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Critical thinking in the context of Chinese postgraduate students' thesis writing: a positioning theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

While research exists on the effectiveness of pedagogical methods in relation to the development of Chinese students' critical thinking (CT), there has been little research on Chinese students' experiences around CT in relation to their own contexts. This paper reports on the findings of a study that investigated the experiences of the use of CT by 29 Chinese postgraduate students studying in a range of contexts in China and the UK. All student participants were engaged in second language education at Master's level. Data were collected mainly through ethnographic interviews and analysed within the framework of positioning theory. The findings reveal that the students' use of CT skills was not only a demonstration of ability but also a consequence of their positioning. In the context of thesis writing, the students' positioning was exercised as perceived rights and duties regarding knowledge, directed by their own goals for personal development. The study has implications for research and teaching of CT in cross-cultural contexts.

Introduction

The implications of critical thinking (CT) expectations in academic practice have only relatively recently taken account of international cultural contexts. Prior to the 1990s, almost all the research on CT was conducted in English-speaking countries where students spoke English as first language (Thompson, 2002). During the 1990s, the concept of CT appeared in second language education (SLE) literature partly due to the increasing number of international students studying in English-speaking countries who were required to demonstrate CT in academic settings (Day, 2003; Thadphoothon, 2005). The teaching of CT occurred alongside the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Atkinson, 1997; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Almost all the research on CT in SLE focuses on how learners with non-Western cultural backgrounds understand and develop CT. The mostly widely used definition of CT in this field can be summarised as the skills to make reasoned judgement (e.g. Dewey, 1933; Ennis, 1992; Paul, 1988). Some studies adopt a socio-political approach to studying the application of CT skills to particular social issues, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity and power relations involved in EFL/ESL

classrooms (e.g. Benesch, 1999; Huang, 2012; Ibrahim, 1999). Nevertheless, the cognitive skills to make reasoned judgement remained central, irrespective of the specific socio-political context or stance adopted.

Chinese students make up a large proportion of international students globally and the problems they encounter with the application of CT in their studies have attracted researchers' attention. Some earlier researchers perceived Chinese students as non-critical, meaning that they are passive, respectful of authority and lacking individual voices, but recent studies suggest that such stereotypes are over-simplifying or anecdotal, assigning a fixed and homogeneous identity to Chinese learners (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Floyd, 2011). Empirical evidence also shows that levels of CT are related to individual factors such as proficiency in English as a second language (L2) (e.g. Floyd, 2011), epistemic beliefs (e.g. Chan, Ho, & Ku, 2011), reading ability and working-memory (e.g. Floyd, 2011). In this paper we argue that those cognitive factors are not sufficient to explain the students' use of CT skills. By regarding CT as an interaction between the students and the academic community, we believe that it is necessary to investigate socio-psychological factors that influence the process of using CT skills. In the following sections, we first review the existing literature and introduce the research questions driving our study. We then present the methodology and report on the findings. In the discussion that follows, we propose a model of CT and positioning. The paper concludes with recommendations for teaching and research on CT.

Literature review

Decontextualisation of Chinese students' CT

Research on Chinese students' CT mainly falls under two categories: the teaching of CT and assessment of CT. In terms of teaching, the most frequently formulated research questions are variations of the following: (1) what is the pedagogical method used to develop CT? (2) how effective is it? (e.g. Li, 2014; Macknish, 2011; Song, 2012; Yang, Gamble, Hung, & Lin, 2014). The data sources usually include classroom observation recordings, test scores of students' CT and of their L2 proficiency, samples of students' written work and students' responses collected from interviews or questionnaires. In general, most studies have focused on students' learning product and have shown that CT is teachable to students in EFL and ESL settings. Studies involving interviews with students have usually only focused on the students' views about CT without considering how their views made sense in relation to the context of their experiences. Few studies have investigated the students' experiences from their own perspectives regarding the development of CT.

