



# WORKING WITH STUDENTS FROM MAINLAND CHINA

A condensed guide for Australian lecturers

This brochure is intended as a brief guide for academics working with international postgraduate media and communication students, in particular those coming from mainland China. While real-time classroom experience and teacher-student interaction will form the basis of these relationships, the research-based material presented here is intended to help lecturers and tutors anticipate and prepare for working with international students, especially during their first semester when they are negotiating the transition from home to host academic culture.

The source of all material presented on the following pages is the “Collaborating for Success” project. Information about the project and research can be found at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia:

<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Collaborating-For-Success/>

The full range of learning resources are accessible at:

<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

These resources are organised around four topics:

- the expectations of Chinese students of the Australian academic context
  - based on pedagogical methods they have experienced in China
  - expectations of learning and teaching, assessment, and of lecturers and tutors
- classroom dynamics
  - rehearsal, performance and presentations
  - participating in class
  - encouraging students to open up
- cultural issues
  - intercultural communication
  - the concept of 'face'
  - critical thinking
- language issues
  - how English is taught and learned in China
  - common problems of English language usage

This brochure is presented with the aim of familiarising academics with core essential issues that will likely surface in work with Chinese students. The text describes trends and tendencies that are not only directly relevant to classroom ethos and specific skills needed to support academic engagement and achievement – but can also be read in some measure as a guide to working with international students from some other countries.



## EXPECTATIONS OF CHINESE STUDENTS

When thinking about Chinese students from mainland China, we need to be able to acknowledge difference. There are fundamental differences between universities and notions of scholarship when comparing China and Western countries, especially those with Anglophone academic cultures. Acknowledging difference, however, does not mean the attribution of deficiency. It simply means that there are many differences that need to be negotiated by students and academics as they learn to work with each other.

### WHY DO CHINESE STUDENTS CHOOSE AUSTRALIA AS A DESTINATION FOR GRADUATE STUDY?

- To gain a higher degree in a relatively short period of time
- To experience Western culture
- Family prestige
- To develop professional skills

It may be that students have very little background in the selected discipline area. And even if their undergraduate degree was in the same area, they will have little knowledge of the discipline within Australia. It is important, however, to honour and appreciate the knowledge and experience that Chinese students bring with them, to draw on this, and allow them to express and share this knowledge within Australian course contexts.

### WHAT DO CHINESE STUDENTS EXPECT ON ARRIVAL?

Interviews suggest that many students don't know what to expect as they have little exposure to or experience of life beyond China. As their reference point is their own undergraduate experience in China, it is important to have some sense of what Chinese universities are like:

- Chinese students are used to a more holistic university experience – a bit like boarding school with everything happening on campus. Students live on campus, have meals prepared for them, socialise on campus and tend to be involved in clubs

and societies, many of which allow them to foster links to support future employment.

- Chinese students are not necessarily expecting that their postgraduate study experience abroad will be demanding. *Hard to enter, hard to fail* is how some Chinese students have described university in China. Chinese lecturers have described it as *relaxing* for students. Because of this, the expectations associated with study in Australia can be unrealistic, leading to shock and stress on arrival.

Because of these differences, Chinese students are often unaware of, don't know how to, or are reluctant to access the different university services available on Australian campuses. Many will also be unwilling to ask for help, believing that they should be able to cope with any problems encountered by being more persistent and working harder. Seeking help involves face (the concept of which is addressed in detail later), and this can be a concern for students.

## WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO CHINESE STUDENTS HAVE ABOUT LEARNING AND TEACHING?

Chinese students expect that they will be taught the required content and that a capacity to reproduce that content will be the measure of success. The complexities associated with learning and teaching in a Western academic setting will be unfamiliar to them. They will be particularly unfamiliar with:

- The degree of independence required for successful study
- The volume of reading required
- The expectation that many different sources will be accessed
- The amount of writing required
- The number of assignments required
- The requirement to reflect knowledge and understanding through different text types / genre that are specific to the discipline area of study
- The requirement to use a critical perspective and demonstrate higher-order thinking
- The requirement to engage in spontaneous oral interaction and debate.

