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## Pushing too Little, Praising too Much? Intercultural Misunderstandings between a Chinese Doctoral Student and a Dutch Supervisor

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### ABSTRACT

To understand the challenges and their causes in interactions between Western supervisors and international doctoral students, we conducted a self-study of our experiences as a Chinese international student and her Dutch supervisor during her doctoral research project. We found the supervisor and the student to differ in their expectations of the learning goals and procedure for the doctoral program. We analyze three types of misunderstandings, regarding how formal the supervision should be, how feedback and assessment should be provided and understood (e.g. strict versus implicit critiques, open praise for excellence versus praise to encourage), and how the student is expected to learn (e.g. expecting answers versus providing questions, learning from modeling versus learning by trial and error). We also illustrate how implicit these misunderstandings were in daily supervision interactions and how deeply they were rooted in the cultural (i.e. power distance, individualism, masculinity, and indulgence) and educational (i.e. education oriented toward qualification versus personal development, level of competition, and degree of teacher regulation) differences between the supervisor and the student.

### ¿Empujando muy poco, felicitando demasiado? Malentendidos interculturales entre un estudiante de doctorado Chino y un supervisor Holandés

Con el propósito de comprender los desafíos y sus causas en las interacciones entre supervisores occidentales y estudiantes doctorales internacionales, realizamos un self-study de nuestras experiencias durante el trabajo doctoral de una estudiante China y su supervisor Holandés. Encontramos que entre el supervisor y la estudiante había diferencias en las expectativas de aprendizaje y en los procedimientos del programa doctoral. Analizamos tres tipos de malentendidos, relacionados a qué tan formal debía ser la supervisión, de qué modos la evaluación y la retroalimentación debieran ser entregadas y entendidas (por ejemplo, críticas estrictas versus implícitas, felicitaciones por la excelencia versus felicitaciones para animar), y cómo se espera que el estudiante aprenda (por ejemplo, tener la

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expectativa de respuestas versus proveer preguntas, aprendizaje por modelaje versus aprendizaje por ensayo y error). Asimismo mostramos lo implícito que estaban estos malentendidos en la cotidianeidad de las interacciones en la supervisión, y la profundidad de su instalación en las diferencias entre el supervisor y la estudiante en lo cultural (poder, distancia, individualismo, masculinidad y complacencia), así como en lo educativo (educación orientada a la obtención de credenciales versus orientada al desarrollo personal, nivel de competencia, y grado de regulación del profesor).

Considering himself quite capable of intercultural communication, PhD supervision, and English as a second language when asked to supervise Yanjuan, a PhD student from China, Klaas, an associate professor at a Dutch university, experienced many apparently cultural misunderstandings in supervising her, resulting in feelings of confusion, frustration and anger for both of them. Due to an intervention of Alessandra, a colleague Klaas asked for help, they were able to see where the misunderstandings came from and how to identify, discuss and solve them. The rationale of this self-study is to gain a deeper understanding of this process of intercultural communication and supervision between a Western supervisor and a Chinese PhD student.

In a larger context, supervising doctoral research students is an important but challenging task for university educators, and a doctoral student's transformation into an independent researcher is a key issue confronting many students and their supervisors (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). Doctoral students' intelligence, thinking style, personal traits, and previous education, as well as the type of supervisor and the learning environment, can powerfully influence this transition (Lovitts, 2008).

This challenge is complicated at Western universities by the growing number of international students in advanced research programs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). A large group of these international students are from Asia. In addition to the general challenges, Asian international students confront new, drastically different learning environments and face hurdles such as acculturation and social isolation (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; McClure, 2007). They can experience strong emotional reactions when they perceive that the learning patterns they have developed in their previous studies are no longer suited to cope with the new environment (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013).

Western university teachers typically find it difficult to understand these international students. Thus teaching and supervising them effectively is difficult as well (Tan, 2011). Asian students who have a Confucian heritage cultural background traditionally have been characterized in Western educational settings as passive, rote learners. Such an impression may be confirmed when teachers encounter student reluctance to express their opinions in class or to challenge teacher opinions (e.g. Campbell & Li, 2008; Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). However, it is possible that Asian learners, similar to their Western counterparts, approach learning with the intention of understanding meaning rather than simple memorization (e.g. Grimshaw, 2007; Mathias, Bruce, & Newton, 2013). The educational orientations and teaching ideas in Asian countries may create particular expectations about learning goals, behaviors, and desirable learning approaches, which could have important impacts on what students aspire to learn and the way they pursue those learning goals when they come to study in the West (Campbell & Li, 2008; Curtin et al., 2013; Lovitts, 2008).

Therefore, as students adapt to the new learning environment, both constructive and destructive frictions can occur if students and teachers differ in their expectations. For example, Western perceptions of the degree of teacher/student regulation of learning might result in Asian students bitterly concluding that the teachers do not teach and professors becoming frustrated that the Asian students are dependent and passive learners (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Cross & Hitchcock, 2007; Mathias et al., 2013; McClure, 2005; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). Whether these claims are valid is not a point of discussion here, but it is clear that both students and teachers experience frictions, likely originating from their cultural and educational differences (Hu & Smith, 2011; Lee, 2011). In this light, it is worthwhile to explore how the groups perceive each other and the teaching and supervision processes.

