From a comparative perspective, this paper analyses Chinese learners’ intercultural experiences in Chinese and British educational contexts. In the Chinese context, interview and questionnaire research was carried out in 24 universities that hosted the British Council’s English teaching development programmes. The research uncovered perspectives on change in the Chinese teachers, who were the learners in this teacher training programme. In the UK, a current study is probing into the challenges Chinese learners face in adapting to the British higher education teaching and learning culture. Early results reveal a change process in the learners, affected by a range of inter-related personal, cultural, social, psychological and contextual factors. Research literature on the links between the Chinese cultural context and Chinese learning styles has provided an important basis for understanding the interface between Chinese learners and Western modes of education. However, in comparing the perspectives of Chinese learners in two contrasting educational and cultural contexts, this paper highlights how factors other than culture alone also influence the adaptation that takes place as part of the learning process. Factors such as the professional identities and motivations of the teachers and learners, the context where teaching and learning take place, and the power relationships between them are shown to be significant issues in the strategic adaptations made by Chinese learners.

**Keywords:** Chinese learners, cultural models of learning, intercultural adaptation, intercultural experience, intercultural mediation, motivation for learning

The pattern of teacher–learner interaction is underpinned by a whole range of interrelated values and perceptions shaped in the cultural context of the teaching and learning environment. Hall’s (1959, 1976) notion of hidden cultures, which he introduced more than three decades ago, continues to offer an enlightening perspective for educationalists working in intercultural situations to understand teachers and learners from different cultures.

Everything man is and does is modified by learning and is therefore malleable. But once learned, these behaviour patterns, these habitual responses, these ways of interacting gradually sink below the surface of the mind and, like the admiral of a submerged submarine fleet, control from the depths. The hidden controls are usually experienced as though they were innate simply because they are not only ubiquitous but habitual as well. What makes it doubly hard to differentiate the innate from the
acquired is the fact that, as people grow up, everyone around them shares the same patterns. (Hall, 1976: 42)

Thus, a teaching or learning approach that is taken for granted and regarded as universal and common sense by people from one culture may be seen as idiosyncratic and ineffective in the eyes of people from a different culture. Awareness of the effect of hidden cultures establishes a useful starting point for this study on ‘the’ Chinese learner.

Although we use it as our starting point, culture is not the only determinant of teaching and learning preferences and experiences. The phrase ‘the Chinese learner’ (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001) invites us to see this group as homogeneous, and their needs and responses as determined by their cultural background. However, other aspects of the process: the backgrounds and goals of the learners, their specific motivation for learning, the setting for the interaction, and the nature of the relationship between teachers and learners, are also influential. A static view of a cultural group of learners tends to obscure the importance of these. We therefore adopt the perspective that ‘the’ Chinese learner may have certain identifiable characteristics, some of which might be related to culture, but that they may also learn and behave differently in different situations, according to personal needs and situational demands. We also argue that an analytical and reflexive attitude is important for educationalists working across cultural borders. By taking this approach, teachers and researchers may avoid jumping to ethnocentric conclusions about their learners, based on their own norms and values.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Chinese learners’ intercultural experiences in Chinese and British educational contexts. We start with research that was carried out in 24 universities in China that hosted the British Council’s English teaching development programmes (subsequently referred to as the China study). The research uncovered perspectives of change in the Chinese teachers, who were learners in this teacher-training programme. We then describe current UK work, in which we probe the challenges Chinese undergraduates and postgraduates face in adapting to the British higher education teaching and learning culture (subsequently referred to as the UK study).

The comparability of the two groups of respondents lies primarily in their shared roles and experiences as intercultural learners, albeit in different national contexts. In common with the Chinese learners in the UK study who were exposed to a foreign institutional culture, the Chinese study subjects were also exposed to ‘a cultural entity’ (Hollliday, 1994: 111): the British Council project, as opposed to the target culture, and confronted with not only new but also foreign professional challenges. Thus, both groups shared similar experiences of endeavouring to learn and develop in an intercultural environment.

