. I mean, I use different sentences to state the original expressions in books and articles. I feel my essay is actually not written by myself…' (S2, 15th January 2006)

4. Critical thinking

'… the tutor of ** has recommended us a book regarding writing… it contains examples … it mentions that if we could criticize what we have referred to, it will be better. But we cannot criticize for the sake of criticizing, can we? If we think others' are good… and I feel we cannot simply criticize other's (ideas) by ours. We cannot create a kind of argument – it will be weak because it has no support at all… it is unlike in china where we are only required to write and no one cares about how to write. Foreigners are serious in this aspect…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'…I have changed a lot. Before coming here, I cannot imagine to question teachers and to challenge ideas in books. But here the tutors keep reminding us that we must criticize what we have read in essays… From little, I was taught to memorize the content in books. I believe so firmly that once written in book, the information is correct and unchallengeable. And I also told my own students to memorize the textbooks as it is all correct…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

5. Chinese-British difference regarding assessment

--. Marking

'Suppose our writings would be read by tutors together with those written by native speakers. The gap (between our writing ability and theirs) will be evident. It will negatively influence the marks of our essays…'(S1, 4th February 2006)

'…we are not clear what the criteria tutors draw on in marking…it could be very flexible and subject to personal preference. The subject itself is not objective at all and I don't think there could be a fixed set of criteria for the tutor to mark (our essays or answers in exam papers)… but we do not know what the difference is between an essay having a score of 49 and another having a score of 50. The one who gets 49 may be unable to get their degree. We don't know what the tutor's intention to give such a score as 49. In China, if we were on the edge of pass – but could not reach the line of pass, tutors always did us a favor and gave a pass… probably the tutors feel on the one hand, the essay cannot reach the standard of pass; on the other hand they would like to be sympathetic and give a possibly highest score… but it is meaningless. A lower one, on the contrary, makes us feel better…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

'…we have dual roles here – we are not only students but also customers… I have considered the relationship between money we paid and the possibility we get the degree. I mean, since I pay so much for the course, there is no reason to fail me in any unit. If you think my writing is not good enough for a pass, why not pointing out in feedback so that I could revise it? If I failed, it would only show that the tutor is not responsible at all… therefore, I am sure I could pass if I follow all advices of tutors and revise my draft strictly according to the tutor's feedback.' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

  -- Forms of assessment

'… the part I feel greatest difference (in assessment between here and china) is the essay questions in paper exams – I mean in China we may also have essay questions in exams, but no exam contains only 3 to 5 questions to answer -- there must be some multiple choices questions or blank filling questions… we feel great pressure here because one question will take a great percentage of scores. If we fail to answer one, we are in the danger of fail…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

-- Graduate requirement

'We are under much more pressure here, because if we failed in two modules we would not get the degree. But in China we are given chance to take the test again and as long as we could pass it, we would graduate with the degrees…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

-- Tutor/student relationship

'In the feedback of **, there is a comment that what I has discussed is outdated. I emailed to the tutor saying my writing is based on the reality of Chinese English teaching. His response, out of my expectation, is 'feel free to disagree'. So surprising! According to him, I could insist on my idea, as long as I could support it with sufficient references. So surprising, we are allowed to challenge teacher. He is so nice…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

6. Importance of grades

'I don't think companies in China will look at our scores when I hunt a job later. I don't think they treat a Master's degree granted by a UK university highly. Situations have changed -- there are too many Chinese going back with a UK diploma. Employers would doubt how much we can learn within one year; unless you have graduated from the most famous universities… they pay more attention to working experiences rather than the scores…' (Interview, S1, 9th March 2006)

7. Proper forms of assessment

'…I feel we should not deny the benefits of paper exam. For example, if the assessment of the module of ** took a form of exam, it would be motivations pushing me to study the development of diverse ELT methods. But (because we only write essay), I don't like to learn it. … I think all ways of assessment have advantages and disadvantages. Learning outcomes all depend on individual's learning attitudes. One of my previous classmates, for example, had great interest in Linguistics which we felt so boring. s/he did not memorize anything only for the purpose of passing exams. He comprehended the knowledge instead. He had high scores in exams and had learned a lot as well… we cannot deny the positive effect of memorization… regarding the form of assessment, I think it must be selected based on the value stance of a particular department/university/country. First, in a UK university, our interest may be put in priority whereas in China no matter whether you like the subject or not, you have to take it and have to pass the exam. Second, the reason our department adopted essay writing as an assessing way may be because it could best realize the teaching objectives of different modules. Some may apply because there is no exam here. But I don't think essay writing is easier than paper exams. It is actually harder to write…' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

