

# Cultural Concepts as Powerful Theoretical Tools: Chinese Teachers' Perceptions of Their Relationship with Students in a Cross-Cultural Context

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Teachers' cultural backgrounds can result in challenges in establishing positive teacher-student relationships in cross-cultural settings. The context for this study is based on the everyday practice of teachers and students in the classrooms of diverse Australian schools, where issues of cross-cultural teacher-student relationships have been raised. This study involved a group of Chinese-background Mandarin teachers who had one year of volunteer teaching experiences in Australian schools. Data were collected from focus group discussions at the point of the completion of their twelve-month teaching practice, in order to access their fresh memories of their experiences. It explores their "culture" in relating to their Australian students during their teaching practice. This research draws on Chinese cultural concepts for theorizing and finds that the cultural concepts of *Guanxi*/relationship, *Dengji*/hierarchy, *Zunzhong*/respect, and *Hexie*/harmony have had a significant impact on these teachers' understanding and management of teacher-student relationships in their Australian classes.

## INTRODUCTION

Intercultural teacher-student relationships are increasingly complicated, particularly in the Anglophone West, due to global mobility and internationalization of education. Two dichotomies of intercultural relationships are identifiable within cultural "mismatches" between teachers and students in all educational sectors – that is, either mainstream Anglophone teachers relating to their students who are cultural and ethnic "others," (often accompanied with bias); or teachers of other language and cultural backgrounds relating to their mainstream students (often accompanied by those teachers' deficits). Schools have become one of the arenas where teachers and students are challenged in establishing positive relationships in such convoluted cross-cultural educational settings.

This research explores one aspect of such complexity through examining one case, teachers from Chinese language and cultural backgrounds and their cross-cultural experiences in teaching mainstream Anglophone students in Australia. It has enabled a different modality for examining teacher-student relationships in cross-cultural settings. Particularly, it looks beyond "mismatch" and "deficit" notions of teachers and/or students, by exploring these teacher-student relationships through the lens of other theoretic-linguistic concepts. The argument proposed in this paper is that the so-called "mismatch" between Chinese background teachers and their Anglophone school students is not simply based on cultural or language differences, but rather is grounded in differing ideological and cultural concepts that inherently guide notions of teaching and learning. The following section reviews current literature on intercultural teacher-student relationships.

## Relationships between Minority Students and Their Mainstream Teachers

Research shows that for many teachers in mainstream contexts, the teacher-student cultural mismatch often leads to negative relationships and consequential low student academic achievement (Spilt & Hughes, 2015; Downer *et al.*, 2016; Sandilos *et al.*, 2017; Stearns *et al.*, 2014; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Specifically, these studies found that cultural mismatches

were a predictor of atypical teacher-student conflict trajectories (Spilt & Hughes, 2015); this is especially so when teachers are "strict," with high demands (Sandilos *et al.*, 2017). This problem was often caused by mainstream teachers' racial stereotypes (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013), and their preconceptions of the social and academic potential of racial/ethnic minority students (Downer *et al.*, 2016). In an ethnicity and job satisfaction survey, Anglophone teachers showed less satisfaction when allocated classes with a majority of non-Anglophone students (Stearns *et al.*, 2014). This negativity resulted from minority students being observed as having more challenging behaviors in the classroom, and pressure from the parents of minority students who held different cultural values and beliefs about child development (Stearns *et al.*, 2014).

## Relationships between Minority Teachers and Their Mainstream Students

On the other side of the dichotomy, research has investigated the experiences of teachers or pre-service teachers from other cultures teaching in dominantly Anglophone countries (for example, Australia, USA, and New Zealand). In these instances, challenges in teacher-student relationships originate due to a mismatch in expectations. On one hand, teachers' understandings/images of "being a teacher," derived from their home country, tests their relationships with their Anglophone students. For some teachers (especially those from a Confucian heritage) the expectation is that they will have the automatic "authority" to "be respected and able to command obedience from their students," and "receive unquestioned support from parents and the community" (Han & Yao, 2013, p. 120, also see Wang & Du, 2014; Nguyen, 2009; Han, 2006). They do not expect students to misbehave in class (Han & Yao, 2013). Therefore, in terms of classroom management, these teachers can be frustrated, as they tend to lack the positive instructional repertoires and techniques for establishing behavioral boundaries (Han, 2019). In terms of engagement and feedback, they tend to use less encouraging language, for example, "half-empty" rather than "half-full" language when praising students' participation (Shin, 2008).