Moreover, the aim of this study is to shed light on the causes of communication difficulties and misunderstandings between Western supervisors and Asian students in relation to their cultural and educational differences. We conducted a self-study (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008; Loughran, 2007) of our experience, as a Chinese international student and her Dutch supervisor during her doctoral research project at a Dutch university. We use intercultural communication and educational theory to analyze the results. By using these theoretical notions, we also aim to demonstrate how our findings go beyond our individual experiences and are valuable to teachers and students involved in intercultural education as a whole.

## Theoretical Background: Cultural differences

In this study, *culture* is generally defined as the collective mental programming of the human mind, which distinguishes one group of people from another. Differences in the mental programming between Western teachers and international Asian students are thus one source of misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. We consider Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) helpful to understand general cultural differences. Among cultural value theories, several of which have substantial overlap (Schwartz et al., 2012), Hofstede's theory is one of the most widely known and has been developed and validated through extended research over half a century. Its ubiquity, together with the simplicity of its structure (e.g. six dimensions compared with Schwartz et al. (2012) 10 values), render Hofstede's theory the most recognizable. We acknowledge that Hofstede's theory cannot be considered deterministic for individuals. We are aware that we both could be outliers in our own cultures. Nevertheless, his theory provides a general frame for understanding the cultural differences in the communication between a Dutch supervisor and a Chinese doctoral student. Hofstede distinguished six dimensions to describe cultures: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, pragmatism and indulgence. We use four dimensions in this study, not only because China and the Netherlands differ remarkably on these dimensions, but also because they are relevant to understanding intercultural communications in an educational setting.

Power distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). Based on his analysis, Chinese society believes that inequalities amongst people are acceptable and formal authority is taken very seriously, whereas in Dutch society hierarchy is mainly accepted for convenience only, control is disliked and attitude towards people higher in the hierarchy is informal and on first name basis.

Individualism versus collectivism is defined as the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups: Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. (p. 92)

China is considered to be a highly collectivist culture where people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily of themselves. The Netherlands, however, are viewed as a strong individualistic society, in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. "The importance of personal time, freedom, and challenge" (p. 138) are the typical for an individualistic society.

Masculinity refers to the distribution of emotional roles between the genders. A masculine culture (China) means that the society is driven by competition, achievement and success. A feminine culture (The Netherlands) means a strong focus on caring for others and quality of life, and standing out from the crowd is not admirable. When it comes to education, "in the more feminine cultures, the average student is considered the norm, while in more masculine countries, the best students are the norm.[...] The best boy in class in the Netherlands is somewhat a ridiculous figure" (p. 160).

Another more recently added dimension, indulgence versus restraint, is defined as follows:

Indulgence stands for a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. Its opposite pole, restraint, reflects a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms. (p. 281)

China is a restrained society, having a tendency to cynicism and pessimism, with hardly no emphasis on leisure time, having the perception that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong. The Netherlands however is a culture of indulgence, having a tendency towards optimism, and valuing leisure time.

Generally speaking, in Chinese culture, formal authority is taken very seriously. People value the importance of training, physical conditions, and the use of skills. Chinese culture is success oriented and driven. Excellence is openly rewarded, and failing in school can be a disaster. Chinese people tend toward cynicism and pessimism and perceive that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong. In contrast, in Dutch society, control is disliked, and attitudes toward higher-powered people are informal. People value the importance of personal time, freedom, and challenge. It is important to keep a life-work balance. Standing out from the crowd is not typically valued. People tend toward optimism and value leisure time.

## Contextual Background-Orientations toward Education

### *Dutch Education*

In Dutch education, as in many other Western countries, two main orientations toward educational goals can be distinguished: an emphasis on qualification and schooling and an emphasis on personal and moral development (Belo, van Driel, van Veen & Verloop, 2014). The first refers to the importance of qualifying young people for jobs in terms of required knowledge and skills. The second involves perceiving education as a personal and moral enterprise: Young people should be guided into adulthood, developing themselves personally to become balanced individuals prepared to function in a democratic society. Most people in Dutch society simultaneously value, either positively or negatively, qualification

and personal development, indicating that they are not valued as opposites of each other. These orientations can also be found in the educational system, where average achievement is sufficient to pass to a higher grade or to access higher education. Stringent entrance regulations, such as high exam scores, are rare in the Dutch educational system. Little need for such regulations exists, because the educational quality is generally high compared with that in other countries (OECD, 2014). In addition, some Dutch schools have a strong educational pedagogy focused on personal development. Many Dutch parents argue that their children's personal well-being is more relevant than becoming highly qualified. Reflecting this philosophy, children are allowed to play after school, teachers avoid pressuring children to learn, and children have a say in decisions about their education.

