Why Don't They Participate? A Self-Study of Chinese Graduate Students' Classroom Involvement in North America

Chunlei Lu

Brock University

Wenchun Han

Brock University

Abstract

China is now the world's largest source of international students. In terms of learning performance, Chinese graduate students studying in North America exhibit distinct differences from students who are born and raised in North America. Conflicting cultural values compel Chinese students to reconcile East-West cultures, and put an onus on North American instructors to implement culturally-sensitive pedagogy. Employing the theoretic framework of yin-yang theory, this paper examines Chinese graduate students' classroom performance against the backdrop of East-West cultural negotiation, and specifically seeks to identify which factors inhibit Chinese graduate students' participation in North American classrooms. Drawing from their own living experiences, the authors employ self-study in the methodological form of narrative inquiry – in conjunction with references from existing literature – to investigate Chinese graduates' classroom challenges. Results reveal six factors impacting students' classroom performance: language; knowledge of the education system; knowledge of the social system; personality; influence of traditional culture; and social/economic/political changes. Future research directions are also suggested.

Key words: Chinese graduates, East-West, cross-culture, North America, classroom involvement, self-study

Chunlei Lu is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Brock University. He obtained a B.Ed. (China), a M.Ed. (China), a M.Sc. (the United States), and a Ph.D. (Canada). He has taught at seven universities in these three countries. These cross-cultural experiences have enriched his research foci on education and culture. Email: Lu@brocku.ca

Wenchun Han received her B.A. in China and a B.Ed. and M.Ed. in Canada. Her East-West cultural experiences have endowed her with a passion for cross-cultural studies in education. Currently she is the Undergraduate Academic Advisor in the Department of Geography, Brock University.

Introduction

Transformations in education arising from migrational international development have transcended national boundaries and highlighted genuine global phenomena (MacPherson & Bekerman, 2008). In the years between the initiation of China's Open-Door policy in 1978 and the end of 2007, more than 1.2 million Chinese in more than 100 countries have engaged in higher education – many of whom were graduate students (Huang, 2008). More recently, the Chinese government implemented its largest-ever graduate sponsorship initiative (titled *The public-funded graduate project for building first-class universities in China*) to assist 5,000 top ranking doctoral students annually to study with top ranking advisors in top ranking disciplines in top ranking universities around the world in 2007-2011 (Zhang, 2008). In fact, since 2004, China rates as the world's largest source country of international students (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006).

The significant Chinese student presence on international campuses is readily apparent, particularly at Western academic institutions. For example, the number of Chinese students in Canada was almost 50,000 in 2006 and is still on the rise (Canadian Visa Bureau, 2010); in U.S. universities there were 83,726 (26,275 undergraduate and 57,451 graduate students) in 2008, which ranks them as the second largest international student group in U.S. higher education (Institute of International Education, 2009; Lewin, 2009). The rapidly increasing ratio of Chinese students in North American classrooms changes the landscape of institutions in North America, enriches its diversity, and sustains graduate programs; yet, it also presents certain challenges for both instructors and students (Xu, 2008). In particular, it has been observed that Chinese graduate students tend to refrain from actively participating in classroom activities, which can puzzle or frustrate instructors (Chen, 1996; Pinheiro, 2001; Wan 2001). Higher educational institutions in North America welcome Chinese students, who bring a rich cultural heritage to their host campuses; however, in order to accommodate the needs of these students and facilitate their learning, it is essential for the schools to understand that Eastern values and learning practices are dramatically different from those in the West. This paper examines Chinese graduate students' performance against the backdrop of East-West culture conflict, negotiation, and reconciliation in North American classrooms, and specifically investigates what factors cause Chinese graduate students to hold back from becoming actively involved in classroom activities in North America.

Some existing studies regarding Chinese graduate students indicate that communication issues are among the top difficulties these students encounter in North American classrooms (Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Sun & Chen, 1997; Wan, 2001). In general, international students tend to experience difficulties in communication skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, particularly with regard to effectively responding to questions and participating in class activities (Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Sun & Chen, 1997). Listening is identified as the most frequently used language skill in the classroom, and it plays a more important role in one's academic success than reading or academic aptitude (Conaway, 1982). Regardless of their level of English, Chinese graduates have ingrained communicative behaviours that codify sharp cultural differences that may not be understood by people with English as their mother tongue. For example, Chinese graduates are accustomed to – and tend to expect – instructor-centred communication (Xia, 2000). Consequently, they are less likely to ask

questions or express their opinions in class, and they tend to be unsure how and when to interrupt in an unfamiliar sociolinguistic context (Portin, 1993).