On the other hand, the English language deficiency/"problem" of teachers from other backgrounds' might "damage" their authoritativeness and trustworthiness in their mainstream students' eyes. This includes their non-colloquial, inaccurate expressions and their identifiable foreign accent (Nemtchinova, 2005, p. 243, 247; also see Edwards, 2009). Due to their obviously different language identity, teachers from such backgrounds sometimes receive unwelcome verbal messages, and are shown disrespect from their Anglophone students. This has been particularly noted concerning their students' view of the instructor's possession of a sufficient level of knowledge about the subject area, especially when teaching in areas other than their native language (Nakahara & Black, 2007). Such experiences affect their confidence and often contribute to them labelling themselves as ineffective teachers of ethnic others (Edwards, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, research finds that teachers and students sharing similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds are able to translate their experiences and identities to form positive relationships (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Research also indicates that students taught by teachers with the same culture and ethnicity received fewer negative behavioral reports (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). It could be proposed that in this classroom dynamic, minority students' strengths and abilities are more visible, and their needs more easily related to—and recognized by—their minority teachers (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Grady & Reynolds, 2013).

## Significance of This Study

This research contributes to the field of cross-cultural education. There have been a large number of studies on cross-cultural learning and learning styles in the last three decades (Loh & Teo, 2017; Song & Oh, 2011; Gündüz & Özcan, 2010; Li, 2003; Kennedy, 2002; Li, 2002; Gardner, 1995). These studies explored how cultural difference affects learners' learning. A common conclusion is that learners' culture influences their attitudes, learning styles, achievement and even their conceptualization of learning. For example, Li's research found that cultural beliefs and cultural attitudes contribute significantly to learning outcomes (2003). In Confucian-heritage cultural contexts (e.g., China), learning is a family mission and part of a whole person's personal development (Li, 2002), and learners cultivate themselves towards self-perfection through learning (Li, 2001).

This research addresses another cross-cultural education issue, the intercultural teacher-student relationship. It is timely and important, given that appropriate relationships with students is the key for "pedagogical wellbeing" (Soini *et al.*, 2010, p. 52); conflicted relationships can negatively impact students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement as well as teachers' wellbeing (Sandilos *et al.*, 2017; Spilt & Hughes, 2015; Estep & Roberts, 2015). As outlined above, there is consensus within the research that problems are encountered by teachers when establishing intercultural teacher-student relationships, in both contexts where teachers or students have cultural identities that differ from the mainstream. This investigation is based on the supposition that the theoretical-linguistic or epistemological meaning of cultural concepts has the power to shape people's ideology and guide their practice. From a theoretical-linguistic perspective (Singh & Han, 2009; 2017), this paper employs the Chinese concept *Guanxi*, and its sub-concepts *Zunzhong*, *Hexie*, and *Dengji*, in contrast with "relationship" and "rapport," to explore some identified cross-cultural issues for Chinese back-

ground teachers in an Australian educational context. Theoretically, this paper provides an alternative to current western dominant, one-way generalistic theorizing and conceptualization (Singh & Han, 2017) by addressing cross-cultural issues within teacher-student relationships, through non-western concepts.

## *Guanxi* vs "Relationship"

The term "relationship" is translated as *Guanxi* in Chinese. More accurately and in reverse, *Guanxi* is interpreted as "relationship" in English. However "relationship" is a very loose translation for *Guanxi*, and as such provides evidence of two languages and cultures being unaware of each other, and thus "we [as the user] enter into that risky zone, one of approaching silence" (Jullien, 2014, p.82). By using "relationship," English, and the thought in the English, forces the user to withdraw from the linguistic and cultural meaning *Guanxi* carries, and the difference in the epistemological meaning of the two concepts. The full, true meaning is hence silenced.

Chinese scholar Jia Wenshan (2006, p. 52) defines *Guanxi* as "connections across barriers." Epistemologically, there are two components to the concept – *Guan* and *xi*. The essential component of the meaning of *Guan* is "a closed door/entry" or "a barrier or hurdle established for security purposes" (Xu, 2010, p. 4316; Jia, 2006, p. 52). This implies that people need to use techniques or strategies to "squeeze" through the barrier or the "door." The outcome of this process is that one becomes an "insider." Song *et al.* (2012) refer to this "squeeze through" process as the establishment of trust. However, being an insider is only the first step for the establishment of *Guanxi*. The second component, *xi* means "connection" (Jia, 2006, p. 52), a bond, or, more precisely, where one is "tied or attached by an imagined rope" (Xu, 2010, p. 3361). For *xi* to occur, an agentic action is needed. The establishment of a deep bond requires deliberate action and behavior.

*Guanxi* is thus not a loose relationship, but a closely intertwined relationship gained through two actions: the struggle to be the insider and, further, the tying of the bond. The meaning of *Guanxi* is hence more than a general network or relationship. Building *Guanxi* is an essential feature of Chinese culture, originating from the Confucian idea that people existed through their *Guanxi* to others (Huang, 2000). The purpose of establishing *Guanxi* with others is often to achieve political or economic benefit (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5) as well as to avoid conflict and confrontation.