### Chinese Education

In China in contrast, as in many other Asian countries that share a Confucian heritage culture, the main goal of education is oriented more toward qualification (Niu, 2007; Wang & Liu, 2011). The overvaluation of academic achievement has been heavily criticized, leading to a new curriculum as of 2001 that emphasizes individual development more (Paine & Fang, 2006), yet the effects of this change have not yet been observed. The Chinese government emphasizes education as a means to prepare a workforce for economic development (Wang & Liu, 2011). China uses an exam-based filtering system, typically the National College Entrance Exam, and education has functioned as a way to improve social status (Niu, 2007; Shin, 2012). With few exceptions, the more prestigious an institution, the more strict the entrance regulations, resulting in intense competition among students. Parents' strong desire for education has prompted their substantial investments in education (Shin, 2012). Excellent performance is frequently rewarded and thus reinforced in both Chinese education and the social environment. High achievement is of primary importance and is a precondition for a student personal well-being. Average study time lasts 8–12 h each day, five to six days a week, especially in the last three years of secondary education (cf. Mathias et al., 2013). Therefore, students aim to or have been urged to become as highly qualified as possible and to sacrifice a great deal of their leisure time (cf. Hu & Smith, 2011).

### Doctoral Programs in the Netherlands

We briefly describe the design and supervision of doctoral programs in the Netherlands in the context of this study. In general, as de Weert (2006) notes, Dutch doctoral programs do not require a standard set of courses to be taken by all students. This aspect distinguishes Dutch doctoral programs from other countries' programs, particularly those of U.S. universities, in which the first years typically involve substantial coursework for the mastery of particular theoretical frameworks and research methods (Gardner, 2008). Doctoral training in the Netherlands "could be characterized as a 'learning by doing model', suggesting that through the undertaking of research activities, doctoral students can prepare themselves for the award of a doctoral degree" (de Weert, 2006, p. 906). However, research schools have an increasing role in doctoral education, providing general and subject-related workshops and seminars. In most cases, at the beginning of a program, the doctoral student begins working on a research project under the supervision of one or more senior staff members. Ultimately, the student writes a dissertation of *acceptable quality* for an international research

community. The dissertation typically includes three or four articles (published or to be published in peer-reviewed, SSCI-ranked journals), an introduction, and a discussion chapter. Supervisors determine whether the quality is sufficient to gain a doctorate. If so, they send the thesis and their assessment to three to five other colleagues (mainly full professors) for confirmation. After their approval, the student then defends his or her dissertation to the committee for 45 min in public and is awarded the doctoral degree.

## Present Study

According to Hofstede et al. (2010), both Chinese international students and Western supervisors could be described as mentally programmed by their cultural background and their previous educational experiences. Against this background, the question then arises: What happens when a student with Chinese social-cultural and educational background is supervised by a Western supervisor? We asked ourselves the following research questions:

- What expectations did the supervisor and the student each have for the doctoral project?
- What misunderstandings did the student and the supervisor experience during the supervision of the doctoral research?
- How are these expectations and misunderstandings related to cultural and educational differences?

## Method

We opted for a self-study methodology because (1) self-study not only informs the participants in the study but also makes the tacit knowledge available to others (Loughran, 2007); (2) it can most effectively reveal the misunderstandings involved in actual supervision encounters (Hamilton, 2005), which are often subtle and easily go unnoticed when rooted in core cultural and educational differences (Hofstede et al., 2010); and (3) it adds an alternative, individualized, and in-depth form of understanding to current intercultural education literature, which to date has relied mainly on surveys and interviews (Campbell & Li, 2008; Chen & Bennett, 2012; Cross & Hitchcock, 2007; Curtin et al., 2013; Egan, Stockley, Brouwer, Tripp, & Stechyson, 2009; Mathias et al., 2013). Furthermore, Curtin et al. (2013) note that a qualitative approach could increase understanding of the origins and consequences of specific misunderstandings. Using the supervisor–student dyad, rather than focusing on one or the other, also allows us to explore misunderstandings from both perspectives.

## Participants

A Dutch supervisor (Klaas) and a Chinese doctoral student (Yanjuan) participated in this self-study. At the time of the study, Klaas was an associate professor at a research university in the Netherlands. Yanjuan came to the Netherlands in 2010 to complete her doctorate and finished in 2014 (Hu, 2014).

Klaas had been supervising doctoral students for five years before taking on Yanjuan as a student. He had supervised and co-supervised several Dutch and foreign doctoral students (from Armenia, Peru, and Brazil). He spent a year in the United States as a visiting scholar.



In addition to experiencing intercultural communication dilemmas as a Dutch person in a U.S. context, he was involved in the supervision of students with international backgrounds, mostly American, as well as some second-generation Mexican, Korean, and Chinese students. He also worked with a Chinese researcher on an international project.

Yanjuan had just graduated from her master's study in linguistics when she started her doctoral project in 2010. All her education experiences were in mainland China until that point. She had won various awards and always had excellent academic performance. Thus she is typical of successful students from a Chinese educational setting.

### **Data Collection, Research Approach, and Data Analysis**

Self-study involves a continual interplay between the participants researched and the research process (Loughran, 2007). Thus the data collection and data analysis in this study were largely interwoven and followed an iterative process, which included three major phases from September 2013 to August 2014.

