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Cultural values of Chinese tertiary students and the implications for first-year engagement

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Abstract

This study identifies the cultural values of Chinese tertiary education students and applies these findings in a discussion of the implications for first-year student engagement for this subgroup. Survey results revealed strong collectiveness and conservation needs and a marked rejection of self-enhancement. The results were compared with previous data over a 19 year period and it was found that the values held by Chinese tertiary students had not changed despite rapid socio-economical change within China during the same time frame. As such, values provide a strong platform from which to develop first-year engagement strategies for this group.

Broadly speaking, engagement activities directed towards Chinese students that facilitate in-group relations and that recognise and reward the combined efforts of group members are likely to be more effective than those that focus upon the individual. Engagement activities that provide consistency, clear expectations and role clarity are more likely to encourage participation rather than those that emphasise change or surprise. Engagement activities that promote self-enhancement potentials are likely to be met with resistance, whereas those that promote transformation beyond self interests are likely to invoke motivation.

Introduction

The changing face of higher education has attracted considerable focus upon e-learning technologies and new educational policy imperatives. Another important manifestation of this “changing face” metaphor during the past decade has been the students themselves, in particular the visible influx of international students arriving predominantly from China. Educational practices developed in the western world may not be effectively engaging these new Chinese students. Additionally, the young Chinese themselves may have undergone a fundamental cultural shift due to the rapidly changing socioeconomic landscape of China in the past few decades and therefore may differ culturally to their predecessors. Values studies have been utilised in the disciplines of management and marketing in order to understand differing groups of people, however, they have not yet been widely applied within higher education research. This study uses the Schwartz Values Survey to identify the current cultural values of new Chinese tertiary education students. The findings are applied in determining preliminary implications for first-year student engagement for this subgroup.

The rise of Chinese students within Australia

There has been a significant increase recently in the percentage of Chinese students within Australia. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade there has been an

increase of 19.7 percent of Chinese student enrolments in Australia, with a total of 127,000 in 2008, representing the largest group (23.4 percent) of all international enrolments. Within The University of Adelaide, the percentage of Chinese students (excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong and other SARs) in 2009 is given as 46%, constituting by far the largest international student group. With continual growth in the Chinese economy further increases in these numbers may be anticipated.

Literature review

Values are identified as key underlying motivational constructs and culture-defining properties that link to psychological constructs that have been widely applied in a management and marketing context. Values have also been described as beliefs, transcending actions and situations, criteria for selections or evaluations, and having an ordered relative importance to one another (Schwartz, 2005). Since values are integral components that contribute towards defining a culture, knowledge of cultural values is a key to understanding that culture. Values not only tell us about culture, but they are also related to personalities (Roccas et al, 2002) and emotions (Laverie et al, 1993). Values are often formed in adolescence and change little thereafter (Schwartz, 2006). Therefore revealing the values of a cultural group offers quite a comprehensive and long-term picture of the nature of people within that culture.

The following widely used theoretical frameworks were considered to investigate cultural values. Hofstede's framework is considered by far the most influential cultural framework, and its usefulness internationally is well established (Steenkamp, 2001). His cultural typology suggests that there are five dimensions (power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individual vs. collective; masculinity vs. femininity and long- vs. short-term orientation) on which cultures differ. Each dimension represents a continuum of opposites.

A Chinese Value Survey developed by the Chinese Culture Connection (1987) contributed to Hofstede's fifth dimension (long term-term orientation) by revealing an element termed 'Confucian Dynamism' (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) concerning a society's search for virtue rather than a search for truth.

Hall's (1976) high and low context as a way of differentiating cultural orientations can also offer a useful tool to examine culture. A low context culture considers that *what is said* is of greater importance whereas a high context culture considers *who said it* of greater importance. It is generally agreed in the literature that western cultures tend toward the low context scale in the continuum whereas Asian cultures tend towards the high context scale, where China appears as the highest (Robbins et al, 2004). In a contractual sense this equates to a reliance on the written word in low context cultures whereas high context cultures have a greater reliance on trust and relationships (Keegan, 2002, p.73). Unlike the low context culture, relationships and emotions have higher priority in a high-context than do tasks and schedules. A high context culture is less likely to use confrontation as a means of problem solving as forming relationships is the end goal, whereas a task orientated society is more likely to experience confrontation within relationships as a means to reaching a specific non-relationship orientated goal.

The Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) (1992) is built upon Hofstede's (1980) scale and is regarded as capturing more cultural aspects. Ng et al (2006) has compared Hofstede's and Schwartz's value frameworks for congruency and found that there is significant overlap between the two values systems, with Schwartz's values having the potential to explain greater cultural variation than Hofstede's values. Schwartz's framework has also been described as being

related to the Rokeach survey yet designed to be equally applicable to western and non-western cultures (Allen, 2001). The Schwartz model was developed in 1992 and 1994 and is the result of analysing data collected from over 44,000 respondents since the 1980s (Fontaine 2005). According to Fontaine (2005), the work of Schwartz has been internationally recognised by names such as Church and Looner, Early and Singh, and Hofstede. The advantages of using the Schwartz Value Survey to determine values within a cohort are that it builds upon the foundations of traditional values instruments, has undergone rigorous testing and development, and enables comparability with existing data (Fontaine, 2005).

In reviewing the above mentioned cultural frameworks, the Schwartz value framework was chosen to examine the cultural values of Chinese tertiary students because it builds on the foundations of traditional values instruments, is equally applicable to western and non-western cultures, has undergone rigorous testing and development, and enables comparability.

Methodology

Schwartz's overall theoretical structure of values represents individualism versus collectivism characteristics, being one of the broad cultural dimensions as identified by Hofstede. However, the SVS model describes these characteristics as consisting of two continuums, 'Openness to Change vs Conservatism' and 'Self-Enhancement vs Self-Transcendence'. These four dimensions represent the four quadrants of the model. Each values item exists within this structure where adjacent values are compatible, opposite values are in conflict, and values at 90 degrees to each other are neither compatible nor in conflict. For example, a need for security is compatibility with power and conformity/tradition values, is neutral with respect to achievement and benevolence values, and conflicts with self-direction values.

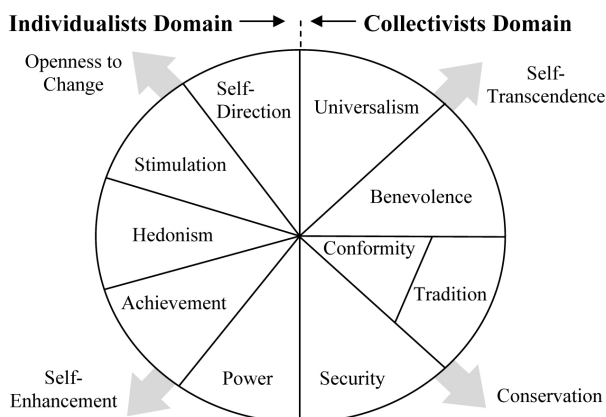


Figure 1: Theoretical Structure of Values - Adapted from: Bardi & Schwartz, 2003, p.1209

The Schwartz Values Survey (SVS) consists of 58 statements which map to the 10 individual values. A translation of the SVS was provided by Romie Littrell of the Centre for Cross Cultural Studies (<http://www.crossculturalcentre.homestead.com>) and administered to the survey participants. A Likert scale of 0 to 6 (not important to important) is used to record responses to the statements. There is an additional scale measurement of 7 for 'supremely important' whereby ordinarily only 1 or 2 statements would hold this rating. There also exists a scale measurement of -1 where the statement is 'opposed to my values'. The following table provides the keying of individual questions to individual values.

Table 1: Keying of SVS Ten Individual Level Value Scales

Values Item	Associated Question Numbers
Conformity	11, 20, 40, 47
Tradition	18, 32, 36, 44, 51,
Benevolence	33, 45, 49, 52, 54
Universalism	1, 17, 24, 26, 29, 30, 35, 38
Self-Direction	5, 16, 31, 41, 53
Stimulation	9, 25, 37
Hedonism	4, 50, (57)
Achievement	34, 39, 43, 55
Power	3, 12, 27, 46, 58
Security	8, 13, 15, 22, 56

Data cleaning was performed on the individual results including the removal of surveys with significantly incomplete results, question 57 was dropped (as per guidance from the Centre for Cross Cultural Studies), and the mean of each individual response was determined. Finally, the mean was subtracted from each individual response to determine each individual's value structure. The mean of all the individual value structures was then determined to create the overall values signature of the group. Smallest space analysis was performed to compare the positioning of the observed results with respect to the theorised model. According to the model, results should cluster together within their theorised positioning regardless of the comparative importance of the differing values.

