Title:

Chinese students' groupwork practices and experiences in China

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Introduction

Within the last decade, groupwork has been introduced and increasingly employed as a teaching strategy in tertiary education in Mainland China. Two influential factors have promoted this trend: the change in educational policies in China and the influences of Western universities setting up campuses within China. At the turning point of the new millennium, the Chinese central government introduced reforms in the educational system, which especially promoted the practice of groupwork in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (the Chinese Central Committee and State Council (CCCSC), 1999; Ministry of Education, 2001).

In 2001 a series of new curriculum standards were introduced nation-wide in the secondary sector, (Wang, 2012; Zhang & Zhang, 2009; Zhou, 2011). The essence of the new Curriculum Standards was summarized in three themes: 自主 zìzhǔ (autonomy), 合作 hézuò (collaboration), 探索 tànsuǒ (exploration) (Ministry of Education China (MOE), 2001). With the idea of “collaboration”, teachers across the country were encouraged to organize groupwork to help learning at primary, secondary and tertiary settings. This was the first time the idea of cooperation with peers was officially introduced in the Chinese educational system.

The idea of groupwork was reinforced in the more recent Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) (MOE, 2010). The Outline encourages “exploratory, discussion-based, and participatory” teaching and learning in higher education (AEI, 2010). As a result of this change, teachers and student organizations are encouraged to incorporate groupwork in teaching as well as extracurricular group research projects, in addition to their regular curricular activities (Gao, Ji, Wang, & Liu, 2012; Guan & Tan, 2011; Liu, 2001; Wang & Wu, 2012; Yang & Li, 2008). Hayhoe, Lin, and Zha (2011) used focus groups with students on twelve campuses in China, and found that undergraduates were active in both student-initiated and League¹-initiated groupwork, indicating that additional forms of groupwork were present in the Chinese context.

At the same time, teaching and learning practices at some Chinese universities are being influenced by Western universities that are setting up campuses in China. These Western universities introduce their preferred educational approaches into the Chinese tertiary educational system in an effort to prepare students to study in western universities (Huang, 2003). This has introduced well-established Western educational practices such as

¹ The League in this paper refers to the Communist Youth League of China, a youth movement run by the Communist Party of China.

out-of-class and in-class teacher-initiated groupwork into the Chinese context (Chen & Hird, 2006; Guan & Tan, 2011).

The studies that examined groupwork carried out in Chinese classrooms in the last decade has been limited to teacher-initiated groupwork. Although reports on using groupwork are found in various subjects, such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Chen & Hird, 2006; Guan & Tan, 2011), Economics (Zhang, 2012), Computer Studies (Song, 2012) and Mathematics (Zhou, 2011), the groupwork experience was reported exclusively from the teacher's perspective. Little is known about the ways Chinese students use groupwork for learning when the teacher is not present. No information has been found on groupwork initiated by students in China, although student-initiated groupwork has been identified as a significant form of student groupwork practice in contexts out of Mainland China such as Australia and Hong Kong (Li, Remedios, & Clarke, 2010; Tang, 1996). In this study, we looked into all available forms of student groupwork, with special interest in those group activities that were initiated by students themselves.

This paper analyzes data on students' groupwork experiences in a context of traditional Chinese culture, changing policies and with the influence of Western educational practices. It aims to provide an insider's perspective on the nature of the Chinese students' groupwork experiences in China, including a) the types of groupwork Chinese students' experience in a tertiary setting, and b) the factors that Chinese students value in their groupwork practices when studying in China.

The term "groupwork" is commonly used in educational literature, often without clarity on the learning behavior being referred to. We emphasize that groupwork takes many forms, which varies depending on its purpose. This study identifies the attributes of a group through the use of frameworks developed by Jaques (2000) and Davies (2009). According to Jaques, a group has specific identifiable characteristics (see Table 1). These are collective perception, needs of group members, shared aims, interdependence, social organization, interaction, cohesiveness, and membership.

Table 1 Key Attributes of a Group (Jaques, 2000, pp. 1-2)

Attributes of a group	
Collective perception	Members are collectively conscious of their existence as a group.