Another factor that significantly affects learning is culture (Oxford, Holloway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992). During the acculturation process, cultural conflicts such as values, attitudes, and beliefs generate various degrees of anxiety and frustration in the international students' academic and daily life (Wan, 2001). For example, the Chinese proverb, *Silence is gold*, marks the importance of being reserved in order to demonstrate courtesy (such as listening to others before speaking), to absorb the opinions of others, and to focus on learning (receiving knowledge) rather than speaking (giving one's own opinions). In China's collective society, "face," or "dignity," and interdependency take precedence over Western values such as individualism and independence (Frank, Harvey, & Verdun, 2000). Classroom etiquette in China dictates that it is undesirable for either teachers or students to lose face (Chan, 1999; Flowerdew, 1998); and, to avoid doing so, Chinese students prefer thinking carefully about the topic before responding to questions or participating in group discussions. "Long silences in the classroom may not indicate that students are refusing to participate, but that they may be thinking about the answers and need more encouragement from the instructors" (Chan, 1999, pp. 302-303). Such conflicting values require Chinese students to reconcile East-West cultures, and signify a need for culturally-sensitive pedagogy from Western instructors.

To further explain Chinese students' experiences in American universities, Hofstede (2001) has developed a framework with five elements: power distance (from small to large); collectivism versus individualism; femininity versus masculinity; avoidance of uncertainty (from mild to strong), and taking a long-term view of life versus a short-term view. At one extreme, Chinese culture is characterized by: low individualism; a significant power distance; a strong tendency to avoid uncertainty; an emphasis on feminine elements; and finally, a long-term approach to living. In American culture, of course, the exact opposites are true (Zhang & Xu, 2007). Consequently, the education process is more student-oriented in North America and more instructor-oriented in China, and the resulting differences in teaching and learning styles between these academic settings may be contributing to the difficulties Chinese students encounter in Western lecture halls (Sun & Chen, 1997).

Moreover, the sociocultural challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in North America – such as the Chinese tendency towards collectivism versus the U.S. propensity for individualism, for example – may be responsible for increasing the anxiety levels of Chinese students and, ultimately, for decreasing their confidence levels (Bellack, Wang, & Paustmann, 1992). To cope with these barriers, Xu (2008) suggests that instructors and graduate students create and share a dynamic and respectful relationship. Instructors should be aware of international students' needs and assist them in integrating with Western academic culture at large, particularly in the process of acculturation (cultural adaptation) in effective writing and independent research.

Although Chinese students share similar experiences with other international students, they also have unique characteristics deserving further examination (Lin, 2002; Zhang, 1992). In the only Canada-based study, Windle, Hamilton, Zeng, and Yang (2008) identified two specific aspects of academic culture among Chinese graduate students in Canada: permeable aspects, related to non-human interactions (such as written work, lab work, and reading ability); and impermeable aspects – human interactions including in-class discussions, oral presentations, group work, oral discourse, and communicating with local people. Some of these findings confirm those in studies conducted in the U.S. (e.g., Lin, 2002; Sun & Chen, 1997; Zhang, 1992).

However, given the significant political, cultural and educational differences between the U.S. and Canada, more studies should be conducted within Canada in order to reach a comprehensive understanding of this growing – yet marginalized and vulnerable – body of students.

Few studies have been conducted on Chinese students' experiences (Chan, 1999; Oxford, et al., 1992; Phillips, Lo, & Yu, 2002), and it seems that most of these were conducted exclusively by interviewing Chinese students, or sending them surveys to complete. In order to acquire valid and in-depth understanding of their issues, the students' own perspectives and narratives must be obtained (Windle, et al., 2008).

The Theoretical Framework

The research framework employed in the present study was informed by a primary theory known as yin-yang theory: an ancient Chinese philosophy which interprets yin-yang unity and the cyclical origin, development, and disappearance of elements in the universe. According to this theory, everything in the world can be described, explained, and classified into yin-yang characteristics such as east-west, black-white, moon-sun, mind-body, stillness-movement, coldness-warmth, inward-outward, closeness-openness, dysfunction-function, earth-heaven, and female-male. There are four essentials in yin-yang theory: opposition (yin and yang are opposites); interdependence/co-existence (there would be no yin if no yang); growth and decline (yin grows when yang declines); and transformation, where yang/yin turns to yin/yang, as in during a changing of the seasons (Lu, 2004). While these yin-yang elements, by their universal and illustrative nature, have played a key role in facilitating a Western appreciation and comprehension of Eastern culture, these same elements – conflict, contrast and transformation in particular – are pivotal to the evolutions and upheavals experienced by Chinese graduate students in Western universities. For example, Chinese graduate students vividly experience East-West conflict due to opposite values such as Eastern collectivism versus Western individualism. The longer they stay in North America, the more these contrasts evolve, as inevitably their Western values increase while their Eastern values diminish. Over the course of cultural adaptation, the Eastern culture embodied among these students is still present, albeit at a different level than when they resided in China.