## The Operation of *Guanxi*

There are three integral components needed for *Guanxi* to fully operate. These are *Dengji* (hierarchy), *Zunzhong* (respect), and *Hexie* (harmony). *Dengji* is the primary element, and the core of Chinese *Guanxi* culture (Servaes, 2016, p. 461; Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). The concept *Dengji* is influenced by Confucius' *sangang wuchang* principle (the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues, in which those people of high status are superiors, and as such will be automatically honored, while those of low status are inferiors, and need to be humble) (Wong, 2016, p. 253). To maintain *Dengji* is to perpetuate the established order, so that family, community and society operate successfully.

The next component, *Zunzhong*, is translated as "respect." According to the *Book of Han* by Ban Gu (an ancient Chinese historian), *Zunzhong* refers to "paying more attention or giv[ing]

high regard to someone in a higher status occupation or senior in age” (Zhang & Liu, 2016, p. 10). The modern meaning of *Zunzhong* is extended, but is still mainly associated with social status and/or age. It is represented in Chinese national moral education, which emphasizes *zunlao aiyou*, to “respect the old and love the young.” This concept conveys a message that such respect is unilateral rather than mutual.

The final component, *Hexie*, is comparable to “harmony.” Chinese *Hexie* is akin to the *Yin Yang* balance, particularly the balance between the rational and the emotional, which is “the reconciling of differences into a harmonious unity” (Fung, 1997). When *Dengji* and *Zunzhong* are in place, in that order, *Hexie* is expected to occur naturally.

These three sub-concepts within *Guanxi* have permeated different levels of Chinese educational contexts throughout history. The implications of this are that teachers are granted automatic, superior power over their students; their authority is rarely challenged in public across all sectors of education. Respecting teachers and valuing education (*zunshizhongdao*) has been unconditional in the Chinese context, and the harmony in Chinese teacher-student relationships involves emotion, but this is balanced by rationality.

### **Guanxi vs “Rapport”**

Those who recognize that “relationship” is an inaccurate translation for *Guanxi* may offer what at first appears to be a more suitable Western concept in its place, “rapport.” Rapport as a definitive concept is absent from Chinese. However, it can roughly be translated as “friendly relationship.” Rapport conveys a relationship that is “mutual, trusting, and prosocial” (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147); it is “pleasant and engaging” with “a high degree of liking,” “mutual attention,” “smooth communication” and “symmetry and synchrony in the interaction” (Hall et al., 2009, p. 324; Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2012). This is a key concept in the West in addressing teacher-student relationships, specifically how teachers show students their sympathy and agreement when communicating with them and providing instruction in the classroom (Bernieri, 1988; Ryan et al., 2011). In general, rapport is positive and harmonious in nature and involves mutual attentiveness and understanding. But this connection also fails, as *Guanxi* is not as attractive and emotional, but is rather more political and rational due to its hierarchical nature. The respect and harmony in *Guanxi* are based on a recognition of the hierarchical nature of the relationship. *Guanxi* implies power via hierarchy. Therefore, epistemologically, *Guanxi* cannot be replaced by either “relationship” or “rapport.”

### **METHODS**

This research was situated within an innovative Master of Education/Philosophy [Honors] program offered at an Australian University established through a collaborative partnership with the Municipal Education Bureau of a city to the south of Shanghai and a local Australian State Department of Education. Students in this program undertake an eighteen-month Masters degree study program which includes a twelve-month volunteer Chinese language teaching practice in local Western Sydney public schools. The program is called Research Oriented School Engagement Teacher-researcher Education (ROSETE).<sup>3</sup> The teacher-researchers<sup>4</sup> conduct research on their Chinese language teaching in local and regional schools. A notable ongoing issue for these Chinese

background volunteer teachers (and their research supervisors) has been the establishment and impact of teacher-student relationships. The teacher-researchers/volunteer teachers constantly asked, “How should I position myself in front of my Western students? Shall I treat them the way I was treated as a student in China? How do I act in order to be accepted as a teacher? How do the students expect me to behave as their Mandarin teacher?” All these questions indicate confusion around “fitting in” to a new and complex cross-cultural education system. Their confusion concerning how best to proceed is based on their confusion about whether the “Chinese way” of relating to their students will be acceptable and successful with their Western students. In effect they asking about how to deal with teacher-student *Guanxi*.

The evidence upon which this study is based is “exit” group interview data collected from five students in one ROSETE cohort (2015) upon completion of their teaching practice<sup>5</sup>. They were in the final stages of their ROSETE study program. Their experiences as Chinese language teachers and their perceptions of cross-cultural student-teacher relationships were collected through a focus group discussion. These students were a purposive sample, as they had completed their twelve months’ teaching practice and could draw on experiences fresh in their memories. The group discussion was guided by three questions: How did you perceive yourself as a teacher with a Chinese background in relation to your Australian students? What helped to develop and maintain your teacher-student relationships during your teaching? How do you see your Chinese background influencing your position in an Australian class?