Needs of group members	Members join a group because they believe it will satisfy some needs or give them some rewards.
Shared aims	Members hold common aims or ideals which to some extent bind them together. The achievement of aims is presumably one of the rewards.
Interdependence	Members are interdependent. They are affected by and respond to any event that affects any of its members.
Social organization	A group can be seen as a social unit with norms, roles, status, power and emotional relationships.
Interaction	Members influence and respond to each other in the process of communicating, whether they are face-to-face or otherwise deployed. The sense of 'group' exists even when members are not collected in the same place.
Cohesiveness	Members want to remain in the group, to contribute to its well-being and aims, and to join its activities.
Membership	Two or more people interacting for longer than a few minutes constitute a group.

Informed by Jaques' description, a group is defined in this study as a collection of students working together for academic purposes. Pair or dyad work is also included as a special type of groupwork, as described in Bowering, Leggett, Michael, & Leng (2007). Davies elaborated on Jaques' framework describing three common forms of groupwork (Davies, 2009, p.566):

Informal learning groups: "ad hoc clustering of groups for occasional uses";

Formal learning groups: "groups formed to complete a designated task or assignment";

Study teams: teams in order to prepare for final exams or other long-term assessment tasks, with a stable membership focusing more on learning support and encouragement.

Jaques' (2000) framework is well established and has been referred to in previous studies of groupwork in higher education (Clarke, Miers, Pollard, & Thomas, 2007; Curran, Sharpe, Forristall, & Flynn, 2008; Kolmos, Du, Holgaard, & Jensen, 2008; Lindsay & Orton, 2011). This framework was selected for this study as they were open frameworks that allow categorization of different forms of groupwork.)

The study context

The study was conducted in a third-year undergraduate classroom in a large university in South China with an enrolment of nearly 30 thousand undergraduate students. We studied the groupwork experience of student enrolled in Finance Management with a lecture group of 64 students. The 64 students were divided into two organizational units that we will refer to as "classes". The lectures were taught in Chinese by a Chinese teacher and were viewed by students as a typical Chinese tertiary classroom.

As is typical at Chinese universities, each class has their own "class committee" and "Youth League branch". A class committee is a student organization representing the class as a permanent study organization throughout the four years of undergraduate studies. The class committee is composed of four to five members and is part of the University Student Union. Class committee members are responsible for the daily activities of a class, such as representing the class in communicating with the university staff on extracurricular activities, games or matches with other classes, and passing on messages from the coordinator to the students.

In China, the Youth League is an integrated part of any public organization with members under the age of 28. The Youth League operates in every university in China. The university Youth League leader is typically a university staff member. The Youth League branch in a university class is the smallest unit of the Youth League committee of the university. It has four or five members led by the branch secretary who is a student. There is cooperation between the Class Committee in the activities above which are part of the Youth League branch's daily duties. In addition to its political role, it is also dedicated to encouraging out of class 'academic' activities. The Class Committee and the Youth League branch often work together to organize extra-curricular activities

for all students. Through this structure, student leaders assist the university with student extracurricular activities and support the government agenda for increasing groupwork activity.

Methodology and methods

A qualitative case study

The Case Study approach has been argued as ideal to conduct a holistic and in-depth investigation to gain a sharpened and systematic understanding of a problem or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). This study investigated the groupwork practices of a group of Chinese students studying at a Chinese tertiary institute with the intention to pursue further studies in a Western country. The methods adopted in this study were chosen to obtain in-depth information regarding Chinese student groupwork experiences and draw a comprehensive picture of student groupwork in the Chinese context. As it is recognized that a shared language between the interviewer and the interviewee provides increased clarity between the interviewer and interviewee, therefore providing better quality data (Patton, 2002), all interviews in this study were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese. As the researcher in this study was a native Cantonese and Mandarin speaker, she was able to conduct all interviews in the students' preferred language.

Participants

The researchers used information-oriented sampling where “cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content” on the ground that a typical or average case tends to fail to provide the richest information (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Students who appeared to be more active in classroom discussions were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview, on the basis that they would be better informants on groupwork.