In addition, both groups cover similar age ranges. The majority of the China study respondents were relatively less-established, young teachers in their institutions when they were invited to participate in the British Council projects. The UK sample slightly over-represent postgraduate students, with the great majority of them being mature students with various industrial experiences. The similarities and differences between the two groups in their
motivation for learning, maturity and social experiences enable us to examine the influences of learner-related factors, in addition to culture and context, on learning and development in intercultural environments.

Findings reveal Chinese learners’ conscious efforts to adapt and develop in both situations. The two studies enable us to compare the perspectives of Chinese learners in two contrasting educational and cultural contexts, and examine the adaptation that takes place as part of the learning process. Whatever differences there are, however, between groups of Chinese learners in different situations, what does shine through in both studies is their motivation and willingness to adapt to the demands of the learning environment in both cases (see also Volet & Renshaw, 1996).

We begin by outlining the background and methodologies of the two studies, including a discussion of the intercultural nature of this research. We then discuss our findings in the light of this interactionist and intercultural perspective.

Background to the Two Studies

The China study

China’s Reform and Open Door policy in 1979 inaugurated a process of establishing international links and cooperation with Western organisations such as the British Council, aiming at promoting English and improving the quality of English Language Teaching (ELT). The period saw the British Council administering a series of English teaching development projects in Chinese tertiary institutions. All the British Council projects assigned British ELT specialists to work on teacher-training programmes with Chinese university teachers.

These projects were examined in spring 2001 by means of semi-structured interview and questionnaire research among British ELT specialists and young tertiary Chinese teachers of English, all of whom volunteered to take part in the study. A sample of 24 universities that were involved in the British Council ELT projects was compared with a sample of 23 universities that were not. The research used qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the impact of these projects on the beliefs about teaching that informed the professional approach of both British ELT specialists and Chinese project participants. A comparison between Chinese project participants’ and Chinese non-participants’ views identified strong enthusiasm for proposed innovations and substantive professional growth in ELT amongst the participants. Table 1 provides data on the total number of questionnaire and interview participants and indicates the composition of field research respondents. Non-parametric tests and factor analysis were employed for the questionnaire analysis, and theme tables for the interview data analysis. In this study Chinese project participants played the role of the learner in the British Council ELT projects.

The UK study

As an immediate consequence of the booming Chinese economy and the British government’s worldwide campaign to attract international students to
the UK, the number of Chinese students studying in the UK rose to a record level of 25,000, surging to top of the list of overseas applicants (The Independent, 2003). There was more than a 12-fold increase in the number of applications between 1998 and 2002 (UCAS, 2004). This major influx of Chinese students to British universities creates an intercultural teaching and learning environment in British universities, and a different cultural and educational context for this comparative research on ‘the’ Chinese learner.

The current study in the UK, which is in its early stages, has gathered both qualitative and quantitative data at UK universities, using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This study investigates the challenges that Chinese students face in their adaptation to the British higher education environment. So far, 35 questionnaires have been collected from Chinese students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses in 13 English universities. Interviews were carried out with 13 of the questionnaire respondents and seven British lecturers from two universities with different research ratings. Table 2 below summarises the number and composition of field research respondents in the UK study.

The research sample size, particularly the quantitative data, will not enable the authors to arrive at generalised conclusions at this stage, but there are indicative patterns emerging from early analysis. These patterns reveal a change process in the learners, affected by a range of inter-related personal, cultural, social, psychological and contextual factors.

