

# WHY INTERNATIONALISATION OF DESIGN EDUCATION BENEFITS UK STUDENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Chinese design students are drawn to the UK for a variety of reasons, not least of which is a consequent increase in their worth in a post-graduation employment market. By undertaking a UK design education Chinese and other international students can demonstrate to potential employers a willingness to undertake difficult challenges allied with a capacity to collaborate productively in a transcultural context. Such prime qualities command a premium in a competitive global employment market. Notwithstanding the benefits that visiting international students gain from studying in the UK, such rewards are not confined solely to visiting international students. At Coventry University, undergraduate design students have the opportunity to experience a culturally disruptive experience by way of a ten-week studentship at Chinese institutions with which the University has established collaborative relationships. The skills they acquire are globally relevant and help open the door to opportunities not available to those UK students who choose to adopt a more parochial approach to their design learning journey. Through case study, this paper explores the advantages that UK design students can also gain from being exposed to transcultural collaborative learning experiences among Chinese students both in the UK and within Chinese higher design educational institutions. It also offers insights that challenge Western preconceptions of the stereotypical Chinese learner and suggests that unquestioning adherence to cultural expectations risks missed pedagogical opportunities that can benefit UK and international students alike.

*Keywords: Internationalisation, transcultural, pedagogy, design education, China, cultural dimensions, Hofstede.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that exposing UK design students to an internationalised dimension as part of their learning experience confers significant advantages, not least when faced with the imperative of finding meaningful employment. This theme is set against Hofstede's claims for the influence of cultural dimensions that he asserts manifest themselves widely, not least in the learning environment where cultural differences carry pedagogical implications [3]. A stereotype emerges of Chinese students studying in the West that has its roots in Hall's expositions on cultural difference [2] and in Hofstede's quantitative methodologies that seek to categorise cultural differences via combinations of distinct national cultural dimensions [3]. Thus Chinese students are marked out as passive learners who are reluctant to speak out in teaching sessions; who have a low toleration of uncertainty; who, in their dealings with teachers expect to work within a high power-distance relationship; and who are inclined towards collectivist rather than individualist action. While these cultural dimensions are held to be generally homogenous within any given nation by proponents of Hofstede's view, this author is particularly interested in exploring the idea that perhaps designers and other creatives - possibly because of an innate potential for and receptivity to unconventional and iconoclastic ways of thinking - are less likely to conform to neat culturally stereotyped behaviour even if a wider overarching cultural stereotype appears valid.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Notwithstanding Roworth-Stokes warning, "that the primary advantage of the case study, its ability to reveal insight into 'real-life' contemporary phenomena (the here and now) set against critical incidents, happenings or events over time (cause and effect), could be undermined by a lack of methodological rigor and sound empiricism in design research" [10], this paper uses case study to try

to critically evaluate the manifestation and influence of Hofstede's dimensions of national culture in the context of UK and Chinese design students in a transcultural learning environment. By making qualitative comparisons across the case studies under discussion this paper sceptically challenges the rigidity of Hofstede's quantitatively derived assertions to suggest that the manifestations of cultural dimensions are more nuanced than is generally held to be the case. The first case study outlines the experience of UK product design undergraduates who spend a 10-week semester studying at a university in Zhejiang province, P.R.C. The second revolves around resident postgraduate industrial design students studying at Coventry University. Both case studies are explored against a background of cultural stereotype and compare actual observed phenomena with Hofstede's expectations to highlight areas of difference. Additionally, a central argument of this paper is that for UK students, the exposure to transcultural learning experiences gained while studying and working among international students brings benefits, opportunities and creative stimuli that simply aren't present in a more parochial learning context. The paper hopes to demonstrate that there are pedagogical lessons to be gained by not being quick to attribute student behaviour and learning attitudes to assumed culturally-rooted phenomena.

### 3 BACKGROUND

The background to this paper is the situation at Coventry University's School of Art and Design (CSAD) that has seen, since 2004, a continuing strategic expansion in its internationalised student recruitment efforts, most especially in its recruitment of Chinese students. A key component in the increasing internationalisation of the University's design programmes has been the establishment of formal relationships between Chinese higher education institutions and Coventry University faculties. Of these, Zhejiang University of Media and Communication (ZUMC) has a research and pedagogical relationship that is bound up, in the context of this paper, with the undergraduate Product Design course.