Rather than recording and analyzing the experiences of other people, for the present study we chose a newer research approach, *self-study*, to record and analyze our own experiences and stories in the context of North American learning environments (Canada and the U.S.). Originated in teacher education and situated in naturalistic and qualitative research methods, the self-study approach has been quickly recognized and embraced in the research community. Since the early 1990s, self-study has been one of the fastest growing research methodologies in education, and it has become the largest growing Special Interest Group (SIG) in the American Educational Research Association (AERA), which is one of the largest education associations in the world (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Kirkwood-Tucker & Bleicher, 2003). "The aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). Although self-study involves study of the self and study by the self, its very nature is open, collaborative, and reframed (Samaras & Freese, 2009). It involves "a thoughtful look at text read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered" (Hamilton, Pinnegar, Russell, Loughran, & LaBoskey (1998, p. 236). Further, self-study research employs a wide range of qualitative methods, all of which adopt narrative in one form or another (Craig, 2009). In the present study, the self-study method involves our storied experiences and

perspectives. We strongly believe that self-study is vital: not for what it reveals about the self, but because of its potential to enhance knowledge of the educational landscape and to improve education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Thus far, the self-study approach has not been employed in existing literature with respect to examining Chinese graduate students in the West. The results of this study are threefold: first, they permit a *from the inside out* understanding of Chinese graduate students' complex cross-cultural experiences in the West; second, they provide instructors with better comprehension of Chinese graduate students and recommend steps towards more culturally-appropriate instruction; and finally, they guide Chinese graduate students and other international students towards a better understanding of themselves and provide approaches for a smooth, academically successful integration with North American classroom settings.

Method

The purpose of this study is to examine Chinese graduate students' storied experiences and perspectives with respect to their classroom involvement in North America. As previously indicated, the method of this paper is primarily that of self-study, which is a new research approach in education. In this section, an outline of the participants, context, data collection, and data analysis is provided.

Participants and Context

In this study, both of us had extensive experience studying in North America as Chinese graduate students. The first author (Chunlei) is currently a professor in the Faculty of Education in a Canadian university. A former graduate student, he has worked as a visiting scholar at universities in the U.S. and in Canada. The second author (Wenchun) recently graduated from a Master of Education (M.Ed.) program at a Canadian university. Considering that the researcher and the research participant are normally separate or distinct persons, misunderstanding or misinterpretation can easily occur during the data collecting and/or analyzing process. To bridge this gap between researcher and participant, we decided to examine our lived experiences and share our own stories, thereby acting as both researchers and participants. Thus we, as collaborative co-agents (Cherubini & Ciufetelli Parker, 2007), have full ownership of stories that genuinely reflected what we went through and how we felt, which we believe are advantages unique to self-study (Creswell, 2005). Further, we studied our stories in a social context (a changing society), rather than in an isolated condition (a classroom), always taking the weight of personal feeling and the background of the stories into account in a personal-social continuum (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

Data Collection

As participant researchers in this study, the two of us served as human instruments of data collection and analysis. Our data was collected over a four month period in the fall of 2008, using the following processes: 1) our ongoing recorded dialogues and discussions during eight face-to-face biweekly meetings; 2) our 16 weekly recorded e-mail discussions; 3) our individual reflective journals; and 4) field notes regarding our comments taken during the face-to-face meetings. Using these multiple data sources permitted strengthening of data triangulation,

facilitation of comparisons, and observation of merging patterns. . While we are able to communicate freely in English when communicating with others, we found ourselves speaking Chinese with one another, as it was more authentic in this context of East-West cultural interaction; therefore our stories quoted here were subsequently translated into English.

Data Analysis

Data collection, data analysis, and interpretation are not artificially separated, but take place in a recursive process from the onset of a qualitative research design. This integrated process advances the evolution of ideas to reveal potential insights and oversights (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). During data analysis, we followed the key guidelines for quality of self-study suggested by Bullough and Pinnegar (2001). These guidelines are critical and unique to self-study methodology because they “offer direction for improving the quality of self-study work that relies heavily on biographical data” (Bullough and Pinnegar (2001, p. 20). Specifically, these guidelines include: maintaining an authentic and genuine voice; seeking to enhance the learning situation not only for the self but also for others; addressing stories in embodied contexts; and providing clear description of data collection. A systematic coding method was applied to process the numbered data files, allowing us to identify meaningful segments and define discrete concepts. We used a constant comparative method to construct coherent categories of meaning, and discussion continued until eventually the work was merged into a master list of concepts or themes. Emerging categories and themes were cross-checked, compared, confirmed, or disconfirmed through intensive discussion between the two authors in conjunction with existing literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results and Discussion

As a result of our data analysis, six interrelated themes emerged: language proficiency; knowledge of the education system; knowledge of the social system; personality; influence of traditional culture; and social, economic, and political factors.

Language

Language is arguably the biggest barrier to Chinese students' active participation in classroom activities in the initial stage of graduate studies in North America, as confirmed in existing literature. Wenchun recalled what happened to her just after beginning her student life in Canada.