### **RESULTS**

During the group discussion, these teachers shared and exchanged their experiences and perceptions of cross-cultural classroom incidents in relating to their Australian local students. Data reveal that these teachers based their initial teacher-student *Guanxi* on their own educational experience in China, by assuming that their elevated status as teachers and the respect of their students would both be automatically in existence. They subsequently experienced unexpected challenges in classroom management/student behavior. To survive in their Western classrooms, they accepted the need to suppress their “Chineseness,” and learned to mimic their local mentoring teachers. Through data analysis, six themes emerged:

1. System justifies the power – examination focus
2. What does respect mean to Chinese volunteer teachers?
3. Understanding of classroom harmony – reflections on mediocre thinking
4. “Rational” engagement – mainstream understanding of educator’s mission
5. Chinese teachers’ emotional engagement as a secondary role
6. Authority vs humor

#### **System Justifies the Power – Examination Focus**

These volunteer Chinese teachers spoke about the role of the examination system as the power generator for teachers in China. The examination system in China is like a *mozhang* (magic wand) that enables and enforces the hierarchical teacher-student

relationship. However, in the Australian school system there is no comparable vehicle, even when considering the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Year 12 university entrance exam. Recollections of the teacher-researchers included:

Bella: It is so different here. There is no exam for students and there is even little homework. The only chance for students to learn is in the classroom. This means if my students didn't learn as I expected, I can't do much to push them because I don't have the *mozhang* (magic wand) in my hand. The only thing I can do is motivate them, make them laugh sometimes, and attract their attention.

Jason: I imagine that I can be stricter with students if I teach in China because in China exam results talk louder. But here, I spent a lot of time thinking of strategies to engage them. My focus is getting them interested. I can't criticize them if I find they didn't do well. It may push them even further out. I tried detention, but things were worse after.

Frank: It's like taking the teeth out of a tiger when there is no exam. When you can't be the tiger, you can't play hard on them. Then you have to think about what you can be! – a friend, one who talks soft and nice, or a clown to be funny and make them laugh. This is the key issue I can see compared to me being a teacher in China and in Australia. There were many moments when I talked and they talked louder than me. I felt helpless.

The examination systems in Australia and China were seen as the key to causing the difference in teacher-student *Guanxi* in the two contexts. Bella believed that no exams created difficulty in pushing the students to learn in the classroom. Jason argued that the importance of examination results in China “talk[s] louder” and hence gives the teacher authority. Frank's metaphor of teaching without examinations as similar to being a “tiger with no teeth” provided a serious account of how he saw his position as teacher. There was an expectation from these participants that teachers would be empowered by the system, particularly the assessment system, in which case the teacher-student *Dengji* (hierarchy) would automatically exist within the system.

Without the support of a strict examination system to measure student learning and subsequently influence classroom behavior, these teachers learned to rethink where they should position themselves in the teacher-student relationship and how to lower their “teacher status.” The need to reconsider the position of students as friends and seek strategies with which to engage, motivate, and attract their attention became apparent. Acknowledging students' emotions in the learning process is evidence of the teachers' concerted movement from holding hierarchical power to the establishment of “rapport” (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers 2008; Frisby *et al.*, 2014).

## What Does Respect Mean to Chinese Teachers?

The participating teachers had a preconceived notion, a stereotypical view, of teacher-student *Guanxi* in terms of respect. That is, if students were respectful of the teacher they would be obedient and accommodating.

Sharon: We formed stereotypes of what a typical class would be like, based on our experience when we were

students. We played the well-behaved obedient students to show respect, and I expected my students to be quiet, not interrupt the class, and participate as asked.

Jason: We flattered our teachers. We showed ourselves to accommodate our teachers, to listen to their talk respectfully and try our best to think and answer their questions actively, because we knew this would benefit us. That's what I expected my students to do. This was something carved into my cultural consciousness. But I found my experience here to be very different. The students sometimes did their own things and ignored me. When I raised my voice to get their attention, they raised theirs higher! From my perspective, this was disrespectful, but maybe they think my teaching was boring. This was the root of the contradiction.

These teachers' prior understanding of “respect” was one-way only, passing from student to teacher, as they experienced in the Chinese education system. For Sharon, she admitted that she had a stereotype of a typical class, where respectful students were “obedient,” “quiet,” and would not “interrupt the class.” For Jason, flattering and accommodating teachers is the type of respect that is “carved into his cultural consciousness,” so he expected this from his class. For him, accommodating the teacher meant to “listen carefully,” to “think hard,” and to “answer actively.” These findings echo earlier research by Han and Yao (2013, p. 120) and Nguyen (2009) that “Confucian heritage teachers expect to be respected and able to command obedience from their students,” and to “receive unquestioned support from parents and the community.”