Sixteen third-year students majoring in Finance and Accounting Management were invited to participate in the video-stimulated recall interviews. These participants included two interviewees from each class or group meeting. Of the 16 participants, 12 were female and four were male and ranged in age from 21 to 22 years of age. The students enrolled in the course were academically successful, achieving scores in the top 30% among all students in the province-wide 高考 gāokǎo (college entrance exam).

Procedures

Ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' University Human Research Committee as well as from the site university. Written consent was obtained by the Director of Foreign Affairs of the Chinese university, which was the formal process for obtaining content at this university. Prior to data collection, all individual students received the Plain Language Statement of the study and signed the Consent Form to be interviewed and/or videotaped during their group meetings. Both these documents were written in Chinese.

Data was collected over five weeks in the second semester using individual interviews and video-stimulated recall interviews (described below). The video-stimulated recall interview method was employed with interviews with individual students following the videotaped classes or group meetings. Ten hours of lectures and three sessions of out-of-class group activities were videotaped over the five weeks.

Each interview comprised two sections. The first was a semi-structured interview which enquired into students' groupwork experiences at university, while the second section was the video-simulated recall interview, which sought student reflections on the enactment of in-class group activities or out-of-class group meetings.

Video-simulated recall interviews. Video-stimulated recall interviews are conducted with the aid of videotaped data of classroom action and group meetings. Students watched the videotape of the whole class and used the remote control to fast-forward to events that they consider to be important. These events were used as the basis for the interview discussion. Video recording and video-stimulated recall interviews have been effectively used to understand student perspectives on their classroom experiences (Clarke, Keitel, & Shimizu, 2006; Remedios, 2008). This method can minimize researcher inference in relation to the participant's thinking and maximize the richness of the information gathered (Clarke, 1998). The use of video-stimulated interview data in this study helped to reveal the Chinese students' perspectives on their groupwork practices and to generate rich information on student thinking. Even where no in-class groupwork was employed, the video-stimulated interviews provided an opportunity to discuss with students any and all occasions when they had the need to talk to or work with fellow students in class.

Data analysis adopted the template analysis approach described by King (2004) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Firstly, a list of codes was developed from the interview questions. After listening to all interviews, the researcher selected four interviews based on their richness of data and transcribed each in detail in Chinese. Back translation was conducted of the sections of data with the identified themes. In these four transcripts, the researcher searched for pre-listed themes and identified new emerging ones. For the rest of the interviews, the researcher listened to the interviews, identified existing and new themes and transcribed the related quotes.

Member checking was used to confirm the interpretation of the interview data by providing participants with a copy of the transcripts.

Results:

Types of groupwork in China

Using Davies' (2009) categorizing of groupwork, three different types of *out-of-class* groupwork were reported in the student interviews. Although the students reported *in-class* groupwork in the past, no examples were observed during the five-week data collection period. Therefore, this paper focused exclusively on out-of-class groupwork. All groupwork was categorised into three forms of groupwork according to who initiated the groupwork: a) individual students, b) the Youth League and c) the teacher (See Table 2).

Table 2 Forms of Out-of-class Groupwork

Groupwork Initiated by	Forms of groupwork	Aligning with groupwork as categorized in Davies (2009)
Students	Group discussions in the library & dormitories	Informal learning groups
	Student tutorials	Study teams
The Youth League	Research projects	Formal learning groups
	Class meetings	Formal learning groups
The teacher	Group assignments	Formal learning groups

Student-initiated groupwork

Students reported two types of student-initiated groupwork in their interviews: 1) informal group discussions in the library and dormitories and 2) student tutorials.

Group discussions in the library and dormitories. According to the student semi-structured interviews, these out-of-class groupwork sessions were typical examples of informal learning groups, as described by Davies (2009). These ad hoc groups were often formed for one-off academic purposes, such as to discuss a point raised in the

lecture notes or a question from the textbook. Students reported that these groups were common, but due to their improvised nature, it was difficult to capture these sessions on videotape. However, most students reported working with one or two peers after class in this informal way. Boarding on campus provided the opportunity for out-of-class interactions among students. Students sat together for regular informal discussions, asking each other questions while they studied. The discussions were mainly about enhancing understanding or problem solving of subject contents. Students often studied with classmates and especially roommates. These discussions were often not planned, but occurred spontaneously when students met classmates at the library or dormitory.