**Methodology: A reflexive and intercultural perspective**

In approaching this study we keep firmly in mind the need to avoid approaching the study from a single cultural perspective. As Reagan argues:

> ... given their [non-Western educational traditions] differences from the Western tradition, it is essential that we all learn to invite and to listen to the ‘multiple voices’ and perspectives that can enlighten our

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<tr>
<th><strong>Interview respondents</strong></th>
<th>British specialists</th>
<th>Chinese tertiary teachers of English</th>
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<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese project participants</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese non-participants</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Questionnaire respondents</strong></th>
<th>Chinese project participants</th>
<th>Chinese non-participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total universities contacted</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total questionnaires distributed</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>492</td>
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**Table 1** Summary of interview and questionnaire respondents in the China study
understanding of these traditions, just as we must learn to recognise that
different groups may, as a consequence of their sociocultural contexts and
backgrounds, possess ‘ways of knowing’ that, although different from our
own, may be every bit as valuable and worthwhile as those to which we
are accustomed. (Reagan, 2000: 2)

Whilst the practice of education is ‘value-laden’ and ‘a contested concept:
different individuals and groups conceptualise it in different ways’ (Scott,
1996: 155), it is problematic for educational researchers who are themselves pro-
ducts of an educational tradition to take a value-neutral or value-free position
when looking into culturally embedded educational practices. Usher’s (1996)
notion of double hermeneutic offers a useful explanation:

Research involves interpreting the actions of those who are themselves
interpreters: it involves interpretations of interpretations – the double
hermeneutic at work. Understanding an object (other people) is always
‘prejudiced’ in the sense that it can only be approaches through an
initial projection of meaning. This initial projection is from the subject’s
(the researcher’s) situatedness, from the subject’s standpoint in history,
society and culture. (Usher, 1996: 20–21)

Bias is virtually unavoidable in an intercultural situation where researchers
attempt to interpret meaning and achieve understanding through lenses
deply coloured in their own sociocultural contexts. We therefore bring to
our research an understanding that it is crucial to adopt a reflexive and cul-
trurally sensitive approach to study our subjects. Such an approach requires
researchers to achieve a primary understanding of their own ‘social stock of
knowledge’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 56). Drawing on Hall’s observation
of hidden cultures, educational researchers need to think, feel and reflect on
their views, beliefs and taken-for-granted behaviour and common sense that
are learned and deeply internalised in their mind. We argue that a self-reflexive
attitude will enable educational researchers to be aware of the development of

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<tr>
<th><strong>Interview respondents</strong></th>
<th>British lecturers</th>
<th>Chinese students on degree courses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of respondents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Questionnaire respondents</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Total universities contacted</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total questionnaires distributed</td>
<td>35</td>
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Table 2 Summary of interview and questionnaire respondents in the UK study
their own professional position and views and subsequently be sensitive to issues in educational and cultural contexts of their own and of the others.

The authors’ own intercultural experiences and complementary perspectives are a feature of the methodology of this comparative study. Gu’s linguistic and academic background spans both cultures and she has herself navigated a process of intercultural mediation during her academic study in the UK – i.e. ‘being able to take an “external” perspective on oneself as one interacts with others and analyse and, where desirable, adapt one’s behaviour and the underlying values and beliefs’ (Byram, 2003: 60). Schweisfurth and Gu had a teacher–student relationship during the latter’s doctoral study. Schweisfurth has teaching, learning and research experience in a wide range of contexts, including Canada, west and southern Africa, south east Asia, and the Caribbean, a background in comparative education, and several years’ experience working with international students.

A comparison of the China study and the UK study involves an analysis of the beliefs and experiences of UK teachers and Chinese learners. Our collaboration combines insider and outsider perspectives, as advocated in comparative education methodology (e.g. Choksi & Dyer, 1997). This perspective positions us as authors in a relationship that gives us access to perspectives of ‘the other’, constantly aiming to examine our own cultural constructs and experiences, and facilitating critical reflections on intercultural commonality and diversity. More importantly, this relationship enables us to probe into an intercultural situation from a truly intercultural and reflexive perspective. Thus the intercultural theme of this research is consolidated in the process of investigation which itself involves intercultural interaction, negotiation, mediation and reflection.