Scholarship in China has historically been constructed very differently from Western scholarship. Traditionally, teachers have been revered as the custodians/holders of knowledge who have a responsibility to transmit knowledge to their students. This process is impacted by factors associated with hierarchy, relationships and face, as well as beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how it is best represented. Scholarship in China is also built on a strong work ethic – the belief that hard work will result in success. Chinese scholarship is changing but is still influenced significantly by tradition.

## WHAT EXPECTATIONS DO CHINESE STUDENTS HAVE ABOUT ASSESSMENT?

Chinese students expect that an examination will be the principal form of assessment in each of their units or courses as this has been their experience in China.

Qualitative feedback in China is often limited to praise or encouragement rather than genuine critique of work against clearly described criteria. Because of this, Chinese students often have difficulty interpreting task rubrics/requirements and the criteria or rating scales that are used for assessment. They also have difficulty interpreting feedback, and they don't necessarily have experience of how to use feedback to improve future assignments.

Students may not initially understand the importance of essays and other assignments for overall assessment and achievement in a course. So they may feel overwhelmed by the number of assignments they have to complete (in a language that is not their native tongue).

Students may be confused or unnerved if they do not receive praise from their lecturers.

### **WHAT DO CHINESE STUDENTS EXPECT OF THEIR LECTURERS AND TUTORS?**

They will expect that they will be provided with explicit and factual information and that the lecturer will present any interpretation of information that they will be required to reproduce.

There will be a sense of dependence on the lecturer that is born out of the traditional belief that the teacher is the source of knowledge and that knowledge forms a bridge between teacher and student.

Chinese students will also believe that the lecturer will be sensitive to their vulnerability and at least have an appreciation of the importance of face and relationships in Chinese society even if the lecturer doesn't know much specifically about these areas.

Importantly, they will expect that you, their lecturer, will be prepared to have them come to your office after class, or talk to them in the corridor outside the classroom, so that clarification and support can be provided in a private, less face-threatening context. It's worth, therefore, posting your availability for meetings on your office door or inviting students to meet you at a specific time.

They will also expect the lecturer to be tolerant of a high level of ambiguity in their work.

In undergraduate study, Chinese students will most likely have been reliant on a textbook or on notes or resources provided by their lecturers. They will not necessarily be used to having to find resources themselves (especially via the university library's electronic databases) or evaluating different sources of information.



## CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

### REHEARSAL, PERFORMANCE AND PRESENTATIONS

The expectations of Australian academics that seminars will include spontaneous oral interaction and unrehearsed argument contrast with the assumptions and experiences of Chinese students. In China, 'rehearsal and performance' are intrinsic to enacting learning and demonstrating knowledge.

- 'Memorisation' and 'speaking out' historically are valued ways of learning within Chinese literacy education. These practices underlie the enactment of rehearsal and performance.
- They are supported by forms of assessment, such as examinations which require memorisation, and the increasingly common use of in-class presentations.
- Presentations usually take the form of well-rehearsed, carefully scripted oral performances that are delivered in front of the lecturer and peers. Students use language that is intended to 'persuade up', i.e. produce a performance that is considered appealing to the one who is in a superior position (the lecturer).
- It is often difficult to discern how marks are allocated for presentations, and feedback from Chinese lecturers is usually positive, verbal comment rather than critical appraisal.

Because of these experiences, Chinese students are often very confronted and threatened when they enter the Australian classroom. The 'disrespectful' argumentation in Australian seminars contravenes their assumptions and experiences of speaking in class. Not having an opportunity to prepare and rehearse for conversations in class, and not having a pre-planned script to be performed are problematic, and can result in Chinese students withdrawing from any form of oral engagement in the Australian classroom.

### Teaching tips

- Acknowledge and express your understanding of the roots of Chinese practices and the values inherent in them (as above). This will enable students to feel more comfortable and their contributions valued.



