

# How language limitations affect conceptual thresholds among Chinese design students in the United Kingdom

Hilton, C

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Hilton, C 2016, 'How language limitations affect conceptual thresholds among Chinese design students in the United Kingdom' *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, vol 15, no. 2, pp. 135-143

[https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/adch.15.2.135\\_1](https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/adch.15.2.135_1)

DOI 10.1386/adch.15.2.135\_1

ISSN 1474-273X

Publisher: Intellect

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

**This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.**

# **How language limitations affect conceptual thresholds among Chinese design students in the United Kingdom**

**Clive Hilton**, Coventry University

## **Abstract**

This article attempts to illustrate the relative impacts of cultural difference and language proficiency in an internationalized design programme at Coventry University. It also seeks to show how apparent manifestations of cultural stereotype might actually be rooted in a combination of limited language ability and normal human behavioural responses. A key focus is on the significance of English language skills among Chinese design students and how it can affect their learning journey, their capacity to respond creatively to briefs, and how it might possibly skew wider perceptions of them. The lens through which this issue is examined is conceptual threshold theory, which essentially holds that learners will, at some point, encounter a troublesome barrier to learning progression. Such conceptual learning thresholds are unavoidable and must be successfully traversed in order to attain some higher, transformative and irreversible internal view of the subject landscape. An argument presented here is that an inability to transcend conceptual learning thresholds because of underdeveloped English language skills can harm affected design students' cultural immersion, academic progression and potential for full creative expression. An example is provided to show how one student's troublesome language threshold was successfully negotiated.

## **Keywords**

design pedagogy

China

cultural dimensions

Hofstede

threshold concept

internationalization

## **Methodology**

There has been a growing stream of published literature that seeks to understand Chinese student learning behaviour in terms of a culturally underpinned mechanism of some sort (Hall 1989; Zhu et al. 2007; Radclyffe-Thomas 2007; Hofstede et al. 2010; Ruble and Zhang 2013; Sit 2013). Much of the literature centres on Chinese students who are studying subjects such as mathematics and physics in secondary school (Watson and Biggs cited in Chan and Rao 2009). While the discussion here draws on some of this, its specific focus is different.

Leaving aside issues of cultural context, in pedagogical and subject terms there is little commonality in the delivery of secondary school physics or mathematics compared to undergraduate or postgraduate industrial design, and this constrains the degree to which conclusions drawn from one educational sphere can be usefully applied to another.

A qualitative mixed method approach uses a combination of example, early-stage research survey findings, case study and threshold concept. The starting point is a summary overview of Hofstede's seminal categorizations of cultural stereotype that he expresses as 'dimensions

of national cultures’, with a dimension being ‘an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures’ (Hofstede et al. 2010). My research examines the role of stereotype and looks for other factors that might more fully explain the apparent manifestation of national cultural dimensions beyond Hofstede’s blunt categorizations.

Primary research (in the form of ethically approved survey responses from Chinese students) casts light on how they see the significance of English language and cultural difference as factors in their western design education. The case study outlines the experience of UK product design undergraduates who spend a ten-week semester studying at Zhejiang University of Media and Communication (ZUMC) in Zhejiang province, PRC, and compares their learning behaviours with visiting Chinese design students studying the M.Sc. Industrial Product Design course at Coventry University in the United Kingdom.

It should be stated here *that it is not my view* that any observations of Chinese students’ English language deficiencies are universal or that they can be extrapolated to mean that such students are somehow correspondingly deficient in other areas, or that this is even necessarily ‘a problem’ in a pedagogical context. It most definitely *is my view* that there are tangible benefits to UK design students who study alongside Chinese students and those from other cultural backgrounds (Hilton 2015). I have been working with Chinese industrial design students for more than four years and they continue to constitute the bulk of my postgraduate cohort.

### **Hofstede and national cultural stereotype**

In his seminal work, Hofstede identified four fundamental factors that are common to all societies: relationship to authority; relationship between individual and society; individual

concept of masculinity and femininity; and ways of dealing with conflict, including control of aggression and expression of feeling (Hofstede et al. 2010). From these he initially derived four dimensions: power distance (from small to large); collectivism versus individualism; femininity versus masculinity; and uncertainty avoidance. On the basis of these dimensions of national culture, Hofstede explains how these dimensions express themselves within particular environments such as in the workplace, in the family, in dealings with the state and in schools. Thus, in a school context, Chinese students are marked out as collectivist, passive learners who are reluctant to speak out, who have a low toleration of uncertainty, and who, in their dealings with teachers, expect to work within a high power-distance relationship. While Hofstede himself asserted that student reluctance to speak out diminishes as group sizes become smaller, the overarching stereotypical claim for Chinese student passivity appears remarkably resistant to challenge.