Findings

The China study

Both the interview and the survey questionnaire data clearly demonstrated the impact of the Sino-British ELT projects on Chinese project participants’ professional approaches to English language teaching. The overarching effect was shown to be the participants’ inclination to adopt the ELT approaches proposed by the projects.

The objective of the Sino-British ELT projects was to introduce the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to Chinese ELT classrooms. The majority of the Chinese project participants indicated that they had benefited from the input of British expertise on ELT theories and practices. The significant result of the Mann-Whitney test ($z = 2.989, p < 0.01$) showed that Chinese project participants had greater preference for CLT than non-project participants. Evidence from the interview data addresses the reasons for their willingness to employ CLT:

... after the Sino-British project I have changed my teaching methods. I mean, I just transferred from the traditional method, that is, the teacher-centred, to the student-centred approach. ... I found that after I had changed the teaching methods, the students became more active in class. I am quite pleased with such a teaching method, because most
students can communicate actively in class. (University A: Chinese participant D)

However, project participants’ positive attitudes towards CLT did not result in their total abandonment of traditional teaching approaches. The exposure to Western methodological innovations and training was shown to enable Chinese project participants to review critically their traditional teaching approaches as well as the appropriateness of Western innovations. The consequence was their determination to integrate the new and the old in order to develop an approach that was suitable and appropriate in their class. In other words, their acceptance of CLT resulted from a process of critical reflection and selective adaptation. The interview data provided accounts of Chinese project participants’ critical attitudes in learning. For example:

They (British specialists) do not seem to remember that English is a foreign language in China. Our students need to know the language well to write a report, to find a job and make a living. It is not simply about being able to understand the gist or read a menu. It is not about knowing something of the language so that they can survive. Our students need to grasp the language well so that they can run a business or act as a representative abroad. (Other University, Chinese participant A)

Although the learning setting for Chinese project participants was at ‘home’ – that is, within their own national and institutional context – the Sino-British ELT projects had imposed an ‘intruding culture’ (Holliday, 1991: 112) in which the actual learning took place and which was by nature cross-cultural. The training and learning could develop into a sophisticated process as a result of differing cultural and educational perspectives within such projects. Evidence from this study suggested that even within the same group of British specialists, there existed contrasting attitudes towards Chinese ELT tradition (Gu, 2005). For example:

My own opinion at that time, and I don’t know if things have changed, was that English language teaching in China was in many ways very unsuccessful, very unsuccessful. … And that is particularly, particularly true of the non-English majors. I felt that the attitude of departments towards non-English majors was, really they came from different directions in terms of how you learn a language. And my own view still is that you can’t learn a language by being lectured to. (British respondent J)

I think certainly there was the willingness. It was not a question of people think ‘We don’t want the new thing.’ That was the case of people being unsure about how to deal with this new beast that had come into our midst. …

But on the other hand, as I have said before, a lot of what was happening in China was absolutely successful. So perhaps they just feel they are hanging onto a few the old things, and balancing it with ever more communicative language for use, type of stuff. (British respondent B)
British specialists’ diverse attitudes and views to various degrees affected the professional approach they adopted in training Chinese project participants, and consequently impacted on the extent to which Chinese participants could benefit from the input of the British expertise. An extreme example was from a material writing project where the British specialist was supposed to train and help Chinese project participants in designing and producing ELT materials:

It is hard for some people to adjust themselves to the Chinese culture. Then it is almost impossible to communicate with Chinese teachers and get to know what our Chinese teachers need and what we are thinking. . . . There was a British specialist who was an expert in materials writing, but not a teacher. He had no idea of my students and my teaching. So it was a disaster to work with him as we could not accept a lot of his proposed ideas. . . . The expert on material writing told us that he had the expertise in materials writing. Therefore, we had to either use his version or there would be no book. We were asked to make a choice. We did not have any choice. The project had been going on for 8 years. We needed to show a product. So in the end we had something that we were not happy with. (Other University, Chinese participant A)