- In the initial weeks of a course, provide students with topics that they can prepare in advance of your class. Initially allow students to 'perform' their learned responses but gradually require them to be less reliant on the script (use dot points only for example, or give them limited time to view their script).
- Add variation to prepared topics that requires students to deviate from the script. Ensure, however, that students feel comfortable and supported as they do this.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Because most teaching at the undergraduate level in mainland China is carried out through lectures, Chinese students will tend to have limited or no experience of seminars. They also have limited experience using English spontaneously and interactively.

### **Face**

The concept of face has an impact on perceived passivity. Face is tied intimately to relationships and hierarchy, and dictates who is able to speak to whom, and when, particularly in public spaces.

### **Argumentation and critical debate**

Thus it comes as no surprise that argumentation and critical debate, as commonly enacted in Western tutorial and workshop contexts, will be unfamiliar (and often uncomfortable) for many Chinese students. Chinese students often comment on the propensity of Western students to 'open their mouths and speak out.' Chinese students find this difficult because of societal and educational norms. They are inexperienced in this area and need to be taught the conventions of how exchanges in tutorials are undertaken and managed.

### **English language proficiency**

Perceived passivity within the Australian classroom cannot be separated from issues associated with the teaching and learning of English in China. English is taught with:

- Emphasis on grammar
- Little attention to use of English for communicative purposes
- Limited interactional opportunities, particularly for spontaneous use of English
- Only limited access to authentic English texts
- Little reference to English-speaking cultures and contexts.

As a result, students have little concept of English language use as socially negotiated interaction. This has an impact on their capacity to be active and vocal participants in Australian learning contexts.

Bonny Norton (2000) talks about students for whom English is a second or additional language obtaining the 'right to speak', of being able to see themselves as legitimate

speakers of the language and of being able to assert the right to communicate on an equal basis. How Chinese students learn English makes this difficult to do. The result is that they can feel disempowered. Their views are silenced because of an inability to express them in the vernacular and style that is the currency of the Western university learning context. **These are not passive learners – they are marginalised learners.**

### Teaching tips

To provide better and more inclusive environments to help Chinese students flourish and communicate:

- Show students you are sensitive to their language issues by:
  - Recasting key ideas using relatively formal language
  - Reducing use of idioms/ slang
  - Being conscious of the impact of speed on comprehending speech/meaning
  - Being aware that sound and accent may be problematic.
- Make it clear to students that their responses don't have to be grammatically correct – what they are saying is important, not how accurately they express it.
- Honour the silence of Chinese students until they feel comfortable 'having a go.'





## CULTURAL ISSUES

### INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

English is taught to students in mainland China with little reference or attention to culture and interculturality. They learn a great deal about English grammar, but they have very limited exposure to authentic English language text. This means that many of the students who study abroad have little knowledge about the host country, such as Australia, and about English language use in real contexts whether academic or social. They are unable to put language and culture together – and yet this is what is required in order to be successful, particularly within postgraduate programs. This situation can be daunting, and research indicates that as a result, Chinese students demonstrate a reluctance to engage with locals.

Even initiating small talk can be difficult. Mark Heyward (2002) describes this as ‘living alongside rather than living with.’

Going beyond one’s own culture and learning to operate effectively in another linguistic and cultural community is extremely challenging. For Chinese graduate students studying in an Anglophone culture, this involves learning to operate linguistically and socially within, and beyond, the university community at increasingly complex levels. Such engagement and functioning requires specific knowledges, including:

**Social practices:** The process of developing intercultural competence requires Chinese students to learn about behaviours, practices, concepts, attitudes, beliefs, values, traditions, conventions, rituals and lifestyles that are intrinsic to Australian culture, as well as about how these all have an impact on learning in and living in (and not alongside) an English-speaking community.

**The connection between literacy practices and social practices:** Chinese students who are interculturally competent appreciate how social practices are fundamentally connected to, and interwoven with, language use and with literacy practices as well as how these practices shape language and formulate and condition ways of thinking and being in English-speaking communities.

