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**Students from mainland China and critical thinking in postgraduate
Business and Management degrees: teasing out tensions of culture, style
and substance**

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Abstract

This paper explores the discourse of critical thinking within Higher Education (HE) practice and evaluates the experiences and achievements of mainland Chinese students within that context. It sets out to discuss teaching and learning as it was experienced by a small group of students who came to the UK for postgraduate study. The paper explores underlying assumptions behind criticality within HE classrooms and discusses this of aspect pedagogy from a cultural perspective. Chinese students face an acute need to bridge different ways of knowing and expressing what they know and are often characterized as unable to work in a critical context. The research accounts document students' responses to the academic and critical context inherent in their programmes of study and make an account of the learning challenges they faced. The key conclusions include: definitions of critical thinking are often unclear, and emerge from cultural knowledge traditions rather than universal measures of higher learning; Chinese students are often stereotyped as cognitively limited because of their difficulties with critical expression; classroom strategies do not explicitly facilitate development or assess critical thinking but focus on stylistic and locally-valid academic conventions; international students may 'under-perform' because of a lack of initiation into cultural practices rather than inability to engage with critical thinking.

Keywords Higher Education, critical thinking, Chinese students, pedagogical cultures, Business and Management

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Introduction

The internationalization of Higher Education (HE) is one of the key contemporary debates within the sector. It appears in many guises: as an influence on policy in response to the globalization of education (Enders, 2004); as an accompaniment to HE marketisation as universities define and respond to international competition (Rajesh and Usunier, 2001); as a descriptor of international knowledge transfer and academic mobility (Bartell, 2003). This debate also touches fundamentally on pedagogical discourse, as university communities undergo an almost tectonic shift from the culturally homogenous populations that dominated them thirty years ago, towards the diverse and multi-cultural constituencies that characterize them today (Peters, 2004). In 2003, 64% of students participating in taught postgraduate education, for example, came from overseas, with China sending three times more students to the UK than any other country (UKCOSA, 2005). Notwithstanding the clearly changing face of student communities, however, much of the discussion about teaching and learning for diverse groups has confined itself to the tactical level, focusing on strategies to accommodate different students' needs within the dominant pedagogical philosophies governing teaching practices in particular cultural contexts - the so-called accommodation model (Biggs, 2003). Relatively little discussion in the literature so far has explored the underlying assumptions behind our everyday

teaching practices and problematized pedagogy from a cultural perspective. This seems rather odd. It is widely recognized that knowledge traditions and pedagogical values emerged from cultural and historical contexts that shaped them in particular ways, reflecting the societies in which they found their evolution (Brown, 1998). In addition, the histories from which modern epistemological belief systems developed were defined by eclectic and isolationist local information contexts (Smith, 1998). It is possible to trace very different roots to European and Asian/Confucianist epistemologies, for example (Spence, 1998). Such differences had all sorts of impacts, including the evolution and social role of scientific enquiry and the processes and styles employed to legitimate the articulation of intellectual thought, particularly in the nature of argument and writing (Woo, 1993). To some degree the increased flow of international knowledge transfer that has taken place in the past fifty years has facilitated some convergence in style and approach across the world (Green, 1997). Nonetheless, the impact of differing locally-defined knowledge traditions still influences many aspects of intellectual life, particularly in the implicit assumptions governing academic practices within education.

Aims and objectives

This paper set out to discuss one dimension of academic style and convention - critical thinking - as it affected a small group of students who came from China to the UK for postgraduate study. International students, perhaps more than many other groups, face an acute need to bridge different ways of knowing and expressing what they know (Kinnell, 1990, McNamara and Harris 1997). The learning transition for such students - especially those

coming from E. Asian countries such as China, where knowledge traditions vary considerably from the Anglo-European - is extremely hard to breach (Egege and Kutieleh, 2003). Such students' struggles with adaptation and academic performance are reasonably well documented. Nonetheless a series of contradictory information emerges from research in this area. This paper will explore articulations of criticality within British HE and present research data about the experiences and achievements of Chinese students within that context. The research accounts document students' responses to the academic and critical context inherent in their programmes of study and make an account of the learning challenges they faced.