Student-led tutorials. Most student interviewees referred to the student-led tutorials. These tutorials were further explored in the video-simulated recall interviews with two students. Students who were viewed as subject experts initiated and taught informal extracurricular tutorials to peers. Students volunteered to attend. In some cases, the expert students were then invited by the Youth Branch and Class Committee to “teach” their respective subjects. The Branch or Committee leaders also organized the time and venue and informed the class about these tutorials. The student tutors took responsibility to identify the difficult and important points of the subject and explained these to the rest of the class. These tutorials were run as interactive discussions. Attendance was high with over 80% of the students from the same class attending and students from other classes also joining in. These tutorials received overwhelmingly positive responses from all students who were interviewed, with reference to learning from peers and improved group benefits. The students interviewed reported that these tutorials were initially unique to this particular class at this university but that other classes had recently started to employ the same strategy for learning.

These group activities did not appear to fit readily with any of the three types of groups listed by Davies (2009). However, their characteristics were effectively accommodated within the essential groupwork attributes pointed out by Jaques (2000) (see Table 3):

Table 3 Categorizing Chinese Student Tutorials using Jacques’ (2001) framework

<i>Key attributes of groupwork in Jaques’ (2000, p.1-2)</i>	<i>The Chinese student tutorials aligning with Jaques’ framework</i>
Collective perception	Members have conscious recognition of the existence of the

	group.
Needs of group members	Members hoped that these group activities were helpful in terms of improved knowledge and skills development.
Shared aims	The one aim that the whole group shared was to help improve academic achievements.
Interdependence	The existence of the groups relied on the co-effort of the student tutor and the audience.
Social organisation	The student tutor was virtually the group leader during group enactment.
Interaction	Communicative exchange in other common groupwork, such as explanation, raising questions, answering questions, exchanging of opinions, and negotiating solutions was also typical in these activities.
Cohesiveness	All the interviewees wanted such groups to continue.
Membership	The group consisted of more than two members and interacting for more than a few minutes.

The data from which this table was derived combined both student interview statements and researcher observations. Example of supporting data and the related thematic categories (in brackets) include,

Our class got lower marks than Class 1 in Taxation Planning assignments, so we had a class meeting trying to work out a way to catch up with Class 1. The Class decided to ask a few good students to teach the subject to the class again (A1). (Collective perception, needs of group members, shared aims, membership)

The student tutors are the more capable students in our class. They are happy to share with the rest of the class so we invite them. ... We are all students so it is easy to discuss. The student tutor might not have a definite answer to every question, but what matters is that we can learn and discuss together.

(A12) (Collective perception, needs of group members, interdependence, social organisation, interaction, membership)

The researcher observed that the interaction between the student-tutor and the audience were intensive. There were frequent explanations, questions raised and answered, exchange of opinions, and negotiation of solutions. Therefore, the student tutorials can be seen as a special kind of group with a larger group membership.

League-initiated groupwork

The Youth League initiated and organized two kinds of groupwork: 1) Meetings for research projects and 2) class meetings. Group projects were initiatives organized at university level in response to the recent policies issued by the Ministry of Education; whereas, class meetings are traditional, well established practices in every public university in China. Two forms of league-initiated groupwork were reported in the student semi-structured interviews and further explored in the video-simulated recall interviews: group research projects and class meetings.

Group Research projects. These groups fit within Davies' (2009) description of formal learning groups since they were brought together to complete a designated task. The University Youth League Committee initiated research projects and encouraged students to participate in groups. Groups were mostly formed among friends within the class, although some students created their groups across majors or departments. Applicants were required to choose a topic of research and submit a proposal. The project lasted for two semesters. Students met to design the project, discuss methods, analyze results and write a report that was submitted to the Youth Branch. The group was also assigned a teacher as their independent academic support. The University Youth League Committee assessed the completed projects and awarded prizes for the best projects.

