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# A Practice-based Study of Chinese Students' Learning - Putting Things Together

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# A Practice-based Study of Chinese Students' Learning - Putting Things Together

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the learning experience of Chinese students' learning experience in the business Faculty of an Australian university. Chinese students are often characterized as "rote learners" or stereotyped as "reduced Other". Areas of concern are limited to addressing the differences in learning styles, language, and sociocultural barriers. However, learning occurs in many forms. There is an absence of discussion about what practices Chinese students use in order to learn. Based on practice-based theory, a longitudinal ethnographic study of the journeys of five students was traced and investigates what practices Chinese students use in the learning and how these students "put things together" in the journey. This paper reports on two of the five students from the larger study. In particular, this article brings attention to the students' everyday life and insights into their doings, sayings, and relating between people, other beings and material artefacts. Chinese students' learning involves foreground entanglements, co-construction, and relationality of practices from both educational and sociocultural perspectives. This paper provides new insights about Chinese students' learning and encourages academics and institutions to be aware of the impact of their practices and to deepen their understanding of the complexities of Chinese students' learning.

## **Keywords**

Chinese students, practice-based theory, higher education, rote learning and homogenized group

## **Cover Page Footnote**

1. CHC: Confucius Heritage Chinese students, are those students come from Chinese Heritage background, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc. 2.CCAD: Chinese Commerce Academic Development. 3.PASS: Peer Assisted Study Sessions. 4. The Ph.D. research data collection details: 118 hours semi-structured interviews, 105 informal interviews, 20 hours reflective group discussions, 86 hours participative observations, 314 pages of reflective writings and field notes, 151 artefacts including students' study journals. 5. In this program, students had completed two years of study and were granted a one-year exemption for their Bachelor degree at UOW. Acknowledgement: I would like to express my special thanks to my PhD supervisors, Dr Christopher Sykes and Dr Lynne Keevers who supported and helped me in writing my Ph.D. thesis.

## Introduction

The number of Chinese students studying overseas has grown rapidly over the last few decades (Heng 2018). More recently, the increasing dominance of neoliberal policies demands that higher-education institutions rely more on fees from international students for economic sustainability (Marginson 2013). Research on Chinese students studying in the West focuses mainly on the differences in learning styles, language and socio-cultural barriers. Typically, Chinese students are a stereotyped group with a learning style described as “rote learning” (Watkins & Biggs 1996) or labelled as “reduced Other” (Grimshaw 2007). The main focus and the recurring themes in Chinese students’ learning are, for example, cultural competence (Leask 2009), intercultural studies (Volet & Ang 2012), curriculum development (McGowan & Potter 2008), linguistic and communication barriers (Holmes et al. 2016), intercultural pedagogies (Wu 2015) and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang 2011). However, academics may still require further insight into how Chinese students learn (McGowan & Potter 2008). In particular, the practices they use in learning are relatively overlooked in the literature. In fact, Chinese students urge to be recognised and to be shown care; teachers’ and peer’ initiatives in approaching them and addressing their concerns has become urgent (Wu 2015).

## Background of Chinese students

This paper uses the term “Confucian heritage Chinese” (CHC) to refer to students who come from countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong as distinct from those who come from mainland China. The number of students with a Chinese background studying in Australia grew markedly in the 1960s and 1970s (Marginson, Kaur & Sawir 2011). At that time, no distinction was made between the Confucius Heritage Chinese (CHC) students and domestic students; CHC students were assimilated with other international and domestic students in Australian universities. By the 1980s, Chinese students were flooding to Australian universities to pursue degrees because of significant changes in the political and economic environment and the increased demand for higher education in China (Marginson, Kaur & Sawir 2011). CHC students’ unique learning needs and characteristics received attention, and a substantial literature has since developed that investigates these students, who are known as “Chinese learners” (Watkins & Biggs 1996). Often, “Chinese learners” are stereotyped negatively as passive learners (Clark & Gieve 2006) and inferior in learning (Jiang & Smith 2009). They have been accused of using a surface-learning approach (Watkins, Reghi & Astilla 1991), with memorisation-based learning strategies limited to reception, repetition, review and reproduction (Hu 2002). They have been considered to be reluctant to speak up or give their opinion and to lack critical thinking (Turner 2013). Further, there is a widespread belief that the Chinese teaching and learning model is based on teachers as transmitters of knowledge and students as passive recipients (Cortazzi & Jin 1996). Chinese learners are regarded as a “problematic” group (Tan 2011) and are treated as a “reduced Other” with a “deficit model” (Grimshaw 2007) who need to change their ways to fit into the Western higher-education agenda (Tan 2011).