Critical thinking and styles of learning

Critical thinking and argumentation are often defined as key characteristics within higher learning. Entwistle (1988, 1992; Entwistle and Tait, 1990), for example, presents a fairly representative normative account of the teaching and learning process. For him, higher learning aims to integrate three separate elements of critical intelligence: memory, logical reasoning and imaginative thinking. This focus on the imagination and the engagement of students which emphasizes active learning is a recurring theme in academic practice commentaries (e.g. Evans and Abbott, 1998; Ketteridge et al, 2002). In this context, it is clear that the learning emphasis lies within an individual's ability to synthesize and critically engage with complex information.

Barnett (1997), for example, discusses the erosion of HE systems supporting the development of critical thought, a capability which he proposes as central to the attainment of deeper learning. In part, however, he also attributes this decline to an ill-defined understanding of 'critical thinking', with implications

for teaching and assessment quality and resultant confusion for some students. Such concerns about gaps between educational discourse and academic practices in the classroom are echoed by others. Even those who regard 'critical thinking' as an uncontroversial skill in HE contexts concede little consonance between abstract definitions and teaching and assessment practice (Entwistle, 1992; Atkins, 1995).

This highlights something of a tendency to articulate the rhetoric of critical thinking as a central component of learning, without a clear identification of its characteristics or, in particular, specification of how to encourage or assess its development in the classroom. Particular contradiction emerges when considering whether critical thought is a 'generic' skill with which graduates should be equipped (Fisher, 2001) or whether it forms part of a cultural epistemology deriving from a specific socio-historical context (Brown, 1998; Peters, 2004). Nonetheless, a fairly strong rhetorical consensus is evident that critical thought remains a distinguishing characteristic of higher learning and that an ability to critically evaluate information or solve complex problems is a primary aspirational outcome of HE (Barnett, 1992; Ramsden, 1992; Ketteridge et al, 1999, 2002).

In part, a focus on critical thinking derives from discourse about 'effective' approaches to higher learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). For example, Biggs' (1987) and Ramsden's (1988, 1992) widely-cited work discusses 'deep' and 'surface' approaches, correlating student motivation, situation and academic performance. For them, 'deep' approaches - desirable for university students - employ critical-evaluation skills to achieve deep understanding of the subject of study, while 'surface' approaches focus on instrumental aspects

of task and memorization, not attempting to synthesize new and existing knowledge, reconcile conflicts or paradoxes. In addition, 'deep' approaches regard the learning experience as holistic, concerned with contextualizing new learning within wider frameworks, while 'surface' approaches take an atomistic view, breaking each learning task into separate parts and failing to recognize either context or the importance of integrating and synthesizing learning into previous experience (Ramsden 1992). Explicit within this taxonomy of motivations and performance, therefore, is a cultural privileging of critical thinking and evaluative capabilities often discussed as 'genuine' or 'deeper' learning (Barnett 1997), and which seem composed largely of the student's capacity to develop understanding through the medium of such critical engagement. Such views are reinforced by commentaries characterizing 'surface' tactics in pejorative ways (e.g. Ketteridge, Fry and Marshall, 1999; Howell and Kemp, 2002).

International and Chinese students

Anglo-European ideas about the contribution of critical thinking to higher learning stand in stark contrast to constructs of teaching and learning originating in many other parts of the world (Woo, 1993). International students, especially E. Asian students, who participate in cross-border study, are frequently stereotyped as not able to 'be critical.' (Volet and Chalmers, 1997; Kember, 2000). The perceived lack of this capability is frequently indicated as a key factor undermining students' ability to perform successfully, particularly in the context of short, intensive postgraduate (PG.) programmes. Yet the literature also shows that in spite of the unitarist knowledge traditions of their home societies, students from China and the so-called Confucian-