## Understanding Classroom Harmony

In managing students' challenging behavior, these teachers tried to avoid direct confrontation, in order to maintain a harmonious classroom environment.

Jason: In a classroom in China students will sleep or day dream if they are bored. They don't interrupt the teaching. They don't embarrass the teacher. A Chinese teacher would try not to shame them in front of the whole class and students won't often challenge the teacher in class. A teacher could remind them by saying something like, “Attention! Someone is not concentrating!” Here, I can see they don't worry about saving face. My classroom teacher here had no problem in yelling out the naughty one's name, and students had no problems showing they were bored by talking and ignoring the teacher.

Yingying: Once, the classroom teacher gave me some good feedback on my teaching. She said: “Your teaching activities and content are all good! You just need to work on your tone when managing the class. You need to be very firm. Don't use a soft voice.” This is easier said than done. I am worried that they will like me and my teaching even less if I am too strict with them. That's called *fanlian* (turn on a strict face).

These excerpts demonstrate that teachers and students in a class in China would try to avoid conflict or confront problems in a direct way. Students there who wished to resist the teacher or the teaching would choose passive, voiceless methods, such as sleeping or daydreaming. Because they are aware of the importance of “saving face,” teachers in China prefer to give indirect hints rather than confront the “naughty” student by calling out

their name. This is because they hold the belief that being too strict with the students would disrupt a harmonious classroom. Changing one's face from a "soft voice" to *fanlian* (turning a strict face) was not an easy task for these teachers.

### **"Rational" Engagement – The Mainstream Understanding of the Educator's Mission**

According to the data expressed by these teachers, "attaining high marks" is the rationale behind Chinese teacher-student *Guanxi*, whereas in Australian teacher-student relationships, the focus is more on considering students as individuals and recognizing their growth as a person.

Jason: In Australian schools, student uniformity is not required. They allow individual differences. So I can't demand the whole class to be at the same level, which was what I expected. ... When I write an evaluation report for my students after a quiz, if a student attended to the quiz and attained a good score or if he is an active learner in my class, I know how to write it. But if not, I don't know what to write.

Sharon: When Australian teachers evaluate students, they do not focus on their academic achievement only; they evaluate them from a range of aspects. They compare the students only with their own pasts, not with others in the class. Chinese teachers like to compare students to their peers and ignore individual differences. Even though a student didn't perform well in the subject, she may still be a very good student. Once I saw a teacher remarking on the characteristics of each student, including their specialties. Australian teachers saw their students' individuality. If I have the chance to evaluate students, I may say this student concentrates on what we learn during my lessons. I may pay more attention to their learning achievement because in my former experience good students are those who get high marks.

Frank: I admired my classroom teacher. She knows every student so well and her end-of-year performance review of the class was so accurate and so detailed. She is so clear about every point of each student, what has been achieved and what aspects need to be worked on. Chinese teachers mainly care about "cold-hard" marks.

For teachers of a Chinese background, scores and/or academic achievement are key factors that influence how they relate to their students. These participating teachers tended to favor and give more attention to those students with greater participation and performance. This is in contrast to what they observed and described about Australian teachers. For Jason, it seems that only students' marks matter to teachers in China. Similarly, Sharon felt that evaluating students meant referring to their academic record only. In her definition, good students "are those who get high marks." Frank's comment indicates that Chinese teachers mainly care about students' "cold-hard marks" rather than their general well-being. Although he admitted that he admired Australian teachers who attended to all-round development and allowed for individual differences, these perceptions do correlate to the findings of research into teacher-student relationship in Confucian heritage contexts. In such milieus teachers tend to lack the feedback and engagement techniques to encourage and praise students (Shin, 2008; Han & Yao, 2013).

### **Emotional Engagement as a Secondary Role**

The strategy of focusing on students' academic performance is an important and rational focus in establishing teacher-student *Guanxi* in the Chinese context. But it is not the only one. The following vignette from one participating teacher indicates that some teachers in China do engage students through an emotional connection.

Sharon: The difference I can see is that Chinese teachers are mostly strict, but there are exceptions. I had this approachable teacher that we all felt closely connected to, in those days when I was in high school. She shared a lot of thinking and feeling with us about life. She seriously cared about every single soul. I was impressed by the way she handled the class. Once, a girl found her pocket money in her school bag was missing during a session break. The teacher did not try to explore who took the money. Instead she did this: "OK, class, let's all go out of the room, and I will ask each of you to come in and go out on your own. If you have taken the money, put it back on my desk when you are in there." At the end, the missing money was back on the teacher's desk. She is an engineer of human souls.

