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Article Title: Unequal Relationships in High and Low Power Distance Societies

Year of publication: 1997

Link to published item: http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1177/0022022197283005
Publisher statement: None

UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN HIGH AND LOW POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES

A Comparative Study of Tutor - Student Role Relations in Britain and China

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Published in *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* **28** (3), 284 – 302

Abstract

This study investigated people's conceptions of an unequal role relationship in two different types of society: a high power distance society and a low power distance society. Focusing on the role relationship `tutor - student', 166 British and 168 Chinese tutors and postgraduate students completed a questionnaire which probed their conceptions of degrees of power differential and social distance/closeness in this role relationship. ANOVA results yielded a significant nationality effect for both aspects, with Chinese respondents judging the relationship to be closer and as having a greater power differential than British respondents did. Written comments on the questionnaire, and interviews with 9 Chinese academics who had had experience of both British and Chinese academic environments supported the statistical findings, and indicated that there are fundamental ideological differences associated with the differing conceptions. The results are discussed in relation to western and Asian concepts of leadership, and differing perspectives on the compatibility/incompatibility of power and distance/closeness.

Unequal relationships occur in all societies, and research into the fundamental dimensions of interpersonal behaviour (eg Leary, 1957; Benjamin, 1974; Wish, Deutsch & Kaplan, 1976; Adamopoulos, 1982) has consistently identified power as an important variable. Moreover, research into culture-related values (eg Hofstede, 1980; Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Schwartz, 1994) has identified power as an important dimension on which cultures can vary.

Hofstede (1980), for example, in his classic study of the values held by employees of a multi-national company, identified *power distance* as one of four fundamental dimensions of culture, and defined it as follows: ' ... the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal.' (Hofstede, 1986, p.307) He argued that inequality exists within any culture, but the degree to which is tolerated varies between one culture and another (Hofstede, 1980, 1986).

Schwartz (1994), in a more recent international study of cultural values, identified two regions of values relating to power: *hierarchy* and *egalitarian commitment.* He and his research team obtained data from 41 cultural groups in 38 nations, asking respondents to rate 56 items for importance as 'a guiding principle' in their lives. The mean importance ratings were then calculated for each of the samples, and analysed by a statistical procedure known as smallest space analysis. Schwartz identified seven regions representing seven culture-level value types, and argued that they formed an integrated structure of compatible and incompatible value types. He found that *hierarchy*, a region of values relating to power and the legitimacy of hierarchical roles and resource allocation, was in conceptual opposition to *egalitarian commitment*, a region of values associated with equality, social justice, and concern for other people's welfare.

Data from Hofstede's (1980) and Schwartz's (1994) surveys show that countries can vary considerably in the extent to which power values are accepted. Those which accept them firmly can be classified as high power distance societies, and those which strongly support egalitarian values can be classified as low power distance societies.

Unequal relationships are likely to be affected by these culture-level values, with the probable result that the power differential of unequal relationships will be regarded as both greater

and more acceptable in high power distance societies than in low power distance societies. However, interpersonal relationships are not only affected by power. Research into the fundamental dimensions of interpersonal behaviour (including linguistic behaviour in different role relationships) has also identified *distance/closeness* as a significant variable, a dimension relating to friendliness, affect or degree of association (e.g. Brown & Gilman, 1960; Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987; Leech, 1983; Lonner, 1980; Stiles, 1980; Triandis, 1978).

Yet distance/closeness corresponds less clearly to cultural-level values. Although it is related to the concept of in-group/out-group which is associated with another cultural dimension identified by Hofstede (1980), *individualism/collectivism*, it is not synonymous with it. Schwartz (1994) noted that three of his egalitarian commitment values (loyal, helpful, responsible) largely govern relations with in-group members, and that they are negatively correlated with hierarchy values. And taken at face value, this implies that countries with a high acceptance of power values show a low acceptance of these egalitarian commitment values. However, as Schwartz points out, societies with strong hierarchy values do not have to emphasize these values in relation to in-group members, because people will naturally behave in this way toward such people. So this implies that in these societies, the distance/closeness of actual relationships may be different from the pattern of compatible/incompatible values identified by Schwartz (1994) at the level of culture.