Class meetings. A class meeting was a class activity organized by the class committee or League Branch. Class meetings were held approximately once a month out of class. These class meetings could also be extracurricular recreational activities within the class and, sometimes included working with students from other classes. Normally all students in the Class, i.e. 30 -40, participated in such activities.

While the student tutorials were informal larger-scale learning groups, the class meetings were the formal larger-scale learning groups. This is because the class meetings shared similar attributes to the student tutorials, such as the size, collective perception (as described in Table 2), shared aims, interaction, and membership.

However, these class meetings were formal as they were organized by the League staff and the League leaders in the class.

Teacher-initiated groupwork

Although not captured in video during the study, students recalled teacher-initiated groupwork in the form of group assignments and in-class discussions in previous semesters.

Group assignments. Formal teacher-initiated groups were formed to work on assignments less frequently than those formed for student-initiated spontaneous groupwork. Students reported that only two out of more than 20 subjects had group assignments during their enrolment at the University, indicating that this form of groupwork was still relatively rare. Both subjects were English language subjects and while one teacher was from a western University, the other was a Chinese teacher.

In-class group discussions. Only two events of teacher-initiated in-class group discussions were reported as occurring in the previous four semesters: one as a role-play in an English class and the other as a group discussion of a business plan in a major Accounting class. Unfortunately, no in-class groupwork was undertaken during the data collection period.

What do Chinese students value in groupwork?

Students highlighted both individual and collective benefits from their groupwork experiences. However, students appeared to value different factors in different groupwork contexts. In student-initiated groupwork, social-emotional, cognitive and collective wellbeing factors were highlighted. In groupwork initiated by the League and Party, group skills and collective benefits were stressed. In teacher-initiated groupwork, equity of responsibilities and efficiency were emphasized.

Student-initiated groupwork

Individual learning, social emotional factors and collective wellbeing were reported as the key motives for participating in student-initiated groupwork. For informal spontaneous learning groups, mainly individual learning benefit and social emotional factors were reported. For student-led tutorials, both individual learning and collective wellbeing were reported.

All student interviewees spoke of learning from participating in spontaneous learning groups in the library or the dormitory. They highlighted the value and effectiveness of learning from peers, especially when having difficulty in understanding material. Student A9's comment reflected a common attitude:

When I don't understand I will ask other students in the library or in the dormitory. ... It helps to solve problems and I can also help other students who fall behind. (A9)

Another value of these spontaneous informal learning groups was the companionship of peers.

I do go to the library myself but most of the times I ask someone to go with me. (A1)

When I go to the library on my own I will walk around and I will find some company to study with.
(A2)

Although the student-initiated tutorials were much more formally organized than the informal learning groups, they shared one important value in common: learning from others. Both interviewees of the tutorial reported gaining significant learning from the fellow student tutor. The student tutor explained the conceptual background of questions and provided suggestions to help the audience to solve questions. This form of learning tended to be more interactive than the typical lectures taught by the lecturer.

For what we do not understand, he points it out for us. Many students have asked him the same questions so he knows which ones were difficult for most of us. He also explains to us the questions he thinks we should learn. (A11)

In normal classes it is difficult for the teacher to supervise more than 60 students, but this class is like small-class teaching. Moreover, the teacher is our classmate. We can ask questions like "I think this is difficult can you talk about it?" "I feel like listening to this, can you also talk about that?" (A1)

One of the student tutors was interviewed. He reported having intentionally avoided just giving answers to the students; instead he tried to let the audience solve problems independently by illustrating examples. It also indicates that he valued the development of his individual skills such as explaining and negotiating:

I would go over all the main points with them. Instead of telling them the answers, I ask questions like "What should you pay attention to in these questions? What are your theoretical bases when you do these items?". When we come to the difficult ones, I would show them with examples. I don't

want them to listen to my answers only. ... It gives me a platform to practice how to explain things better so that students can understand better. It's a training of the ability to explain. (A8)

The wellbeing of the larger group was another valued factor in the student-led tutorials. Students viewed it an honour to serve the class and improve the cohesive strength in the class:

I am not a member of the class committee, but by doing this (running the student tutorials) I can serve my class. (A8)

It is for the sake of the cohesion in the class. We all make an effort for the overall strength of the whole class. (A11)

As highlighted in these quotes, the two forms of student-initiated groupwork addressed a need for learning and brought recognized collective or social benefits to the group members.