'…practical skills to teach and to handle different emergency in class environment are undoubtedly crucial. When hunting a teaching position in China, you need to show the administrators your capacity of teaching. Teaching is practical – no matter how well you master educational theories, you cannot be offered a job if you cannot teach. And proficiency in English is important as well… therefore it is a key to assess ability of oral expression. We could have presentations as a part of assessment.' (Interview, C1, 2nd February 2006)

Appendix IX Final analysis of data of formative feedback

Prior experience

In interviews, 13 main informants (MI) and 5 of their classmates (C) were invited to recall their previous assessment experiences in China. With no exception, all students reported the paper-based standardized multiple-choice test as the only assessment tool in their school days. Such a description is consistent with the well-documented Chinese 'culture of learning', which is characterized by examination-oriented teaching and repetitive drillings.

The following are typical responses prompted by the enquiry:

'method of assessment? I think everybody experiences the same, just test, test and test...' (S3, interview, 06/04/06)
'we had lots of exams, multiple choice types...' (S7, interview, 05/04/06)

The Chinese government regards the education of the country's younger generation as being strategically crucial, viewing it as decisive in terms of the nation's economic competitiveness and political power. Being at the heart of education, the issue of proper forms of assessment has been debated throughout the country (see Han & Yang, 2001). However, from the responses above, it seems that formal paper-based examinations are predominantly used in pre-tertiary education in China. This situation may reflect the continued influence of the imperial examination system, which in history was a tool to select imperial officials. It may reveal a belief that such an examination is an objective selection mechanism, which provides comparatively fair chances for youth on the basis of their ability rather than nepotism or wealth.

Despite acknowledged strengths, the weaknesses of exam-oriented education are recognized by the informants. In the following excerpt, a participant described how great the pressure was which he had experienced in the CEE (College Entrance Examination) and how hard it was for him to step out of the shadow of failing in it.

'... I have worked so hard and suffered so much for the Examination... in high school the class director talked to us almost every day, emphasizing the importance of CEE and the significance of getting higher education. It made me so nervous... I was so anxious that I cannot fall asleep during the Exam... as a result, I performed badly and failed to reach the enrollment standard of ** (top Chinese science and technology university). I did not give up and tried for the second time in the following year. But the same thing happened. I was even more anxious and failed again... after it, my confidence was totally lost. For a long time, I could not forgive myself, because I thought I did not live up to the expectation of my parents and my teachers... It cost me two years to step out of the shadow of failure.' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

On the one hand, it is a Chinese cultural tenet that an academic credential is superior to other qualifications; on the other hand, Chinese youth and parents are acutely aware of

the utilitarian value of education, as society becomes more competitive and many job opportunities are only open to graduates (Agelasto, 1998, Wang, 2003). Both factors work together and place tremendous importance on the CEE, the only legitimate college entry mechanism. Schools and teachers are evaluated by promotion rate, while students are evaluated by their test performance. CEE looms over the whole of secondary education. Overwhelming social emphasis on it fills students with the belief that their performance in it is the sole indicator of their academic ability and the sole determinant of their future academic development. The consequent stress upon success in CEE inevitably results in an affective outcome which has a seriously negative impact on learners.

It should also be noted, however, that some participants' maintain that to some extent such high stakes testing does motivate learning: '*..we are good students because we always get high scores... from when I was little, I was often told how someone won a scholarship and studied for a PhD in America...*' (C1, interview, 22/07/05). They insist that there are no answers available which can be memorized and reproduced to achieve success in CEE. Not only must understanding of theories and examples be acquired but students also have to think, reflect and explore by themselves, to apply what they are taught and to cope with complicated cases by their own efforts.

By contrast, in higher education more weaknesses are identified. For example,

'*...in university, it seems whether you study or not does not count... it is much more important to work hard, as much as possible, in the last one month before the examinations.*' (S2, interview, 22/07/05)

In her account S3 reduces the study time even further, stating that just days before the exam '*we* (she and her fellow classmates) *took out the textbooks and memorized the content which we never read in the term*' (27/07/05).