### 4 CASE STUDY 1 - UNDERGRADUATE INTERNATIONALISATION

Since 2011, CSAD has been sending around a dozen or so UK product design students (approximately 25% of the eligible pool of candidates) to the Tongxiang campus of ZUMC each summer semester, and since its inception approximately 45 have made the trip. To help the UK students cope with and adjust to the disruptive cultural jolt they are assigned a number of Chinese volunteer students on design courses at Tongxiang who are tasked with helping to familiarise the UK students and ease their path into what is undeniably a novel and challenging situation. It rapidly becomes clear to the UK students themselves just how vital these dedicated and remarkably conscientious volunteer students are to the success of the mission. The role of the student volunteers is wide-ranging with significant responsibilities; serving as translators, guides, fixers and coordinators. In a learning context, these volunteers and other Chinese students engage in joint design projects alongside the UK students. Pro-active, gregarious, openly curious and very keen to initiate conversation with both UK students and accompanying UK tutors alike, these Chinese students seem to be the very antithesis of Hofstede's introverted, passive and hierarchically subservient cultural stereotypes. If Western students are often characterised [2],[3] by an inherent willingness to contribute and speak out, by a higher toleration of uncertainty, by their willingness to act in the absence of full information, by their preference for individual rather than collectivist action and by their expectations of low power-distance relationships within institutional structures, then from this author's own direct observations it can only be said that the Z

That said, within the classroom or during formal meetings that involved senior members of staff or high ranking visitors, the social and behavioural dynamic did alter somewhat, as observed by the author at first hand. Certainly, the Chinese students adopted more passive, respectful attitudes and were less willing to interrupt superiors than at other times, but the really noticeable phenomenon was that when the UK students were similarly exposed to these experiences, especially early on in their programme, they too became tangibly introverted and decidedly uncomfortable at times - especially so when discussions were in Mandarin with only occasional and minimal English translation. In short, the UK students adopted a collectivist behavioural attitude that more or less precisely mirrored the dimensions cited by Hofstede as being typically Chinese. The outgoing and ebullient characteristics that might normally characterise them in less taxing settings had all but disappeared. Clearly, they had not suddenly undergone some sort of spontaneous cultural paradigmatic transformation; the observed

reality was far more pragmatic. Because of the considerable barriers of language and communication combined with a lack of a familiarity of cultural, behavioural and social norms in these sorts of situations, the students' instinctive coping mechanism was simply to remain silent and passive. Since they couldn't easily understand what was happening they adopted an attitude of silence and invisibility until the meeting was finished, after which they immediately engaged in animated discussion with each other and with the English speaking Chinese students to try to gain an understanding of what had been said and what was expected of them. The similarity in behaviour of the UK students under these circumstances was uncannily like the behaviour that this author has witnessed first-hand of Chinese students in UK classrooms under similar conditions - and probably, to a degree, for the same reasons. Clearly, then, assumptions that when Chinese students are exhibiting this sort of behaviour in learning environments in the UK they are simply conforming to an innate cultural stereotype risks a blindness to other underlying factors, which, as can be seen from this real-life example, may be far more pragmatic and somewhat less exotic.

Further, it was apparent to this author that the Chinese volunteers are in possession of a degree of self-motivated initiative and developmental maturity that, frankly, the author has found to be generally rather uncommon among UK student cohorts. Indeed, this was a perception that came to be acknowledged by some of UK students themselves who came to view Chinese students *within their own environment* as highly tolerant of uncertainty, fully prepared to take risk, happy to challenge within a power distance relationship and more than capable of operating at an individualist rather than a collectivist level. In discussions with the Coventry students after their return to the UK, it became apparent that a normalised former laissez-faire attitude towards international students at Coventry University had undergone something of a sea change. As one later articulated, "The willingness to support and assist myself and other UK students shown by the Chinese students has helped me re-evaluate the often lacklustre approach I once had towards international students...I developed a lot of respect for the Chinese students, and their eagerness to learn, interact with and conjure up friendships with foreign students is an ethos that I have taken on board." (Source anonymised).