This research, therefore, does not show clearly how distance/closeness interrelates with power distance. However, studies of Asian leadership styles suggest that benevolence is an important feature of Asian leaders. Pye, for example, argues that 'In most Asian cultures leaders are expected to be nurturing, benevolent, kind, sympathetic figures' (Pye, 1985, pp.27-8), and Bond and Hwang draw the following conclusion from a number of Taiwanese studies into preferred leadership style: 'It seems that Chinese prefer an authoritarian leadership style in which a benevolent and respected leader is not only considerate of his followers, but also able to take skilled and decisive action.' (Bond & Hwang, 1986, p.251)

Pye (1985) and Wetzel (1993) both emphasise the contrast between Asian and Western concepts of power. They point out that in the West, power is often associated negatively with domination or authoritarianism, whereas in Asia it is typically associated positively with benevolence, kindness, nurturance and supportiveness.

This suggests, therefore, that power and distance/closeness are more likely to be perceived as compatible variables in Asian high power distance societies than in western, low power distance societies, and that unequal relationships in Asian societies may even be closer than those in western societies.

On the basis of these studies, and drawing on my personal experience of living and working in both cultures, I therefore generated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The power differential of unequal relationships will be regarded as both greater and more acceptable in high power distance societies than in low power distance societies.

Hypothesis 2: The distance/closeness of unequal relationships will be regarded as closer in high power distance societies than in low power distance societies.

Hypothesis 3: The interrelationship between power and distance/closeness will vary in different societies. In low power distance societies, the two variables will be regarded as incompatible and will thus be negatively correlated; in high power distance societies the two variables will be regarded as potentially compatible, and there will be no significant correlation between the two.

This article reports an empirical investigation of these hypotheses in relation to one type of unequal role relationship, tutor - postgraduate (henceforth PG) student. The two societies chosen for investigation were Britain and the People's Republic of China, which according to Hofstede's (1980) and Schwartz's (1994) surveys, can be classified respectively as low and high power distance societies.

METHOD

The research explored British and Chinese conceptions of the typical degrees of power and distance/closeness of the role relationship, tutor - PG student. It did not include the supervisor-research student role relationship, since this relationship seems particularly subject to individual variation, especially in Britain. Instead, it focused on the role relationship of PG students taking a master's degree by coursework and tutors who teach such students and who have some kind of special responsibility for them (for example, course organiser, dissertation supervisor, personal tutor). It focused on the respondents' conceptions of this role relationship in general, rather than on the actualities of a specific tutor - PG student relationship, in an attempt to probe the respondents' role schemas rather than their person schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991:118-9).

The principal means of data collection was a Likert-type questionnaire. In addition, 2 types of qualitative data were collected: written comments on the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The questionnaire had two main sections that explored the power and distance/closeness of the tutor - PG student relationship (as defined above); in addition, there was an introductory section, where subjects were asked to provide a certain amount of background information, such as their role position (i.e. tutor/PG student), course of study/field of specialization, approximate age, and experience of living abroad. (There were also two other sections that dealt with aspects of the role relationship that are not dealt with in this article.)

Two versions of the questionnaire were produced: an English version and a Chinese version. They were developed using back translation and multiple translators, and using the principle of decentering[1] , as recommended by Brislin (1980), so that problems of lack of equivalence could be minimised.

Questionnaire Items relating to Tutor Superordination

In order to explore the extent to which tutors are considered to be superordinate to PG students, I used the notion of asymmetry. Asymmetry focuses on the nonreciprocality of unequal relationships; for example, that a superior can criticise a subordinate but a subordinate is less free to criticise a superior. Drawing on results from earlier cross-cultural studies (Triandis et al, 1968; Adamopoulos, 1982), I identified behaviours that were found to have high loadings on the factor *superordination*, and then generated pairs of items such as the following:

A tutor corrects a PG student over an academic matter.
A PG student corrects a tutor over an academic matter.

A tutor challenges a PG student on his/her academic viewpoint.

[1] Decentering is a translation process whereby the precise wording of the questionnaire is 'decentred' away from the original language version and adjusted so that it is smooth and natural sounding, as well as equivalent, in both languages. For further details of the process, see Brislin (1980) and Triandis (1994).

A PG student challenges a tutor on his/her academic viewpoint.

One member of each pair referred to tutor behaviour, and the other to PG student behaviour. There were 10 pairs of items in all (in other words, 20 individual items), and subjects rated each of the items on a 7-point scale for likelihood of occurrence. My assumption was that any difference between respondents' ratings for the likelihood of tutors performing the behaviours and their ratings for the likelihood of PG students doing so would be a reflection of asymmetry in the relationship; and the greater the asymmetry, the greater the extent to which subjects regarded tutors as superordinate.