As argued by Tang (1994), the responses show that the dominance of examinations has led to a backwash phenomenon, where what is tested decides what is learned. The purpose of learning is not to explore the unknown but to get a satisfactory score in the exams. It, therefore, inhibits the all-round development of students, and probably encourages students to deal with test questions in an artificial environment rather than developing the ability of solving practical problem (Han & Yang, 2001).

Furthermore, although for most of the participants, like S2 &S3, exams continued to be dominant in undergraduate study; for others course work took their place as a major assessment method. It was different from their school education, where all participants experienced tests as a sole way of assessment.

'*... I am familiar with the essay as a form of assessment. In my college life many units, like philosophy and literature, were assessed by essay writing...*' (C3, interview, 02/02/06)
'*...in my third and fourth year in college, we always worked by ourselves to complete designing work, which would be given a score by teachers...*' (S2, 22/07/05)

The above excerpts draw attention to more heterogeneous aspects of Chinese students as a group. From the responses, generally the participants majoring in arts and social science for their first degree seemed to be more frequently assessed by course work than those studying in science and engineering. Besides, some universities (like the one that C3 graduated from) seem to go further in terms of introducing more innovative assessment practices. The differences are further embodied in the case of S5, who received his undergraduate education in Japan. Unlike other participants, from the third year in the university, he joined in a research group to conduct his graduate project. This diversity of experience must be recognized to avoid stereotyping of Chinese students' backgrounds when they enter a foreign university.

Despite this, however, there is a consensus among all participants on their very limited experience of formative feedback. Although some students, like C3, did report they had been given comments on their written assignments, these comments were usually a single word or simple sentence, typically '*well done*', '*good*' and '*try hard next time*'. Such feedback, no matter whether goes together with a mark or not, reflects more a traditional view of assessment as measurement than a social-constructivist one serving an informative purpose.

First reactions to formative feedback
When the participants came to study in the UK, they were suddenly exposed to a British academic environment where assessment is built more or less on a social-constructivist framework and where formative feedback is expected to play a key role in learning. The following are extracts relating to first encounters with such feedback, selected from the students' diaries and from the follow-up interviews. From these, we may see how formative comments shocked the participants, who lacked similar experience in their home country.

'*… there are so many pieces of comments in the feedback. I was astonished at the time reading it. How striking! I kept asking myself: am I such a bad student; is my writing so terrible…? I am completely discouraged…*' (C3, interview, 02/02/06)

'*(I) got the feedback from **. The whole draft has been corrected, full of red marks. There are 11 pieces of comments in total. (I) do not want to read them through. Too discouraged…*' (S13, diary, 20/01/06)

'*…with the feedback in my hand, I felt so bad that I could not keep myself from crying. I even cried in front of the tutor later in his office. I cannot control myself. I told the tutor I was extremely depressed. As an English teacher myself, how can I write such a bad essay? I told him I was so sad…*'(C1, interview,10/04/06)

'*…when I got the feedback, I could not believe it – so many pieces of comments! So many grammatical errors! Am I so bad in grammar? I cannot read it, let along revising a redraft based on it! …I left it aside and worked on other assignments…*' (S3, diary, 18/01/06)

'*…so depressed! The tutor gave me feedback. Although s/he said 'generally OK', s/he gave me 7 pieces of comment and told me my essay was too short! My classmate said I*

had handed in the draft very early – thus the tutor thought you had time and asked you to do a lot. I am so stupid!... I cannot do anything tonight. Heartbroken! I spent so much time on the essay. It is true all things written by the students are seen as rubbish in the tutor's eyes...' (S6, diary, 08/01/06)

The descriptions demonstrate that the students viewed formative comments as summative judgements of their academic performance. To them, the more comments they got, the worse the written assignment was. Formative feedback, in this way, was treated as verbal grades which had no essential differences from the marking system the participants had been used to. By putting the feedback aside and refusing to read it, some students immersed themselves in sadness and self-criticism. Others sought support by comparing the 'comment list' they got with others. They rebuilt their confidence by finding their classmates were given more comments; otherwise they were further discouraged. On the whole, it seems safe to say that when experiencing such formative feedback for the first time, the respondents failed to properly perceive its functions. Having no idea that formative comments are intended to facilitate learning and to close the gap between actual and desired performance, it is inevitable that the students felt astonished and discouraged.