[...] an apparently common observation is that Chinese students are more silent in class as compared to their Western peers. This observation is even undeniable to those scholars who criticized the stereotyped views of Chinese learners. (Cheng and Guan 2012)

While Hofstede's dimensions offer a mechanism for relative comparison between cultures, these characteristics are painted at the level of national culture and there is little granularity. This begs the following question: how applicable are dimensions of national culture at the level of the individual design student? Similarly, while Hofstede predicts student behaviour within some notional 'school' environment the lack of specificity is problematic. For instance, leaving aside cultural complications, at the subject level could it be said that there exist

fundamental innate, qualitative differences between, say, design students and mathematics students?

### **Case study: The internationalized experience**

Since 2011, Coventry School of Art & Design (CSAD) has been sending UK product design students to the Tongxiang campus of ZUMC each summer semester, some 45 having made the trip. UK students are assigned Chinese student volunteers who are tasked with helping to mentor and culturally familiarize them. From observations formed over two trips and based on working with around a dozen or more volunteers, I found them to be typically proactive, gregarious, openly curious and very keen to initiate conversation with the UK students. Of course, these qualities might well have been expressions of their innate personalities, which may have been precisely why they were selected for their roles as volunteers. What was striking, however, was that their observed behaviour and attitudes appeared to bear little resemblance to Hofstede's characterization of the introverted Chinese cultural stereotype.

That said, compared to observed recreational and social behaviours external to the classroom, within it, during project briefings that involved senior members of staff or high-ranking live clients, the behavioural dynamic of both Chinese and UK students did alter somewhat. The Chinese students adopted more passive, respectful attitudes, being less willing to interrupt superiors than at other times. It was also noticeable, especially early on, that in those meetings the UK students were displaying symptoms of introversion during discussions in Mandarin or when questions from Chinese tutors were directed at them. Uniformly, they retreated to a collectivist, passive attitude that more or less precisely mirrored the dimensions described by Hofstede as being typically Chinese in complexion (Hofstede et al. 2010). This situated behaviour of the UK students is uncannily like the behaviour of newly arrived

Chinese (and other) students in UK classrooms that I have witnessed often and which other pedagogues have also reported (Radclyffe-Thomas 2007). The implication seems clear; if students from differing cultures exhibit similar situated behaviour when exposed to culturally alien learning environments, then these observed responses cannot be explained in terms of cultural difference alone.

Thus, in the context of the UK students, none of whom could speak Mandarin and all of whom were uncertain of classroom protocol and the nature of the power-distance relationship between teacher and student, it is understandable that none of them felt comfortable in speaking out, at least not initially. It would take a student with a strong personality to start asking questions and risk exposing themselves to potential critique or embarrassment under these circumstances. It is no surprise that the UK students sought safety in collective passivity. However, once these sessions had finished the students would immediately engage in animated discussion with each other and with the Chinese volunteer students to try to gain an understanding of what had been said. Again, this mirrors behaviour observed among Chinese students in the United Kingdom. It seems clear that what the students were expressing in their temporary introversion was actually a perfectly normal situated human response to uncertainty rather than a definitive manifestation of cultural difference per se. Yet when visiting Chinese students are silent in western environments the assumption tends to be that because they already possess a command of English any displays of passivity must be solely down to stereotypical national characteristics (Ruble and Zhang 2013). Interestingly, research survey responses (quoted here) from postgraduate Chinese design students to a question on the difficulties in studying in the United Kingdom suggest that both cultural and language deficit factors can be at work at the same time:

The communication between teachers and students in UK was not ideal for me, but that was more likely to be the result of language differ, Chinese students like to communicate between each other, and only contact with the teachers when they have to. Communication, Not only the language problems, cultural differences, the fear of making mistakes caused by misunderstanding [*sic*].