Questionnaire Items relating to Distance/Closeness

In order to probe distance/closeness, I used Hays' (1984) conceptualization of close and casual friendships. Hays specifies four behavioural content areas relating to friendship that can be used for differentiating close and distant relations:

> *Companionship:* sharing an activity or experience together, doing something together, sharing each other's company.
> *Consideration (or utility):* friend as 'helper', providing goods, services or support; expressing concern for the other's well-being.
> *Communication (or self-disclosure):* disclosing (verbally or non-verbally) or discussing information about oneself; exchanging ideas, facts, opinions or confidences about any topic.
> *Affection*: expressing any sentiment (positive or negative) felt towards the other, any expression of the emotional bond between partners.
>
> Hays, 1984:78

Using this conceptualization as a framework, and through discussions with British and Chinese informants, I generated a range of items (covering the four behavioural content areas identified by Hays) that represented behaviour typical of a close tutor - PG student relationship; for example:

A PG student visits his/her tutor at home.
A PG student asks a non-academic personal favour of his/her tutor (eg to borrow a household possession, etc.).
A tutor and a PG student talk to each other about their respective families.
A tutor and a PG student feel genuine, long-term concern for each other's welfare.

There were 11 such items, and I asked respondents to rate each of them (on a 7-point scale) in two ways: for likelihood of occurrence, and for the minimum degree of closeness needed between tutor and student for the behaviour to be regarded by both parties as appropriate.

The reasoning behind my design was as follows: if British and Chinese respondents agreed that the items described behaviour typical of close tutor - PG student relations, then any differences in the British and Chinese ratings of likelihood of occurrence could indicate a cultural difference in the degree of perceived closeness of the tutor - PG student relationship.[2]

The items from section 1 of the questionnaire, which probed superordination and the likelihood of close behaviour occurring between tutors and PG students, are reproduced in the Appendix.

[2] I included the closeness ratings, and did not simply rely on the likelihood ratings, because I was concerned that British and Chinese subjects could have different conceptions of the `meaning' of different behaviour. For example, visiting a tutor at home could indicate closeness in Britain, but might not indicate this in China. The results suggested that there *were* some differences of this kind, and so I took them into account in my analyses.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In planning my sampling, I treated nationality and role as the most important variables, and so distributed the questionnaire to the following four main groups: Chinese tutors, British tutors, Chinese PG students, and British PG students. In both countries, I avoided using subjects who were specialists in foreign languages and/or education, since they were less likely to be representative of their socio-cultural group. There were no other restrictions on the fields of study included in the sample, and the respondents' specializations covered a wide range of subjects, including the following: computing, psychology, geography, business studies, environmental studies, transport studies, engineering, and chemistry.

311 copies of the English version of the questionnaire were distributed by internal mail to students taking taught master's courses at 3 British universities. A further 95 copies were sent to academic staff who teach such students. 98 of the student copies were returned, and 68 of the tutor copies.[3]

Unfortunately, because of a tense political situation in China at the time, I was unable to control the distribution of the questionnaires in China as carefully as I would have liked. Westerners were forbidden to issue questionnaires at the time, and so I had to rely on third party help. I gave 402 copies of the questionnaires to a range of people at different tertiary institutions in Beijing and Shanghai, and they promised to distribute them to 1st year Master's students and to academic staff who teach such students. Some of these people later ran into difficulties in distributing all the questionnaires they had taken, and this meant that an indeterminate number of the 402 questionnaires were never passed on to prospective respondents. 120 copies were completed and returned by the target type of students and 48 copies were completed and returned by appropriate tutors; a further 42 questionnaires were returned blank, and several people informed me verbally that they had had difficulties distributing the questionnaires. I was therefore unable to calculate a precise return rate, but the situation implies that the ‘true' response rate was considerably higher than the ‘apparent’ overall rate of 59%.

QUALITATIVE DATA

I supplemented the statistical data from the questionnaire by gathering two types of qualitative data: written comments on the questionnaire content, and semi-structured interviews.

Each section of the questionnaire had space for comments, and respondents were encouraged to explain or qualify their choices if they wished, commenting on individual questionnaire items, and/or making more general comments.

The questionnaire data (both statistical and qualitative) were supplemented by a small amount of interview data. 9 Chinese students who had had experience of Master’s courses at both Chinese and British universities were interviewed about their experiences of tutor-student relations on these courses. The interviewees’ length of stay in Britain ranged from 3 months to 34 months, and averaged 10.8 months. The main purpose of the interviews was to try and gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese statistical results. Interviewees were asked about issues relating to power and distance/closeness in the tutor-PG student relationship, and were encouraged to discuss and explain freely their experiences, opinions and interpretations.