Moreover, in the research, there are two main informants enrolled in the subject of Interpreting and Translating. Most of the teaching hours, in these two cases, are arranged for oral interpreting practices and teachers' on-the-spot evaluation. Receiving comments in public in the presence of other classmates turned out to be a fresh but bitter experience for the students.

'…at first when the tutor criticised us in class, I have to say we could not accept it. The better one's English is, the harder it is to accept the fact that one's weaknesses are pointed out in front of all others. We think the tutor is too strict and never saved face for us...' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

It has been argued that any attempt to understand Chinese social behaviours cannot avoid the study of *face*, which has been assigned a key role in regulating interpersonal relations and has a key function of maintaining harmony in Chinese society (Ho, Peng & Chan, 2002, Hwang, 1999). As a result of family education and schooling, Chinese individuals internalize the idea that they must protect themselves from losing *face* and that they must consciously save one another's *face* (ibid). Bearing this point in mind, it is understandable that the emotional reactions of the participant S11 is mixed. He, on the one hand, felt ashamed as he failed to behave as well as demanded (which is far more than the embarrassment that students from other culture may experience); on the other hand, he was found angry, as the tutor did not show any concern about his self-esteem and did not place any importance on his *face*.

This student mentioned that *'the better one's English is, the harder it is to accept the fact that one's weaknesses are pointed out in front of all others.'* To check whether or not public feedback had a similar impact upon lower achievers, another student (C5) in Interpreting and Translating was interviewed and was invited to recall her reactions to the tutor's comments at the beginning of the first semester. She is the only student on

this course who majored in a science subject before studying in the UK and thus her English proficiency was lower than that of her classmates.

'...I knew my English was weak. Right from the beginning I knew I was worse than the others... but that is different when tutors pointed it out. I mean, when tutors gave negative feedback -- actually never was I praised here..., my self-evaluation was confirmed. My classmates, who are good in oral English, may not agree with the feedback they got because they are sure they deserve a better comment. But I am different. I know I am bad. But even so, I felt so low. I felt others were laughing at me. I usually took one week to recover from the tutors' comment... sometimes I could not bear the pressure of being evaluated again and played truant...' (C5, interview, 21/04/06)

Unlike S11, C5 did not blame tutors for ignoring *face* saving, an implicit rule of interpersonal interactions, nor for commenting on her performance directly in public. But as with S11, she seemed to perceive teachers' feedback as a summative 'evaluation', which was accepted as an authoritative measurement of the performance. Attending too much to the summative function of the comments, she neglected its formative function to assist learning through the provision of information. Therefore, she imposed unbearable pressure on herself, which resulted in truancy. In this sense, her study was negatively influenced.

At the end of the first semester
Although feedback had firstly astonished and demotivated the participants, by the end of the first semester, they tended to appreciate feedback and stressed the benefits they got from it. For those in subjects that were assessed through written assessments, a process of drafting and redrafting turned into a process by which they deepened their understanding of and adapted themselves to British academic culture.

'...before coming here, I had no idea of critical thinking. My first draft seemed only to put different theories together. The tutor commented that it was like a 'shopping list'. He told me to add in my opinions... ...I have changed a lot. Before coming here, I could not imagine questioning teachers and doubting ideas in books. But here the tutor keeps reminding us that we must criticize in essays what we have read... Since I was little, I was taught to memorize the content of books. I believe so firmly that once written in a book, information is correct and unchallengeable. And I also told my own students that it is alright to memorize the textbooks ...' (C1, interview, 02/02/06)

'... (in the feedback, the tutor pointed out that I should criticize what I had cited.) ...today I suddenly have some ideas upon critical thinking. So happy... I think it indeed needs time to improve the ability to criticize. Feel so good…' (S3, diary, 04/02/06)

It is argued that Chinese culture is embedded in the teachings of Confucius (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Despite changes in all aspects of social life, Confucian doctrines remain powerful in shaping the Chinese people (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). The informant C1 seems to be one of thousands of Chinese students who are taught to respect textbooks and to submit to rules listed in them. To her, a good student must not

question authorities, but faithfully copy and reproduce them. It was the British tutors' feedback, both in written and oral forms, which guided her to gradually reject the belief in absolute truth and to challenge the view that a written text is a trustworthy reflection of reality. By promoting critical thinking, feedback helped the student to be aware of the new norms of the host country and gradually to become adept at relevant critical skills.