I remember my first Canadian History class in a western Canadian college. I went to the class with notepad and pen: I was ready to learn. However, after three hours of lecture, my notepad was still blank. I couldn't write down a word because more than half of the lecture was not understandable to me, and I was so preoccupied with decoding the other half of the lecture that I could not follow completely. I did not have time to write down anything. I went home with a blank notepad and feelings of frustration. I did not know how to review the lesson or what to focus on because the materials the lecture covered were not in the textbook. (Wenchun, September 8, 2008)

Apart from the listening difficulties she had in the class, Wenchun also experienced communication problems with her fellow students who spoke English as their first language:

I was reluctant to talk to my fellow students because I found, after various attempts, that they did not understand my English. They said "Pardon me?" a lot or smiled politely to me. I had difficulty in differentiating certain words when I spoke, for example, word vs. world, wet vs. white, and red vs. right – and difficulty understanding other students, too. First, I had to adjust myself to their speaking speed. Instructors in North America talked much faster than English-speaking instructors did in China. My fellow students spoke much faster than the instructors and did not always complete a sentence after starting it. Slowly I began to catch up with their speed but there were always words that I did not understand, especially certain colloquialisms or slang expressions. For example, what is "Double-double"? Is "What's up?" a question? (Wenchun, October 20, 2008)

This precisely echoes one of the Chinese participant's remarks in Chen's study (1996): "Actually I've tried very hard to speak out in the class. Sometimes I just find. You know, that I really can't cut in. They talk too fast. And they just like blah...blah... blah..." (p. 2).

Chunlei also retains strong impressions from his first experiences in graduate classes in the U.S. He was a national visiting scholar brimming with talent and enthusiasm, yet he experienced difficulty and frustration when expressing himself. Like many Chinese graduates, we both had had extensive English training throughout our schooling, both within China (often training with English speaking instructors) and abroad. However, lack of practicing what we had learned in English contexts significantly reduced our ability and confidence in our speaking skills. This finding is in line with results noted in Haydon's (2003) work which indicate a positive correlation between strong language skills and the international student's ability to participate and interact both inside and outside the classroom.

Despite these initial difficulties, we found that our strong foundation in the English language, as well as the comprehensive learning skills we had acquired in our previous school years, allowed us to make remarkable progress and to adequately catch up – a finding which has not thus far been acknowledged in previous literature. Many strategies we employed to assist our own learning could serve as suggestions for other international students. For example, we became bolder in expressing personal opinions in class, asked instructors for additional assistance during the initial graduate study year, and began to socialize more with English-speaking friends instead of associating exclusively with our Chinese companions. To enhance our conversational and written skills, we focused on using colloquialisms in our verbal communication and used formal expressions for academic writing, improving our language proficiency through a variety of means such as watching television programs, watching movies, and becoming involved in campus and local community activities – an initiative which has been endorsed by Xu (2008).

Knowledge of the Education System

China has a completely different education system from that of North America. From elementary school to university, all courses taken in China are usually fixed by the educational institution, with minimal latitude allowed for personal course selection. Wenchun described the confusion she experienced when she first encountered the course selection process.

When I had to select courses myself here in Canada, I did not know what to do. What difference does it make if I choose this course instead of another? What if I miss important things by *not* taking a particular course? Once the courses started, I found that what I thought important was not what the instructors deemed important. In my first psychology course, I read every page of the huge textbook. However, my test results were not optimal because I concentrated on details rather than the “big picture.” The process of trying to understand what the instructors were looking for took me more time than domestic students. (Wenchun, December 6, 2008)

Chunlei expressed a similar frustration he had at an institution in the U.S.:

When I applied for the position of national overseas visiting scholar (sponsored by the China Scholarship Council), it was the first year the position was open to all 1.3 billion Chinese people. And I won. I was granted this prestigious award, which signified that I must be a very smart person. However, once I got to the States and enrolled in the graduate program, I found that while I could understand the lectures in class, I felt lost. The material I studied really hard was not the material the instructor considered important. I did not know where to place my efforts. I felt as though I were a person with a learning disability, even though I clearly was not, which was very disorienting. Furthermore, I felt like a fully able person living in a very dark, disabling environment. That darkness slowly receded, eventually becoming completely sunny, as I feel today. (Chunlei, October 28, 2008)

A lack of familiarity with the differences between college and university in Canada cost Wenchun a great deal in terms of time and money:

I thought I could save money by going to a college and transferring courses to a university in the third year, but did not know that some courses were not transferable. I discovered later I had to take similar courses over again to fulfill university credit requirements. In another case, I failed the admission requirements at a Canadian university *by one mark* due to my non-standardized resume. Learning that I had been declined because my resume was too short, I pointed out that the requirement indicated that the resume could not be longer than two pages. I had one page, what was wrong with that? They replied, “Well, normally people have more than two pages so we had to set the limit.” When I argued that the requirement did not say one page was unsuitable, I was advised that my resume did not show my precise achievements; I had extensive experience but had not provided enough detail. Later, from a tutor, I learned that in resumes one should use certain words such as “implement,” “design” or “lead.” (Wenchun, November 2, 2008)