Heritage-Cultures (CHC) which draw heavily on Chinese educational traditions, compete well with their Anglo-European counterparts, especially in numerate and scientific subjects: the so-called Chinese Learner Paradox (Biggs and Watkins, 1996, 2001). Equally, difficulties emerge when attempting to evaluate deep and surface learning approaches and performance among groups such as Chinese students. Counterintuitive results emerge when using Anglo-European-designed instruments to assess cognitive development, including critical thinking. High-achieving Chinese students may even show a decline in critical commitment-engagement over the course of an undergraduate degree rather than the opposite, calling into question underlying assumptions about both the tests and the universality of constructs of higher learning (Zhang and Watkins, 2001). Nonetheless, within much of British HE, stereotypes about Chinese students persist, especially in social sciences subjects, where stylistic conventions are intimately integrated into forms of intellectual thought (Brown, 1998). In spite of their acknowledgement that Chinese students' difficulties with critical thinking may stem from cultural educational style differences, therefore, lecturers continue to negatively ascribe their learning capacity based on stylistic and language issues (Samuelowicz and Bain, 2001).

In addition, little in the literature pedagogically deconstructs what we commonly ascribe as 'critical thinking' or 'critical argument' and differentiates between cognitive substance and culturally-inherited conventions or preferences (Brown, 1998). Thus Chinese students may be stereotyped as underachieving more because they find it difficult to conform to implicit cultural expectations rather than because they cannot achieve high levels of

reasoning or cognitive ability (Egege and Kutieleh, 2003). In this light, it seems sensible to reconsider the assessment criteria either to make transparent stylistic conventions or to attempt to evaluate performance in more culturally neutral ways.

Critical thinking: style over substance?

As noted above, attempting to deconstruct critical thinking in teaching and learning is not easy. From the practice-based literature it becomes difficult to identify a consistent set of criteria against which it may be assessed. Often critical thinking is linked to the use of complex or contradictory information or to solve complex problems (Bowell and Kemp, 2002). These baseline indicators certainly do resonate with high level cognitive skills. The literature on critical thinking is also dominated, however, by a focus on forms of expression - use of evidence and argument style - which are stylistic conventions rather than matters of intellectual substance (Egege and Kutieleh, 2003). Fundamentally, higher learning aims both to increase knowledge and restructure understanding (Biggs 2003). It is also performative, changing what the student does in relation to particular contexts. Critical thinking, therefore, relates strongly to the latter, reflecting on existing knowledge in a relational manner and reconsidering information from the perspective of newer knowledge gained. There is no evidence to support the notion that Chinese students do not do this (Biggs, 2003; Devos, 2003). Evidence does, however, reflect their struggles with the public articulation of this process in a 'western' style (Biggs and Watkins, 2001). In addition, it is important to differentiate between discourse and assessment practice. For

example, Biggs (2003) asserts that the predominance of assessment in HE is declarative - whether a student can tell-describe a problem - rather than functional or conditional - whether they can use or critically engage with knowledge (pps. 41-43). This suggestion contradicts the rhetorical emphasis on the contribution of critical thinking to student learning. Not only does the emphasis on 'critical thinking' in much of the practice-based literature describe phenomena more aspirational than actual but re-emphasizes the stylistic nature of much of what might be assessed as 'critical' in student work:

"To use our learning in order to negotiate with the world and see it differently involve understanding of a high order. It is the kind of understanding that is referred to in the rhetoric of university teaching, yet seems hard to import." (Biggs, 2003 p.36)

In responding to persistent stereotypes describing Chinese and E. Asian students as cognitively limited because of a lack of critical abilities, it is important to recognize the effects of transition from one cultural epistemological set of values to another. This is reflected in Australian research about international student stereotypes (Volet and Chalmers, 1997, Kember, 2000). Such research suggests that learning transitions for Asian students last from three to nine months. Clearly, this has significant implications for students studying on one-year PG. programmes. Practical considerations about initiating Asian students into prevailing local academic conventions and practices, therefore, come to the fore. Chalmers and Fuller (1996), for example, recommend that teachers embed study skills into their teaching practices, teaching both what they want students to learn and how to

learn it. Such support is vital in helping students develop the meta-cognitive learning skills that enable them to become self-managing learners (Biggs, 2003).