In phase one (September–November 2013), to gain a first orientation, both Yanjuan and Klaas reflected on their experiences during the previous three years of supervision and independently developed a list of the striking aspects they experienced, including the most impressive and most challenging aspects of the supervision environment and supervising activities.

Next, we exchanged, combined, and systematically analyzed the lists. Phase two consisted of open, deep interviews with Yanjuan on December 7 (two and a half hours) and with Klaas on December 16 (one and a half hours). To ensure that both participants would talk as openly and in depth as possible, we chose to be interviewed by a third researcher, Alessandra, who has extensive knowledge and experience with intercultural communication and good knowledge about both participants.

A third phase (January–August 2014) involved discussion, debate, and negotiation between Yanjuan and Klaas to distill the essential elements of the misunderstandings and the underlying assumptions we each held in relation to our educational, cultural, and personal background characteristics (see Wright, Murray, & Geale, 2007 for a similar process in reaching consensus for their interview data analysis). Thus we summarized key points of the interviews and discussed them in relation to the list from phase one, followed by open and ongoing discussions about the initial results and several revisions of the results during the analyzing and reporting process. This phase included Yanjuan and Klaas—and, in a later phase, Alessandra—actively pursuing alternative perspectives of understanding. We used this procedure to “minimize possibilities for self-justification or rationalization of exiting practices and behaviors” (Loughran, 2007, p. 16). The process continued until we reached consensus.

In the analysis, several concepts are used that need some additional explanation. *Implicit expectations* refer to expectations held only by the student or the supervisor but not openly stated, so that the other was not aware of those expectations. As a result of mismatched implicit expectations, certain misunderstandings occurred, which we refer to as “implicit misunderstandings.” We selected three main forms of such implicit misunderstandings in this study: informality, feedback and assessment, and learning and teaching styles. *Informality* refers to the way the supervision and learning environment is organized (e.g. how to address each other, how formal the daily conversation should be, etiquette, gift giving). *Feedback and assessment* refers to the way student work is evaluated, in either spoken or written form



(e.g. complimenting, making suggestions, criticizing research assignments). *Learning and teaching styles* refer to the role of the supervisor and the student in the learning process (e.g. teaching by providing answers or guiding questions, learning from the models or learning from trial and error, who is expected to organize the help needed for a learning task).

As described in the theoretical background, we distinguish cultural and educational differences. However, educational differences are strongly influenced by cultural differences. In addition, personality can play a role in explaining the misunderstandings explored in this study. We checked for this factor by comparing Yanjuan's experiences with those of other Chinese doctoral students in the same academic context. We assumed that a misunderstanding occurred because of an interplay of all three factors, but especially culture and education. Thus we do not argue that certain misunderstandings are cultural misunderstandings and others are educational or personal misunderstandings, rather, we aim to illustrate each specific misunderstanding by investigating the different layers of influence from specific cultural and educational characteristics.

## Results

### *Implicit Expectations*

On the basis of previous experiences with foreign doctoral students, Klaas began the supervision of this Chinese doctoral student with the impression that Chinese students are hard-working, serious, and somewhat problematic with regard to social aspects, because of a different and, for him, unfamiliar culture and political context. Therefore, he did not expect much in the beginning from this student, assuming it would take some time before she understood what it meant to complete a social science doctorate in a Dutch academic context. This expectation was reinforced by a misunderstanding that lasted approximately eight months: He mistakenly believed she came from a teacher education program at a Chinese university, but she actually came from a modern foreign languages background. He thus concluded that she likely did not possess sufficient research training, knowledge, skills, and experience for conducting this specific doctoral project, which required a social science background. However, he assumed that it would still be possible that she could finish the project "acceptably." In any case, he did not assume that she would finish the project in time and with the good results that she actually did in 2014.

About what to expect from a doctoral project, Klaas stated:

What I think a PhD project is.... The way we do it lately, we [the supervisors] mostly formulated a project, the student applies for it, and conducts the research, collects data, and writes three or four articles out of it. If you see it in a technical way, it is *simply producing four articles*, and an introduction and discussion chapter, that's it. So what you learn is to *do the trick of conducting research* that has *certain quality* (main standards are the criteria used by peer-reviewed SSCI-journals), and you do this at least four times (resulting in four or more articles). And you report it in a standard way *we think is acceptable* for an international research community.

Moreover, he described the procedure of this doctoral program:

By doing this you get your PhD, you learn to become an independent researcher. You do follow some courses, and you read a lot of literature. But if you compare [the Dutch program] with American universities, they have two years of formal education, mainly courses, followed by writing your own research plan and then conduct it. *We actually learn more by doing, by being engaged in the research process of reading, conducting, collecting, analyzing, reporting, and especially discussing all these steps with each other.* [emphasis added]

**Table 1.** Summary of implicit expectations about informality, feedback and assessment, and learning and teaching styles.