It is highly probable that if Chinese students like ourselves were introduced to the differences of the two education systems either before or soon after relocating to North America, it would take them much less time to reach their academic goals. This finding has not been reported in existing literature, yet evidently, Chinese graduate students simply cannot succeed without an adequate understanding of North American education systems, regardless of their

competencies in other areas such as language and cultural awareness. As indicated in literature reviewed above, it is also essential for both instructors and students to recognize and understand the substantial differences between East-West teaching and learning styles (Sun & Chen, 1997). In particular, it would be helpful if an orientation course or workshop were provided to international students when they begin their studies.

Knowledge of the Social System (Local Culture)

We both came to North America directly from China. Without knowing what the taboo topics were, what the famous regional teams were, what the names of the brand stores were, and how much physical distance was comfortable among people during face-to-face conversations, it at first was very hard for us to initiate a conversation with fellow students, or to make references or give examples that are meaningful and relevant to our North American instructors and students when speaking in class. Wenchun recalled her initial residential years in Canada:

Not knowing what to talk about with my fellow students was another factor that kept me quiet for a long time. When I was too busy reading textbooks instead of watching popular TV shows, when I could not afford to rent Blockbuster movies, when I did not cheer for the Toronto Maple Leafs, I did not have a clue what other people were talking about. They were chatting about what happened in their daily life but I was not living in the life they were living in. (Wenchun, October 31, 2008)

Chunlei's story contains another example:

I was very careful not to say something offensive. One of my classes consisted solely of local Caucasian school teachers, except me and a Korean student. One day, a female classmate arrived late. Only one chair remained, beside me. Observing that she was looking for a seat, I remarked in a jocular way, "This chair is reserved for ladies only". The course instructor knew me quite well and asked to meet with me later. He cautioned me that some classmates expressed concern over my remark, and that he assured them my "intentions were pure." (Chunlei, December 6, 2008)

In another course, when the instructor was asking if everybody was present, a Chinese classmate said jokingly, "Everybody is here except that Hong Kong girl." I recognized that his statement was politically inappropriate, but my classmate – who had great English proficiency and was comfortable making jests in class – did not. While I correctly interpreted the course instructor's facial expression in response to this remark, my Chinese classmate could not. Apparently adequate social knowledge is more important than language proficiency, because learning occurs in a social context. (Chunlei, September 8, 2008)

Both of us observed that even when conversations got underway, we often became encumbered by our misunderstanding of nonverbal communication. For example, as a gesture of respect, the Chinese usually do not look directly at listeners' eyes. However, if he/she were to do that in North America, a Western person would consider that Chinese student to be either rude or disinterested in the topic under discussion. It is also interesting that, in Chunlei's case, he felt comfortable looking into the eyes of non-Chinese in conversation, but still did not feel

comfortable looking into the eyes of fellow Chinese in conversation even after being in North America for more than ten years! This yin-yang (East-West) co-existence in an individual signifies the complex process of cultural adaptation, and this emergent bi-cultural sociality deserves further examination.

Personality

We progressively transformed our personalities after coming to North America in order to adapt to Western society because we realized the role personality plays on one's success. Wenchun recalled one of her Chinese classmates who was quite an extrovert:

A girl who had arrived directly from China frequently spoke up in class within her first month in Canada. It took me about three years to reach that level. Her well-spoken English and cheerful demeanour, her willingness to initiate conversations and her natural ease when she was physically close to people, all added up to her having a charming personality. Everybody liked her and was willing to help her when she needed it. Another person I know is just the opposite of her: he never initiated conversation, not even with Chinese students. Whenever I met him on campus, he would look down and avoid eye contact. I heard that he had always been like that - always alone. (Wenchun, October 20, 2008)

To an extent, our experiences echo some previous personality studies on overseas Chinese students (Cheung, Conger, Hau, Lew, & Lau, 1992; Stevens, Kwan, Graybill, 1993). According to these two empirical studies conducted in the early 1990s, basic continuities are evident in the personality traits of mainland and overseas Chinese despite some superficial discontinuities (Cheung, et al., 1992). Moreover, Chinese are at greater risk for psychological maladjustment than their Caucasian counterparts, and stressors that foreign Chinese face in the U.S. can have lasting negative consequences. The examples given by Wenchun demonstrate that in North America, where individualism and independence are encouraged, an extrovert tends to be more active in learning settings and is more successful at building social networks than an introvert. Sue summarized that "foreign Chinese appear more alienated, anxious, conforming, dependent, introverted, passive, and restrained than Chinese Americans or Caucasian Americans" (as cited in Stevens, Kwan, & Graybill, 1993, p. 24). In a North American setting, Chinese graduate students tend to be introverted, requiring more time to build friendships than they would on their home soil. As it is difficult to separate personality and culture, updated and qualitative studies on personality (especially in relation to culture) are necessary to examine this important factor among Chinese graduate students in North America (Stevens, et al., 1993).