Other students expressed similar views. "After studying in China, I feel I've learnt a great deal about social differences between Chinese and Western culture. I think this helps me to be more tolerant of other cultures in different scenarios and to also communicate better with students from other cultures now I'm back in my home country." (Source anonymised)

#### **4.1 Internationalisation and Mutual Benefits**

One of the key tenets around which the initial establishment of the CU-ZUMC relationship was founded was the idea that visiting UK design students would gain practical exposure to working with live clients in China who would set commercially realistic briefs that could potentially see their concepts put into production. The benefits of this arrangement are designed to work at many levels; ZUMC gains valuable experience and insight into how the design processes are taught and delivered under a Western pedagogical paradigm, and local industrial companies have access to a pool of talented Western designers and can directly benefit from any design outcomes they feel are of value to them. In the words of Andrew Beck, CSAD's International Partnership Manager, "Working together, faculty from both universities will work with local industry with the ambition of moving from 'Made in China' to 'Designed in China'...the joint research centre offers countless opportunities for students and junior faculty to undertake research in design, in design curriculum innovation, and in the management of design education and design processes."

At home product design students gain professional experience through internships and by working with live clients on collaborative briefs, it is of a magnitude more challenging for UK students to find themselves in high-profile briefings comprising representatives of industry, local government and senior university officials and which is conducted entirely almost entirely in Mandarin within an overarching alien cultural environment. It is this exposure to novel, challenging and socially uncertain factors that serves to subsequently strengthen the UK students' intellectual, social, emotional and creative capabilities. If at first UK students are somewhat inhibited and introverted, it soon becomes a matter of functional necessity that they learn fast about developing strategies for coping and thriving under these testing conditions.

Generally, within the first week, two briefs are issued. The first is usually in collaboration with a local manufacturing company and typically involves designing or redesigning an industrial product of some sort. Past examples have included a domestic heating controller, domestic cleaning products and

interior and exterior lighting aimed at both the home and international market. There is the potential for a successful design to be put into production, which is a major incentives to the UK students. Other projects having involved designing a high-value crafts-based souvenir intended to promote West Lake, an area of outstanding natural beauty to the west of Hangzhou, and a project in collaboration with a theatre production company. For the 2015 visit, a new brief was written by this author with the strategic aim that both Chinese and UK students would engage in a project designed to elicit a cross-cultural response and which would involve an effort to decode artefacts to discern culturally derived aesthetic and functional affordances.

Over the course of the following ten weeks or so, the Chinese and UK students work together on both projects and rapidly became self-reliant and pro-active in negotiating difficulties and overcoming barriers, becoming tolerant of uncertainty in the process and developing something of a collaborative, collectivist mindset in the process. Interim presentations and feedback ensure that the assignments are kept on track. The final week sees an exhibition of the students' work attended by local dignitaries alongside the ZUMC team and representatives of the contributing client companies. The learning distance that the students have travelled is significant and is not lost on the students themselves:

"Even though the language barrier may have been a slight issue, we managed to communicate professionally through our designs with the help of translators and students who were willing to help us with any issue we had... The international experience has given me insight into different working methods and in addition I have developed new skills within the design process, it has given me the confidence to make decisions which could impact on the design outcome." (Source anonymised)

Other students who've commented on their experience were more directly focused on how it would contribute to their own future employability, especially in a global context:

"I believe my experience in China will greatly benefit my postgraduation employment prospects. I feel I have successfully shown to any perspective employer that I am capable of being removed from my comfort zone (into a particularly different environment from any other) and still perform to a professional standard and even to excel and surpass expectations of multiple demanding international clients; despite adversity in the form of communication barriers and sometimes opposing understandings of culture and society."

## 5 CASE STUDY 2 - POSTGRADUATE INTERNATIONALISATION

The MSc Industrial Product Design and MSc Design & Transport courses at Coventry University attract an overwhelmingly-international student cohort, the majority of whom are Chinese. Within the learning spaces, the language of discourse is English. While some aspects of Hofstede's national cultural dimensions appear to be valid and are confirmed to an extent by the author's own experiences with working with Chinese students, the following case study demonstrates that there are nuanced aspects to these dimensions that suggest that such apparent manifestations of innate cultural difference may in fact be more accurately attributed to situational factors rather than deeply engrained, inviolate national traits. The second case study revolves around a projects that the MSc students undertake, which is a live brief set by senior R&D engineers from Ricardo, a world-leading engineering technology organization. Delivered as a group project, five teams comprising a mix of nationalities were set a brief in 2014 to design an innovative, energy efficient excavator that was to employ novel working principles. In apparent confirmation of cultural stereotype, all teams elected the more overtly outgoing Europeans as team leaders while Chinese students tended to be reluctant to volunteer for roles, choosing to accept allocated tasks based on other team members' evaluation of their skills and capabilities. In all formal project presentations it was universally the case for each team that the main spokesperson was a either a UK or a European representative while, consistently, Chinese team members spoke only in response to direct questioning on some aspect of the project that they were responsible for. Within the academic framework of the project, on the face of it, it appeared that Hofstede's categorised cultural dimensions were being accurately reflected in the team makeup and project implementation. Ultimately, two concepts were felt to be particularly strong; one called Pangea, the other, Hercules, and of these the Hercules concept was judged the final winner (Figure 1). Yet it was what happened after the completion of the project that helped to illustrate to this author how assumed preconceptions about cultural stereotype can be radically overturned if the social dynamic is propitious. And with this realization has come a considered pedagogical reappraisal of the supposed