Themes	Implicit expectations
Supervision environment	Formal
Feedback and assessment	Between formal and informal
	Explicit and genuine compliment and critique
	Implicit critique, compliment to encourage
Learning and teaching style	Guidance initiated by the supervisor
	Learning from experience and examples
	Learning initiated by the learner
	Learning through trial and error

Yanjuan had different expectations. On the basis of her previous experiences as a successful student in China, she started her doctoral program with the assumption that she would continue her story in a different country. Although she was outside China for the first time and did not know much about the Dutch (academic) context, she was not worried and was determined to overcome the challenges and return to China like a “star.”

She also had different ideas of what she should be learning in this doctoral program. First, she wanted to increase her chances of a better career by getting better credentials: the doctoral degree, publications, advanced knowledge, and good research skills. To distinguish herself from other candidates, she needed to be as good as possible. These goals were in line with the highly competitive exam-based filtering system in the current Chinese education. Second, later in the process of working on her doctorate, her goals expanded to include the value of her research and becoming an independent researcher: “I should be able to come up with my own idea, to defend it, but also have the capacity to take in the other arguments to make my own arguments or decisions more justified.” Her adapted goals were better aligned with the qualification orientation in the Dutch education but still strongly rooted in her Chinese educational background, which emphasizes student ability. Third, she wanted to experience Western culture. As an English major, she had read a great deal about the beautiful and unknown West.

On the basis of her experience in China and her understanding of the British and U.S. systems, she presumed that she knew the procedure, though she did not know what getting a doctorate implicated and what was required to complete it. She had unconsciously assumed those requirements would be specified as part of the doctoral program or by the supervisor. She also assumed there would be courses and training designed to prepare students to accomplish the research tasks, as well as explicit standards to measure her research knowledge, skills, and output in terms of good or weak performance.

**Implicit Misunderstandings**

Table 1 presents a selection of the implicit expectations between Klaas, as the Dutch supervisor, and Yanjuan, as the Chinese doctoral student, in a Dutch academic context. In retrospect, the misunderstandings seem obvious, but in the day-to-day reality of the supervision process, they were implicit, and it took time to understand that we were misunderstanding each other. Although such misunderstandings could also happen when both the supervisor and student are from the same cultural and educational background, the emotional reactions to those misunderstandings were much greater due to our differences in terms of language

(English was used as language to communicate and was for both a second language), culture, educational goals, expectations, and so on. Because we did not expect these implicit misunderstandings and were not immediately aware of them, they were not addressed fully during the supervision meetings in the first two years. Although at a personal level they felt both sympathetic to each other, professionally Klaas considered Yanjuan to be difficult, sensitive and unwilling to articulate her thoughts, while Yanjuan saw Klaas as unpredictable, rather blunt, and offensive. After those two years, after an intervention of Alessandra, a colleague Klaas asked for help, we both became more aware of its cultural roots and also developed a method of meta-communication to talk explicitly about them. This method consisted of addressing feelings of misunderstanding explicitly in terms of possible cultural and educational differences, asking each other to articulate the expectations one had in that specific situation and how one interpreted the other's reactions and actions.

For our analyzes, we selected three sets of misunderstandings that were most clearly related to our different backgrounds: informality, feedback and assessment, and learning and teaching styles. In the following subsections, we introduce each aspect with dialogs between the supervisor and the doctoral student, which are careful reconstructions of dialogs that actually happened and summarize the specific misunderstandings between us.

### Informality

Yanjuan, entering the supervisor's room, states: "I learned from the ICO [Dutch research school of education studies] introduction course that I should have 600 h of supervision from you. That means roughly 3 h per week. I only have one hour or so. I should have more time...."

Klaas, shocked: "I think we might have some misunderstanding here. This is not the way you should ask for my time. Do you talk to your Chinese supervisors this way?"

Yanjuan, becoming nervous and slightly emotional: "No, but I don't know how to talk to you."

Klaas: "Please come in and sit down, let's talk about this."

In general, communication between students and supervisors differ in the Chinese and Dutch educational contexts. This difference is rooted in the cultural differences in power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Yanjuan assumed the highly formal supervision she was accustomed to in China. She was uncomfortable addressing her supervisor by his first name, which she unconsciously felt a bit disrespectful. She also found it confusing that the supervisor asked her, "How are you?" every day, really wanted to know how she was doing, and made jokes all the time during the supervision sessions.

Klaas, being used to a more informal way of communicating and supervising and not really willing to make it more formal, noticed that she was not familiar with his informal communication style. He tried to help her adjust and attempted to create a warm and inviting climate.

Although the initial confusions may derive from the differences in power distances between a teacher and a student, the misunderstanding that Yanjuan and Klaas experienced may also be based in their personalities: Klaas is extremely open and strongly prefers informality. Yanjuan is highly motivated to explore and to accommodate the informality she understood to be expected of her.

Yanjuan soon became fond of this informal way of communication. She was learning to appreciate that the supervisor would share lyrics from his favorite music, lines from movies he enjoyed, and funny stories during the supervision meetings. She was even more pleasantly surprised that Klaas would also talk about his careless mistakes with cultural differences in

the past as a result of being “too Dutch.” She then gradually came to the conclusion that the supervisor was very friendly, and she could speak her mind “without worrying too much about its consequences,” which to her was a new situation in a supervision relationship. Therefore, she assumed she simply could state what she thought she was entitled to—three hours of supervision per week.