However, despite British specialists’ different approaches to training, which varied in its cultural sensitivity, the overarching finding of the China study was extremely positive. The qualitative and quantitative data analysis strongly identified Chinese project participants’ professional growth. Ninety-seven percent of Chinese participants demonstrated a willingness to change in their teaching and 78% believed that they had developed more interactive teaching in class. The following quote exemplifies British specialists’ recognition of Chinese participants’ ‘genuine’ willingness to learn:

I believe that the teachers who had been trained were quite sincere about preferring the new methods, because they felt that it made the teaching more lively, that it helped the students to learn better, and so on. I think that feeling was genuine. (British respondent R)

These learners shared a similar professional background – in that they were all young tertiary teachers of English. The intercultural experience in these projects was shown to have broadened these learners’ minds, helping them to realise that there was another way of teaching, and to develop a more rational and critical view on teaching traditions and innovations. The fact that this experience took place in their own professional and cultural context, and that it related directly to ongoing professional needs, may have facilitated this receptivity, and increased the ground they shared with the UK participants, who were the teachers in this case. Some (not all) of the British specialists, many of whom had previous experience of living and teaching in other cultures, would also be in a good position to ‘meet them halfway’.

The UK study

The early results of the UK study indicate Chinese students’ determination to survive and develop themselves in the UK higher education environment. Responses to the open-ended question regarding their purposes of studying
in the UK suggest three principal motivations: obtaining a higher degree and/or qualification, enriching themselves for a better career, and improving English and learning knowledge. The objective of these students of strengthening their academic backgrounds through the UK higher education is fairly clear. However, the early findings show that their survival and development in this foreign educational environment is by no means a linear progress.

First of all, there exists a widely acknowledged learning shock, which primarily results from differences in approaches to teaching and learning and difficulties in using the English language to express their opinions freely. For example:

When I first started my MA, I felt very strongly that I was not used to the teaching and learning environment at all. First of all, I was still struggling with the jetlag, and I did not like the food at all.

Secondly, the teaching style was very different from that in China. Chinese students were taught like stuffed ducks in China, whilst here students are encouraged to take part in group discussions, where they can feel free to express their views and opinions. I think this is the fundamental difference. . .

Finally, I found that language could be a barrier, particularly in listening. I could not quite understand students from countries like Malaysia. A particular teacher had a very strong local accent, which I could hardly understand. (Chinese student B)

Evidence from responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire further supports the observed learning shock in the interview data – ‘language difficulties’, ‘difficulties in understanding’, ‘not sure about the learning tradition in UK’, and ‘It can be quite difficult to keep up if a student does not know how to study efficiently or does not have a good knowledge foundation’.

Chinese students’ further comments on their student life indicate that the most overwhelming experiences of studying in UK universities may not necessarily be the endeavour to handle a different teaching style, but a psychological and physical struggle to live with an entirely different life pattern. In the questionnaire, Chinese students are asked to describe three not so good things about their study in the UK. We have observed quite a few descriptions that are rather brief, but highly revealing about students’ strong emotions in coping with their student life in a foreign educational and cultural setting. These descriptions can be summarised into three categories:

(2) An outsider – ‘can’t really communicate with international students’, ‘not enough communication with native students’, ‘discrimination’, ‘feeling like an outsider most of the time’, ‘some English residents are not very friendly’.
The following quotations from the interview data also exemplify these Chinese students’ experiences when exposed to an ‘alien’ environment.

When I first arrived here I was on my own. My husband and my daughter were both in China. I felt very, very lonely. I was once seriously ill. I think it might be because I was not used to the life here. . . .