Due to an inadequate understanding of how Chinese students learn, university teachers often only focus on their academic competence and lack reflection about their teaching approaches (Badley 2000). Their cultural background and previous learning experience become a default model to criticise and stereotype Chinese students and to make generalised assumptions (Cho, Roberts & Roberts 2008). The static and narrow range of research methods about students’ experiences neglects the changing dynamics in students’ lives (Wu 2015). However, learning occurs in many

forms. From a practice-based point of view, learning is not fixed or static. Rather, it is conceived as a performance and always involves action (Hager, Lee & Reich 2012). Adopting a practice-based approach, this in-depth and longitudinal ethnographic study of Chinese students studying their bachelor's degrees at the University of Wollongong (UOW), this paper traces students' learning experiences and explores the details about their doings, sayings and relatings amid people, things and sites (Kemmis et al. 2012). The study adopts the practice lens and, drawing on Hager et al.'s (2012) "Post-Cartesian" theorisation of learning, argues the need to go beyond the static or snapshot, the overgeneralised approach in researching Chinese students. The paper emphasises the ongoing process of learning and takes notice that learning involves embedded practices and changes.

## **Practice-based theory**

Drawing on philosophical and epistemological traditions, including phenomenology and Wittgenstein's later philosophy, practice-based theories on learning apply a range of research approaches that include activity theory, situated learning theory and communities of practice (Keevers & Abuoduha 2012). Practice-based theories go beyond dualisms and dichotomies in educational research, such as cognitivist and structuralist accounts of education phenomena (Armseth (2008). The practice-based approach emphasises the relational character of practice, which suggests that relationality is within a situated practice where the knower and knowns co-emerge and define each other (Keevers et al. 2012). Relationality in practice consists of relationships among people and the material world and is continuously changing (Hager et al. 2012). Practice theories view knowledge of learning and teaching not as a fixed, embedded capability of individuals, but as an ongoing sociomaterial practice, constituted and reconstituted as teachers engage the world of practice (Hager et al. 2012). In practice theory, the primary unit of analysis is defined by Schatzki (1996) as a nexus of doings, sayings and relatings between people, other beings and material artefacts. A particular practice or set of practices often links ends, means and moods appropriate to it, and the teleo (purpose) and practice are governed by what it makes sense to do (Hager et al. 2012). Such an approach offers a good fit to study Chinese students learning in a foreign country. This research traces two Chinese students' ways of "putting things together" and presents how they organised their studies through the teleoaffective structures of ends, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods (Schatzki 1996). The focus of the paper is on the local, situated complexity of higher education in practice, and it investigates how the students' educational and sociocultural practices emerged and entangled with their family, peers, and teachers in this specific place and time at UOW and how their practices were socially and collectively constructed and co-constructed in the journey.

## **This study and methodology**

This section situates the study, describes the research methodology and outlines the methods used and the data collected and analysed.

Nicolini's (2013) practice methodology encompasses a coherent practical package of theories and methods that generate a world made of practices. This approach removes the distinction between theory and method to develop a flexible, tool-kit approach that uses different but relevant theories and methods to address the issue of Chinese students' learning. Furthermore, the use of a tool-kit approach implies that the study of practice requires choosing different angles of observation and interpretation without necessarily giving prominence to any (Nicolini 2009). The methodology lets the researcher highlight how the students "put things together" differently, what practices they use

in order to learn, how their practices have developed historically and culturally in China and how the practices are reconstituted in new contexts.

The participant students, aged from 20 to 22, were studying a Bachelor of Commerce degree in the Faculty of Business at UOW and included students in every year of the three-year degree program. The study used ethnographic methods to attest to the lived experience of the students (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2006). The study included participative observations of two Chinese students in tutorials, lectures, CCAD classes,<sup>1</sup> PASS workshops<sup>2</sup> and library study sessions. Semi-structured formal and informal interviews with students and academics and reflective group discussions over three semesters were used.