In this context, it is important to explore the root of the stereotype of Chinese students as lacking in critical thinking skills. Some commentators (Mok et al, 2001; Turner and Acker, 2002) have differentiated between *rote* and *repetitive* learning strategies in achieving deeper learning. It is clear that repetitive learning makes an important contribution to deeper learning development in Chinese educational culture and cannot be dismissed simply as a surface approach or as an indicator of a lack of criticality. Other research (Volet and Chalmers, 1997, Kember, 2000) identifies the foundation of stereotypes of Chinese and CHC students which coalesce into a view that they do not operate as critical learners. These include student passivity, an instrumental focus on assessment, a lack of understanding of plagiarism, placing excessive authority on lecturers. Such characteristics emerge, however, as predominantly surface perceptions held by lecturers and attaching to students' behaviour before they have undergone learning transitions. Other data (Gay, 2003; Turner and Acker, 2002) shows Chinese students as lively, engaged, critical and self-managing learners who, once they have understood academic conventions and assessment expectations, participate effectively.

The influence of Confucianism

A philosophical root of the stereotype of Asian learners stems in Western characterizations of Confucianist thought, which retained a powerful influence on socialist pedagogical practice in China during the twentieth century, in

addition to its established role in CHC countries (Turner and Acker, 2002). Contrary to expectations, critical argument and analysis have a part to play in Confucianist knowledge traditions (Kim, 2003). Fundamental values attaining to authority and stylistic conventions characterizing argumentation, however, have influenced assumptions about Confucian dynamics (Woo, 1993). In Confucian practices, significant emphasis is placed on authority and expertise. Equally, such concerns are not entirely absent from Anglo-European traditions. For example, McPeck (1990) emphasises that: 'first students must learn basic information about their culture so that they will have something to be critical about.' (p.44). Distinctions in emphasis between Confucianism and Anglo-European Rationalism are two-fold. First, different values are placed on the stage at which social knowledge-traditions confer scholarly authority, permitting engagement in critique. Second, differences emerge from the extent to which critique exists within a harmonizing or radicalizing context. Deriving from its neo-classical roots, Anglo-European knowledge traditions include the social acceptance of the 'rule of reason' (Woo, 1993), absent in traditional Chinese society, and "a critical attitude which prefers the abandonment rather than the repair of a basically untenable framework" (Woo, 1993, p.111). Historically, though the Chinese engaged in high-level reasoning and thinking, social conditions did not facilitate the emergence of emancipatory critical thought. A practical divergence between Confucianism and Anglo-European thought, therefore, focuses on the purpose of critical argument. Within Confucianism, the harmonization of differing perspectives within dynamic synthesis is emphasized rather than a deconstructive approach (Chen, 1994). This is reflected in the outcomes of established research into

cultural orientations to work and organizations, for example, where people in China show a high level of Collectivism and a concern for harmony in the workplace (Hofstede, 1984; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). Such attempts to secure harmony and to regard intellectual innovation and development within a social continuum have generated stereotypes about an absence of critical enquiry in Chinese and Confucian-Heritage cultures. Exacerbated by often authoritative political systems, the contemporary result has tended to be that undergraduates in some Asian countries, including China, are practically discouraged from critical engagement (Turner and Acker, 2002). It is clear, however, that Confucianism's underlying educational philosophy does include critical enquiry as part of its core values (Kim, 2003).