Sample

The Chinese translation of the Schwartz Values Survey was administered in 2007 to 382 Chinese aged between 18 and 23 living in Jiangsu province, China. Those participants were taking part in tertiary studies majoring in English, Japanese, or Korean. Previous data (1995, 1988/89) that had been administered in Shanghai (neighbouring Jiangsu province) was sourced from the Cross Culture Centre. The acquired surveys provided a means for longitudinal comparison.

Table 2: Values Survey Respondents

2007 data (surveyed):	1995 data (acquired):	1988/89 data (acquired):
Respondents: 382	Respondents: 194	Respondents: 253
Age Range: 18-23	Age Range: 18-23	Age Range: 18-23
Occupation: tertiary students	Occupation: mostly tertiary students	Occupation: mostly tertiary students

Results

T-test for Significance

The T-test for significance has been performed on the 2007 results to determine significantly accepted or rejected values within the group. Those values items that appear above x-high and x-low can be regarded as predominant tendencies for the group, and as such are described as defining group characteristics. Significantly higher or lower values are underlined in the table below.

Table 3: Results—including T-distribution

Mean:	Statistical mean of the group	Alpha:	P value of statistical significance
N:	Number of value items	t-Value:	T-Distribution Deviation
DF:	Degrees of Freedom (N-1)	x-low:	Minimal value of significance
SE:	Standard Error	x-high:	Maximum value of significance

Mean	N	DF	SE	Alpha	t-Value	x-low	x-high
-0.19	10	9	0.22	0.05	2.26	-0.69	0.31

Security	Conformity	Tradition	Benevolence	Universalism	Self-direction	Stimulation	Hedonism	Achievement	Power
<u>+0.53</u>	+0.25	<u>-1.53</u>	<u>+0.40</u>	-0.03	+0.22	<u>-1.08</u>	-0.13	+0.27	<u>-0.82</u>

The T-test results indicate significant preference for the collective values of security and benevolence, and significant rejection for the individual values of stimulation and power. These results are in-keeping with previous literature describing Chinese as having a collective orientation. However, there was also a significant rejection of the collective value of tradition that appears contrary to general collectivist preferences.

Individual Values Comparisons

The 2007 results in Figure 2 reveal the overall values signature of the surveyed group. This values signature may also be visually compared with graphs of previous data from similar cohorts for the years 1995 and 1988/9.

The values signatures for years 2007, 1995, and 1988/9 reveal a consistent pattern indicating strong values persistence over time. The signatures reveal a very strong rejection of tradition, and a strong rejection of stimulation and power as the three defining negative value associations of the group over time. There is also a consistently high need for security and achievement visible over time.

Smallest Space Analysis

The following description of smallest space analysis is as per Bloombaum (1968) who explains the statistical method as suitable for cross-cultural data. Smallest space analysis attempts to find the minimum number of dimensions in which data can be adequately represented. These dimensions may include any measure of distance between two variables such as correlation coefficients, association coefficients, conditional probabilities and so on. In the resultant space diagrams of smallest space analysis the result from each question is represented as a point. The physical distance between any two points is inversely related to the size of the correlation coefficient between those two points. The closer the points are, the higher the correlation between them. Thus responses to questions of a similar nature should cluster together. According to the theoretical structure of values, smallest space analysis should cluster together questions associated with the same values dimension.