In order to assess Chinese students' level of CT, the following questions have so far tended to frame the analysis: (1) What level of CT is demonstrated by the study participants? (e.g. Wen, 2012); (2) Is CT related to other factors and if so, what are they? (e.g. Floyd, 2011; Luk & Lin, 2015; Zhou, Jiang, & Yao, 2015) The methodology used to assess CT consists mainly of quantitative tests such as the original or adapted versions of Watson-Glaser CT Appraisal (Ennis, 1958), California CT Skills Test (Facione, Facione, Blohm, Howard, & Giancarlo, 1998) or other CT questionnaires. A few studies (e.g. Dong & Lu, 2015; Wen, 2012) have used students' writing samples to assess their CT. In this body of research, students' voices are underrepresented, and their CT performance is

often defined as a fixed competence rather than dynamic interactions between the students and their social contexts.

Contextualising CT in academic literacy: a positioning theory perspective

CT is a key issue in the development of academic literacy, especially in the writing of a thesis at graduate level (e.g. Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Zhang, 2011). Developing academic literacy is not only about enhancing writing skills, but is also a social practice where students learn to interact with existing bodies of literature and to negotiate issues of identity and epistemology (Robinson-Pant & Street, 2012). For example, when one reviews existing research literature on a given topic, whether one 'memorises and reproduces material' or 'understands and transforms material' (Light, 2002, p. 258) is essentially a manifestation of how one understands the nature of academic knowledge and how one defines one's role in relation to it – whether as a consumer or as a creator of knowledge. This reflects that CT entails certain patterns of engagement with knowledge as the students learn to establish their voice in the academic field. In this study, positioning emerged as a major factor that shaped students' interpretations of their CT experiences. We therefore chose positioning theory as the theoretical framework.

Positioning theory was formulated by Rom Harré and his colleagues as a theory of cognitive psychology to study social behaviour. Its major concern was to reveal 'the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning that are realised in the ways that people act towards others' (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009, p. 5). In this theory, positioning is defined as 'the assignment of fluid "parts" or "roles" to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts' (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17). Positioning involves both interactive and reflexive positioning. Interactive positioning is when 'what one says positions another' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48), and reflexive positioning is when 'one positions oneself' (ibid). The positioning of oneself involves two processes. On the one hand, one positions oneself according to the expectations imposed by others or by institutional conventions, largely based on one's 'knowledge of social structures' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 52). On the other hand, one also acts as an agent, making fairly independent decisions regarding whether or to what extent to take up an imposed position. Such decisions are largely derived from 'a subjective history' (ibid).

According to Harré and van Langenhove (1991), the social realm is constituted by conversations as its 'most basic substance' (p. 394). Conversations, in a broad sense, create the social world, generate social acts and reproduce societal icons. All of those functions are actualised by two discursive processes: 'positioning' and 'rhetorical redescription' (p. 394). While positioning is about locating each person within narratives produced by conversations, rhetorical redescription refers to the construction of narratives about actual events that makes social act intelligible. A research paper, as Harré and van Langenhove (1991) suggest, is 'a rhetorical redescription of both the events that happened (e.g. a laboratory experiment) and of publications by other authors (the ones quoted and commented on)' (p. 406). Likewise, a postgraduate thesis is also a rhetorical redescription of particular events, including the research that the author conducted and the previous research published by other authors in a relevant field. A thesis, like a research paper, can be understood as 'a form of tacit and intentional positioning of the authors' (p. 406). To

demonstrate CT in a thesis, in its literature review chapter for instance, not only involves applying CT skills to a collection of written materials, but also entails positioning oneself among a group of authors who are established members of the academic community.

It is necessary to differentiate the concept of positioning from that of identity and of role. Identity is usually construed as a continuous form of self and the expression of identity is usually seen as 'a display of self-consciousness and of agency' (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991, p. 400), whereas positioning is often discontinuous, i.e. a person often assumes 'multiple and contradictory positions' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 53) with or without awareness. Regarding roles, traditional drama can be used as a model to illustrate that 'people are construed as actors with lines already written and their roles determined by the particular play they find themselves in' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 52). They learn to play their role by emulating role models and following pre-existing scripts that are 'static, formal and ritualistic' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 43). In contrast, positionings are not pre-existing; they are fluid and dynamic, depending on the choice of the individual, conscious or subconscious. In other words, positionings are 'cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49).