However, from her supervisor’s perspective, the way she stated her request (“just demanding it”) was inappropriate and rude, which surprised him because he was used to her polite and gentle way of asking questions. Moreover, he believed that her calculation of the amount of hours was actually incorrect. Her reply that she did not know how to talk to him made him aware that they had a communication problem related to his informal supervision. He knew it confused her: “so much more informal than she was used to, and at the same time not sure what the rules are.”

Yanjuan was not fully aware that she had been rude in asking for more supervision. However, she learned from her supervisor’s reaction that she should ask such questions indirectly in the future, watch her manner, and try not to be blunt and act impulsively. Her awareness of how to communicate more efficiently was made more salient from conversations with a colleague, Alessandra, who came from Italy and had lived in the Netherlands for 20 years. Alessandra, along with a workshop on effective communication, raised Yanjuan’s awareness of the many intercultural issues one faces when studying abroad. It made her realize the crucial role of good communication and the relevance of making these issues explicit, which never occurred to her as a goal on her learning list.

In the meantime, after noticing Yanjuan’s confusion, Klaas acted more patiently, taking time to talk about those intercultural issues, and tried to raise her awareness of certain mistakes indirectly, for example, by telling stories that implied similar mistakes Yanjuan was making. Making those issues a topic of conversation helped improve the communication, though it did not completely prevent other misunderstandings from happening.

### *Feedback and Assessment*

Klaas: “You did some good work!”

Yanjuan: “I don’t believe you!”

Different meanings and connotations of certain types of feedback and assessment were another source of confusion, resulting into another set of implicit misunderstandings between the student and her supervisor. Being socialized in the Chinese educational system, Yanjuan was used to receiving praise for good performance and strict and clear criticisms for weak performance, which made it obvious that that particular performance was in need of improvement. Moreover, she was more accustomed to a restrained culture and an education tradition that portrays senior teachers as “masters,” full of wisdom, therefore, receiving strict and clear criticisms from senior teachers in general is expected and even appreciated when expressed tacitly.

Klaas was unfamiliar with this way of giving feedback and assessment; explicitly stating something is weak is often not useful or helpful but rather discouraging. Furthermore, he focused on improving the work by asking questions, giving examples, or even showing how to perform (e.g. to improve writing, he would rewrite sentences or paragraphs as an example of how to do it instead of merely stating that it should be rewritten). Relatedly, Chinese and Dutch educational systems differ with regard to assessment. Yanjuan was used to explicit

criteria and evaluation for each assignment, module, or semester, which gives the student a clear overview of how well they have performed. This method is rooted in the Chinese education value, oriented toward qualification, which encourages high levels of competition. Not only are explicit criteria applied, but student performances also are frequently assessed to determine their competitiveness (typically, students receive grades ranging from 0 to 100 or 150, thus scores can be easily differentiated), and assessment results are used to modify student learning accordingly. In contrast, Dutch education emphasizes student personal well-being, and assessment marks range from 0 to 10. Moreover, Dutch society ranks higher than China in indulgence, and people typically exhibit weak control and value leisure time. The doctoral program in the Dutch academic context actually has only one formal assessment, at the end when the thesis is ready. In between, the assessment is informal, and in most cases, clear criteria are missing, except for a common shared understanding of what good research is and how students should perform to learn how to conduct such research. Even Dutch doctoral students may find this method of assessment problematic. Coming from a Chinese educational background compounded the problem. All these differences resulted in some rather complicated misunderstandings, as illustrated by the following example.

For the first a few months, when Yanjuan handed in work, she was happy to hear the supervisor say that it was good. However, gradually, Yanjuan started to suspect that Klaas sometimes used positive comments even though the work did not deserve them yet. It seemed that her supervisor was holding back some negative feedback, either rephrasing his comments carefully into constructive feedback or telling strategic lies.

Therefore, when she received positive comments, she did not know whether the comment was true or false. Later in the process, she deliberately refused to believe the positive comments. She only believed him if he expressed it with surprise and explanations or if it was confirmed by the comments of other colleagues.

Other times, she thought she performed well, and yet her supervisor made no comments at all. She was one of the top students at her university in China, where she received a great deal of what she considered “real” positive feedback. Now she received hardly any accolades when she expected them. She was implicitly self-evaluating according to the Chinese educational standards but remained unaware that those evaluations were no longer valid in the Dutch educational context.

Therefore, this combination of ambiguous, unclear, or missing feedback made her feel like a weak student and very insecure about how well she had performed. Therefore, she frequently asked her supervisor about the criteria he used to evaluate her work. The answer she got was “If you perform poorly, we will tell you.” Or phrased differently, as a form of implicit trust, Klaas stated, “I accepted the job to supervise you, so by definition you are good. Otherwise, I will drop you.”