As well as ways of thinking, the proper practices of citation, which the participants have established, appear contradictory to the well accepted notion of plagiarism in the UK. This could be demonstrated in the following excerpts in which the participants described their writing practices in China:

'. ...*when I worked on my undergraduate dissertation, it was totally different. We wrote freely. We were only required to list references at the end of the essay rather than at every place of citation within the writing...*' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

'*My undergraduate dissertation is full of direct quotation of books or articles without any references...*' (C2, interview, 02/02/06)

It has been pointed out that in Confucius Heritage Culture countries, the insights of an author, especially those who are well-known, are usually treated as common knowledge and as belonging to everyone. The use of such insights without any reference tends to be considered appropriate, and is indeed viewed as a practice that adds glory to the author (Swoden, 2005). On the one hand, such generalizations about cultural influences should be treated carefully as they miss the ever-changing nature of culture and homogenize the Chinese people; on the other hand, it is difficult to deny certain influences on Chinese students. As shown by the above comments, the participants indeed held a view on the unattributed use of material that differs from the British conception of plagiarism as a major 'crime'.

Tutors' feedback played a key role in aiding the participants to a correct method of citation and attribution, as the following comments indicate:

'…*tutors always emphasize the importance of proper citation. They do not mind how few references we have consulted – but as long as we have used other's ideas, we must give references*…' (S1, interview, 09/03/06)

'…*Tutors told us that writing an essay is playing a language game – 70% of your essays is based on other's arguments, so you should know how to summarize and paraphrase... although I have written a lot in my college life, I had no clear idea of how to write in a proper way.*' (C3, interview, 02/02/06)

Here both tutors helped the students to enhance their familiarity with new writing requirements. Their feedback, in the form of written comments and face-to-face exchanges, supported the participants to meet the challenges presented in the new concepts which firstly appeared to be alien. Not only did it refer the students to the criteria for correct citation, by stressing the importance of acknowledgement whenever the ideas from other sources were copied and appropriated, but, more importantly, it instructed the students on how to construct an academic text on what already exists,

which was even harder for non-native English users. The formative feedback, therefore, ensured that the norms recognized in British academic culture were followed in the Chinese students' writing and as such freed them from the charge of plagiarism.

Recognition of the benefits of formative feedback is another explicit change in the students' attitudes. In other words, by the end of the first semester, the participants tended to perceive formative feedback from a more positive perspective:

'...although the tutor gives such bitter comments, I believe, it is not to torture us. As ** told me, he would like to achieve improvement through redrafting...' (C1, interview, 02/02/06)

Informants focused on the information the feedback provided and strived for improvement:

'…I was asked to do note-taking practice in the front of the classroom. I did so badly... the tutor pointed out that I was weak in listening skills; she also comforted me and said environmental factors should be counted because noises may also influence my performance. But I think I do have a lot to do for improvement. … after class I talked with the tutor and she helped me make a plan to improve my listening skills. I should work hard.' (S11, diary, 10/01/06)

By then, the participants began to step out of their accustomed view of comments formed through prior experiences. By realizing the value of feedback, they began to reject their previous perception which saw teachers as authorities and saw comments as measurement of their performance. The above responses show the signs that at the end of the first semester the participants would like to accept the idea that feedback enhances learning. It might therefore be anticipated that such an active attitude would be much clearer in the second semester, which is discussed below.

Second semester
At the time of writing this paper, the students were busy with course work assigned in the second semester. The following comments were made by S13, the student who had experienced 'culture shock' when receiving a long list of formative comments in the first semester:

'... I am sure feedback is good for our study. It points out your problems and weaknesses and helps you to make improvements in more effectively... it forces you to think and to read more… getting few comment does not necessarily show the quality of my writing. ** (a tutor) gives me very simple comments which only require me to correct several spellings. It is not good, I think, because I do not know what the strengths of my writing are...the more comments I got, the better…' (S13, diary, 01/05/06)

This excerpt illustrates how, in the second semester, the students may link learning and feedback together. In other words, they tend to regard learning as an on-going process in which formative feedback plays a key scaffolding role. Although grades are still

viewed by most as being important, to get a good score seems no longer the sole goal of their learning. It is the achievement of real development which counts.