Influence of Traditional Culture

Many traditional Chinese sayings favour listening over talking – for example, *Silence is gold*. Since the more you talk, the less you hear, Chinese believe that one learns best and becomes wise when one listens to others, and thinks deeply and well (Lu, 2004). Chunlei noted this cultural conflict:

When I studied in the U.S. and Canada, I wanted to learn from all kinds of people around me. As I had been educated in China for more than twenty years, I learned by listening, watching, and thinking. Considering the amount of money and time I had invested, I did not want to *waste a minute* on talking because then I would miss the opportunity to listen to and learn from others in the classroom. Compared to students in North America who *take every chance* to express themselves and share what they know, Chinese students are more like sponges – they absorb knowledge quietly. (Chunlei, November 30, 2008)

Wenchun described how she felt when answering questions in class:

As with many Chinese students, speaking in public was uncomfortable for me. My heart started beating fast while I considered how best to respond to questions in class. Time slowed down; my palms became sweaty; and the sound of my pulse in my ears drowned out the replies of other students. I would rehearse my answer in my mind repeatedly while awaiting my turn. If I was not called, I felt relieved yet agonized at the same time that I had to experience this again and again, because I *had* to participate for the marks. When I was called, my face would begin to burn. I could feel all eyes on me while I struggling to find the right words. I would stop in the middle of a sentence when I could not find a word, and felt the overwhelming silence while the whole class waited for me. I would realize afterwards that what I had said was not exactly what I meant; then I was mad at myself because I had lost face in front of so many people. I felt guilty because I wasted their time by saying things that did not make sense. (Wenchun, October 1, 2008)

Some of the cultural practices we were raised to believe in might not apply in a different cultural context. While we were taught that *Silence is gold*, talking is also a way of learning (e.g., trial and error). Talking often contains the same value as listening, and further, it permits sharing in an interactive, complex learning community: the classroom (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). In order to obtain these benefits, we felt that Chinese graduates must negotiate East-West (yin/yang) cultural traditions, and actively engage in class activities in the new learning environment.

Social, Economic, and Political Factors

Dramatic economic changes in China and its increasing global political power significantly impact the lives of Chinese students studying overseas. The dated perceptions of China and its people is long gone and, with the reduced difference in income between Chinese and North Americans, more Chinese students who come to North America can afford to live in a manner comparable to their Western counterparts. These changes indirectly yet deeply influence Chinese students' confidence and capacity for academic performance. In Chunlei's experience, the openness of North American society has a significant influence on the international students' opportunities within that society. "Many years ago, the Canadian government only allowed Chinese to conduct two kinds of businesses: restaurants and laundry marts. Things (e.g., policies, multiculturalism) have changed a lot over the years." (Chunlei, December 6, 2008) The current Canadian Prime Minister officially apologized for the *head tax* imposed on Chinese immigrants between 1885 and 1947; Chunlei notes this speaks strongly to the Chinese community and represents great improvement in Canadian cultural pluralism.

These examples indicate a pattern in which increases in Chinese socio-economical-political power and promotion of multiculturalism (or cultural pluralism) are directly related to the ease with which Chinese students adapt in North America (see Table 1). Table 1 indicates that this level reaches its highest when China is economically and politically strong and when North America strongly promotes multiculturalism. The lowest ease of their adaptation is when North America maintains a high level of cultural diversity during a period when China's economical and political power is weak; and the most negative conditions for adaptation occur when both North American multiculturalism and China's resources are low. This framework partially explains why we felt that it was comparatively harder to adjust to North America a decade ago than it is for Chinese students today. Despite these social changes, Chinese must adjust to North America at both the micro level (e.g., classroom, institution) and the macro level (e.g., local community, society) in order to achieve integration and to avoid assimilation, isolation, or marginalization (Berry, 2001). The social, economic, and political influences on Chinese graduate students' academic performance in North American classes have not been reported in currently available literature. More research is required in relation to the discourses of cross-cultural studies and globalization in education.