By using positioning theory as a theoretical framework, this multiple case study investigated how Chinese students made sense of their thesis writing experiences in relation to CT. It aimed to answer two questions: How did the students position themselves within the context of postgraduate thesis writing? How did their positionings relate to CT?

Methodology

Participants

This study investigated 29 Chinese students studying SLE at Master's level. They were from three groups located in three institutions in China and the UK (Table 1). The programmes that they were registered in were all academically-oriented with a good reputation. The students went through similar processes of thesis writing: selecting a topic, writing a proposal, collecting data and writing up. When participating in this study, all student participants were in the final year focusing on thesis writing.

All of the student participants were educated in the Chinese system from primary to tertiary levels. All of them studied in foreign language departments in universities in China, mostly in linguistics, literature or foreign language education. Jin and Cortazzi (2006) argue that the learning in foreign language departments in Chinese universities is largely shaped by Confucian values, characterised by rote learning, imitating models, as well as 'reflective thinking and independent interpretation' to achieve deep understanding (p. 12). Although many Chinese students have experienced the Confucian

Table 1. The three groups of student participants.

Group number	Master's programme	Social context	Language of learning	Length and structure of programme	Number of students
One (G1)	Research in SLE	England	English	1 year of taught courses and research	7
Two (G2)	English Language Education	China	English	2 years of taught courses and research	12
Three (G3)	Teaching Chinese as a Second Language	China	Chinese	3 years of taught courses, practical work and research	10

culture of learning, neglecting students' complex backgrounds and unique individualities has led to the formation of a stereotype that Chinese students are passive, uncritical learners.

Data collection and analysis

This paper reports on one part of a larger project that investigated Chinese students' conceptualisation and application of CT in the context of postgraduate academic writing. Ethnographic interviews were the main method of data collection (Creswell, 2009; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Each student was interviewed twice during their final year of the Master's programme when they had a relatively fresh memory regarding their writing experiences. All interviews were semi-structured. The student participants were first invited to 'recall any aspects of [learning] that [were] prominent in their memories' (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996, p. 37) and then to comment on specific issues relating to CT and thesis writing. All interviews were in Mandarin Chinese, the first language of the participants. There were altogether 57 interviews, totalling almost 47 h. In addition to the interviews, documents and relevant course materials were collected and referred to where relevant.

In the students' accounts of their experiences on their respective programmes, positioning emerged as underpinning the students' approach to the use of CT skills when writing postgraduate theses. To illustrate this point, this paper reports on the analysis of three students' narratives, i.e. Zhimin, Liping and Yihan, all of which are pseudonyms. Those narratives were selected not because they represented each group but because: (1) they talked extensively about their thesis writing experiences; (2) while most students demonstrated a mixture of different positionings in different situations, these students' experiences can illustrate features of typical positionings. The students' narratives were their autobiographical accounts, representing not the actual events but the students' interpretations of those events. Davies and Harré (1990) suggest that 'in telling a fragment of his or her autobiography a speaker assigns parts and characters in the episodes described, both to themselves and to other people, including those taking part in the conversation'(p. 48). The assignment of 'parts and characters' is by essence a positioning process. This paper focuses on how the student participants positioned themselves in relation to people who influenced their writing. Positionings were identified according to the 'pattern of rights and duties' (Harré et al., 2009, p. 6) that served as the presumptions of the students' description of their writing experiences. The purpose of the analysis was to examine how their conscious or subconscious positionings related to their use of CT.

CT conditioned by positioning

The 29 student participants demonstrated three categories of positioning perspectives in their accounts of thesis writing experiences: as novice researcher, as learner and as practitioner. These were the dominant positionings that emerged from the data. They represent different approaches of establishing relationships with existing knowledge in the academic community. As CT also entails a pattern of relationship with existing knowledge, positionings can thus illustrate different students' approaches to CT in academic writing.

The report focuses on two aspects: (1) features of each positioning, (2) the exercise of each positioning in relation to CT. Two factors were most relevant to the students' exercise of positioning: knowledge and goals. These two factors will not be examined in separate sections but will be incorporated into the three narratives about positioning.