Data was collected<sup>3</sup> over 18 months at different locations that included consultation rooms, classrooms, the library and coffee shops. The data included semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, reflective group discussions notes, participative observation notes, reflective writings and field notes and artefacts including students' study journals (Yanow 2009). The interviews were undertaken in Mandarin to enable the students to think deeply and discuss freely (Wu 2015) in constructing their social worlds (Silverman 2011). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Samples of translations were checked by the participants and proofread by a third-party translator to ensure the accuracy of the data translation. The data was organised and analysed through consecutive stages: transcribing, translating the data, extracting and categorising key points, generating provisional themes, mapping clusters of practices and selecting data evidence. The data analysis traces the complexity of the students' experience to better understand how they put things together in order to learn.

## Putting things together

The following section traces Chuchu's and Su's doings, sayings and relatings and present how they "put things together" and perform a bundle of practices in their studies that were often things they did every day and were seemingly banal. Their practices were an "open-ended, spatially temporally dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 2012, p. 14). In the specific space and time of UOW, they expressed their "practical understanding" (Schatzki 2012, p. 15), and they carried out actions or activities for the sake of particular ends; that is, to finish assessments, complete subjects and obtain a certificate at the end of their degree. This journey, unavoidably, embraces their emotions and moods, and the sense of worth and value inherently related to their learning (Schatzki 2012). Indeed, the bundle of practices they use is relational or emergent; thus, the relationship between the practices is inevitably one of causality and intentional directedness (Schatzki 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> CCAD: Chinese Commerce Academic Development.

<sup>2</sup> PASS: Peer-Assisted Study Sessions.

<sup>3</sup> The PhD research data collection details: 118 hours of semi-structured interviews, 105 hours of informal interviews, 20 hours of reflective group discussions, 86 hours of participative observations, 314 pages of reflective writings and field notes, 151 artefacts including students' study journals.

## Chuchu

Chuchu was 22 years old. She had finished her first two years of study in a transnational diploma program at a Chinese university.<sup>4</sup> At UOW, she enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce, majoring in Finance. Chuchu's parents were both professors at a university and lived on campus in China. Having grown up on a university campus, Chuchu was familiar with university life. Once at UOW she quickly learned how to use the university's relevant facilities and services, which helped her to adapt to her new environment. Chuchu is under a great deal of pressure to perform well. She said,

*The lecturers' kids all work hard and have a high level of qualifications. Many of them have won prizes in maths or in other areas.... [M]y parents keep comparing me with other kids.... They expect me to get a master's degree, as they believe this makes it easier to get a job in China (Chuchu, Int, 05092014, p. 4).*

Consequently, the influence of Chuchu's family affected her educational practices. Chuchu's practices in studies are not isolated from her historical, social and familial contexts, which related to her upbringing in particular spaces and times (Reich & Hager 2014): growing up on a university campus and being under study pressures from her professor parents as they constantly compared and judged her progress in her studies.

Strongly influenced by her parents' aspirations for both her academic performance and her future career orientation, Chuchu said her academic path became clear when she was in high school:

*I made the decision to do a Master's degree when I was in high school.... It was also because of the job-hunting pressure in China.... [M]y parents keep influencing me with this thought (Chuchu, Int, 29052014, p. 7).*

She chose to have a busy schedule by doing her bachelor's degree and the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) course at the same time:

*I enrolled in the CFA course in this session and also the four subjects of my degree. I need to read six textbooks for the exams.... I have a full schedule every day. When I get up, I study CFA, after lunch... CFA again.... If I pass the Level One exam [CFA], then I will take the Level Two exam in the first year of the master's degree. And then I will do the Level Three exams in the second year of my master's degree (Chuchu, Int, 14082014, pp. 6-7).*

Chuchu's academic needs had been shaped and developed since she was a small child. Obviously, her emotional needs and her proposed purpose to be successful in academia were closely influenced by her parents and her upbringing. Schatzki (1996) describes the teleo-affective structures that organise the emotions and purposes of practices. Chuchu's practices in studies were driven by her emotional need to be a high-performing student to satisfy her parents.

### *Using institutional resources*

During the induction, Chuchu took the opportunity to learn how to use the university facilities and resources to help her settle in.