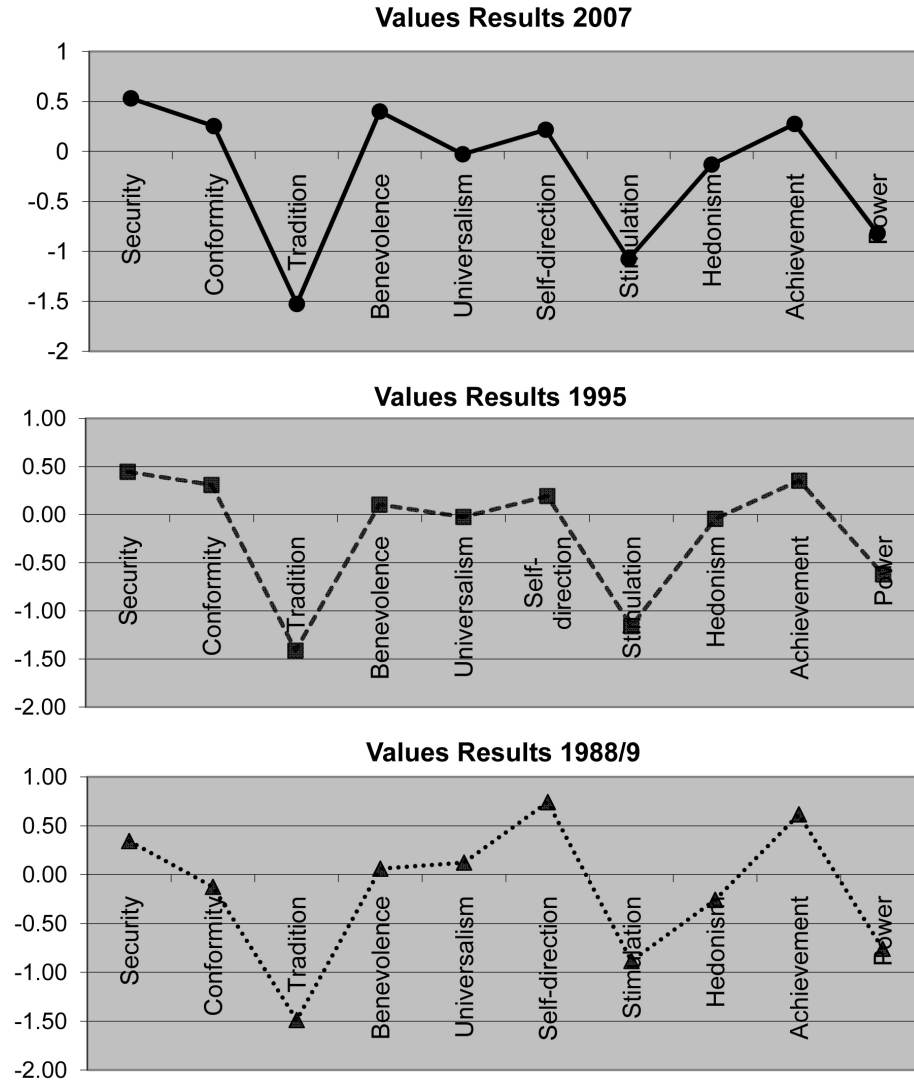


Figure 2: Comparison of Group Means for 2007, 1995 & 1988/9 Data

The theoretical values structure is presented in Figure 3 for each values dimension. Each model follows the same orientation as per Figure 1 where collectivists values are presented on the left hand side of the model, and individualists values are presented on the right. The illegible numbered points within each model represent the smallest space positioning of the responses to every single survey question (referred to as a 'hit' below). According to Schwartz's theory of values, the smallest space analysis results of individual questions associated with a particular value should cluster together within their corresponding area. The actual clustering of the observed results has been outlined in a freehand manner in Figure 3, whilst the theoretical positioning of the results according to the model has been shaded.