I had struggled a lot at my MA, mainly because I was not used to the writing styles here. Things like why and how to use references as evidence. . . . I had some very difficult time. I was very successful in university study and at work in China. I thought of myself as a very competent person. However, I first tasted the bitterness of failure and disappointment in here. The pain seemed to have gone straight into my bones. I don’t think if I have ever cried in China. But I don’t know how many times I have cried here. (Chinese student I)

The process of these Chinese students working towards a British degree involves an anxiety about managing a different way of living, a different way of learning, and a different way of communicating with others. What they have taken for granted at home does not seem to work in the UK context. The anxiety and discomfort are likely to arise when their ways of living and unconscious values, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs are challenged and forced to be brought to the surface for examination and reflection. In her work on students studying abroad, Murphy-Lejeune (2003) makes a similar observation:

This particular intercultural experience involves at first disorientation and loss, a confrontation with a foreign environment which may violently jolt individuals and perturb their taken-for-granted world. It places individuals in a situation where adaptation and transformations are necessary if they are to maximise life in their new conditions. In other words, life abroad represents an extensive natural learning situation which stimulates many more aspects of learners’ personalities than are usually catered for in educational institutions. It can be understood broadly as an interaction between an individual and a new environment where the former is unsparingly put to the test as a whole person. (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003: 101–102)

Thus, Chinese students’ survival and development in UK universities involves far more than strengthening their linguistic competence and subject knowledge and adapting to a different teaching and learning approach. Change at the deepest level tends to be psychological and personal. Evidence from the UK study suggests that such adaptations do take place, at least to a degree.

A holistic perspective is required to interpret and understand Chinese students’ experiences and change observed in the early findings of the UK study. Roberts (2003) proposes a similar stance in her study of students on a course of language studies in higher education abroad:

As well as trying to do a holistic study, the (students’) experience itself can be called holistic. It involves the whole social being struggling to make
sense of him or herself as she or he tries to make sense of others. (Roberts, 2003: 124–125)

In the UK study, we observe that in addition to an apparent improvement in their English proficiency, the profound change in Chinese students appears to lie in their greatly increased sense of self-responsibility and independence in managing not only the progress of their study, but also their student life.

As discussed above, Chinese students experienced some learning shock when they were exposed to the learner-centred educational environment in the UK which is in stark contrast to the teacher-centred educational tradition in China. The early findings of the UK study indicate success in Chinese students’ efforts to overcome such learning shock. The development of their independent learning abilities and stronger responsibility for their study is evidenced in the following quotations:

Another thing is that when I was in China, I was not very keen on studying very hard. I would complete what I was asked to do. But you would not expect anything more from me. But now I realised that I had to be totally responsible for my own study. I had to read things that I was not even very interested in, because otherwise, I would not be able to solve problems in my study. (Chinese student A)

British lecturers in the UK study have also noticed their Chinese students’ conscious and reflexive change towards more independent learning. For example:

I had an interesting example of a Chinese student who started a degree with us and she had problems. Very often the Chinese students have problems finding themselves extending from one to two years. But she went from a student who in her first year suffered all sorts of problems to a student who in a second year took a piece of research which she found, challenged it, researched it and actually came up with some original research data disputing quite an important article which she based her research on. (British lecturer B)

In the autumn term, we had a seminar group and a workshop group. .... And I would say – Right. We have had this now. Let’s see: are there any questions that we can collect from that, so it will help us afterwards in our discussion. .... I would be surprised if a Chinese student was going to say ‘Yes, I would just like to do it.’ That would surprise me, because on the whole they don’t, because on the whole Chinese students don’t take the initiative.

(In the second semester), they become more and more confident about doing that sort of thing, because they learn the rules. Most students, whether they are Chinese or not, are wanting to be pleasing to their teachers and to their fellow students. And when they realise what’s required, then they will do that. But beyond that, it is not just about being pleasing. .... It is also about finding out how you learn in this situation because if you use a sort of stereotypically Confucian approach to learning in a course which is designed around participating workshops,
then you are not going to make the most of the learning resources. You are not going to make the most of your learning. ... Yes, what happens to them (Chinese students) is that I think they become aware. I think they actually on the whole come to value it ... as a result of reflecting on it. They don’t value it just because it is there. They value it because they think about it. (British lecturer H)