## THE CONCEPT OF FACE

Face is about actions and interactions and it is about the perceptions of others. For Chinese students face is very important – so important in fact that Zhi Tan (2007) states, ‘No one can afford to lose it.’ Face needs to be protected in public space, and this is why interactions within academic and social discourses at university can be intimidating for Chinese students. Everyday on-campus activities such as seminars can be face-threatening.

Face is not such an issue in private spaces. Some forms of media (e.g. online blogs) are considered as private space and therefore not such a problem for Chinese students. Interacting through these media is a good way for them to become involved in academic discourses and exchange of ideas.

Chinese students consider lectures, seminars and workshops to be public but also to be formal situations within the university experience. Sensitivity to face-threat is heightened by the degree of formality of a situation. Because of this, teaching and learning experiences are influenced by face.

**In the classroom:** Chinese students are unlikely to ask or answer questions in lectures or smaller classes, as these are public spaces. They will, however, **seek out lecturers after class** to ask questions and seek clarification with respect to expectations for tasks and assignments. Lecturers need to appreciate that **meeting with them in the private space** of the academic’s office is much less face-threatening for Chinese students. It is important, therefore, to provide consultation times for student meetings.

Other face-related needs include:

- Accommodation for a transition period for Chinese students. Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) describe the need to create a ‘buffer zone’ – time to allow Chinese students to familiarise themselves with their new and very different educational environment. This has implications for how seminars are conducted. Allowing students an initial period where it is OK to be silent is important. Moving then to providing Chinese students with time to formulate answers, or even allowing them to prepare answers in advance, will help with transitioning.
- Opportunities for students to meet with their lecturers out of class need to be provided not only to allow them to seek clarification and ask questions but also as part of enacting the relationship and obligations between academic and student.
- Chinese students need to be permitted to work with each other initially, but then they need to be required to broaden their engagement with other peers.
- It is important for Chinese students to appreciate that, in general, there is less need for formality in university contexts and therefore there is less emphasis on face.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Critical and creative thinking are integral to activities that require students to think broadly and deeply. In order to do this, reason and logic must be used, but so too must imagination, creativity and innovation. Importantly, intellectual independence is integral to critical thinking. Critical thinking involves:

- Generating and applying new ideas in specific contexts
- Interpreting information in different ways
- Seeing existing situations in new ways
- Identifying alternative explanations
- Refining ideas to discover possibilities
- Synthesising information to generate different outcomes

Critical and creative thinking in media and communication requires students to:

- Gather, organise and deploy ideas and information in order to formulate arguments cogently and express them effectively in written, oral or other forms
- Work in flexible, creative and independent ways, showing self-discipline, self-direction and reflexivity

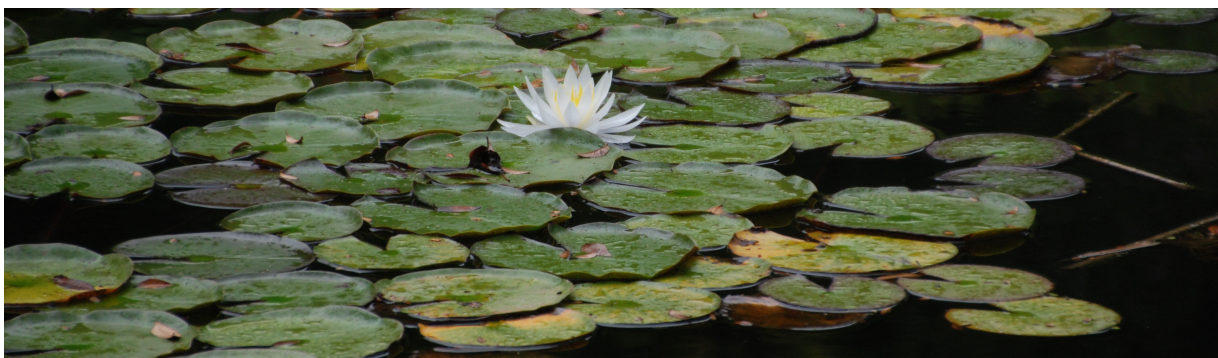
Kirkpatrick and Xu (2012) have observed that, “A typical Chinese undergraduate may be well-equipped with writing short articles with memory-based historical facts or evidence but not research-based academic essays, and a typical Chinese university major will be trained to write a wide variety of practical ‘bureaucratic’ genres. Non-Chinese majors, however, who comprise the great majority of Chinese university students, will receive little instruction in Chinese writing and composition once they have entered the university.”