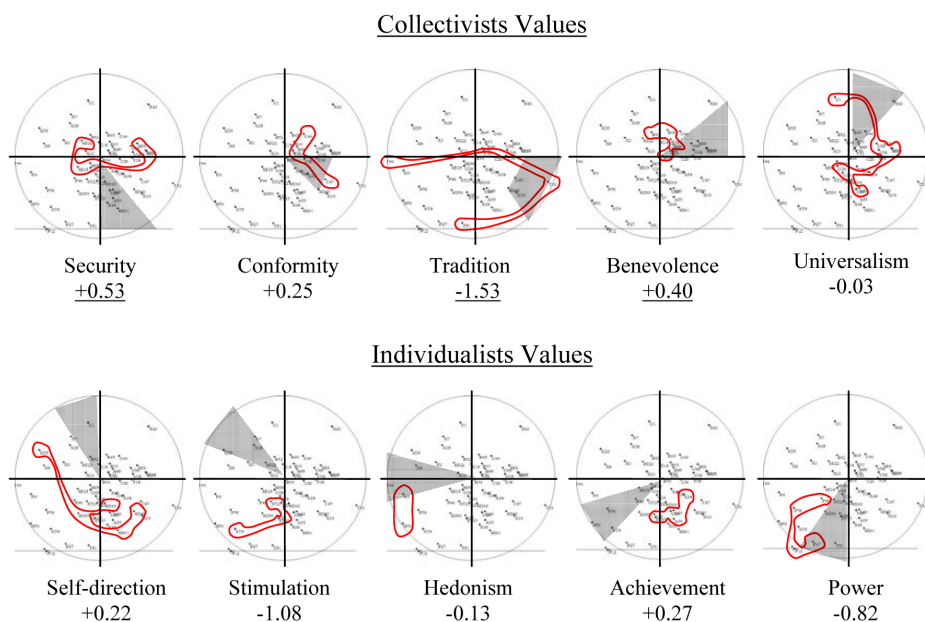


Figure 3: Collectivists and Individualists Values

The smallest space analysis in Figure 3 (provided by the Cross Centre for Cross Cultural Studies) shows that most hits tend to cluster together. The exception is the value of tradition having no apparent clustering and, therefore, the validity of these results representing the tradition values of those surveyed is questionable (this is possibly due to the unintended interpretation of associated survey questions). Due to the lack of clustering with this dimension, the value of tradition will not be considered in further analysis. Although the results for values dimensions of universalism and self-direction also appear to each have one hit that does not cluster as closely with other hits associated with the same value, the remaining hits do have visible clustering and therefore these dimensions will be included in further discussion.

Clusters in the collectivists hemisphere

The values of conformity, benevolence, and universalism appear to predominantly cluster within the collectivists hemisphere of the Schwartz theoretical structure of values as predicted by the model. However, it is interesting that the achievement dimension has also clustered within the collectivists 'conservation' quadrant of the structure, and not in the individualists 'self-enhancement' quadrant as theorised. This suggests that a sense of achievement among the group may be directed towards conservational goals and not towards self-enhancement.

Clusters in the individualists hemisphere

The values of stimulation, hedonism and power cluster within the individualists hemisphere. However, the value of stimulation has clustered in the self-enhancement quadrant of the model, and not within the openness-to-change quadrant as theorised by the model. This suggests that stimulation may be perceived by the group as directed towards self-enhancing or ego needs rather than towards openness-to-change. All three values are rejected, with stimulation and hedonism found to be significantly rejected via t-test. This indicates a strong rejection of the individualist self-enhancement values within the surveyed group.

Clusters in both the collectivists and individualists hemisphere

The values of security and self-direction appear to span both the collectivists and the individualists hemispheres, both being favoured values with security significantly so. Security has 2 hits in the self-transcendent quadrant, two hits in the self-enhancing quadrant, and one hit in the openness to change quadrant. It appears more as two distinct clusters, one within the self-transcendent quadrant, and the other over the border of the two individualistic quadrants. This suggests a possible division of interpretation between the survey statements representing security, wherein some questions may have been perceived as representing a collective sense of security while others may have been perceived as representing an individual sense of security.

Self-direction has three hits in the conservatism quadrant, one hit in the self-enhancing quadrant, and one hit in the openness to change quadrant. The latter appears somewhat of an outlier with respect to the rest of the group, which indicate an overall tendency towards conservatism. This is interesting as although the value of self-direction is theoretically positioned as being opposed to conservative values within the model, it appears that value statements pertaining to self-direction may have been perceived as relating to conservatism by the group.

Individual versus collective clustering

With the exception of one hit, all of the responses associated with individualist values appear below the horizontal division of the model. This is in contrast to the collective values where (with the exclusion of the non-clustering value of tradition) three out of the four collective values span both the lower and upper halves of the model, whilst the remaining collective value of benevolence resides predominantly in the upper half of the model. This represents another distinct difference identified within the model regarding values theorised as being individual as compared with values theorised as being collective.

Summary of Results

Steenkamp (2001) argues that wealth makes people independent and individualistic, therefore it can be anticipated that Chinese will become more individualistic as wealth in China increases. Hofstede argues that it is colder climates that promote individualism due to a historic higher self-reliance, suggesting that a greater interdependency exists in countries nearer to the equator (in Steenkamp, 2001). Landes (1999) argues that both temperature and a historic labour-intensive, water-intensive energy model evolved along the Yangtze basin has considerably influenced current Chinese culture. Mo (2007) identifies the Chinese writing system as not only a driving force behind Chinese values, but as a retainer of those values, even though he regards that Chinese people are becoming increasingly individualistic via globalisation. At the onset of this research it was anticipated that a cultural shift via the values of young Chinese may exist due to the rapidly changing socioeconomic environment within China. However, no indicators to suggest a shift in values for young Chinese were evident.