The pedagogical role of criticality

In general significant practical differences remain between British and Chinese education in their response to criticality. Contemporary Chinese constructions of higher learning, for example, are articulated more through technical breadth of knowledge learned than in the adoption of a critical stance (Li, 2003). In addition, the basic construction of knowledge is unitary and largely uncontested in the classroom (Zhang and Watkins, 2001; Turner and Acker, 2002). On the other hand, UK knowledge constructions are explicitly open to critique and, through its practice, the nature of the academic zeitgeist is relatively transparent. Criticality also becomes important because it requires the learner to take a critical-reflective perspective on the learning process as well as its substance, unifying propositional and procedural

knowledges (Bruner, 1996). The learner's context and the learning activity, therefore, become an important and necessarily transparent aspect of the learning outcomes. In the Chinese construct of teaching and learning, absence of critical discourse tends to reinforce the obscurity of procedural aspects of learning, however deep propositional learning may be (Woo, 1993). It is possible to see, therefore, why underlying constructions of knowledge and learning in China remain largely uncontested, especially when counterpointed with the dynamic and sometimes faddish patterns of educational theorizing in Britain (Woo, 1993; Baumann, 1997; Krucken, 2003).

The danger of conceptual colonialism

In spite of such broad, educational and pedagogical considerations, the importance to overseas students in the UK of a clear set of substantive criteria against which critical thinking can be measured, cannot be underestimated. As indicated above, Chinese students come from a rich indigenous knowledge tradition which has a whole series of ways of assessing higher learning and reasoning skills that vary from those in the UK. The implicitly cultural nature of criteria against which we assess their performance has been labelled 'conceptual colonialism' (Biggs, 2003). Leaving aside the clear political debates here, one must question the continuing viability of setting locally-valid achievement criteria for diverse groups of cross-border students, who will mainly follow careers outside that local context. Moreover, such enculturation of the standards against which performance is assessed marginalizes the essentially reciprocal nature of the teaching and learning process with the potential losses of rich learning benefits.

Critical thinking, teaching and learning

The link between criticality and teaching and learning methods demonstrates that there is often little to support student access and development. Critical argument and sophisticated literary style require scaffolding for students and a strong, transparent developmental pathway (Brown, 1998). Fundamentally, HE is about the production of higher reasoning development and cognitive ability -- criticality may or may not be part of that tradition, depending on context. In addition, teaching methods, especially for PGT students, do not necessarily reflect that developmental trajectory and make assumptions about previously-acquired skills, which is why some international students may 'fail' according to the ambiguous criteria against which they are assessed. The key point here is that at the heart of critical thinking and argumentation is an epistemological core - scientific scepticism - and a bounded pluralist perspective on knowledge. Nonetheless, Kuhn (1996) and others have demonstrated very real limitations of scientific consensus. Especially in the social sciences, therefore, the root of much of what we ascribe as criticality is often stylistic - a way of making an argument - rather than substantive - the value of the argument that we make (Smith, 1998). It is as much a cultural convention as representation of intellectual depth and range. We have to consider the impact of privileging style over substance in working with diverse groups of people, if we are to avoid the intellectual imperialism already discussed in the literature.

The project and methods

To explore these issues further, the paper draws on data taken from an exploratory small-scale longitudinal study that qualitatively explored the learning experiences of a group of students from mainland China in a British

Business School. The project's aim was to obtain information that revealed the individuals as they developed and to reflect on how their experiences resonated with the characteristics of Chinese students that emerge from previous research literature (Turner, 2004). This was primarily achieved by the use of life-history-style case methods, tried and tested within narrative and educational action research (Walford, 1991). The research took place over the course of one academic year, at a post-1992 university, involving nine students recently arrived from mainland China to study one-year taught postgraduate degrees in Business. Lightly-structured data-collection conversations, which were recorded, took place approximately monthly during the academic year (excluding vacation periods), totaling six interviews per participant in all. The interviews lasted from approximately forty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The interviews were fully transcribed, data thematically encoded and analyzed to explore the students' individual and collective accounts. The overall framework for the research was to investigate participants' primary motivational influences and to explore their experiences and attitudes towards study and student life in Britain. The data was reported as transcript extracts, illustrating the themes that emerged.

