

# An Agenda for Change: Supporting Chinese Postgraduate Students Studying Media and Communication in Australia

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# Project aim

How can we best support the educational adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students to Australian university programs in media and communication?

# Chinese students and scholars: a major group of international learners



- 40.6% of international students studying at tertiary level in Australia are from China (AEI, 2012)
- Increasing scholar exchanges and university partnerships
- Increasing 'internationalisation' of Chinese education (Jin and Cortazzi 2011)
- More learners of English in China than native speakers of English worldwide (Ryan 2013)

# Little interest/understanding amongst Western teachers/researchers of Chinese learning cultures



Due to?

- Belief by academics in Anglophone universities in superiority of their own academic traditions and cultures of learning (Ryan 2013)
- 'Deficit model'
- Complacency about the continued flow of international students (Ryan 2013)
- Negative views of Chinese teaching practices and education systems based on inaccurate, outmoded assumptions and stereotypes (Ryan 2013)
- Little research undertaken on education in China (Jin and Cortazzi 2013) – and none on media/communication

# From 'Deficit model' to 'What can we learn from Chinese learners?'



- Calls for Western cultures of learning to become less ethnocentric and take account of other academic values (Singh 2009, Huisman 2010, Rizvi 2010)
- Rise of China and increasing recognition of its importance, now a need for Western lecturers to learn *about* and *from* China

# A 'Cultures of Learning' Framework (Cortazzi and Jin)



- Focus on shared cultural values, discourses, expectations and interpretations of behaviour in learning
  - while acknowledging diversity and difference within and between cultural communities
- Cultures are complex, dynamic with common values but also internal diversity (therefore counters stereotypes)
- Learning is not transmission but transformative
- => reflection on our own assumptions, expectations and values for learning => reassessment of how we engage with others' learning
- Requires emic research approaches



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# Our collaborative project

- Partners: Victoria University and Communication University of China
- Other Chinese and Australian participating universities
- Designed to nurture dialogue and mutual understanding between Australian and Chinese academics as a 'springboard for the generation of new ways of working and thinking' (Ryan 2013)
- Preliminary research
- Current stage: Formative research into learning cultures
- Next: Action research
- 2 year project funded by OLT

# Outcomes for both countries



- new pedagogical approaches
- teaching resources
- student learning materials
- For use:
  - In China pre-departure
  - In Australia in orientation and introductory courses
  - In both countries in disciplinary teaching



# Currently at formative research stage



- Where are the differences and similarities in Anglophone and Chinese learning cultures?
- 72 interviews/focus groups with students and lecturers + classroom observations  
in China  
In Australia  
Conducted in Chinese and English



# Assessment in China

- No feedback on assignments – just a mark  
=> students think effort = high mark
- 'If a student does not submit assignment but scores high in the exam, he will be okay' (Fang - Lecturer)
- 'Teachers give [pgs] assignments though not too much. Normally once a semester and the length of their work is limited to 1500-3000 words. They are not required to write too much – otherwise they might copy from some websites' (Rose - Lecturer)
- Nevertheless, much content is downloaded from the internet

# Chinese Student's View: Assignments



- 'We submit the essays, teachers give marks. That's it. We don't really know if our writing is ok or not' (Student Focus Group 3)

# Chinese Student's View: Assignments



- 'Personally I could achieve a very good mark for an undergrad assignment but have no clue whatever about what I was doing [in China] ...because I mean in terms of theory this is my task. I have criteria to follow and I just Google the database and put everything together but in terms of understanding that's the problem because as I say it's a passive education system and...Chinese students can be very good at writing things but they are not necessarily very good at understanding what they're doing.'  
(Tanshan Yan - Student)



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# Intuitive assessment criteria?

- 'Normally teachers are very tolerant, especially in the Schools of Arts because there are no very strict assessment criteria. If a student attends lessons and submits their assignments, they will at least get 60. The better the writing is, the higher the score. Plagiarism will result in a fail. If there is no plagiarism concern, all students will pass'.
- (Rose - Lecturer)



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# Intuitive assessment criteria?

'Normally the requirements on essays are not as high as those on exams, teachers still can't give them all 80+. The marks will be set into several levels according to the quality of the essays. Deciding the topic of the essay is the first thing I will look into. Some students are really lazy and just grab the area topic I gave them as the title of their essays. I will give these essays 60 or at most 70 without reading through it because I know these students can't write a good essay at all. How can they finish such a grand topic within just a few pages? If some students do well in deciding a topic, though based on others' opinions, but if they can present their reading and understandings to some extent, I give these students 80 to 85. 90 will only be given those with both novel ideas and careful analysing and concluding. For the rest, I give them 80-.' (Mei - Lecturer)



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# In the classroom in China

- Listen and remember, little note-taking
- Attend because it's mandatory
- Lack of engagement with lecture
- No seminars



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# The Chinese Lecturer's View

We teach in a traditional way: we talk and students listen. You may have found that Chinese students seldom give their opinions in class when studying overseas; they are not used to do so. Because in our classes, usually once a teacher starts talking, they will talk fifty minutes and leave little time for interaction between the teacher and students.

It is almost impossible to interact in class. Time is limited and I have to complete my teaching.

There is a teacher assessment at the end of each semester. Students will give scores and comment on their Teachers' teaching. I have noticed that many students wish for more interactions in class. But what upsets me is that when you want interact with students in class; they will have little interest in it. How to motivate students and make them active in class? I think it is tightly connected to Teachers' capacity. (Rose - Lecturer)





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# The Chinese Student's View

'Teaching style always speaking. We can ask question but usually we don't ask questions because[when] teacher is explaining theory students will listen – always act like they understand but often they don't. Teacher is speaking up at the blackboard ... sometimes after they ask. Teacher is speaking speaking.' (Beijing Shen)

' In China if teacher thinking 'that's a simple question' they don't pay much attention cos education in China is exam driven so what are you studying for? It's just the exam.' (Tanshan Yan)



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# In the Classroom in Australia

- Late students
- Few students turn up
- Extensive lecturer-student interactions, including lecturer questioning
- Movement of lecturers in classroom
- Critical perspectives used
- Pre-reading required
- Lecture content is more overview than China



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# To conclude: a word of caution

- We have just started analysing and still reading the literature
- Small sample so care needs to be taken re generalisation
- Cortazzi and Jin: not dichotomous characteristics of learning cultures although may be 'influential features' with 'contrasting interpretations', or 'different emphases'
- Care needed with the term 'Chinese learners' (Yuan and Xie 2013) => 'learners from China' (Pilcher et al 2011)

# Finally

- Onus is on us as lecturers to be mindful of our own academic traditions
- And to recognise that the students we teach are acculturated to learning cultures that may be different (or similar) to our own
- => consequences for how they adapt in Australia
- We need to be willing to broaden our practices to better suit the future needs of all our students in a changing global education context



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# Next stage in the project

- Further research and draft materials development based on formative research findings
- Leading to development of teaching strategies

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Thank you

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