influence of cultural difference on the teaching and learning experience.



*Figure 1. Hercules Excavator. Winner of the 2014 Red Dot Best of Best Concept Award  
(Source: Apostolos Papamathaiakis)*

### **5.1 Transcultural Collaboration Brings Competition Success**

Shortly after the project itself had formally ended, one of the Chinese students - under his own initiative and based on past experience - proposed to his fellow Pangea team mates that they enter their concept into the forthcoming Red Dot design competition. During the original project, he had not volunteered for a team leadership role, choosing instead to be responsible for delivering the CAD element. Yet outside of the original academic context of the brief and now operating within his own independent sphere free of academic oversight, he became the central driving force for the team. He was assertive in organising the team effort to deliver an entry against a severe deadline. Under this new team configuration, the UK and European students assumed less high-profile roles such as copy writing, proof checking and so forth and they reported to the Chinese student in his new role of de facto team leader. In the event, both the Pangea team and the Hercules team entered the Red Dot competition. The Hercules team went on to win the Best of Best Concept Award [7] with the Pangea concept winning the Best Concept Award in the Construction category [8].

In pedagogical terms, the dynamic, assertive and gregarious behaviour of the Chinese student during the Red Dot competition effort could not have been more in contrast to the behaviour he'd exhibited only weeks previously during the formal academic stage of the project. Upon reflection it has become clear that the innate potential for this behaviour had already been signalled via the adaptable and self-motivated Chinese volunteer students at ZUMC, Tongxiang. What both circumstances had shown was that outside of the academic learning space - a space in which behaviour, social decorum and cultural convention are formally encoded among Chinese learners who learn within a Confucian Heritage Culture system [9], [11] - these students, when freed from these codified behavioural expectations, are every bit as capable of free-thinking, self-initiated and gregarious engagement in collaborative contexts as their Western counterparts are usually held to be. But at a pragmatic level, it seems that the Chinese students' inhibitions in formal class settings may well be as much about an underlying lack of confidence in their language skills and a reluctance to have this exposed as anything more complex. In other words, the sharply contrasting attitudes of the same Chinese students operating on precisely the same project but under differing academic and social dynamics powerfully suggest that cultural behaviour imperatives are not as deeply engrained as Hofstede et al might claim.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

Cultural difference is relevant and does exist. What this paper argues is that its manifestation may often be masked by other factors that may be largely pragmatic or socially contingent. Such factors

can be as applicable to native UK students as to those from other cultures. Case study examples appear to challenge the rigidity of Hofstede national cultural dimensions on the basis that it is too blunt an instrument to be pedagogically reliable. Further, work by Gieves and Clark [5] which uses Hofstede's quantitative methodology and data only to come to somewhat contra positions, and that of Chinese academics Cheng & Guan et al [4] imply the need for caution in blindly assuming that all apparent attitudinal differences among nationally diverse students within the classroom are inevitably culturally originated. What this paper does assert - based on direct feedback from UK students themselves - is that those students who choose to expose themselves to transcultural experiences will emerge enriched and developmentally transformed to their wider benefit. The final word goes to Ricardo's Dr. Shuttlewood: "Academic ability is one thing, but the most important is the ability to problem-solve via processes to the end-solution; through communication skills, organisational skills and skills obtained through multicultural team working." And as the sole English student representative on the Pangea team later commented, "Had it not been for the Chinese students it would never even have crossed my mind to have done something like enter the Red Dot competition. Working with international students has shown me that you can see things from a different perspective; see things differently." (Source anonymised) .

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