Sharon: One lesson I prepared was the Happy Birthday song in Chinese. When I planned it, I hoped it was someone's birthday on the day so the students could learn and sing meaningfully for that special reason. The week before I taught this topic, I went to the school office and checked. Luckily enough, it was a girl's birthday on the day. Then I had my plan in place. During my teaching, I told the class we were going to learn the Birthday Song in Mandarin, and we would learn the song and sing it for a birthday girl in the class. When I showed the name of the girl on my prepared Power slide, she was so surprised and happy. I realised she changed a lot after that birthday song for her. She put more effort and she was more focused in class and in a quiz afterwards. She got all the answers right.

Sharon's perception of teachers in China is that they tended to be strict, but she appreciated teachers who were "approachable," "closely connected," and who shared thoughts and feelings beyond the subject matter with their students. This echoes Frank's description of Chinese teachers' focus on "cold-hard marks." Sharon used the metaphor of "an engineer of human souls" to describe the former teacher who impressed her most. This indicates her educational values: nurturing souls with emotion rather than focusing on the subject knowledge and cold marks.

Sharon's example of her own teaching demonstrates her former teacher's powerful impact on her. She sought opportunities to build emotional connections with students, and most importantly, she witnessed the magical change in the girl involved: the student offered "more effort," was "more focused in class" and got "all the answers right." This example shows that emotional engagement has the magic to make a change in students. This aligns with the argument by Yang (2008) that students are more motivated in subjects where they like the teacher. Emotional engagement is further highlighted by Ahmad (2016, p. 13) who states, "Building rapport with students is an important component to successful communication, especially when the subject is learning a second language."

## Authority vs Humor

Recollections by all the teacher-researchers included times where their local teachers used humor as a tool to build connections/rapport with students. They drew on this method in their teaching to improve their students' emotional engagement.

Bella: When I introduced the topic of China, the "world factory," I continued by asking the students to list some things they knew that were made in China. They were quite into the topic and even showed me examples like their shoes, school uniforms, and many other things. Then this came into my mind and I said it: "God created the world, but everything else is made in China!" and the students laughed.

Jason: Once before class, we found something like a crystal on a front desk. Two girls asked me what it was. I said: "You try it. It's delicious." Somehow my answer made the two girls connect with me and my class, and I noticed they became different in a good way after that. Another time, when we were in class, a cockroach came out and I caught it and walked to the bin, but suddenly it fell off my hand and I screamed "Wo Kao!" Students were quite interested in the meaning of *Wo Kao*. I explained that it means "Oh my God!" and they tried to repeat it. Then, taking this chance, I taught them the nickname of the cockroach in China – *Xiao Qiang* (literally, Little Strong). I explained that *Xiao Qiang* means small but strong (in life force), and they were fascinated. Like this, I showed a bit of myself as down to earth, and I felt they had a better connection with me and my teaching.

Yingying: One thing I learned is that being funny can attract students' attention, but teachers in China are not good at it. They are more serious, especially with students with low grades. When students see you so *suibian* (relaxed), they can be out of your control. I tried to be humorous when I could, but English translation sometimes ruined the humor and the students didn't laugh at all, and I felt embarrassed. A boy came in late one day and I stopped him and said: "Did you stay up late last night or something?" The whole class laughed at him: "Hey! Hey! What did you do last night?"

These teacher-researchers learned to inject humor into their teaching. Bella's "God created the world, but everything else is made in China," Jason's trick "you try it," and his scream of "Wo Kao" were all well-received by the students. Students felt that their teacher was approachable; they enjoyed the fun and became more interested in learning. It can be argued that teacher-student rapport is improved when teachers are approachable (Glazier, 2016). However, attempts at humor may not always have the desired effect. Yingying's experience indicates that humor can be lost when crossing languages and cultures. She also acknowledged that Chinese teachers are less likely to use humor to provide an interesting explanation: "When students see you so *suibian* (relaxed), they can be out of your control." She touched on the relationship between power and *suibian*. When humor in teaching is not employed properly, teachers can lose their authority over students.

Nevertheless, these teacher-researchers all took the risk to stimulate students through relaxed, funny, or humorous actions and they immediately noticed an improvement in their rapport with the students. As one participant explained, when teachers showed a bit of themselves as "down to earth," a better teacher-student connection could be seen instantly.