The novice researcher perspective

Zhimin was registered in the Master's course in Group One (G1) in England. She obtained a Bachelor's degree in English at a university in mainland China. After that, she taught English for a year and then studied anthropology at a university in Hong Kong at Master's level. Afterwards, she taught Chinese in Hong Kong and enrolled in a PhD programme in education in another university there. During her PhD study, she took one year out to study in the UK towards her second Master's Degree in SLE. She specified in the interview that her future work would prioritise research over teaching. That was her goal for personal development. With that goal in mind, she demonstrated a commitment to improving her academic writing skills. She regarded academic writing as a 'combination of joy and pain':

> Zhimin: Generally speaking, if I can concentrate, I do enjoy thesis writing.
> Interviewer: Which part do you enjoy most?
> Zhimin: It's a combination of joy and pain. […] But having pain doesn't mean that I don't like it. It means that it's not easy. It's a process of challenging yourself. Every day, when you see yourself moving forward for one step, even if it's a small step, when you look back you'd feel proud. You organise many scattered and complicated ideas into a coherent whole, just like gathering up scattered hay to make a tight scarecrow. Eventually, you produce a thesis with a refined argument. You've put a lot into it. Your language has been improved and your thinking skills have also been improved. Then you'll feel good about your achievement and feel that it's your self-actualisation. This is the most enjoyable part. I think you can't feel that joy if you don't work as an academic researcher.

For Zhimin, the development of her thesis writing was intrinsically part of her personal development. The last sentence shows that she positioned herself as a researcher and that she was fully aware of such positioning. While most of her peers in the UK were struggling to understand how to critique research literature, she was already confident about her own level of criticality. However, she did find it difficult to use CT in the discussion chapter of her thesis, particularly regarding how to connect her own research to the prevailing issues in the academic field:

> I think the most difficult part is to elaborate a deeper meaning behind an issue. […] I know that this topic has significance, but how can I make the readers see the significance, how can I reveal deeper meanings at the individual level as well as institutional, societal and cultural level – that is the most difficult part.

To demonstrate depth in analysis meant that one should think critically about the outcome of research, so that the findings of a single research study could be interpreted as an issue of more common concern.

To cope with this challenge, Zhimin believed that, as a junior scholar, she should read as much as possible:

> You should read widely, and then synthesise the knowledge from various fields. You should quote classic works and have an appropriate use of theories to discuss your findings so as to strengthen your argument. Ideally the discussion should be accurate, precise and involve a wide range of quotations.

For most students across the three groups, lack of knowledge was seen as a major cause for not being able to produce critical commentary. Zhimin regarded reading as a duty, and for her reading meant accumulating knowledge in a selective way. The commitment to reading could presume the positioning of a learner, but yet for Zhimin, the learner's positioning served as a means to achieve the goal of becoming a competent researcher. That was different from those who merely, or subconsciously, positioned themselves as learners without other goals, as will be illustrated in Liping's case in the next section.

For Zhimin, the process of writing a thesis ran parallel with that of obtaining a valid position in the academic community. Zhimin valued the feedback offered by her supervisor. She defined the role of the supervisor in the following terms:

> In research, he might not be an expert in your particular field, but he should have the ability to evaluate the research of a junior scholar. He knows the position of your research within the whole research field. He knows whether it's a good research or just so so, or extraordinary. He can stand at a higher position to evaluate the quality of your work. I think this is the most important role that a supervisor should play.

Zhimin believed that the most important responsibility of a supervisor was 'quality control', i.e. to help novices to understand their own positions in relation to the academic community. Zhimin considered her duty as a junior researcher to be that of producing independent and critical thoughts, which were then to be evaluated by her supervisor who was clearer about the requisite academic standard. As will be shown in the next two sessions, students who positioned themselves differently had different ideas about their rights and duties.