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<sup>4</sup> In this program, students had completed two years of study and were granted a one-year exemption for their bachelor's degree at UOW.

*I found the proofreading service in building 11 for my assignments. They have workshops for students...how to use the university website to search for the information. From the library programs, I have learned how to find and borrow books and even how to book a study room in the library (Group discussion, 09042014, p. 6).*

Further, Chuchu was aware of the difference that material settings and arrangements (Reich & Hager 2014) had on her study. When she prepared for exams, she preferred working in the library, as she said that the arrangement of the space helped her to improve her performance:

*I like the desks in the library because they are very big and comfortable. Big desks make me feel productive and improve my efficiency (Chuchu, Int, 14082014, p. 5).*

The sociomateriality in practice is evident in that the material setting of the UOW library supported her learning (Reich & Hager 2014). Chuchu pointed out that the library atmosphere and her relationship with other hard-working students motivated her study (Keevers & Sykes 2016):

*I decided to go to the library and stay in the library longer than usual. The atmosphere is very good for study as other students work hard, which can motivate me (Chuchu, Study journal, 06042014).*

She also included the use of technology in the range of things she put together. She recognised when and how she needed to use the recorded lectures to help her:

*...I listened to the Echo recording of the lectures. [After that], I understood what the lecturer was trying to teach. Echo360 is a very good service: it allows students to replay the lectures as many times as they like, and it can help me to deepen my understanding, especially for those difficult concepts I can replay (Chuchu, Study journal, 07022014).*

Schatzki (2010) clarifies that material arrangements are “a set of interconnected material entities...humans, artefacts, organisms, and things of nature” (p. 129). In Chuchu’s practices, the library desk was “comfortable” for studying, the atmosphere in the library “motivated” her to study harder and the technology (Echo360) used by the lecturers allowed her to replay lectures, which helped her to understand the difficult concepts. Chuchu’s own practices and institutional activities “hung together” through these material arrangements (Reich & Hager 2014). Chuchu’s approach was to maximise her use of the institutional facilities. These material arrangements interconnected and co-constructed Chuchu’s study practices (Schatzki 2010): when she used the resources that UOW provided, the institutional practices changed and shaped her study practices.

### *Study practices*

Chuchu complied with lecture attendance, as she considered it important. In particular, for those lectures that relate to her major, her practice was in line with institutional expectations:

*I attended lectures all the time, especially finance and accounting subjects. I definitely attended those lectures (Chuchu, Int, 29052014, p. 4).*

Upon reflection, she recognised how to approach different types of assessments:

*At first, I only read lecture notes for exams and did not read the textbook...then I realised that the lecture notes were only important for the final exam. For mid-session [exams], lecture notes are not necessarily important, [as] the lecturer tests us from the textbook, not just lecture notes (Group discussion, 09042014, p. 9).*

She then adjusted her practices to use different resources depending on how new concepts were delivered and explained:

*Lecture notes are the key part, but textbooks are important supplements. I read the textbook for my final exam. After I read the textbook, I answered exam questions with the textbook information, not lecture notes. Examples in the textbook helped me understand the concepts more deeply. Lecture notes only showed me the brief concepts but did not provide me with specific examples (Group discussion, 09042014, pp. 9-10).*

Learning is part of students' becoming, and occurs through their everyday performance of practices that are themselves situated in time and space (Gherardi 2009). Chuchu's "knowing" of bundles of interrelated practices (using lecture notes as a key, reading textbooks for final exams and answering exam questions by using information from the textbooks) helped her improve her performance in the exams. The following notes were taken during data collection:

*The more I understand Chuchu, the more I feel she is a "perfect" student. She is compliant: attending all the induction programs the UOW provided; using the UOW resources and facilities as much as possible; enrolling [in the] CPA program while she is in her bachelor's degree; studying in the library; using [the] Echo360 online system; attending lectures; reading notes; reading the textbooks; reflecting about her study practices (Field notes, 90052014)*

Chuchu was an active learner, which is contrary to the common view of Chinese students as passive learners, inferior in learning and excessively dependent (Zhao & Bourne 2011). She reflected on her study practices and adjusted them when she needed to. The practices of adjustment emerged (Reich & Hager 2014) from her own learning experience and were shaped by her lecturers' practices and the institutional practices.