### **Threshold concept theory**

Osmond's writings on conceptual threshold theory are on its application in design education. As does Hofstede, Osmond identifies the toleration of uncertainty as a conceptual threshold. She also identifies as a further conceptual threshold the moment in which a design student finally understands the complexities of the brief to gain higher appreciation of its subtleties and potential solutions. And it is at this rarefied threshold level that limitations of language can stymie some Chinese students' progression and frustrate their abilities to give full expression to their creative and problem-solving powers. If students cannot grasp the nuanced or implicit cultural implications of the brief how can they construct effective solutions? A commonly cited reason among Chinese design students for coming to the United Kingdom for design education is to gain understanding of western culture and design thinking methods. To achieve this they must, at some point, successfully pass through conceptual threshold gateways. Chinese students typically arrive in the United Kingdom with satisfactory scores for general English ability, but often come to realize for themselves that this may not suffice to enable them to discern cultural subtleties or communicate authoritatively within a design lexicon.

The weakness of your language ability and professional ability will become the obstacle when you study here [*sic*].



## I

Gieve and Clark confirm that what may *seem* to be expressions of national cultural dimensions are actually symptoms that have their roots elsewhere. ‘Differences in responses to the programme *could be attributed to differences in language abilities and learning needs*’ (Gieve and Clark 2005, emphasis added). Happily, where identified and addressed, the language threshold can be successfully negotiated:

The most difficult part is to adapt your writing to British academic writing, but with a lot of reading and practicing you eventually learn it.

### **Language**

At Coventry there is a well-connected and growing Chinese social community around which students gravitate. For students who are struggling with English, it is not hard to see the appeal of joining a familiar cultural collective in which the pressure to communicate in a difficult second language and conform to alien cultural norms is, to some extent, relieved. As one survey respondent put it, ‘Language ability is not very well, so that communication becomes difficult. No family and friends, accompanied in an unfamiliar environment can feel very lonely [*sic*]’.

This collectivist reliance has been seen to extend to the classroom and, perhaps surprisingly, it can occasionally cause frustration among Chinese students themselves. Group discussions in English can suddenly collapse into Mandarin as Chinese students struggle with arcane concepts within a design discourse. This occasional resort to impromptu discussions in their native language is clearly felt to be necessary for those students who have lost the struggle to understand in English. And generally a short exchange is all that is needed before normal

service is resumed. Yet there have been instances in which Chinese students with weaker English become habitually reliant on others with stronger language skills when seeking clarification. Indeed, one Chinese postgraduate student with particularly strong English skills became so frustrated at being continually called upon by his Chinese peers to explain something that he protested that he did not come to study in the United Kingdom only to serve as an unpaid translator!

A small number of Chinese graduates have admitted that even after spending a full year in the United Kingdom their English skills had not materially improved, principally because for the most part they found that beyond occasional classroom demands they did not need to speak much English in their daily routine:

Obviously the language barrier at the beginning is a problem, when you arrive in the UK with a basic English it is hard to get used to all the terms, vocabulary and expressions. Also it is hard to make friends with British students, when doing group work there is always a gap between us. It is hard to adapt to the culture at the beginning [*sic*].

Under these situations, by following a line of least resistance, those Chinese students who do not compel themselves to acquire the skills necessary to pass through the difficult conceptual language and cultural threshold may not attain the very things that they came to the United Kingdom for in the first place. Hence, mastery of the language of discourse, an absorption of the native culture and apparent manifestations of national dimensions become inextricably linked: 'Language is one of the problem, but I always wanna try my best to practice and keep

talking. Otherwise, if I want to do a good design, I must understand more about the culture here?.

At the Tongxiang campus, visiting UK students (a dozen among thousands of native students) carry a novelty value. The resident Chinese students compete strongly to win the coveted role of volunteer mentor under whose tutelage the UK students become assimilated into Chinese academic and cultural life at Tongxiang. The very small numbers involved help facilitate the process of academic and cultural integration on the part of the host institution. The cultural threshold is navigated smoothly in part because the process is institutionally managed, and not least because the volunteer students invest time and considerable personal effort in helping and guiding the UK students.

At Coventry there are hundreds rather than dozens of Chinese students. This key difference in the ratio of visitor students to native students (vs:ns) appears to be a crucial influencing factor in facilitating the integration of visiting international students into academic and cultural routine. Small vs:ns ratios ensure that each visiting student is perceived as a unique individual by native students and by the wider institution, and processes of integration can be easily institutionally directed. By contrast, larger vs:ns ratios militate against easy implementation of cultural immersion programmes. From the perspective of native students (and possibly teachers too, as well as other institutional organs), visiting students can lose their identities as individuals, acquiring instead the identity of a collective. And it is at the level of the collective that dimensions of national culture start to acquire some currency (Ruble and Zhang 2013). Under conditions where large vs:ns ratios exist, native students feel no compulsion to go out of their way to forge relationships with large numbers of visiting students, almost identifying them as a single-acting colony, few of whom are perceived as unique individuals. This helps reinforce notions of national stereotype and individuals come