League-initiated groupwork

Values in League-initiated groupwork concentrated on two areas: individual learning and social emotional factors. Fulfilling personal goals for developing certain skills was a major motivation for most participants. Group skills and learning were highlighted in relation to these League-initiated research projects. Students highlighted the importance of developing groupwork skills, such as leadership, as one of the motives for participating in research projects:

I thought I could develop my other abilities (besides academic skills). ...I am the group leader and I divide work; but I don't want to be the serious leader and I try to divide work according to their advantages (A10)

Students also realized the importance of negotiation and dealing with disagreement among group members, for example:

It is very hard to avoid disagreements in such groupwork. Normally, when it happens, I think you should explain your point with patience... When disagreements occur, it is important we communicate well. (A2)

This type of groupwork also revealed students' desire to learn non-curricular knowledge, research skills and learning methods of other students outside the classroom. Deeper learning of extra non-curricular knowledge out of class constituted an important reason for participating in these extra-curricular activities.

(Through conducting the project) I am able to learn about some topics in depth. (A2)

To do these activities, I need to collect information and read a lot of materials. This can enrich my knowledge. ...Through the groupwork, I can learn the advantages in my classmates. I can also reflect on myself when seeing what they don't do well in and tell myself not to do it in the future. (A16)

There were also reports that students appreciated social-emotional connections among group members. Students' welcomed the increased familiarity or social connection with peers.

Also in this way I can communicate with classmates about our thoughts and what we are doing. (A3)

Through this activity I am able to know more about my classmates. While working with them I can understand their personalities. (A10)

As in student-initiated groupwork, the groupwork organized by the Youth League also demonstrated both individual learning and some social emotional values among students. League-initiated group activities occurred more frequently than the other two types of groupwork and made up an important component of the students' out-of-class groupwork.

Teacher-initiated groupwork

While it was not as common as the other types of groupwork, all students mentioned experiences with teacher-initiated groupwork. The students reported two group assignments in their three years of study at university. No group assignments were captured during the data collection period. In teacher-initiated groupwork, more learning and adaption of skills were identified, including the widening of knowledge horizons and the development of analytical skills.

Working in group assignments can broaden my knowledge horizon as others can think of what I can't.

Also everyone sees things differently. As we are used to looking at things from one angle and then you find someone different from you and you think, "Yes I can see it that way too". In this way slowly you learn to see things from different angles. (A7)

Students also found group assignments beneficial in the development of certain group skills such as planning and organizational skills:

Dividing work according to everybody's characteristics trains my ability of planning and use of personnel.
(A1)

While highlighting the benefits of groupwork, students were aware of the importance of both the need for sharing of responsibility and the need for efficiency:

Sometimes the work division is not clear. Some people do a lot of work while some are a little lazy and do not do some of the work. ... The supposed results are not really achieved. (A10)

Sometimes group discussion is not efficient because everybody has a different opinion. In this way it is hard to achieve an agreement. (A9)

In summary, this study found that out-of-class groupwork was practiced in tertiary settings in China, and that students had several opportunities to become involved in groupwork initiated by their peers, student organizations and teacher, and to work in groups on curriculum and non-curriculum related projects. This study has also found that student political organizations such as the Youth League had substantial impact on the amount of groupwork. The Chinese students valued not only the widely recognized individual benefits of groupwork, but also its impact on the wellbeing of the larger group. Both individual and collectivist factors influenced the Chinese students' choice to be involved with groupwork.