The responses also show that Chinese students, represented by S6, can be open-minded. They may cling to their traditional values for a sense of security when starting learning in a foreign context; but they do not resist change, and once their confidence grows, they appreciate the strengths of the host academic culture and display a willingness to accept the prevailing norms.

'*…the tutors here are very strict and always give very detailed comments... perhaps one year is limited in terms of knowledge being taught. But it provides opportunities to learn from the tutor their serious attitudes towards learning, research and career. This is valuable and we will benefit for our whole life…*' (S6, diary, 07/04/06)

Now let us turn to the responses of two students in the department of Interpreting and Translating. As discussed earlier, their attitudes towards feedback are particularly interesting because they have been connected to the issue of '*face*'.

'*I cannot say that now I don't mind what sort of comments I got – I mean I may still feel depressed if being negatively evaluated in class. But I could recover quite quickly... it is good to get teachers' feedback. Because I know what my level (of English) is. That the tutors doesn't point my mistakes out does not mean that my English is good now... it is better to have feedback and it is our duty to adjust our mood... we should work hard.*' (C5, interview, 21/04/06)

'*Thus now we don't care about our face – or we don't care about face as much as we care about the actual improvement we have gained.... Time flies by. Everyone is under great pressure to achieve more within a short period. We could judge whether we have done well or badly in class. If we always made similar mistakes, for example, we are too nervous and not confident in interpreting practices, we would blame ourselves, even if the tutor did not say so...*' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

Despite the differences in extent, both students no longer place *face* in such an important place as before. Pressure to achieve may be one reason. Realizing that feedback does not aim at summative judgements seems another reason. The two factors work together and push the students to go beyond the concerns of *face* and concentrate on learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the excerpts reveal that these Chinese students have strong learning motivation, which may be intrinsic interest, as in the case of C5; or the desire to succeed, as in the case of S11. The motivation drives the students to make full use of formative feedback to close the gap between their actual and desired achievement. Moreover, the ultimate aim of feedback is to help students to monitor their own study. In the above cases, such an aim is achieved, for no matter whether the tutor gives comments or not, the participant is able to locate her weaknesses and accordingly makes improvement.

Factors resulting in different benefits

Unfortunately, not all students report that they benefit much from the tutors' formative feedback. Illegibility of handwritten comments is one of the reasons for a lack of impact stressed by the respondents, which seems worsened when commentary is given in a pre-designed standard format and in a photocopied version.

'… *we can hardly read the feedback; because we cannot tell their handwriting. On the cover sheet of essays are the pre-printed lines which tutors fill their feedback in and which I think are not spacious enough. To make things worse, original cover sheets are kept in the department and what we get is only photocopies which are even harder to read…*' (C4, interview, 09/03/06)

Such criticism of the readability of comments was confirmed by talking with peers and course directors. The issue of illegibility is not the one involving a specific tutor, but a pervasive phenomenon troubling quite a few students.

'…*we guess together hoping to find out what a word is; but we always fail...*' (C4, interview, 09/03/06)

'…*when course director handed out the comments, he asked whether we could read it; he said he himself cannot recognize the tutors' handwriting...*' (S5, interview, 11/04/06)

Personal styles of handwriting could be difficult to distinguish by native English users, let alone Chinese learners. A participant (S4) showed the researcher samples of comments she received. Some words on it did look like meaningless signs with a shape of curves and lines and dots. As discussed previously, formative feedback should function to provide guidance on how to improve. However, if it cannot be understood, it fails to inform students of current weaknesses and strengths, let alone aiding them towards further enhancement.

Opaque comments containing little useful information is another source of complaints by the respondents.

'*Little mistakes in grammar were pointed out… there was a comment of 'nice work'… on the whole, the comment was very simply and pretty general.*' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

'…*some tutors feedback is not very helpful. Like 'the essay is overall OK'. Does it mean revision is unnecessary? Anyway, it is too general and I am not sure what the weakness is.*' (C1, interview, 07/04/06)

As discussed before, what is crucial is the quality of comments and feedback given. Words like '*ok*' and '*nice work*' are in fact alternatives forms of marks. Although they may be seen by the tutors as sufficient in themselves to indicate the level of performance, opaque comments would trouble students in discerning meaning and do not, in themselves, aid students in taking steps to improve.