The learner perspective

Like a novice researcher, students who positioned themselves as learners also saw knowledge acquisition as their duty. However, for a learner, knowledge was viewed as facts to be learned whereas for a researcher, knowledge was more likely to be viewpoints to critique. Unlike novice researchers who saw their supervisors as insiders and gate-keepers of the academic community, learners would regard their supervisors as an authoritative source of knowledge and probably someone with the right (and duty) to instruct students. Liping's story can illustrate the positioning of a learner.

Liping was from Group Two (G2) in China. Right after her undergraduate study, she decided to pursue a Master's degree because she wanted to become a university teacher, teaching English. Since research was compulsory for teachers at the tertiary level, she felt the need to learn about research. Based on her good academic record, she had the confidence that she could manage the learning at Master's level. After going through the thesis writing process, however, she lost interest in academic research.

Liping's story began when she found it difficult to choose a research topic and happily accepted one that her supervisor suggested. She assumed that her supervisor had a clear idea about how to research that topic but did not want to tell her because it was supposed to be her learning opportunity. Although Liping was

conducting research and should have assumed the positioning of a researcher, in reality she perceived supervisions as opportunities to discern her supervisor's intentions. She expected her supervisor to have 'the answer' and her goal was to design a research study that matched the one in her supervisor's mind. It was a shock to her when one day she found that her supervisor did not actually have any plan for the research. She described that moment in the following way:

> At the time my supervisor seemed to be sure that this coding framework would work, but for a long time I didn't understand why he wanted to code like that and what he wanted to see from such coding. So it was difficult to write […]. When I didn't know how to write about it, I went to talk to him. He said: 'Why are you coding like this? What are you trying to find out?' His question shocked me. It shocked me because since he agreed earlier on this coding framework, I thought he knew how to write the coding results. After that, I realised that perhaps my supervisor was also only exploring.

It was only then that Liping realised that she was supposed to think independently rather than merely follow her supervisor's guidance. She subsequently found a different coding scheme and revised her literature review according to her own understanding. Before that, her positioning did not allow her to perceive the possibility of independent thinking. From a learner's perspective, independent (let alone critical) thinking, was neither a right nor a duty.

Despite the tortuous process of research, Liping appreciated that she achieved the goal of learning, which from another angle revealed her primary positioning as a learner. Some students from G2 chose a topic for themselves and found the research literature difficult to access. In contrast, Liping's supervisor provided her with most of the literature she needed. Liping acknowledged her supervisor's timely and pertinent feedback:

> Every time when I have a problem, I want to 'clasp Buddha's feet' [laughs]. I feel secure that when I email him about a problem, he'll definitely help me to solve it, like an angel [laughs]. […] Without him I definitely won't be able to graduate.

Liping felt grateful for the substantial input received from her supervisor that enhanced her learning. For most of the time, Liping felt the duty to follow her supervisor's instructions for the purpose of learning rather than to develop CT. Although Liping wanted to become a teacher, she did not perceive research as a resource for teaching, but rather, as a separate field of knowledge to be acquired. Thus, the possibility of positioning herself as a teacher, or practitioner, was not actualised either.

The practitioner perspective

The role of practitioner was demonstrated by Yihan. Before commencing her postgraduate study in G1 in England, Yihan obtained a Bachelor's degree in Japanese at a university in mainland China. She then worked as a volunteer teacher for two years, teaching English in a school in rural China. She registered on a Master's course for instrumental reasons, i.e. to obtain a degree for a future career as an educational consultant and entrepreneur. She clearly positioned herself as 'not academic', with no duty to acquire academic knowledge. She said that when she read research papers, she usually only read abstracts, introductions and conclusions. When one of her course tutors explained the requirement for thesis writing, she responded like this:

> He always talks about high standards […] He has a few famous words that we often joke about, like your thesis has to be 'cutting-edge' […], 'critical', and so on. Except for a few people who want to continue to PhD, most of us feel that it doesn't matter that much. We just want to get a pass. Every time when we heard 'cutting-edge', that we should 'create knowledge', we'd laugh to death [laughs]. We just felt, is it that serious?