#### *Fitting to teaching practices*

In fitting herself to the new learning environment, Chuchu carefully chose which teachers' practices could support her learning. She recognised that the teachers could help her with detailed instructions, but she did not need to always rely on teachers, as she knew how to work out some questions by herself:

*When I have a problem, I still prefer to resolve it by myself as a habit. I also want to know whether I have the ability to resolve it by myself (Chuchu, Int, 29052014, p. 5).*

She developed her own study practices by working out the problem by herself rather than always asking the teachers for help. Chinese students are normally criticised as mainly having a surface learning approach (Watkins, Reghi & Astilla 1991), with learning strategies limited to reception, repetition, review and reproduction (Hu 2002). Chuchu's responses contrast markedly with this view of Chinese students.



The influence of past practices learned in the Chinese education system remained:

*I only answer questions when the teachers ask students, but no one responds to them. The teachers might be embarrassed if no one answers the questions in class (Chuchu, Int, 15052014, p. 3).*

Following the Confucian practice of remaining silent in front of teachers, she only answered questions in class if other students do not respond. However, remaining silent brought her into conflict with another Confucian practice: ensuring that the teacher remains the teacher and does not lose status and become comprised by losing face in front of a class (Wang 2006).

In classroom teaching, it is important to understand students' prior learning experience. If students remain silent in class, this does not necessarily mean they do not understand, or they are not engaged in the discussion. It may indicate that they are unwilling to interrupt the normal teaching speed by asking questions in class. Asking questions in class is not generally accepted in Chinese classes, as teachers prefer students to concentrate on listening, taking notes and trying to understand what they are teaching (Yin, Lu & Wang 2014). Chuchu's practice in class participation was clearly influenced by her Confucian background, as Chinese learners tend to avoid conflict, criticising their peers or claiming authority (Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot 2006).

#### *Joining social practices*

As well as her commitment to institutional practices, Chuchu was also keen to participate in many social activities and connect with her friends, especially as she was a member of the Chinese International Association at UOW:

*The social club has a lot of activities often.... [W]e go camping; climbing mountains...this can help to release the pressure. I participate in all of the activities. I do not just focus on study.... I meet a lot of students. They are fun...there are PASS leaders, [and] master's and PhD students. If I have questions, I could ask them. Some have been here for years; they share their experiences in the university (Group discussion, 09042014, pp. 4-5).*

There was no clear line in the Chinese student social club separating outdoor social practices with her peers, the emergence of friendships and networking practices and study practices. Asking questions, sharing experiences, climbing mountains, camping and socialising with her friends were useful for her study and in dealing with stress and pressure. Joining the Chinese international community provided her with a supportive learning environment, and helped her to develop a strong sense of belonging to her own culture in a foreign country (Keevers & Abuoduha 2012). In this network, everyone shared a similar powerful motivation to succeed, and the students supported each other academically and socially to a certain extent, as well as emotionally (Montgomery & McDowell 2009).

#### **Su**

Su, a female student aged 23, was enrolled in her first semester when she participated in this research. She had completed a transnational Diploma of International Business in China before she came to Australia, which included some tuition from Australian lecturers. After a few months in Australia, she started her own business. Her ultimate goal was to be successful in business: "I

would like to have my own business before I enter my 30s, and make good money” (Su, Int, 24042014, p. 10).

Su's ways of “putting things together” related to her ability to make strong relational connections between her social practices and academic practices. Her social practices shaped her academic practices more noticeably than was observed for other participant students. Social practices she had developed in China had a very important influence on her. Referring to her time as the chair of the students' association at her university in China, Su said:

*I have learned a lot from my work. I have improved massively in my personal skills in handling difficult relationships and [in] negotiation skills (Su, Int, 22052014, p. 16).*

Her student leadership role in China provided an opportunity to gain practical experience that related strongly to her business studies:

*As the chair of the whole student association committee, I had meetings four times a week with different groups of people, such as teachers, student leaders of each department.... What we did included marketing and promotion, budgets, and business plans and event organising, et cetera (Su, Int, 22052014, pp. 14-17).*

While she did not explicitly say so, it became clear through discussions, interviews and observations that she practiced the skills and knowledge related to running a business, such as marketing and promotion, budgeting, business planning and event organisation, while she was managing her studies at UOW. She had a strong capacity to integrate practical and theoretical ways of knowing.