Discussions and conclusions

This study has shown that groupwork is established in a Chinese tertiary context and that the Chinese students value the individual benefits, collective wellbeing and group skill development that they associate with groupwork. This study agrees with previous findings that Confucian Heritage Culture students liked to form spontaneous groupwork out of class (Remedios, 2005; Tang, 1996). By employing research methods that prioritised the students' perspective, the current study has also added to the strength of previous studies on teacher-initiated groupwork in China such as Chen and Hird (2006), Gao, et al. (2012), Guan and Tan (2011), Song (2012), Zhang (2012) and Zhou (2011). Moreover, this research has identified groupwork initiated by students themselves and the Youth League. In-class groupwork was not employed during the period of this study (a finding in itself) and so this type of group activity was not available for analysis.

Among the three forms of groupwork, it can be seen that different factors were valued in different groupwork settings. Existing literature on the benefits of groupwork has focused on its individual aspects, with groupwork skills highlighted (Clark, Nguyen, Bray, & Levine, 2008; Mooney, 2006; Olivera, 2004). The current study has provided supportive information of Chinese students' valuing the individual aspects as well as the groupwork skills of groupwork.

The findings from this study also reflect some Chinese cultural traditions. It has been argued that collectivist culture places importance on companionship and emotional interdependence (Darwish & Huber, 2003; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006). In this study, the students reported a need for social connection and companionship in student-initiated group learning activities such as those in the library. This is consistent with findings that Chinese students actively engaged in spontaneous out-of-class groupwork in Hong Kong (Tang, 1996).

In addition, this study has documented the collectivist culture in Chinese students' groupwork experiences. Collectivism has been commonly viewed to promote the idea that the larger group's interest and wellbeing comes before the interest and wellbeing of the individual (Signorini, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2009). Individuals find themselves responsible to bring honor to the larger group (Jiang, 2006) and in turn the groups care for the individuals' wellbeing (Signorini, et al., 2009). In this case, traditional Chinese culture appeared to play a role in groupwork practices in this context. Collectivist influences on groupwork were identified in most groupwork (see Table 3), reinforcing the impact of the traditional culture as it was spontaneously practiced by the students. That the class leaders made efforts to improve the academic achievement of the whole class on one hand reflects the honor of the larger group, on the other, shows the care from the group for the individuals.

There was also evidence that student political organizations such as the Youth League had impact on the student groupwork experience. They provided incentives to encourage out-of-class groupwork among students. This reflects the effort of the government and university to improve the quality of education to meet the current needs of society and to 'catch up' with international educational practices. Arguably, with the use of groupwork in Chinese classrooms, students are potentially better prepared to engage with groupwork when they make the transition to studying in western universities. However, the degree to which students are able to adapt their existing groupwork skills to the Western tertiary contexts needs further examination.

While this study has added to the existing literature on the Chinese students experience of groupwork, a few issues relevant to the generalizability of the findings need to be considered. As the university used for this study

was a major Chinese university, known for its progressive stance, the experience of its students may not be applicable to all Chinese tertiary students. Further, it should be noted that this paper reports the views of students working more actively in groupwork in the case study and those who volunteered to participate in the study. While this study is informed by a select group of students identified as providing insights into the groupwork experience in the Chinese context, this may not reflect the experience of the wider cohort of Chinese students. The reader should also note that the most active students in groupwork were not necessarily the best able to articulate their opinions. As suggested by Mills, Wiebe, & Durepos, (2009), the reader has the authority to make the judgment if the results of a qualitative case study can be applied in another context.

What is offered in this paper is information on the learning experience of a group of Chinese students from one university and draws attention to their active initiation of and participation in groupwork and the valuing of individual, collective and social emotional aspects of this approach of learning. Educators in the higher education sector in developed countries who enrol Chinese students into their programs need to be informed of the changing groupwork practices of international students from China.

This paper sets the groundwork for further research into the experience of Chinese students as they make the transition into a Western tertiary context, with attention to the extent to which Chinese students can apply their previously learned skills in the Western context. It would also be of interest to examine how Chinese students' valuing of groupwork may alter in the Western classroom context where they must work with peers from different language and cultural backgrounds.

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