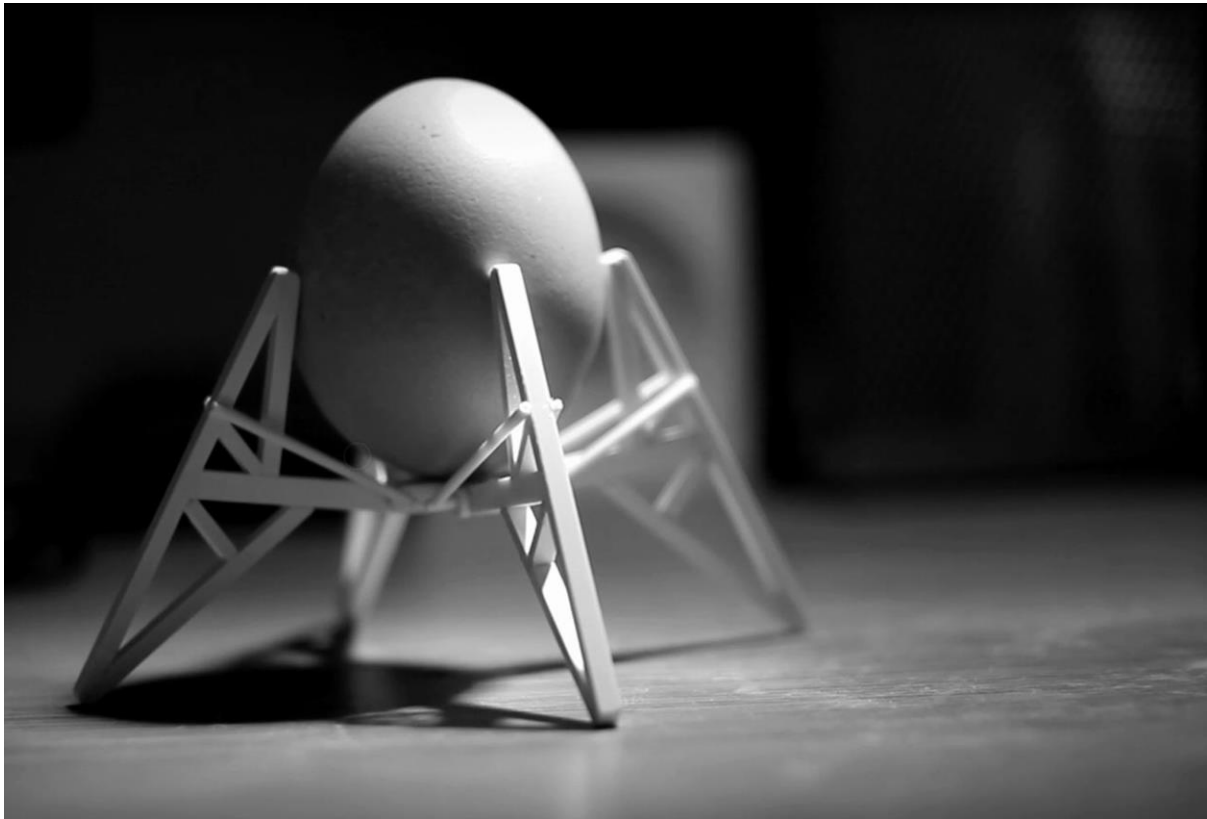
to be seen as single representatives of a homogeneous collective. One of the visiting UK students to Tongxiang alludes to this:

The willingness to support and assist myself and other international students shown by the Chinese students has helped me re-evaluate the often lacklustre approach I once had toward international students [...] I developed a lot of respect for the Chinese students. Their eagerness to learn, interact with and conjure up friendships with foreign students is an ethos that I have taken on board.

### **Overcoming language limitations – an example**

This discussion ends with an example that illustrates how the limitations of language are not insurmountable in instances where an adaptable pedagogical approach is applied. The brief called for the design of an egg cup (which, as a cultural artefact, is imbued with a distinctly British cultural sense of identity and ritual). Among the required outcomes was a written project report that explained the making of the design concept model. One Chinese student felt that his written English was inadequate to the task and asked whether there was an alternative that he could do instead. Aware of the student's interest in film it was agreed that the student could produce a short video instead. With an innovative design concept at centre-stage, the highly successful result was a black and white film in an art documentary style. At every level it was a creative triumph and he communicated far more via his mastery of a visual medium than he would have been able to do through written English. Manifestly, he had indeed attained a 'new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something'. The video has been universally well received and has since been shown many times to design students, design pedagogues and those with an interest in developing internationalized

courses. Indeed, in a recent complete rewrite of the postgraduate Industrial Product Design programme, I made the creation of a video or multi-media artefact a formal requirement for some projects, replacing a formerly written component. At the time of writing, students of the new course have now produced three project videos and the evidence so far is that they are enjoying exploring its narrative and creative potential.