[3] The low overall PG student response rate was mainly due to an exceptionally low return rate (11%) at one university. At a second university, 50% were returned, and at a third, 90% were returned. It is unclear why the rate should have been so low at the first university. However, statistical tests showed no significant difference between the responses at the three different institutions.

RESULTS

STATISTICAL ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The questionnaire statistical results were analysed using two main procedures: factor analysis and analysis of variance. An alpha level of .05 was used for all tests of statistical significance.

First, factor analyses were carried out on the items probing tutor superordination and social distance/closeness. This was to check on the design of the questionnaire: to make sure that the items were really probing the factors they were intended to measure. Separate factor analyses were carried out on the British data, the Chinese data, and the combined British and Chinese data, and all of them confirmed that the items were probing two main factors. These two main factors each comprised two to three sub-factors, but when two factors were deliberately extracted, the questionnaire items that had been designed to measure tutor superordination loaded onto one factor, and the items that had been designed to measure social distance/closeness loaded onto the other factor. I therefore concluded that the questionnaire items were indeed measuring these two main variables.

Overall measures of these two scales were then computed, using two different procedures: factor analysis method and summation method. For the factor analysis method, the factor loadings were saved in an active file. This provided an overall measure of each factor which gave differential weightings to the component items, according to the strength of their loadings on the given factor.

For the summation method, the factor loadings were used to decide which items to keep and which to discard. Items with loadings of less than .5 were not retained. One item which was intended to measure distance/closeness was discarded for this reason, and also four pairs of items intended to measure tutor superordination. Then the responses to each of the usable items were summed, with equal weighting given to each of them. A reliability analysis, which examined the consistency with which the scale items measured the same underlying concept, yielded an alpha coefficient of 0.808 for the tutor superordination scale, and an alpha coefficient of 0.879 for the distance/closeness scale, indicating a satisfactory degree of scale reliability.

Having obtained these two different overall measures of each factor, I then used analysis of variance to explore the effect of different independent variables on people's conceptions of tutor superordination and social distance/closeness. (Checks were carried out to ensure that this was a valid test to use on the data.) I investigated the effect of the following five variables: nationality (British and Chinese), role (tutor and PG student), field of speciality (social science and general science), experience of living abroad (those with 6 months' experience or more and those with less than 6 months' experience), and age (young, middle-aged, and older).

Analyses of variance were carried out on both the factor analysis and summation measures of tutor superordination and social distance/closeness; the results from the two procedures were almost identical. The summation measures were used for calculating means and standard deviations, because there were scaling difficulties in using the factor analysis measures.

Finally, separate correlation coefficients for the measures of social distance/closeness and tutor superordination were calculated for the British and the Chinese respondents.

CONCEPTIONS OF TUTOR SUPERORDINATION

Statistical Results

As I explained in the method section, people's conceptions of tutor superordination were measured using pairs of items: one member of each pair referred to tutor behaviour, and the other to PG student behaviour. So I calculated the degree of asymmetry in the relationship by deducting the responses to the items describing PG student behaviour from the responses to the corresponding items describing tutor behaviour.

For each pair of items, both British and Chinese respondents rated tutors as being more likely to perform the behaviour than PG students. This indicates that all groups of respondents regarded tutors as being superordinate to PG students. Since the likelihood rating scale was a 7-point one, the maximum degree of asymmetry that could emerge for each pair was 6, and the minimum was 0.[4] The overall mean ratings (and standard deviations) that emerged are given in Table 1.

	British	Chinese
Tutors	2.534 (1.07)	3.425 (.95)
PG Students	1.921 (1.04)	2.990 (1.08)
Overall mean (*sd)*	2.163 (1.09)	3.106 (1.06)

Table 1: Mean Ratings (and Standard Deviations) of Degree of Asymmetry in the Tutor - PG Student Relationship (Scale 0 - 6)

Analyses of variance of the results indicated that both nationality and role had statistically significant effects on the ratings, with 11% to 14% of the variance being attributable to nationality, and 5% to 7% attributable to role. (Factor Analysis Method: Nationality: F = 25.058, DF = 1,261, $p <$ .001*, beta^2 = .11; Role: F = 7.165, DF = 1,261, p = .008*, beta^2 = .07. Summation Method: Nationality: F = 34.926, DF = 1,269, $p <$ .001*, beta^2 = .14; Role: F = 5.711, DF = 1,269, p = .018*, beta^2 = .05). None of the other variables (field of speciality, age, or experience of living abroad) had a significant effect according to either procedure.