Unlike students who were striving to fulfil the requirement for critical writing, Yihan treated the term 'critical' merely as a 'posh' academic word. By doing this, she rejected the institutional discourse that set the standard for academic writing. Instead, she believed that a good thesis should be accessible to a wide audience:

> To me, a good thesis should be easy to read, for people who don't work in this research field. It should enable them to easily understand the background of this case study, and they can easily understand and they can easily understand the pattern of interactions between the people in this case, why there are such interactions and what are the causes. They should be able to understand all these with ease, and, as long as they are literate, they should be able to understand the thesis. I think that is the best thesis I have in mind.

This comment reflected her positioning as a practitioner, and her belief that her duty was therefore to make the thesis intelligible to a wide audience.

Yihan chose to carry out research on the professional identities of volunteer teachers, a community where she worked as its member. For her, the real purpose of doing research was to understand society rather than 'to create knowledge'. She wanted to address problems that she encountered in her previous work, but she found thesis writing rather an inadequate method:

> The thesis is a result of reporting a selection of data and relating it to the research literature. I think I'd evaluate this thesis in this way. It doesn't mean that I've solved the problem. It's very far from solving the problem […]. I think problems in writing are easier to solve. But to understand all the issues in reality, to interpret them, I think there's no end. Based on a short fieldwork like the one I did, even though I have two years' working experience, my understanding is still far from what I wanted to achieve.

To Yihan, writing a thesis was about interpreting social reality from a particular theoretical perspective. It was inadequate for increasing one's overall understanding of the real world, let alone solving problems in it. From Yihan's perspective, using CT to review the research literature was not a useful activity, because it was largely irrelevant to her goals. However, her comments demonstrated a critical understanding of the writing task from a practitioner's perspective, and by choosing a research topic related to her own interests, she manipulated the research task in a way that benefited her personal development.

Discussion

Comparing the narratives of Zhimin, Liping and Yihan, it is possible to discern that the positioning of each student entailed certain 'patterns of rights and duties' (Harré et al., 2009, p. 6) that shaped their intuitive or intentional use of CT. In the context of thesis

$$\text{Positioning} \xrightarrow{\dfrac{\text{Knowledge}}{\text{Goals}}} \textbf{Critical Thinking}$$
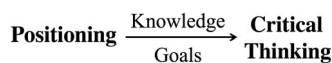
Figure 1. Model of CT and positioning.

writing, their perceptions of rights and duties were expressed as attitudes towards academic knowledge and goals for personal development (Figure 1).

The three students' narratives are examples of the three types of positioning assumed by the 29 students when they wrote their theses. The diagram presented in Figure 1 can be used as a model to explain how positioning relates to the use of CT in thesis writing. When students positioned themselves as novice researchers, acquiring academic knowledge was usually a primary duty, as it was the basis for achieving the goal of creating knowledge. Novice researchers were usually keen to follow academic conventions. When they were required to demonstrate CT, they would learn to perceive CT as a natural right that had to be exercised in order to join the academic community. Knowledge, from their perspective, was embedded in the voices of their future colleagues with whom they should interact.

When students positioned themselves as learners, they were likely to regard knowledge acquisition as a primary duty as well as the most important goal. Learners usually found it difficult to problematise the literature, but that difficulty was caused not necessarily by a lack of competence but more likely by their perceived rights. They were likely to think, due to their limited knowledge, that their views were not as valid as those who possessed more authoritative knowledge. They would rely more on the guidance of their supervisors in thesis writing in order to achieve the goal of learning.

When students positioned themselves as practitioners, they would aim to reflect upon or to solve practical problems. Practitioners were more likely to regard academic knowledge as a resource or a tool whose value lay in its relevance to real-world issues. The acquisition of academic knowledge, therefore, would not be their duty unless it could help with their practice. They believed that they had the right to critique research literature, but the goal of their critique was not to create academic knowledge but to deal with practical issues. The focus of their critique was thus more likely to be on the usefulness or applicability of theoretical knowledge. If they could not provide critiques from other angles, it was not usually because they did not have the ability to do so but because they did not see the need for it, as the academic community was probably neither a reference point nor the audience for their writing.