However, compared to their difficulties with adapting to the UK higher education environment, Chinese students appear to be more impressed with their improved abilities to communicate with people from various backgrounds, to cook food for themselves, and above all, to lead an independent life. It is worth noting that the majority of these Chinese students were born under the one-child Family Control Policy in China. A child may grow up under intensive care of six adults – four grandparents and parents. Their competency to look after themselves appears to have been a concern for educationalists. Therefore, our observation of frequent comments by Chinese students on their improved ability to manage their student life in the UK is not a surprising finding. Satisfaction and pride can be seen to have permeated their comment on themselves as being able to ‘cook delicious food now’. The following quotation from a Chinese student provides a detailed description.

I think the biggest change is my ability to independently manage my life. I have to think everything for myself. It is a feeling that there is nobody around to help me with all this. My life in the UK has improved my ability to communicate with people. I came here on my own. I realised that I had to get used to a completely different environment and meet different people. Sometimes when I come across problems, I need to learn to ask for help from those new friends. I feel that my interpersonal abilities have greatly increased. And, I have had some part-time working experience. (Chinese student K)

The quotation below from another Chinese student indicates more profound change. Her studying experience in the UK is shown to have broadened her mind and led to an in-depth personal and professional change, or perhaps more appropriately, growth.

The biggest change. I think I am thinking of what to do after I graduate and what to do to my society, while I have never thought of it before. I think it might be part of the cultural shock or kind of, ... you know, if I am living in a foreign country, the cultural shock or cultural difference could be quite shocking and depressing for someone, which makes me think about myself. What is my position? Here in the UK or back in China? And what can I do with my studies? And that is maybe the most important for me. (Chinese student E)

Murphy-Lejeune (2003: 113) describes the experience of adaptation and learning abroad as ‘a maturing process’ – ‘Rather than a total personality change, this process takes on the shape of a personal expansion, an opening of one’s potential universe.’ We argue that the driving force and essential qualities learners require to achieve such ‘personal expansion’ are more
significant and beyond cultural models. The findings all suggest that it is the interaction of these learners with their particular living and studying environments that facilitates change. This suggests not only that constructs shaped by culture can be changed, but that the nature of each individual’s motivations and experiences are major factors. This is in contrast to deterministic notions of culture and learner.

Discussion: Who Adapts, and Why?

It was evident from the two studies that different concepts of teacher and learner and teaching and learning existed between the British and Chinese respondents, and that these differences were acknowledged on both sides. Such differences can be seen in the quotations below:

They have serious difficulty in adjusting to expectations of the British education system. ... We are trying to encourage an autonomous approach to study. I have an impression of the Chinese education system, which may be mistaken, that students are encouraged to memorise facts, that they perceive the teachers as the holders of the knowledge, that there is one fixed set of knowledge, that to every question there is an answer. The teachers have the answer. It’s for the student to learn what the answer is.

And that is not the view in higher education in the United Kingdom. The view of higher education in the United Kingdom ... is that you are learning to learn, ... that there is no one answer to a question, ... so the education process becomes about asking the right questions and finding ways to investigate those questions. And your teacher acts as a facilitator to help you in identifying the question and in researching the answer. ... Saying this (I don’t know the answer) to many Chinese students lifts a great frustration, great confusion and the real sense of being lost. (British Lecturer B)

I feel high levels of uncertainty for learning. Sometimes British tutors will not tell us what is correct and what is wrong, which the home students have also found too ambiguous. So we sometimes have to spend a lot of time doing research to find out the answers ourselves. In contrast, the Chinese tutor will be more likely to give out the answers straight away when students request. (Chinese student, Questionnaire 32)

However, irrespective of these differences and problems Chinese learners may encounter in intercultural settings, their determination to learn and willingness to change were observed in both studies. Therefore, there appears to be something fundamental that has been encouraging Chinese learners to adapt and develop. In both studies, learners’ enjoyment in their change is apparent.