**Critical and creative thinking can seem difficult for Chinese students:** In Chinese universities students are encouraged to think a lot, work hard, accumulate knowledge and know if something is right or wrong. None of these things, however, necessarily translates into or requires critical and creative thinking. In fact, practices associated with the above can work against thinking critically and creatively. The following common practices are associated with university learning in China:

- Memorisation of large quantities of information from the prescribed textbook
- Memorisation of information contained in lectures, handouts or PowerPoints
- Delivery of rehearsed presentations
- Provision of right/wrong responses to questions
- Writing of short texts designed for state and bureaucratic purposes.

These practices tend to reflect a style of thinking that, according to Western notions of learning, is often described as passive. This tends to be enacted within a style of learning that is less independent than that encouraged in the West because it is designed primarily to meet the needs of China's government and its bureaucratic institutions (Kirkpatrick and Zu, 2012).

For a Chinese student, thinking critically and creatively can be a challenge. The first step is to appreciate that thinking critically is not thinking 'passively' and accepting everything as it is presented. Nor is it about criticising, thinking negatively or thinking that something is wrong. It is thinking actively, and it involves asking questions and evaluating all forms of information encountered. The questions asked need to involve higher-order thinking. This means that the asking and answering of questions should be directed at promoting forms of thinking such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating, rather than remembering facts and information.



## LANGUAGE ISSUES

### HOW ENGLISH IS TAUGHT AND LEARNED IN CHINA

Academics in English-speaking environments have certain expectations of what it means to be a proficient user of academic English. The academic learning context in China is different. What it means to be a proficient user of language is also different. We need to appreciate that both students and their lecturers in China tend to believe that learners' English proficiency is built on the lecturer's lectures rather than on the students' own practice. We need to appreciate the impact this has on the way Chinese students view their learning experiences. We also need to guard against interpreting difficulties with using academic English as being reflective of either a lack of ability or criticality.

- Chinese students have learned and used the English language separately. They have little experience of using English interactively or multi-modally.
- Chinese students don't have the same cultural reference points to guide their use of English. They have limited experience with real English (although this is changing with increasing use of the Internet and social media), so they have little understanding of how English reflects and expresses the culture of their new English-speaking environment.

### Reading

The teaching and learning of English in China focuses heavily on grammatical knowledge. Students are encouraged to learn grammatical rules rather than make meaning from what they read. When given English material to read in China, students are encouraged to focus on decoding the separate words that make up sentences. They use grammatical rules to try to read texts in the same way that they would work out a puzzle or a mathematical equation. As a result, they view English texts as some sort of code that needs to be cracked. It's like opening a safe. The problem is that once the safe is open, they often don't know what to do. They have difficulty understanding the broader meaning of the material they read, even though they can understand the words that make up the text and are very often able to reproduce what they read exactly. Unfortunately, this approach to reading does not foster the ability to read deeply or critically.

## **Writing**

(See also 'Common problems in English language usage' below.)

For Chinese students writing in English, using the conventions expected will most likely be a new experience. The value of writing and the processes associated with it in China are very different.

- Exams are the principal form of assessment in China, and therefore there is not the same requirement for students to write extensively in Chinese let alone in English. Students will be accustomed to writing short assignments in English, usually no more than a couple of hundred words.
- The style of essay writing is also different. Persuasive writing in Chinese is not linear and does not have the same conventions as in English.
- Conventions of essay writing in China do not prioritise referencing as do Western academic conventions. Scholarship is often reflected through historicity and the use of literary language. Do not be surprised to see essays where the language used is flowery and ornate and where there is an overuse of adjectives as well as extensive use of clichés and proverbs.