## DISCUSSION

### Revisiting "Relationship" – *Guanxi* and Rapport

The teachers in this study brought their own preconceptions with them into the Australian schools, an expectation of teacher-student *Guanxi*. Specifically, this included the expectation of automatic teacher-student hierarchy, respect, and harmony. However, such an expectation quickly came into conflict with their new teaching reality, the local classroom environment where teacher-student relationships operate on the basis of rapport. Table 1 below summarizes the findings from this research. The participating teachers provided evidence of the distinctions between the concepts *Guanxi* and "rapport," and how these impacted on their teaching in cross-cultural classrooms.

| Teacher-student <i>Guanxi</i>                                                 | Teacher-student Rapport                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Top-down - Rational                                                           | Bottom-up - Emotional                                                  |
| <i>Dengji</i> /Hierarchy                                                      | Equality                                                               |
| Examination<br>Strict (magic wand)<br>Cold-hard Marks<br>Distant and Rational | Same Level<br>Down to Earth<br>Emotional<br>Close Emotional Connection |
| <i>Zunzhong</i> (Respect) with fear                                           | Mutual respect                                                         |
| Obedient<br>Quiet<br>Accommodating                                            | Caring<br>Relaxed<br>Interruptive                                      |
| <i>Hexie</i> (Superficial Harmony)                                            | Harmony                                                                |
| Indirect Criticism<br>Avoid Conflict<br>Avoid Direct Embarrassment            | Mutual Comfort<br>Mutual Understanding<br>Sympathetic                  |

### *Dengji* — Pre-determined Chinese Teacher-student Hierarchy

Chinese *Guanxi* includes the concept of relationships having a pre-determined hierarchy. When these Chinese volunteer teachers walked into their classrooms they assumed that hierarchical *Guanxi* would work in their favor and provide them with an automatic position of power over their students. As discussed in the background section, the concept of *Guanxi* is not simple, nor can it be replaced by a "relationship." It is enclosed and hierarchical. Historically in China, teachers have been granted automatic, superior power over their students; their authority is rarely challenged in public across all sectors of education (Wong, 2016, p. 251). This traditional stereotype of the teacher's role, *Dengji* – "the hierarchical teacher-student relationship" is also pervasive in other Confucian heritage countries and regions (Huang, 2000; 2003). Chinese teachers were unconditionally granted power through hierarchical *Guanxi* due to the belief that education benefits students. Chen and Starosta (1997) argue that *Guanxi* with others is for political or economic benefit, whereas teachers of Chinese background see *Guanxi* as benefitting students through the accumulation of cultural capital. In this context, the Chinese teachers expected that students would be able to see the benefits for themselves of a positive relationship with their teacher, and act accordingly. These teachers therefore perceived developing and maintaining *Guanxi* as the students' responsibility, which does not hold true in this cross-cultural setting.

## Zunzhong – Fearful One-way Respect

In Chinese teacher-student *Guanxi* there is an automatic emphasis on how students should *Zunzhong* (respect) teachers, as teachers are empowered with full authority. This is largely due to teachers being regarded as the knowledge holders, and they are therefore privileged with power over students. This is described by the participating teachers in this research: teachers have the “magic wand in hand”; they can solve students’ learning problems and provide the subject knowledge that may shape their futures. Parents in China acknowledge that, to a large extent, their child’s future is in the teacher’s hands – students’ academic success comes through teachers pushing students to achieve excellent examination scores. Parents often facilitate this by reminding their children to show full *Zunzhong* to their teachers. Research into Chinese classrooms shows that hierarchical relationships are evident through “teacher-centered pedagogy, and student compliance” (Ho, 2001, cited in Yin & Lee, 2012, p. 59), and it is taken for granted in Chinese society that students should *Zunzhong* their teachers by showing respect for the teachers’ knowledge and expertise (Wong, 2016, p. 253).

*Zunzhong* in this context is beyond genuine respect for teachers, but encompasses respecting the knowledge teachers will transfer to students. In essence, there is a recognition that there will be some personal benefit for those showing respect. *Zunzhong* utilizes lower-ranking people’s fear in order to maintain *Guanxi*. It is not the sincerely relaxed or pleasant feeling that comes with rapport. In this sense, *Zunzhong* contains an element of fear, and may more accurately be described as “fearful respect.” This kind of respect flows in one direction only, from the lower- to the higher-ranking person. Respect does not necessarily flow from higher- to lower-ranking individuals, and therefore, as could be expected, there is scant research that focuses on how teachers respect students. In Western educational contexts, establishing respect is mutual; it involves two-way efforts between teachers and students. Respect is non-automatic, but is earned by teachers through their efforts and effects in the classroom (Han, 2006). Respect is shown through rapport and the safe environment teachers create where students feel “valued, known, connected, and respected,” and can thus concentrate more readily on learning in class (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 149).