Interestingly, Su herself did not make the choice to study in Australia: “I did not want to come here to study; it was my dad who wanted me to come” (Su, Int, 29052014, p. 9). Su's father had a strong influence on her orientation towards her business career:

*I used to listen to my dad talking with his business friends. I was very interested in what they said about how to run businesses (Int, Su, 24042014, p. 5).*

Her father's example helped to shape her ideas for her future career.

#### *Running the business and developing social networks*

Su repeatedly said that her priority for the future was to be a businesswoman and that her social networks were vital. She strategically managed her study and social practices to achieve this goal in the future:

*I am keen to learn useful knowledge, and how that knowledge can [be used to] help to run the business, not just for a certificate.... I think what I learn can influence my business and vice versa, and many things are related to each other, even [through] a subtle, implicit relation (Su, Int, 24042015, p. 7).*

This future career orientation strongly positioned her view of learning. She was very committed to practices of social networking as part of her future business orientation; this was related to her social needs and practices. In the interviews, especially in her first session at UOW, she often

described the importance of networking and socialising and the value she placed on her social network:

*Socialising is far more important for me than my study, as I would like to be a businesswoman in the future. Therefore, a social network is crucial for me. Connecting with people is more likely to happen when you socialise (Su, Int, 20082015, p. 10).*

She managed her time carefully to achieve her other goals, and even considered study to be a waste of her time. The need to maintain close contact with her business partners affected the time available for her studies. It seemed that her social commitments were more important to her than assessment commitments:

*I know I should not have handed in [my] exam paper early, as I should have redone a question. But my friend was waiting for me outside the exam room (Su, Int, 24042014, p. 5).*

Su clearly prioritised her social network over her study. She was very strategic in how she organized her time commitments and practices in ways that simultaneously worked for her social networking, social needs and studies.

#### *Managing her study practices*

Su had her goal clearly in mind and managed her study practices accordingly. She maintained tensions between studying just to get a passing grade, her social networking, and her business orientation. Integrating these areas required her to use considerable organisational and management skills:

*To maintain a balance is the most important thing. For the marks, if students get C, they want to get D. If they get D, they would want to get HD.... For me, if I don't fail in the subject that is enough. There is no need to spend too much energy on studying. I have many other things to do.... I only need to finish the assignments; I do not push myself to keep revising work again and again until it is perfect (Su, Int, 11042015, p. 3).*

She explained that because her teleo-affective goal (Schatzki 2002) was to get a pass, her study practices could be less pressured, and she could maintain a balance and use her energy wisely.

Su again drew attention to her temporal practices, in that she was clear about how much time to allocate to study. Her way of managing her time showed that she did not follow the institutional temporal structure (Orlikowski & Yates 2002) or academic expectations to work hard for the whole session. Instead, she organised her temporal structure to have periods in which she could relax along with periods of intensive study:

*I do not spend time in study during the session. My study is not through the accumulation of the whole session. I socialise a lot during the session.... Only before exams, I work hard, especially for the final exams, I spend about one month studying intensively (Su, Int, 09052015, p. 5).*

Here again, Su strategically identified or prioritised how to allocate her time and energy.

*I only prepare for mid-session exams one to two days before the exam. Even if I have one week, I still do not start till one or two days before. I don't care too much about the mid-session exam, as it is only worth 15 percent. But the final exam is worth 60 percent, much more important (Int, Su, 24042014, p. 1).*

By doing this, she could maintain her life balance between socialising, running a business and studying at university. Su said:

*I get used to handling exams in China in this way. I did not put too much time or effort in mid-session exams as the marks are very low compared to the final (Su, Int, 20082014, p. 5).*

Therefore, part of Su's strategy in Australia was to continue to use the effective learning practices acquired in China that she knew would work. She had her eyes on the future, even liking to guess what would be tested in the exams:

*I don't read the whole book in preparing for final exams. I try to understand what the important parts are.... I like to do the tutorial questions; [by doing this] I can understand the direction and outline of the subject, and then notice more detailed concepts in it (Su, Int, 09052015, pp. 5-6).*

She was clear about her goal; she strategically planned how she allocated her time and energy in her studies.