**Figure 1:** Still image of the making of an egg-cup concept from video created as an alternative to a written report. View video at <http://1drv.ms/1QF15rK> (©Author 2015).

## **Conclusion**

Cultural difference is relevant and does exist. This article argues that its manifestation and pedagogical significance may often be masked or compounded by limitations of language and other factors that are behaviourally situated or socially contingent. Cultural difference,

conceptual threshold and mastery of language are inextricably linked, and apparent manifestations of cultural difference may not, in fact, be all that they appear. Conceptual thresholds can be as equally daunting to native UK students as to those from other cultures and they are certainly not exclusive to Chinese students. What this paper does assert is that limitations of English language skills among Chinese design students can severely harm their capacity to breach cultural and learning thresholds and so limit their ability to acquire native cultural familiarity and the design thinking skills that they come to the United Kingdom for in the first place. It can also compromise their creative development and their ability to communicate their ideas. The up-side is that most Chinese students, in my experience, possess great determination and a desire to do well, being willing to do whatever it takes to succeed: 'Obviously, language is important, and the critical thinking and creative thinking, are what we study here. Be brave and never give up'. In this message there is much that all students can learn from.

## **References**

Chan, C. K. K. and Rao, N. (eds) (2009), *Revisiting the Chinese Learner*, CERC Studies in Comparative Education, vol. 25, New York: Springer.

Cheng, H.-Y. and Guan, S.-Y. (2012), 'The role of learning approaches in explaining the distinct learning behaviors presented by American and Chinese undergraduates in the classroom', *Learning and Individual Differences*, 22:3, pp. 414–18.

Gieve, S. and Clark, R. (2005), 'The Chinese approach to learning: Cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme', *System*, 33:2, pp. 261–76.

Hall, E. T. (1989), *Beyond Culture*, New York: Anchor Books.

Hilton, C. (2015), 'Why internationalisation of design education benefits UK students', in *17th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education*, University of Loughborough, UK, 3–4 September.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J. and Minkov, M. (2010), *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Third Edition*, New York: McGraw-Hill Professional.

Meyer, J. and Land, R. (2003), 'Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines', *Occasional Report 4*, <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/publications.html>. Accessed 28 October 2012.

Osmond, J. (2013), 'The scholarship of teaching: Threshold concepts and research informed design education', in *DRS//CUMULUS Oslo 2013 Proceedings, 14–17 May*, vol. 2, Oslo, ABM-media, pp.357-370.

Osmond, J. and Turner, A. (2010), 'The threshold concept journey in design: From identity to application', in J.H.F. Meyer and R.Land and C. Baillie / (eds), *Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, pp.347-364.

Radclyffe-Thomas, N. (2007), 'Intercultural chameleons or the Chinese way? Chinese students in western art and design education', *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 6:1, pp. 41–55.

Ruble, R. A. and Zhang, Y. B. (2013), 'Stereotypes of Chinese international students held by Americans', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37:2, pp. 202–11.

Sit, H. H. W. (2013), 'Characteristics of Chinese students' learning styles', *International Proceedings of Economics Development & Research*, pp. 36–39.

Zhu, C., Valcke, M. and Schellens, T. (2007), 'A cross-cultural study of Chinese and Flemish university students: Do they differ in learning conceptions and approaches to learning?',

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1041608007000866>. Accessed 27 August 2014.

### **Contributor details**

Clive Hilton (BA[Hons], MA[RCA], SFHEA), a former practising designer, is a senior lecturer and the course director of the M.Sc. Industrial Product Design Course and the M.Sc. Design & Transport Course at Coventry University. Both courses attract predominantly international students, the majority of whom are Chinese. This has necessitated the need for imaginative pedagogical strategies and an internationalized approach to curriculum and course design. He is studying towards a Ph.D. on the theme of Sino-Anglo transcultural design pedagogy in UK higher education.

Contact:

Coventry School of Art and Design, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB,  
UK.

E-mail: [ab2359@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:ab2359@coventry.ac.uk)