The results

The students were drawn from a class cohort of forty-eight, studying common core modules on International Business Management and full-time MBA degrees. The cohort was comprised of predominantly overseas and European Union students, with three UK participants in total. Altogether nine students agreed to take part, six women and three men, with an average age of 23. They came from a wide variety of locations across China. All were unmarried. Four

had previous work experience, averaging one year. The remainder of the group had graduated from degree courses just before their arrival in the UK.

During the year, a significant volume of interview conversations were devoted to discussing participants' attempts to make sense of UK academic conventions. Students arrived aware that learning and would be different in the UK from what they had experienced before, and enthusiastic about engaging with this new learning agenda:

I am the kind of person who just likes to get used to the environment quickly...according to the different environment, I will change myself.

In this context, they quickly identified that understanding the differences in knowledge constructions would be crucial to their academic success:

Here, in a lecture, when sometime the lecturer tells something, then we are divided into groups and we discuss in the groups. But in university in China, the whole lecture is the teacher saying.

I think the difference is in the teaching style...here the lecturer only point something, the next thing you must do by yourself. The lecturer over there tell everything...[Here], they only give you guidance, the rest of the thing you must try by yourself.

HLG: I must read more books, and the teacher teach few, teach little, I think.

I: And what does that mean?

HLG: Just like self-teaching, a kind of self-teaching, I think.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, their stories were peppered with comparisons between educational styles in the UK and in China:

You know in China, I spend most of the time to talk with the teacher. The teacher will give me most of the advice, but here I try to study by myself....I think the tutors in China will help you greatly.

In China, the teacher always tell people what they should do and how to do...the Chinese teachers always tell you, 'You should finish this! You should do like this!.'

These comparisons underlined their expressions of vulnerability and bewilderment at the challenges of making the transition between one educational system and another which was very different:

It is difficult for me to write some material to reference. First, I must read many books so that I can find the material and understand. Then I can outline my notes...In China we will finish two or three essay in one semester, but here there are many for us to finish.

Sometime, like for some courseworks, I really didn't know what to do.

In terms of learning development, the students also saw key expectations that lecturers had of them in terms of academic performance, including problem-solving, independent working, evidence-based argumentation etc:

The lecturer give you the case and you have to write some feeling about it. You have to read a lot of books and you have to read a lot of article... but you have to put a lot of your own feeling in your essay, so it is really difficult I think.

What was less clear to them was how to begin engaging with these kinds of activities, given that they had not experienced them before. Universally, they ascribed a cultural assessment to the reasons why this was difficult for them. For example:

It is a little bit different from the Chinese point of view and an English point of view...According to the British education system, I think you have to know how to write an essay at first, and how to write in a formal system.

They also noted that a lack of these cultural skills led to an inevitable disadvantage for them compared to their UK / EU counterparts, whom they described as better-trained in these areas and closer to the cultural norms that lecturers used to evaluate effective student behaviour:

Home students, I don't think they have their own idea or something but they can get a good score in the coursework. They just quote, quote some words and reference to others' words. I don't know why. Because in China, the teachers always encourage us to have our own ideas in the coursework. We must have our own idea. But here I am confused about the marks for the courseworks.

Yeah, but can't compare with the other students they come from...another Europe countries because they can write down many very good sentences and they know a lot about Europe, about America, and I just know a little about European things.

Though wide-ranging in discussing education and learning issues over the year, strikingly, none of the participants explicitly discussed critical thinking or criticality as part of the skills they were gaining or of the expectations that lecturers articulated as necessary. This was in spite of their awareness of the value placed upon various other skills within generic definitions of criticality. It also reflected the largely implicit nature of the expectations that they felt lecturers had of them - which they were never able to puzzle out - and which left them uncertain and sometimes angry about precisely what it was that they were meant to demonstrate to perform well in assessments and classroom activities:

Although she [the lecturer] tried to explain it to me and she tried her best to explain it, but I still can't get anything. I still can't get any information. I don't think I can connect to the things that she said, connected with the knowledge that I learned before.