#### **Study practice – summarising**

One study practice Su adopted to manage what she needed to know for the exams was summarising:

*I like summarising. Arranging the key concepts in a certain order helps to remember them. If there are too many concepts and no key points, it can be confusing (Su, Int, 09052015, p. 4).*

She organised the concepts to reduce confusion. Therefore, her memorisation was not just “rote learning”, as she had first to understand the concepts before memorising them:

*I start with summarising the key categories. After I know how to group the concepts, then I notice the details and those exceptional concepts that cannot be put into any category. The special cases, most of the time, are emphasised by the lecturers at the end of the sessions and before the exams (Su, Int, 09052015, p. 17).*

Su's method of summarising showed a high level of reflection as it involved a deep understanding of the concepts she had learned. She explored her understanding of what she was doing and why she was doing it and the impact on her studies (Boud 1999) based on her past and current experience, and imagined future experiences (Sykes & Dean 2012). Su gave the impression of being a capable and skilful student.

### *Useful teaching practices*

In line with her strategic approach, Su found it important to identify what teaching practices and arrangements were useful. She worked out which classes to attend and which teachers could help her to learn quickly and effectively.

*The CCAD leader uses the diagrams to show their relationship and how they affect each other, and then he explains and links the concepts together to make the relationship clear. He is good at helping us to see the links between the concepts.... What he says is very useful for my exams (Su, Int, 20082015, p. 7).*

She considered that the leader's summary covered all the useful points for the final exams. She also liked and connected with one lecturer, Sophie, whom she found to be organised:

*Her lecture slides are detailed; we follow each step and go through all the slides. Then we are able to do the homework by ourselves, and we do not need to read the textbook at all (Su, Int, 22052014, p. 2).*

She considered this teacher's practices useful because when she followed her detailed procedures, she could do the homework even without reading the textbook. Interestingly, whereas other students found that Sophie helped them in their learning, Su described the teacher as helping her to save time and energy. She felt that some teachers did not meet her needs, as they did not help her save time and energy. Therefore, she lost interest in attending their lectures:

*In the previous weeks, the lecturer could not finish the lecture slides. This week she can finish [the lecture slides], but she pushes the time very hard (Su, Int, 22052014, p. 2).*

Su believed that if the lecturer could finish her slides, she was not well organised in her teaching, and her poor time management in the lecture put pressure on her students. Su also identified as poor lecturers those whose notes fail to present clear links between the lecture and the assessment requirements:

*What she taught does not link to the essay, tutorial homework or any assessments. However, in another subject, there are blanks in the lecture notes we need to fill in [during] the lecture and there is lots to learn, and to be tested in the quizzes (Su, Int, 20082015, p. 2).*

She preferred subject lecture notes where there was a close relationship between what was being taught and what could be assessed. She also preferred lecturers to use examples to demonstrate how to apply the concepts:

*She needs to provide a comprehensive example after one section... and to combine those small examples to make a more complicated example. Then more information can be applied to the concepts [in order to understand the concepts] (Su, Int, 22052014, p. 7).*

She considered it important for academics to clearly understand how students learn so that they could better support students' learning.

### *Re-evaluating and changing over time*

She realised towards the end of this project that her way of learning might not quite work if she did not change. In the third-session interviews, her attitude toward studying changed:

*What changed for me this session is that I worked harder than the last session. I read the textbook a lot; I did not read textbooks before (Su, Int, 05062014, p. 6).*

It was noticeable over the three semesters that Su changed her view of what her study meant to her, and that this was a result of participating in new practices. It seems that her participation in the research helped her to reflect on her study and its purpose in her life. She seemed to have better integrated and related her understanding of the value of academic study with her social practices and her future as a businesswoman. Whereas at the beginning of her studies, she considered that there was a tension and contradiction between her study practices and social practices, by the end of the project, she realised that they were not contradictory; in fact, that they could be complementary. After data collection was completed, Su said that she considered her participation in the research to be beneficial for her:

*Because of participating in this research, I have reflected on my study and life more than before...and after I got to know you and the other students. I became clear about my aim and why I came to here to study. I am enjoying my study more than before for sure; it is a surprise for me (Int, Su 05062014, p. 15).*

The researcher's notes included this entry:

*I was pleased to meet Su in the library today. She was warm and keen to express her thanks for participating this research. She said she missed the interviews and she did not realise how much fun she had in participating in this research and it was nice she was listened to. She said she has changed a lot (Reflective notes, 05062014).*

She changed during her learning journey, and later proudly said that she had graduated with distinction.