A persistent values system is observed over a 19 year period among tertiary students originating within the east coast of China. Therefore the values signature held by the group is recognisable over time regardless of rapid socio-economic change within the area. The evidence suggests that there exists a strong overall tendency towards collectivism, particularly towards conservation, and a strong rejection of self-enhancement. There is also evidence to suggest that values of achievement and self-direction are perceived within the group as directed towards the collective goals of conservation as seen in the smallest

space analysis. The main issues relating to collectivism, conservation and rejection of self-enhancement are discussed in greater detail below.

Collectivism

Collectivism places importance on relationships over tasks. This is often referred to with the Chinese term 'guanxi', representing a network of connections consisting of reciprocal obligations between members. The observed predominance of collectiveness within the surveyed cohort suggests that there is a high importance on the value of other members within their group. Therefore this cohort is likely to naturally value activities that help strengthen in-group relationships and to value feedback that recognises their sense of belonging within their group. They may however feel uncomfortable when they perceive themselves as being outside of their associated in-group. This may also manifest as an avoidance of individual recognition, either positive or negative.

Conservation

The values of security and conformity reside in the conservation quadrant of the Schwartz values model, and both were observed to be important values held by the surveyed cohort. Smallest space analysis revealed that clustering of the individualistic values of achievement and self-direction predominantly resided in the conservation quadrant. This indicates that a sense of achievement and self-direction may exist within the overall context of conservation needs such as maintaining the current order, moderation, and cautiousness.

Self-enhancement (rejected)

There was a marked rejection of the individualistic dimension of self-enhancement. This suggests that a focus on self promotion is likely to be perceived negatively by Chinese tertiary students, conflicting with rather than stimulating motivation. An emphasis upon group-related activities or group-orientated benefits is likely to generate a greater sense of involvement than emphasising individualistic activities or benefits. Rewards that recognise group effort are likely to be received in higher regard than those that recognise efforts pertaining to self-enhancement.

Preliminary implications for first-year Chinese student engagement

Student engagement has been linked to a range of beneficial outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success (Krause, 2005). The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement in 2008 found that within the international student cohort first year students are likely to feel less engaged than later year students. Additionally, international students who are the first in the families to attend university have greater troubles with engagement than others. This may be especially applicable to a large number of Chinese students due to recent rapid socio-economic changes in China and increased access to education, and due to the one child only policy. In addressing the issue of enhancing student engagement, ten working principles have been put forward by Krause (2005), the third specifically addressing demographic subgroup differences:

3. **Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement**
 - Make it a priority to get to know your students, their needs, aspirations and motivations.
 - Monitor the subgroup differences and develop targeted strategies for engaging students according to their needs and background experiences.
 - This provides a powerful platform for supporting and teaching students in a responsive way so as to maximise the possibilities for engagement.

Applied within the context of this paper the principle above suggests that responding to the needs, aspirations and motivations via the values orientation of first-year Chinese students is a powerful platform for engagement. Given that values are underlying needs and motivators, the following discussion presents considerations based upon observed values orientation when planning activities focused towards student engagement with first-year Chinese.

Values persistence

Although there has been rapid socioeconomic development in China in the past few decades there is evidence to suggest strong values persistence. We can therefore have confidence in basing engagement strategies on values findings for first-year Chinese tertiary students and in linking strategies to existing cultural research.

Collectivism

First-year Chinese students are more likely to be responsive to engagement activities that facilitate in-group relations and that recognise combined group efforts. Tang (1996) notes that the Chinese put more emphasis on achieving collective goals than on individual competitiveness as their concept of 'self' is more closely involved in social relationships. Chinese students are more likely to work within their groups during the learning process and are more likely to consider their feedback collectively. Feedback provided to first-year Chinese students that acknowledges and thereby validates their group efforts over individual effort will be more highly regarded as it is aligned with their collective values.

Conservation

First-year Chinese students are likely to resist change and to seek conformity and security in efforts to be conservative. Conformity relates to uncertainty avoidance and as such there is likely to be less tolerance for ambiguity and a greater need for role clarity within the group (Sawyer et al, 2005). Additionally, Volet & Renshaw (1996) suggest that the Chinese students' propensity to rote learn is influenced by their perceptions of course requirements more so than by cultural characteristics. Therefore, role clarification with respect to course requirements, and in particular the process of learning, may assist in encouraging deeper learning and integration for this group rather than appeals to individual self-enhancement.