When Yanjuan told her supervisor she did not believe him when he said her work was good, Klaas’s reaction was surprise and amusement, he said, “Well, then you don’t—what else can I say?” At the same time it made him aware that another intercultural misunderstanding occurred without being able to articulate it yet. He already noticed that sometimes she had difficulties in accepting his feedback, often trying to force him to make explicit statements about her work. However, considering that a doctoral program is a learning process, in his view it was almost never possible to say something is weak, rather, it is more useful to talk about it in terms of what can be improved. Moreover, considering his initial assumptions about her expected performances (as described previously), after a few months, he was

happily surprised to observe how good she was, and how fast she learned and adapted herself to the new environment and academic requirements.

At the same time, he knew that the kind of explicit criteria for assessment she frequently asked for and was used to in China was simply not available in the Dutch academic context. He tried to show her that the informal assessment involved everything she did, and as long as he and the other supervisors perceived her work as good, she could assume it was good and continue. He was aware this way of assessing made her insecure, just as it did with Dutch doctoral students, so he tried to give her clear and positive feedback because he and his co-supervisors considered her work good. The bottom line of such an approach is that the investment a supervisor makes in the work of the doctoral student is considered a sign of trust and positive assessment.

Explicating our different understandings helped, though it took time to understand we had such different understandings. Even knowing these differences, it was difficult to grow accustomed to and truly “believe” what the other was saying. For Yanjuan, after some unsuccessful attempts to try harder (a process of shrinking self-confidence, her supervisor’s repeated compliments, and other colleagues confirming his comments), she came to realize “they do not have any intended learning goals for me as long as I finish the papers.” Moreover, if she wanted to learn something, she should define the goal and assessment criteria herself. In other words, she realized that she had been overly dependent on external approval and decided to seek internal approval independently. She also came to learn that “the shrinking confidence may not necessarily be bad, just difficult to accept in the first place. It helps to skim off the overconfidence or arrogance.” She began to filter the positive comments, not believing the words literally but to hear the message between the lines. For her supervisor, he tried to be more explicit about the criteria and to check regularly with her about her progress and the way she perceived it.

### *Learning and Teaching Styles*

Yanjuan: What should I do next?

Klaas: What do you think you should do?

### *Providing Answers versus Posing Questions*

Being accustomed to her supervisors at her Chinese university, Yanjuan assumed her Dutch supervisor could provide better answers and inform her of the best course of action. Thus not only was she prepared to learn from his example, but she also expected answers from him upon her inquiry. In contrast, Klaas expected her to take the initiative, ask questions if needed, and to discuss with him what she found and wrote. So in the beginning, she tended to be quiet during the conversations, agreeing all the time with him. Even if she doubted his statements, she would not share this doubt, telling herself, “I’d better make sure and come back to the supervisor later.” Klaas noticed

a lot of time she said yes, without explaining a lot. I had to ask for it. I am used to asking a doctoral student a question and hearing ... a whole explanation ... a whole story that we have a conversation about. That was something she was not really used to in the beginning. ... It was kind of a polite waiting. Just wait and see what happens. You tell me what to do.

In addition, it took time to understand each other and to adapt. Klaas’s initial interpretation of Yanjuan’s silence was that she did not have any idea about what to do or any opinion

about what she read, forcing him to teach and instruct. However, he had experienced similar misunderstanding before, so he kept trying to show her that a doctoral program is a learning trajectory that requires the student to actively ask questions, share opinions, and take initiatives, especially in the Dutch context in which silence or obedience is understood as a sign of not understanding or participating. Yanjuan gradually switched to a more active attitude during the meetings and took more initiative. In light of Yanjuan's previously described misunderstanding about informality, Yanjuan's confusion about how to communicate with her supervisors is even more understandable.

### ***Modeling versus Trial and Error***

Another difference related to Yanjuan's perception of the supervisor as the master pertained to how to learn new skills. Yanjuan expected clear instructions, prepared to "imitate the master's way," before she began work on a learning task. Klaas was focused on letting her learn by doing, by trial and error. An example was learning how to conduct an interview. Yanjuan lacked any practical experience regarding conducting interviews. She had attended a workshop that provided her with a broad overview of interviewing. Klaas therefore assumed that she already had a general idea about interviewing and only needed to learn by doing and making mistakes and therefore proposed a meeting to practice. Whereas Yanjuan came to the meeting expecting Klaas to tell her some practical rules of conducting an interview, which she would then practice, Klaas proposed to practice straight away: she would interview him, and he would interview her. Because Yanjuan was not used to learning by trial and error, she felt insecure which made her hesitate and which resulted in Klaas taking over several times.

Yanjuan felt sad about her clumsiness during the interview practice, as she recalls: "I felt somehow humiliated for doing such a bad job, but also frustrated because he did not teach me how to do it, but expect[ed] me to be able to do it right there." She also noted that "after the practice, I [dived] into the books, any sources I could find, to teach myself." This can be understood against her collectivism cultural background, where losing face such as exposing one's weaknesses and inability should be avoided in any case. Klaas instead perceived this trial and error, and the resultant cognitive frictions, as useful for her to experience how difficult interviewing can be and was completely unaware of how she experienced this practice. He was surprised afterward to learn that she perceived the experience in terms of failing and even humiliation, whereas he saw it in terms of a learning experience.