This motivation is likely, of course, to have some of its origins in culture. The influence of the Confucian tradition, and its relation to high learner motivation and respect for teachers, has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Cummings, 1996; Wing On, 1996). This helps to explain why these different groups of Chinese
learners have demonstrated such perseverance, and willingness to adapt themselves to the learning environment. However, they define their own motivations in slightly different terms which complement and go beyond this cultural model.

In their home settings, the Chinese in-service teachers were able to be selective in terms of how far they adapted their professional practice. They were motivated by the perceived utility of what they were learning from the British ELT specialists, and mediated this learning in order to adapt the principles to their own professional contexts, picking and choosing to mix the new with the old. Some of the British specialists with whom they were interacting perceived this as a constructive part of the learning process, which is likely to have facilitated this process of mediation.

In the case of the Chinese students at UK universities, their motivation to adapt is based in part on the fact that they have little choice: if they want to succeed, they need to understand and conform to the new learning environment. Their willingness to do so reflects a desire to improve their future career opportunities, as an investment in their own ‘human capital’. Additionally, some evidently derive satisfaction from the growth experience of intercultural adaptation itself, and the independence and confidence that it brings, after the initial experience of culture shock.

In both cases, it is apparent that the learners adapted not out of unquestioning habit but because they perceived the importance of what was being taught. The opening up of China to the outside world, and, rightly or wrongly, the power of English language and education in English in that world, is part of the wider learning context. These adaptations can thus be seen as a highly rational response in a globalising world, as an investment learners feel they can usefully make in themselves and their own career and economic futures.

**Conclusion**

These studies have shed light on the issue of the motivation and adaptations of Chinese learners in two markedly different contexts: China and the UK. The findings support conclusions from related research regarding their high levels of motivation and willingness to adjust. When we compare the two different groups of learners, however, in interaction with different sorts of teachers in contrasting settings, some subtle differences emerge which allow us to argue that culture is not monolithic or deterministic in its influence. The outcome of the intercultural learning process is as much about learners’ relationships with their learning environments and teachers, as it is about a set of fixed cultural constructs within themselves.

Drawing on Hall’s hidden culture (1959), we hold that intercultural encounters are potentially positive experiences in that they provide an opportunity for critical self-reflection and self-awareness, strategic adaptation and consequently professional and personal growth. Central to learners’ survival and success appears to be learner-quality related influences, essentially learner motivation, agency and determination to thrive. These qualities are individualised and vary greatly even within a monocultural group.
The implications for educationalists are at least twofold. First, when working in intercultural environments it is important that teachers ‘generate a sense of vitality and awareness’ (Hall, 1959: 30) in order to understand their learners. It is not simply a question of understanding how Chinese cultural norms might impact on teaching and learning; it is equally important to understand the motivations and needs of particular groups of Chinese learners. Second, a support system is required in institutions to help learners overcome the stress and frustration caused by initial cultural shock and enable them to enjoy the professional and personal benefits of intercultural experiences. Such support needs to be both socially and academically targeted.

These findings are by no means conclusive; the UK study is in its early stages, and the snapshots afforded by the different research designs in the two settings offer a limited comparative perspective. However, what has been illuminated calls for further investigation, and longitudinal designs may help to extend this. How sustained are these adaptations? How does the learner’s view of the utility of their studies stand the test of time? What is the effect of a return to the learner’s home culture, or the departure of the ‘intruding’ outside experts?

This study reinforces images of ‘the’ Chinese learner as a motivated and adaptable one, while also calling for acknowledgement of factors which take us beyond this ‘the’. Understanding the complexities of the interaction of Chinese learners with their learning environments is of growing concern in the current UK higher education context. As their experiences and needs become better understood, it will be increasingly important that their teachers see education as the intercultural experience that it is, and take advantage of these understandings to reflect on their own assumptions and practice.

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Note

1. This study is based on Qing Gu’s doctoral research (Gu, 2003), which was co-supervised by Michele Schweisfurth.

References