These results provide clear support for hypothesis 1, in terms of the extent of the power differential: the Chinese respondents conceived of tutors as being significantly more superordinate to PG students than British respondents did.

Qualitative Data Results

Further information about superordination in the tutor-PG student role relationship was obtained from the qualitative data.

In terms of the questionnaire comments, 15 British respondents added a general comment on the power differential between tutors and PG students. 13 of these comments drew a distinction between possession of power and right to power, and questioned whether it was appropriate for tutors to have power over PG students; for example:

[4] This range is based on the assumption that the tutor - PG student relationship varies between equality and tutor superordination. Theoretically, the range could have been from 6 to 0 to -6 (tutor superordination - equality - PG student superordination).

Tutors certainly have these powers but possibly shouldn't have. (British PG student)
They do have the power. Whether they should have is a different matter. (British tutor) (emphasis in original)
Tutors should treat all PG students ... with equal status. (British PG student)
Tutors must always bear in mind that the PG student is a customer - MBA £5000 a year! (British PG student)

None of the Chinese questionnaire respondents raised this issue. There were only two explicit comments on the power differential, and these were as follows:

Chinese people's attitudes to teachers is 'treat teachers as you would treat your elders'. Students should be reverent and respectful towards teachers, and teachers should in every respect be a model for their students. In reality, it is extremely difficult to be a good tutor like this. (Chinese tutor)

Whether a tutor can actually gain PG students' respect depends on whether the tutor has a rich knowledge, is a dynamic thinker, and also on whether s/he has high moral values. (Chinese tutor)

In the interviews with Chinese students who had had experience of postgraduate study in both cultures, 8 out of the 9 interviewees stated unequivocably that tutors are shown more deference in China than in Britain. None of them questioned the appropriacy of tutors' superordinate position; on the contrary, nearly all of them commented that looking up to tutors is part of the Chinese culture; for example:

... when we were in childhood, we are taught, we were taught that we should respect parents, and we should respect teachers. (Chinese interviewee)

The custom, the Chinese custom is that the young should respect elders, and in some ways, the professors who haven't got any power, you have to respect them. ... That's the Chinese way. (Chinese interviewee)

Obviously, it is impossible to know whether British and Chinese questionnaire respondents who did not add comments would have similar or different opinions to those which were given. Nevertheless, the qualitative data as a whole provide tentative further support for hypothesis 1, suggesting that the inequality between tutors and PG students is both greater and more acceptable in China than in Britain.

CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL DISTANCE/CLOSENESS

Statistical Results

As I explained in the method section, the questionnaire items probing social distance/closeness were rated twice by respondents: once for likelihood of occurrence, and once for the minimum degree of closeness required for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate.

I used several different procedures to analyse the results. Some took both types of ratings into account; others investigated only the likelihood ratings. All of them yielded almost identical results, and so only one procedure is reported here. In this procedure, I first considered the ratings of minimum degree of closeness required for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate. I selected only those items that showed a mean nationality difference of less than 1 point, and that were also rated as requiring a relatively close relationship for the behaviour to be regarded as appropriate. There were 6 such items. The overall mean rating of these items was 4.095 (the scale ranged from 0 to 6; 0 = very

distant; 6 = very close). I then used the likelihood ratings of these 6 items for my subsequent analyses.

The mean ratings (and standard deviations) of the likelihood of this 'close' behaviour occurring between tutors and PG students are given in Table 2.

	British	Chinese
Tutors	2.457 (1.14)	3.905 (.97)
PG Students	1.760 (1.00)	3.273 (1.24)
Overall mean (*sd*)	2.041 (1.11)	3.442 (1.20)

Table 2: Mean Ratings (& Standard Deviations) of the Likelihood of 'Close' Behaviour occurring between Tutors and PG Students (Scale 0 - 6: 0 = extremely unlikely, 6 = extremely likely)

Analysis of variance of the results indicated that both nationality and role had statistically significant effects on the ratings, with 37% of the variance attributable to nationality, and 5% to role. (Nationality: F = 112.059, DF = 1,288, $p < .001$*, beta^2 = .37; Role: F = 6.242, DF = 1,288, p = .013*, beta^2 = .05.) None of the other variables (field of speciality, age, and experience of living abroad) had a significant effect.