Su's way of "putting things together" was orientated to her being a businesswoman in the future. Su was clear about her purpose, and her emotions were tied to her desire to be a businesswoman. This clarity of "teleoaffectivity" (Schatzki 1996) helped her to organise her study to achieve this goal and established her priority: that socialising came first and studying came second. Su put together seemingly contradictory things that nevertheless made sense to her, such as the organising practices she used in China, meeting with friends, networking with business colleagues, going to parties, sharing meals and drinking coffee, summarising, categorising, maintaining a balanced life and cramming for exams.

In contrast with Su, Chuchu's way of putting things together was shaped by her family's strong desire that she be academically successful. Chuchu presented a "perfect" student model, as she had a passion for learning, was oriented to academics and career, went to classes, listened to teachers, joined institutional practices, adapted to university life, used the induction programs and institutional materiality, fit into teaching practices and planned her time and study practices. She was also active in socialising: she joined a social club and participated in social activities such as mountain climbing, camping, networking, going to parties and meeting peers. Chuchu planned her

leisure time and lifestyle strategically. These apparent contradictions worked well because of her practical understanding of the process and through the teleoaffective structures of ends, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods in her journey. Chuchu's study practices were changed and shaped by the institutional practices when she actively used the material arrangements that UOW provided.

## **Significance of this study and conclusion**

The practice-based approach of this study is distinctive in its application to the examination of Chinese students' learning; this approach broadens the focus of the study on Chinese learners in the West beyond the view of overgeneralization of Chinese students' learning.

The examination of Chinese students' learning highlights that the lives of Chinese students are entangled with educational and sociocultural practices, and that learning involves embodied, contextualised activities (Boud & Brew 2013, p. 214). This paper demonstrates how students' learning involves foreground entanglements, co-construction, and relationality of practices from educational and sociocultural perspectives in their learning journey. The practice-based approach provides a lens to view the tensions and contradictions in the practices of Chinese students and shows how different practices shape and reshape each other.

This paper argues against the oversimplification of Chinese students as "rote learners" or "reduced Other" and suggests that Chinese students' learning involves deep understanding of concepts and a high level of reflection in the learning process. Learning is not decidable in advance; rather, it emerges from contexts and practices in unanticipated and unpredictable ways (Hager, Lee & Reich 2012). In this view, the practices are relational and inseparable from their educational and sociocultural experience in China, and these embedded practices are reshaped. Students have grown up with the Chinese context and come into conflict with current institutional practices, pedagogies and settings. Through their experience, students understand what to do and what to say. They arrange their studies through their goals, purpose, beliefs, emotions and moods, and their practices and the way of putting things together unfold according to the specific direction from their knowing in the learning process.

Learning is a situated process in which students develop understandings and knowing through practices. They experience changes as unexpected factors emerge over time. This knowing through practices is a shift from a fixed view of knowledge that opens up possibilities in a situation: the specific context in time and space. Su better integrated and related her understanding of the value of academic study with her social practices and her future as a businesswoman. She changed over time from considering her study commitments and social needs as contradictory to realising that these practices can be complementary. Learning may be viewed more fruitfully as an ongoing process rather than as a series of acquisition events (Hager & Hodkinson 2009). In the light of growing interest in Chinese students' learning, this research suggests the use of more dynamic approaches to better understand how Chinese students learn.

The paper advocates that drawing attention to reflexive practices in teaching and learning will encourage both students' learning and teachers' teaching. From the students' perspective, opportunities to reflect on their lives and learning help them to grow in their understanding of how they put things together and what practices are unhelpful. For academics, being reflexive about their own teaching practices can help them to identify students' needs and understand and appreciate how students learn, so as to assist them in their learning (Badley 2000). Academics

need to be alert and have a cultural awareness and sensibility (Volet & Ang 2012) that encourages an enrichment of students' learning experiences in Australia. For institutions, the review of orientation programs and curriculum design and practices for international students is crucial to ensure embracing the differences as part of improving their learning experiences.

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