Table 1

Levels of Ease with Which Chinese Students Adapt to North American Society

China	North America	Level of ease with which Chinese students adapt into North American society
Economical & political power	Promotion of multiculturalism	
High	High	Easiest
Low	High	Easier
High	Low	Difficult
Low	Low	More difficult

Conclusion

This study explored multiple facets affecting Chinese graduate students' performance in classroom participation in North America. It is important to note that the six identified themes or factors cannot be examined separately due to the embodiment of acculturation in a complex system (Davis, et al., 2008): for example, it would be difficult for an instructor to determine whether a student is reluctant to speak in class due to an introverted personality or due to a lack of understanding of North American cultural norms. Each of the six factors will have more or less impact depending on the "developmental stage" of the Chinese graduates in question. In the students' initial year of arrival, language might be their biggest barrier to speaking up in the classroom, as noted in previous literature (Windle, et al., 2008). However, after an extensive period of language practice and improvement, personality might play a bigger role in class performance. Likewise, the students' classroom behaviour will change as their knowledge of the social system and the education system increases: once students are aware that not answering

questions in class will result in loss of marks, they make efforts to participate. Generally speaking, no matter how the six elements affect each other, most Chinese graduate students will improve their classroom participation over time.

It is our hope that instructors gain a better understanding of the obstacles Chinese graduate students face, thereby encouraging them to conduct lectures in a way that is welcoming and encouraging for students. For example, knowing that the “saving face” issue is a sensitive one for Chinese students, the instructor can prevent a loss of face by not calling on them without giving them time to prepare themselves. Instructors could also communicate clear expectations on participation at the beginning of a course, and make themselves available for private meetings with students who are unfamiliar with speaking in class. To ease the adaptation process, instructors should be aware that, for these students, *speaking* English is quite different from – and more important than – being able to correct grammar mistakes in an exercise; and the students themselves should learn as much as possible about their host culture in order to adjust themselves to their new environment. Further, students should initiate conversations at every opportunity, to maximize language skills and self-confidence. Finally, students should maintain a positive attitude and trust that a bright future awaits them regardless of the challenges they may encounter initially.

In addition to the future research directions indicated in the findings, emerging from this study are other aspects deserving of future research attention. For instance, how do the attitude of the instructors and the tolerance level of domestic classmates affect Chinese students' classroom performance? We feel that a supportive environment encourages everybody involved to be successful, whereas an unfriendly class atmosphere could create unpleasant pressure especially in classrooms with minority students. Further, more discipline-specific studies of Chinese graduate students should be conducted since there are significant differences between natural sciences and the humanities/human sciences. More importantly, there are pressing issues for researchers and instructors to ponder. For example, in the dynamic process of integration, what are the most effective teaching methods in institutes of higher education where classrooms are increasingly culturally diverse, and what avenues should universities pursue in order to become culturally competent in this globalized world? An interesting key development is that some new paradoxes and pendulum shifts have been observed: many Western educators have now begun to examine the Chinese education system for “secrets” that could possibly enhance Western education, because Chinese students who are passive yet successful learners outperform their counterparts in other countries, in many school subjects (Chan & Rao, 2009).

In the present study, we employed a self-study approach not to reveal our *self* but to examine, *from the inside out*, Chinese graduate students' complex cross-cultural experiences in the West. It is our hope that these findings provide instructors with a better understanding of Chinese graduate students, and that they lead to the development of more culturally-appropriate strategies for effective instruction. Lastly, we hope this study equips Chinese graduate students and other international students with meaningful guidelines to achieving smooth integration, integrated participation, and true success in North American classroom settings.

References

- Bellack, D. R., Wang, M., & Paustmann, L. (1992, March). *A cross-cultural comparison of analogical reasoning between Chinese graduate students studying in either the People's Republic of China (PRC) or the US of America (USA)*. Paper presented at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Knoxville, TN. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED349900&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED349900
- Berry, J. W. (2001). A psychology of immigration. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(3), 615-631.
- Bullough, R. V., & Pinnegar, S. (2001). Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 13-21.
- Canadian Visa Bureau. (2010, September 16). *Canadian immigration minister says Chinese migrants are very important for Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.visabureau.com/canada/news/16-09-2010/canadian-immigration-minister-says-chinese-migrants-are-very-important-for-canada.aspx>
- Chan, C. K. K., & Rao, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Revisiting the Chinese learner: Changing contexts, changing education*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre.
- Chan, S. (1999). The Chinese learner- A question of style. *Education & Training*, 41(6-7), 294-304.
- Chen, S. (1996, April). *Learning multiculturalism from the experiences of international students: The experience of international students in a teacher training program*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED398177&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED398177
- Cheung, P. C., Conger, A. J., Hau, K., Lew, W. J. F., & Lau, S. (1992). Development of the Multi-trait personality inventory (MTPI): Comparison among four Chinese populations. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 59(3), 528-551.
- Cherubini, L., & Ciuffetelli Parker, D. (2007, May). *Living in the margins of teaching and scholarship: Two professors' program and study in a learning Faculty*. Paper presented at the annual conference of Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE), Saskatoon, SK.

- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2004). Knowledge, narrative and self-study. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 575-600). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Conaway, M. (1982). Listening: Learning too and retention agent. In A. S. Algier & K. W. Algier (Eds.), *Improving reading and study skills*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Craig, C. J. (2009). Trustworthiness in self-study research. In C. A. Lassonde, S. Galman, & C. Kosnik (Eds.), *Self-study research methodologies for teacher educators* (pp. 21-34). Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research, planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2nd ed.), New Jersey: Pearson.
- Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2008). *Engaging mind: Changing teaching in complex times* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Flowerdew, L. (1998). A cultural perspective on group work. *ELT Journal*, 53(4), 323-329.
- Frank, H., Harvey, O. J., & Verdun, K. (2000). American responses to five categories of shame in Chinese culture: a preliminary cross-cultural construct validation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 28, 887-896.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hamilton, M. L., Pinnegar, S., Russell, T., Loughran, J., & LaBoskey, V. K. (Eds.). (1998). *Reconceptualizing teaching practice: Self-study in teacher education*. London: Falmer.
- Haydon, L. (2003). *Meeting the needs of international students at Dominican University of California*. (Report No. HE 036092). San Rafael: Dominican College of San Rafael. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (ED 478835)
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Huang, W. (2008, December 30). *Chinese overseas education 30 years*. Retrieved from http://www.jyb.cn/world/cglx/200812/t20081230_232334.html
- Institute of International Education (2009). *International students in the U.S*. Retrieved from http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/0-10000/3390/folder/68485/Open+Doors+Fast+Facts+2008.pdf

- Kirkwood-Tucker, T. F., & Bleicher, R. (2003). A self-study of two professors team teaching a unifying global issues theme unit as a part of their separate elementary social studies and science preservice methods course. *The International Social Studies Forum*, 3(1), 203-217.
- Lewin, T. (2009). *China is sending more students to U.S.* Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/16/education/16international-.html>
- Lin, L. (2002, March). *The learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in American social science programs*. Paper presented at the 2002 CIES Conference, Orlando, FL.
- Lu, C. (2004). *East meets West: A cross-cultural inquiry into curriculum theorizing and development in physical education* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- MacPherson, S., & Bekerman, Z. (2008). A few words from the editors. *Diaspora, Indigenous, & Minority Education*, 2(1), 1-3.
- Oxford, R. L., Holloway, M. E., & Horton-Murillo, D. (1992). Language learning styles: Research and practical considerations for teaching in the multicultural tertiary ESL/EFL classroom. *System*, 20(4), 439-456.
- Phillips, W. K. & Lo, S., & Yu, T. (2002). Teaching techniques among Chinese international students in Christian colleges and universities. *Christian Higher Education*, 1(4), 347-369.
- Pinheiro, S. O. (2001). *Perceptions versus preferences: Adult international students' teaching-learning experiences in an American university*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED452785&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED452785
- Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice*. London, UK: Springer.
- Portin, G. J. (1993). *Chinese students and questioning skills in American graduate level classrooms* (Unpublished master's thesis). Biola University, La Mirada, California.
- Qian, J., & Krugly-Smolksa, E. (2008). Chinese graduate students' experiences with writing a literature review. *Teaching English as a Second Language in Canada (TESL Canada)*, 26(1), 68-86.
- Samaras, A. P., & Freese, A. R. (2009). Looking back and looking forward: An historical

- overview of the self-study school. In C. A. Lassonde, S. Galman, and C. Kosnik (Eds.), *Self-study research methodologies for teacher educators* (pp. 3-19). Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Stevens, M. J., Kwan, K., & Graybill, D. (1993). Comparison of MMPI-2 scores of foreign Chinese and Caucasian-American students. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 49(1), 23-27.
- Sun, W., & Chen, G. (1997, March). *Dimensions of difficulties mainland Chinese students encounter in the US*. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference in Cross-Cultural Communication, Tempe, AZ. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED408635&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED408635
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2006). *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics across the world*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Retrieved from http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?URL_ID=5456&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201
- Wan, G. F. (2001). The leaning experience of Chinese students in American universities: A cross-cultural perspective. *College Student Journal*, 35(1), 25-44.
- Windle, S., Hamilton, B., Zeng, M., & Yang, X. (2008). Negotiating the culture of the academy: Chinese graduate students in Canada. *Canadian and International Education*, 37(1), 71-90.
- Xia, Y. (2000, November). *Construct the culture from the classroom speaking: Ethnography of Chinese graduate assistants' speaking in the U.S. classroom*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Seattle, WA.
- Xu, F. (2008, October/November). Cross-cultural challenges in teaching international graduate students. *Academic Matters: The Journal of Higher Education*, 14-18.
- Zhang, S. (1992). *Chinese-American students: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED369682&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED369682
- Zhang, X. (2008). Thirty-year history of overseas study. Retrieved from <http://www.chinaqw.com/news/200806/06/119514.shtml>
- Zhang, Z., & Xu, J. (2007). Understanding Chinese international graduate students' adaptation to learning in North America: A cultural perspective. *Higher Education Perspectives*, 3(1), 45-59.