## **Listening**

In China, at all levels of education, reading and writing are prioritised over listening and speaking. In fact, it is often the case that listening activities are consigned to time outside of class for students to complete on their own, with little scrutiny of what and how much listening has been done. Because of this Chinese students tend to have had limited opportunities to listen to English, particularly authentic English and English that expresses discipline-specific knowledge.

Another challenge for Chinese students is that the listening that they have engaged in is very often one-way with no requirement for spontaneous response or interaction with other listeners and speakers. Chinese students are not used to participating in extensive academic dialogue in English. Having to operate in real time without being able to go back and listen again can be daunting.

## **Speaking**

This is the least practised of the language skills. The sheer number of students studying English in China makes the practising and assessing of spoken English a logistical nightmare. Because of this it is not undertaken with sufficient frequency to support the development of fluent spoken English. Also, even when assessed, it tends to be undertaken in circumstances that are more reflective of monologue than conversation. The issue of spontaneous oral interaction again emerges as a significant challenge for Chinese students studying abroad.

## COMMON PROBLEMS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE USAGE

Chinese students have a thorough, theoretical knowledge of English grammar, the law of the language. Research into second-language acquisition indicates, however, that knowing grammar in theory does not translate into accurate use in practice. Chinese students can feel immense frustration over the fact that they know the grammar but in their extended English writing they make many errors that they have difficulty eradicating.

**Common features of the English language with no equivalents in Chinese,** resulting in common errors in written expression:

- *Articles (a, an, the)* are used interchangeably or omitted.
- *Auxiliary verbs (be, have, do)* are used inappropriately.
- *Modal verbs (will, can, may, shall, would, could, might)* generate frequent errors.
- *Prepositions (e.g., at, in, on)* are not required in most Chinese writing structures.

**Other common errors:**

- Tenses, particularly past tense, because the Chinese tense system is simple and straightforward with regard to the concept of time
- Singular and plural: Plural 's' and 'es' are often omitted.
- Pronouns are often omitted.
- Verbs: In use of infinitives, Chinese often omit 'to'.
- Verbal nouns (ending with -ment e.g., requirement) are often used incorrectly.

**Other impacts of Chinese on English language use:**

- Chinese is a topic-prominent language; English is a subject-prominent language. This can affect word order.
- Chinese writing features run-on sentences. Chinese students are taught to use colons and semi-colons to punctuate in English, resulting in their overuse in written English.
- The linear subject-predicate sentence structure required in English can be difficult for Chinese students, who write repetitiously as a reflection of more recursive thought patterns.
- Chinese writing is often flowery and ornate and features many adjectives. Clichés and proverbs are also overused. In written Chinese these features are hallmarks of quality writing.
- In spoken Chinese, gender-specific pronouns are not required, so it is common to use he and she interchangeably in conversations. It is interesting to note that there was no word for she in Chinese until the 1920s.
- It should be noted that Chinese grammar is elegant and for the most part logical. In many cases, English grammar is neither of these.



## Teaching tips

It is helpful to have an idea of where you can expect there to be problems with the English grammar and expression of your Chinese students. However, do bear in mind that:

- Learning grammar is different from acquiring grammar and using it correctly. The latter takes a long, long time.
- Chinese students know the grammar but this doesn't guarantee they can use it correctly.
- Error correction by you when marking assignments is unlikely to make a great deal of difference to how students write. However, you might want to draw attention to errors by underlining them as, in the longer term, this technique may have greater impact on their development of grammatical accuracy.

It is worth appreciating that as a media and communication lecturer, there is no point in you, or any of your students, becoming overly anxious or stressed about grammatical errors in students' written work as within the timeframe of a coursework Masters degree there is probably little anyone can do to change persistent grammatical errors. This is because how we all acquire the grammatical systems of languages that we speak is to some extent an unconscious process over which we have limited control.

To read about these topics in more detail, and to find teaching resources to support students to develop skills in these areas, please go to: <http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

For more information about the research which underpins these ideas and resources, please go to: <http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Collaborating-For-Success/>

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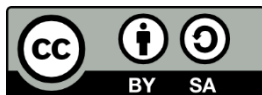
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