Security needs relate to safety and well being and, when considered in the overall collective context, primarily to the safety and well being of the in-group. According to Ryh-song (1988) the notion that the family group comes first and other groups come second is deeply rooted in Chinese society. This is reflected in a high degree of parental involvement in and commitment to the education of children via the Confucian tradition (On, 1996), and has been found to influence perceptions of study pressure experienced by Asian students in Australia (Volet & Renshaw, 1996). We can expect that security in family safety and well being is a central motivator with respect to the first-year Chinese student group. Engagement activities that may be easily relayed to significant others are likely to create a deeper impression and therefore be more effective than those that are relevant only within the course assessment context.

Self-enhancement (rejected)

A general rejection of openness-to-change and in particular a strong rejection of self-enhancement is likely to exist within the first-year Chinese student group. This indicates an avoidance of surprise which has also been related to an avoidance of shame (Laverie et al, 1993), an intrinsic characteristic of collectiveness. Coupled with a lower propensity to complain (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998) it is likely that first-year Chinese students will avoid

voicing their concerns with their studies as to avoid a sense of shame associated with being perceived as distinct and thereby outside of their in-group. This presents a challenge with respect to the demographic subgroup student engagement principle (Krause, 2005) where it is stated that knowing your students' needs is a priority for engagement.

However, Tai (2004) has determined that transformational message strategies are strongly associated with collective and idealistic cultures. Tai (2004) also states that eastern cultures prefer emotional rather than rational appeals, and that high-context cultures are likely to use emotion with indirect and harmony-seeking appeals as opposed to confrontational appeals as exhibited within low-context cultures. Given the strong rejection of self-enhancement (improving upon what you already are as an individual), it is recommended that appeals towards transformation (become a new 'you') in-keeping with in-group needs is likely to engage the first-year Chinese students.

Conclusion

Student engagement is important because it relates to persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success. First-year international students are likely to experience less engagement than in later years. Students become engaged via their needs, aspirations and motivations, and according to their background experience. Given that values represent culture-defining needs, the observed values of Chinese tertiary students have been applied to engagement issues for first-year Chinese students.

A strong collective nature has been revealed consisting of a predominant need for conservatism and a rejection of self-enhancement. Schwartz (2005) contrasts the intellectual openness and self-direction values of education to the conflicting conformity and tradition values; positive correlations of education with self-direction and stimulation values were found, whilst negative correlations of education with conformity, tradition and security values were found. Thus there is more likely to be a perceived conflict between educational values generally and the unchanging conservative values evidently held by Chinese students.

Preliminary recommendations are as follows: recognition for and facilitation of in-group relationship needs is a high priority to which individual and task-orientated needs are subordinate. Responses to engagement efforts are more likely to be influenced via their role perception as a student and via involvement of significant others. A transformational approach toward student engagement activities is likely to yield greater results with this group than one directed towards self improvement. Since there is increasing student diversity and a predominance of Chinese students within the international mix, an overall awareness of differing Chinese perceptions and motivations via their values may not only assist in greater first year student engagement for this student group, but also greater engagement potential for staff interacting with these students who may themselves harbour a differing set of values.

As a result of the findings in this study, focusing on the cultural values of Chinese students, the following are conclusions that teachers of first-year Chinese students should be cognisant of when considering engagement strategies that they use in their teaching:

- Communications with first-year Chinese students that acknowledge and validate their in-group are more likely to engage than communications that focus individually.
- Clarifying and re-stating student roles is of great importance for this group and has the potential to positively influence perception of learning outcomes and subsequent learning behaviour.

- Engagement with this group (Chinese students) that is also relevant to their significant others is likely to create a deeper impression.
- First-year Chinese students are likely to exhibit avoidance behaviour when confronted by self enhancement opportunities, however, they are likely to engage when offered opportunities for transformation.

Limitations

The paper studies the values of the Chinese students within a Chinese tertiary education institution and applies these findings within an Australian university context. However, given that values are formed in adolescence and change little thereafter, it can be regarded that once formed the values of Chinese students will persist throughout their Australian education.

This paper focuses on engagement issues for one sub-group of first-year students and is intended to provide awareness only with respect to this group. Issues of applicability to other student groups or integration with the wider student community are not addressed.

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