In Chinese [there is] a saying, "There is no bad student, just a bad teacher." Because every student, every people, they can learn. Why they didn't learn, well, maybe is the method of the teacher, the teacher has some problems, they cannot teach the student well.

For the most part, their conversation was confined to discussion of stylistic and technical aspects of demonstrating what they had learned to their examiners - citation, essay-style, plagiarism etc - and to which they had been explicitly directed by lecturers on their courses:

What I have learned is how to finish the essay, in two weeks or one week and search the information and make there reference to others.

I think British education, the most benefit is the independent study... You must investigate a topic by yourself and find information to write and think the structure and then to write.

What was missing in these conversations, however, was any sense of an integrated intellectual context or unifying element which would draw disparate skills and activities into a coherent whole:

I study here for more than half a year and do lots of work just to understand other people's thoughts, just like translate, no, just like paraphrase their thoughts in my own words, but basically the thought are theirs. It is not difficult.

The overall result of these experiences for the group was that they generally sought to confine themselves to developing basic 'surface' skills and excellence in these technical areas as an exercise in 'British style' rather than recognizing any deeper intellectual rationale indicating the underlying epistemological context. They felt quite strongly that this was not because of

their own intellectual limitations but because of a number of external factors, such as the implicit nature of lecturers' culturally-driven expectations of academic style, the intensity of the one-year programme, lack of skills development support which left them disadvantaged compared to European colleagues who were more used to these academic practices, and English language skills. For example:

I think it is just about the pattern of the article. We don't have the same one because here the article's pattern is very clear or obvious. It is like the opening part and then the main body and then the conclusion, but in China we combine all these things, maybe one paragraph, maybe several paragraphs, but you couldn't tell clearly which part is the opening part. Because in the opening part you show your idea if it is an argument, but in China maybe you show your idea at the end of the article, so according to the beginning you don't know whether you support this point of view or not.

Their confusion about expectations and their inability to penetrate UK academic culture did not mean that they were all unsuccessful as students. Of the group, two participants achieved distinction-level work by the end of the programme and could be said, therefore, to have successfully overcome the learning transition. Neither believed that their achievements constituted anything more than a superficial, technical achievement, however, and both felt that their learning experiences in the UK would have very little long-term personal value for them in the future:

We have to do so much reading and so much research and also I don't think these courseworks are valuable.

Anyway, after this year's study I know about the English education system and how it works. And I know how to study and how to devote yourself to your course under this kind of system. And I know some new learning method. ...According to me I have just got new knowledge, not changed to a new person.

They clearly articulated that the key learning benefits had either been technical, for example learning how to write an essay in an acceptable UK style, or personal, deriving from the value of living independently in another country for a period of time:

Before I came to Britain, I haven't lived alone. My parents looked after me. But here, everything you should do yourself, so I think this should improve the life skill.

For the whole group, academically successful or otherwise, the learning experiences that they accounted during their studies were not transformative or deep and were focused far more on understanding and making display of the stylistic attributes around critical rhetoric rather than actually engaging with critical thinking:

In the first essay, I use, maybe 90% of the essay, I use my own words. I didn't quote anything. I just read something and then, most[ly] my own

thinking. I think, I'm not sure, maybe it's a kind of cliché [about what] you have you write, but I think you have to quote some work from the famous author or very famous person in the field to strengthen your idea. Because your own idea is worthless compared to theirs because you know nothing about business, nothing compared to them, so you have to quote something. I think that is the most important thing here...Actually, I like to write article that use my own point of view. I do not like to use other people's point of view instead. But I think that most people believe that you have to quote some people from the gurus or there are very famous people in this field - you have to quote them.

This was most clearly demonstrated when students evaluated differences in the status of a dissertation in degree study between their undergraduate studies in China and PG. work in the UK:

Actually, the final dissertation at university, it is not very, very important in China. But here it is important, I think. The point I'm saying is that [in China] it is hard when you enter the university, it is very hard. You have strict examination. But when you enter the university, it is easier for you to [graduate]...So the final dissertation is a process - you pass it. You have to go through and get a lot of information from website or books, you pick out and give it to the tutor. Most of the students don't want to have a very good mark.