A comparative analysis of the 29 students also reveals individual differences, i.e. students who assumed the same positioning did not necessarily perceive identical patterns of rights and duties. This is in line with the view that positioning was not about playing prescribed roles, but about 'liv[ing] one's life in terms of one's ongoingly produced self' based on particular personal histories (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). Generally speaking, the findings illustrate that learning to use CT skills was a process of learning to position oneself in relation to established players in the academic field. The rules that one chooses to follow, the resources that one makes use of,, and the way one interacts with academia all reveal one's positioning, formed in the past and growing into the future. Of course, the extent to which one engages in CT is influenced by many factors. In this paper we argue that positioning is a factor that cannot be neglected as it can explain why some students demonstrate more (or less) CT than others in their writing.

The study shows that positioning theory can be used to explain the process of demonstrating CT in postgraduate thesis writing. The major theoretical contribution of the study lies in its focus on the exercise of positioning. Harré and his colleagues categorised positioning into various types and specified that some positionings are formed according to

cultural norms while others are derived from personal experiences (Harré & van Langen-hove, 1991; Harré et al., 2009). However, since positionings are evidence of 'one's ongo-ingly produced self' (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48), we argue that merely identifying the forms and references of one's positioning is not enough. Rather, it is necessary to theorise the process of exercising one's positioning, i.e. what factors are involved when one makes use of external norms and/or personal experiences to complete a particular task. This study shows that positioning is exercised through one's perceptions of knowledge and goals in the context of thesis writing. Analysing the exercise of positioning can reveal more about the 'patterns of reasoning' underlying people's social behaviour (Harré et al., 2009, p. 5), which in itself is an aspiration for developing positioning theory.

Conclusions

This paper reported on a study that investigated how Chinese students' use of CT skills was related to their positioning in the context of postgraduate thesis writing. By analysing the experiences of three students whose primary positioning was respectively a novice researcher, a learner and a practitioner, our analysis revealed that the students' use of CT skills was not exclusively a demonstration of competence, but was also a consequence of positioning. Each positioning revealed perceived rights and duties about knowledge and was directed by particular goals for personal development. The extent to which those perceptions were in line with those required for CT shaped students' approach to applying CT skills in their writing. Positioning, therefore, was an inherent part, if not a pre-condition, of using CT skills in thesis writing.

Based on the findings we developed a model of CT and positioning. We would argue that the model applies to all students regardless of nationality. However, as that is beyond the focus of the study, we suggest that future research can test the explanatory power of the model on a wider range of students. It would also be interesting to explore if the model can explain students' use of CT in relation to socio-political matters. In terms of methodology, we suggest that future research can continue to adopt such a 'context-sensitive' methodology (Tian & Low, 2011, p. 73). Multiple data sources can be used to analyse students' CT experiences, such as various forms of inter-views, journals and students' written drafts. Regarding CT and positioning issues, research-ers can focus on individual students to see how different positionings interact with each other throughout a person's life history. Researchers can also observe how students pos-ition themselves in relation to their disciplinary subjects and compare it with how their supervisors position themselves in relation to the same disciplinary subjects.

Pedagogically, the study suggests that in order to teach CT to Chinese students, it is necessary to understand their positionings in addition to their abilities. Some positionings may preclude students from using CT in certain circumstances. Students may not even be aware that some of their difficulties are related to positioning issues. The range of position-ings illustrated in this study suggests that Chinese students are not a homogeneous entity characterised by passive learning and lack of criticality. In teaching and supervision con-texts, addressing positioning issues may help students to understand the nature of CT expectations. For students who are used to performing as mere learners, instructors can clarify the rights and duties expected of a researcher, so that students' CT potentials are not constrained by unarticulated restrictions entailed by the positioning of a learner.

For students who adopt a practitioner's position, it can be helpful for instructors to encourage them to make the best use of available resources to achieve their own goals, as CT is not merely academic skills but a set of skills that a set of skills that can and should be used in a wide range of practical settings. The ultimate aim of teaching CT is not only to enable students to meet institutional requirements, but to use such requirements as a positive stimulus for reflecting on themselves, establishing clearer goals and accomplishing their own dreams.

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