### **Discussion**

Cultural and educational backgrounds are highly relevant factors, though a large part of the misunderstandings in intercultural doctoral education may resemble those experienced by doctoral students in general. Many doctoral students in U.S. universities struggle with the transition to becoming independent researchers (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2008). On the one hand, students are accustomed to the structure of their previous educational experiences and constantly look for guidance from their supervisors. On the other hand, they need to feel competent and independent from their supervisors, thinking that asking for too much help may be a sign of their inability to do what is expected of them (Egan, 1989; Gardner, 2008). Yanjuan experienced this struggle, compounded by the previously discussed transition from the Chinese to the Dutch educational system. The use of a second language by



either the student or the supervisor—or, in this case, both—further added to the complexity of those misunderstandings.

Our findings are based on one supervisor–student dyad and are highly personalized, thus we caution against generalizing the findings. We also do not mean to suggest that misunderstandings during the supervision of doctoral students should be avoided completely. Their implicit nature renders such avoidance highly unlikely. However, we argue that there are more misunderstandings than students and teachers are aware of, particularly during intercultural encounters.

## Conclusions

This article describes a selection of implicit misunderstandings, together with their causes and consequences, in the supervision process between a Dutch supervisor and a Chinese doctoral student. The intercultural background of this supervisor–student dyad exposes how culture and educational experiences influence these misunderstandings and reactions to them. We are aware that causes of these misunderstandings are layered, partly rooted in cultural and educational differences, partly related to the transition to an independent researcher that is new to most PhD students, and partly related to supervisor and student personalities. In this study, we have focused on the cultural and educational differences.

The three implicit misunderstandings in this study occurred due to mismatched and unspoken expectations about the learning goals and learning behaviors between the supervisor and the student, largely reflecting their educational and cultural background differences. The learning patterns they previously had developed became a natural source for them to understand the teaching and learning of international education in the beginning. However, both supervisor and student remained mostly unaware of these patterns, particularly with regard to concrete learning tasks (e.g. how formal the supervision should be, how feedback and assessment should be provided and understood, how one is expected to teach and learn). Although these implicit misunderstandings now appear obvious, during the process, they were noticed only when the supervisor and student acknowledged them. It took time and continual meta-communication throughout the supervision process to make the misunderstandings explicit to both sides. As the study of our supervision process progresses, we came to recognize how little we were aware that our educational ideas and learning habits have been profoundly prescribed by our own cultural and educational backgrounds. Making them explicit created an opportunity to set us free from thinking and acting in those culturally and educationally prescribed ways. In addition, we learnt to interpret teaching and learning practices from our own perspectives as well as from the perspectives of each other, and to suspend our judgement of the apparently odd learning behaviors of others from different cultures.

To increase awareness of hidden misunderstandings, university educators and students involved in intercultural education should clearly communicate their intended learning goals and expected learning behaviors at the start, for example by talking about students' prior educational experiences and how the students envision themselves to be when they finish their overseas study. It is then important to establish an environment to sustain open and ongoing communication, so that either the teacher or the student is prepared to acknowledge when a possible misunderstanding has been experienced. The specific implicit misunderstandings reported in this study can be a helpful resource for identifying likely areas that

need ongoing communication (e.g. educational goals together with program organization, expected student–teacher interactions, evaluations of student progress, preferred level of student regulation of learning).

The sources for the implicit misunderstandings in relation to the cultural and educational differences as we have extensively discussed in this study, offer insights into the work of academics and educators who are involved or interested in supervision of international research students. A first insight relevant for others in similar contexts, is the relevancy of explicitly addressing the issues of cultural and educational similarities and differences. Our initial tendency was not to address them out of a respect for each other's culture, and also actually a fear for doing so due to a lack of knowledge and skill to make this a point of conversation. Knowledge of and a dialogue about each other's cultural and educational background is a necessary condition for intercultural supervision. It would be recommended to start the supervision with explicitly addressing these cultural and educational differences and similarities.

A second insight is that many of the intercultural differences are embedded in concrete behaviors, interactional patterns and expectations about supervision, which, if not perceived in terms of intercultural differences, might lead to misunderstandings, biased judgments, and a poor quality of the supervision. For instance, supervisors might perceive certain behavior as poor academic behavior instead of part of someone's cultural background, such as students' reluctance to express their opinion, or a hesitancy to question teacher's knowledge, or a tendency to be guided by teachers rather than taking initiative. Being aware of the background of this behavior, supervisors can make their international students aware of how such behavior is perceived in a Western academic environment and invite them to try to adjust themselves to this different environment.

To go back to the start of this article, as for Klaas, in his role as Ph.D. supervisor of international students, he was strongly reminded of the complexity of intercultural communication, even though in advance he saw himself quite capable based on many previous experiences. His subsequent approach to supervising international students, and even Dutch students, is to be more articulate about expectations and to conceptualize them explicitly in cultural and educational terms.

At the start of our collaboration we assumed that there were many differences between us. At the same time, these assumptions made it difficult to notice the many similarities of which we gradually became aware as we discussed our misunderstandings. In international collaboration, celebrating cultural differences while also perceiving them as challenges is an absolute necessity.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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