To enable students to tackle better their future work, clear understanding of comments and the amplification of feedback are unquestionably necessary. Where neither can be

achieved through written and paper-based feedback, face-to-face tutorials become essential. However, for some students, seeking support from tutors was difficult:

'…*of course it is better if the feedback could be handed back by tutors and a tutorial could be given afterwards. But the tutors, I am afraid are busy… one of my tutors told us at the beginning of the semester that she has no time to speak to us after class…*' (S1, interview, 27/04/06)

'…*seldom did we have a tutorial. In my memory, there was only one time (in the past 7 months), which lasted only minutes. Tutors are busy. We all guess they have other part-time jobs. They need money…*' (S11, interview, 08/04/06)

From the above responses, it seems that in some departments, the routine tutorial is not (or ceases to be) a complementary mechanism for formative feedback. When clarification becomes impossible, the written comments are in fact inaccessible. Thus, potential benefits from them are denied to the learners.

It should be noted that despite few officially arranged tutorials, some students reported that they do have other chances to seek their tutors' help, if required:

'…*most of tutors gave us their email address or told us their office number but never did I contact them for learning advices… I think we should not blame tutors, because they do provide the chances for a tutorial. It is us who don't make full use of it…*' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

'…*I think there are too many students in our department. That is why we don't have chance for a tutorial. It is impossible for tutors to meet all of us. But I think if we do, they will help us…*' (S1, interview, 27/04/06)

'… *I should say that dropping into the tutors' office and asking questions is welcomed in my department. There are also time slots allocated for problem-solving in class. Regarding coursework, it is easy to get the tutors' help…*' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

In such cases, one of the factors preventing students from obtaining fully the benefits of face-to-face feedback is their limited English proficiency:

'…*frankly, even if I had chance to talk with the tutor, I am afraid I cannot understand most parts of what s/he said. So I prefer to contact the tutor via email…*' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

Deficiency in English competency has in one way or another influenced the respondents' communication with the British tutors. The problems include unfamiliarity with terminology, and the inability to catch information when it is imparted quickly or with a strong accent.

A further factor inhibiting the provision of effective feedback and help lies in the participants' belief in self-learning and autonomy. The point has been stressed by those students who report fewer difficulties in learning their subject:

'I feel it is unnecessary – there is nothing too difficult to be solved by ourselves. If we work hard, all could be done by ourselves … and I think that is important we complete course work by ourselves.' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

'… I think independent learning is encouraged here... I remember I have read an article written by a successful Taiwanese businessman. It is about enterprise strategies, but mentions that good employees are those solving problems on their own. They should not knock on the door of their boss for no good reason. Always asking for advice is thought of a sign of low capability... I think the same is true with the student. There are always other ways to find the solution, if you are diligent enough. You should not bother your tutor because there are always other options…' (S8, interview, 11/04/06)

Seemingly the students are tolerant of the lack of tutorial support, because they consider independence as a crucial demand of intellectual maturity at the university level. They may particularly feel that seeking a tutor's advice contradicts the expectations of postgraduate students in the British academic culture. A note of caution must be sounded here, however, particularly with regard to the weaker learners. Although the limiting of feedback may aim to steer students towards self-evaluation, over-stressing autonomy may carry a danger of promoting disorientation in learning and inadequate learning outcomes.

A lack of opportunity to revise assignments seems to be a further limitation on the potential benefits from feedback. In some cases, although the value of feedback is recognized, the students do not want to bother themselves unless the feedback can contribute to a higher score:

'… although we want to know our weakness, it, however, makes no differences (whether we can read the feedback or what it contains). Because we have got the mark and cannot do anything about it – I mean we have no chance to redraft it or revise it anyway.' (C4, interview, 09/03/06)

'…but the written comments on essays, to me, are of little use. They are given together with marks – there is no chance for us to redraft it.' (S5, interview, 13/04/06)

For others, any comments are treated as being unimportant:

'…having the feedback in hand, grade attracted all my attention and I frankly did not read carefully the tutor's comment…' (S9, interview, 14/04/06)

On the whole, when qualitative feedback comes along with grades, the respondents tend to ignore the feedback or treat it superficially. Seldom do they reflect on it nor act accordingly. As such, the formative comments are in fact perceived to serve summative ends – if they serve any ends at all - rather than being an essential aid to learning.