## Hexie – Harmony from Chinese Chungyung Thinking

The data in this research reveal that avoiding direct confrontation and compromising is a theme in teacher-student *Guanxi* in order to maintain *Hexie* (harmony). Students in classrooms in China tend to passively resist teachers’ talk by daydreaming rather than by becoming disruptive. This acquiescence and passivity allows the establishment of a harmonious classroom atmosphere and conflict-free teacher-student relationships. Such behaviors echo the *chungyung sixiang* (idea), a Chinese philosophy of life. This entails choosing the middle ground and disposing of the extreme ends, which achieves a non-injurious and non-colliding state of harmony (Fung, 1997). The middle ground is less straightforward, direct, or confrontational. To establish harmonious relationships, both teachers and students choose a meliorated stance, presenting themselves carefully in a “proper” position: *zhong* (middle) (Fung, 1997). *Zhongyong* is neutral, and the *Hexie*

achieved through the middle ground can be argued to be a superficial or pretentious harmony.

In Western teaching and learning environments harmony is built through interactions between teachers and students that result in an overall positive relationship (Ryan et al., 2011, p. 136). The key element to building genuine harmony is how teachers show students their sympathy and agreement through their communication and instructions (Ryan et al., 2011, p. 135). This harmonious relationship relies on the teacher’s communication skills rather than on the suppression of students (having them be quiet and not speak).

## Shifting from Guanxi to Rapport

*Guanxi* is a uniquely Chinese concept. These Chinese teachers expected their pre-understanding of *Guanxi* to automatically direct their relationship with their students. Within their new cross-cultural educational milieu, where hierarchy was not automatically recognized, these teacher-researchers realized they had no hard power over students, and their expectations subsequently collapsed. To survive in an Australian classroom where the systemic support for “hard power” did not exist, the teachers who could adapt by re-thinking how they might establish rapport made gains with their students and their Chinese language teaching.

The learning curve for them was steep, because they had to discover new ways of engagement. They learned to shift from a reliance on and expectation of *Dengji* (hierarchy), *Zunzhong* (respect) and *Hexie* (harmony), to the establishment of rapport with their western students through emotional engagement and connection. Some of them created a de-hierarchical experience, by lowering themselves to their students’ level through acting in a manner that was “down to earth.” They allowed students to see their vulnerability, stimulated their interest with humorous language, and showed their concern by engaging students emotionally. The shift might be seen as a strategic one for survival purposes. Teacher-student *Guanxi* that was based on an unconditional hierarchy, fearful respect, and harmonious relationships without conflict had been inculcated in them throughout their own educational experiences. But these teacher-researchers made concerted efforts to change themselves, hastening the development of their teaching practices that might have occurred more naturally in a more comfortable educational milieu.

## CONCLUSION

Studies on teacher-student relationships in cross-cultural settings have focused on contexts where teachers or students have cultural identities that differ from the mainstream (Soini et al., 2010; Sandilos et al., 2017; Spilt & Hughes, 2015; Estep & Roberts, 2015). This study has taken the existing research further by going beyond the superficial description of such problems and the popularist Western notion that awareness and respect for cultural differences is a universal solution to teacher-student relationships. It sought to uncover embedded cultural understandings, specifically, how culturally unique concepts have affected the practice of teachers from other cultures (and in this research, the case of teachers with a Chinese background). Specifically, this study investigated teacher-student relationships experienced by a group of Chinese volunteer teachers who taught Mandarin in Australian schools. It drew on these teachers’ cultural concepts

in order to understand the issues and challenges in cross-cultural teacher-student relationships. Through data analysis, this research identified that a pre-existing understanding of *Guanxi* powerfully influenced these teachers' expectations of teacher-student hierarchical relationships. But within this Australian context, there was no automatic teacher status and authority conferred via the educational system, no respect shown by students through obedience and passive listening, and no purposeful contribution by students to a conflict-free type of superficial classroom harmony. These Chinese teachers changed their understanding of teacher-student relationships through their increased understanding of "rapport." This change was based on their reflections on their own experiences, and the observations and feedback of their local mentoring teachers. This research provides a more nuanced theoretical lens for understanding the issues inherent in cross-cultural teacher-student relationships in multicultural Australia. Additional studies that would further explore the impact of cultural concepts on teacher-student relationships are recommended, specifically those utilizing mixed methods and with a larger sample of participants.

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## NOTES

1. Notably an issue for teachers from Southeast Asia, Middle East, East Europe, South America and South Africa.

2. Edward conducted research in New Zealand schools with teachers whose first languages were Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Hindi, Gujarati, Dutch, Somali, Russian and Afrikaans.

3. The ROSETE program combines research and teacher education with an emphasis on using teaching practice as the basis for a research study (hence the ROSETE students are referred to as 'teacher-researchers') The teaching practice component of the ROSETE program consisted of two days per week as a volunteer Mandarin teacher in Western Sydney schools.

4. The ROSETE volunteers are so called teacher-researchers due to the balance of 'the relationship between teachers-as-knowledge workers and researchers-as-knowledge producers' (NSW Government, 2012, cited in Singh & Han, 2015, p. 166-190).

5. This research received Human Research Ethics Committee clearance from Western Sydney University with approval number H11038.

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