Nonetheless, they did show clear critical / reflective skills during the interviews, evidenced by their ability to evaluate their experiences and learning development during the year and in their analysis of their life in

Britain. What seemed clear from these results, however, is that relatively little opportunity existed for them to harness their critical tendencies within the context of their formal programme of study.

Summing up the discussion

What emerges clearly from the insights into the experience of this small group of students is that their practical struggles with studying in the UK strongly resonated with the contradictions inherent in the literature about the nature of deep learning and the contribution of critical thinking to it. First, the participants struggled to make sense of the implicit underlying context of the various aspects of their studies. They were very aware that expectations of them as students and the ways in which learning and its articulation were constructed in the UK differed from what they had previously experienced in China. They arrived in the UK ready to adapt to the new situation but quickly discovered that the basic expectations that lecturers had of them were implicit. The main focus of learning conversations was confined to techniques, rather than underlying intellectual processes beneath the declarative level. In addition, the students quickly saw that they suffered practical disadvantage compared to British or European classmates who had previously received training in these practices and who were better-versed in the kinds of cultural knowledge that contributed to student success. The absence of explicit discussions about criticality is also interesting. Participants discussed many other areas, including group-working, problem-solving, argumentation in essays etc, but did not bring critical thinking explicitly into their study accounts. Given the centrality of critical thinking in the academic practice literature, this absence is striking. Moreover, the good academic achievements

of some group members, without their clearly understanding what contributed to this success, underlines important ambiguities in the cultural translation of teaching, learning and assessment criteria.

Overall, therefore, the students' struggles reemphasized the importance of managed learning transitions, and the need to make explicit the intellectual rationale for expectations driving teaching strategies. They also brought into question the contribution of what is termed 'critical thinking' to the routine experience in the postgraduate classroom. At the very least, the contribution of critical enquiry was not clear to this group of students by their graduation.

Conclusion: critical thinking, culture, style and substance

A number of points emerge from the discussion of the literature and the data. First, critical enquiry, deriving from democratic liberalism and scientific skepticism, is a key defining characteristic in the rhetoric of Anglo-European education. In the classroom, however, it may be ill-defined and poorly communicated to students. University assessment methods frequently focus on declarative knowledge rather than critical thought. In the social sciences, much of what is assessed is written, a form of discourse in which cultural style and language competence are at least as important as intellectual/ critical content. Moreover, academic style varies considerably around the world. Chinese students, therefore, are negatively characterized as possessing limited learning capacity because of their inability to 'be critical'. In fact, apparent under-achievements may be because their work does not conform to culturally-based academic conventions into which they have not been initiated and because cultural values within assessment criteria are highly implicit. With adequate transparency around learner expectations and academic

conventions, therefore, it is possible that student progress and achievement could improve.

There is significant scope to develop research in this area further than has been possible in the context of the small-scale, tentative investigation documented in this paper. Certainly research into the cultural aspects of HE pedagogy in Business and Management is under-explored in the face of increasing classroom diversity. It seems clear, however, that what we are assessing in the HE classroom is governed as much by cultural practice and style as intellectual substance. International students may sometimes underachieve not because they don't possess the intellectual grasp but because they do not receive a translation of the cultural cues. In any case, it remains important to question the long-term value of locally-relevant intellectual styles in an environment of international knowledge transfer. It is clear that powerful nations like Britain, who are leading in cross-border HE, are also the nations who are determining the rules by which the knowledge-transfer game is played worldwide with the consequence of increasing intellectual convergence and conformity of expression. To do so unconsciously, however, risks some ineffable losses to global development. Opening up implicit assumptions about the nature of enquiry in the classroom, may not only facilitate increased quality of access for the diverse student communities within them but also go some way to beginning to addressing those wider losses.

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