The measures of social distance/closeness and tutor superordination had a correlation coefficient of -.041 (p = .569) for the Chinese data, and -.496 ($p < .001$*) for the British data.

The mean ratings and analysis of variance results provide clear support for hypothesis 2: the Chinese respondents conceived of the tutor - PG student relationship as being very much closer than the British respondents did. The effect of nationality was very large and consistent, with the percentage of variance attributable to nationality being between .35 and .39 in all the different tests.

The correlation coefficient results provide clear support for hypothesis 3: the negative correlation between power and distance/closeness found for the British respondents suggests that for British tutors and PG students, the two variables are incompatible; the lack of correlation for the Chinese respondents indicates that the two variables can be compatible for Chinese tutors and PG students.

Qualitative Data Results

Further information about social distance/closeness in the tutor-PG student role relationship was obtained from the qualitative data.

In terms of the questionnaire comments, 18 British respondents added a general comment on the distance/closeness of tutors and PG students. 8 of these referred to the likelihood of a close relationship developing: 3 felt a close relationship would be extremely unlikely; 3 felt that personal factors affected it; and 2 described social contact they often had, especially with overseas students.

The other 10 comments were evaluative in nature, and 9 of these questioned the appropriateness of a close tutor - PG student relationship; for example:

> *I find it invidious to establish close relations with a few students, and so I maintain, I hope, a friendly but not close relationship with most of them.* (British tutor)
> *A "teacher's pet" situation is not wanted as the tutor could be influenced with marking PG students' exam papers.* (British PG student)

This is a professional relationship not a personal one, and unless family problems affect the students' work, they should not be discussed. (British PG student)

Only one Chinese questionnaire respondent made a general comment on social distance/closeness between tutors and PG students:

Generally speaking, the amount of interaction between tutors and PG students in China is comparatively great. I myself also do it like this, but some of the customs are different from those of overseas tutors. (Chinese tutor)

In the interviews with Chinese students who had had experience of studying in both Britain and China, all 9 of the interviewees felt that tutors and PG students typically had a closer relationship in China than in Britain; for example:

Comparatively, I think the distance is bigger [in Britain] than that in China. Because in Britain, the teacher perhaps just pays attention to the academic things. (Chinese interviewee)
... for a lot of [Chinese] supervisors and students, just more or less like relatives. You know what I mean? Because in China, we are all, sometimes we regard teachers as fathers, or mother, I mean, that's a kind of very close link. (Chinese interviewee)
For teachers, in China, they are habits in Chinese culture, I think. The teachers view the students as something like son or daughter, and the students often view the teacher as father or mother. I think this is very popular in Chinese culture. I think this is a big characteristic of Chinese culture. So if the teachers view the student as the son or daughter, so they will be concerned with many things. (Chinese interviewee)

Seven of the Chinese interviewees spoke of the advantages of a close relationship, and of the difficulties they faced in Britain when they experienced a comparatively more distant relationship with their tutor; for example:

If you develop a very close relationship with the tutor, you feel much more willing to talk about your problems, academically. ... for example, ... if you don't get a closer relationship with your tutor, you won't go to him and talk to him about this silly problem you're thinking. But sometimes you feel it's silly, just because you're not secure aobut it; you don't know whether it is silly or not, but when you approach your tutor, he might say that's a good idea. (Chinese interviewee)
You know, for me, I found it very difficult. I came here with the expectation to be very friendly, to develop a very friendly and open relationship with my tutors, only to find out that I'm only an outsider in their life, no one would like to invite me into themselves and into their life. And I only come here, it seems to me, to take advantage of their, of their, you know, academic superiority, or whatever. It seems to me, so impersonal. It makes me feel uncomfortable. (Chinese interviewee)

Once again, it is obviously impossible to know whether British and Chinese questionnaire respondents who did not add comments would have similar or different opinions to those which were given. Nevertheless, the qualitative data as a whole provide tentative further support for hypothesis 2 (that the relationship between tutors and PG students is closer in Britain than in China), and also suggest that a close tutor - PG student relationship may be less acceptable in Britain than in China.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate substantial differences in British and Chinese conceptions of the tutor - PG student role relationship, and suggest that the culture-level value, power distance, has a major effect on these conceptions. However, since the British and Chinese educational systems differ in many respects, some people might question the validity of this claim.

For example, in China, only Professors and Associate Professors are allowed to supervise PG students, whereas in Britain any academic member of staff with appropriate specialization can do this. So it could be argued that the greater power differential between tutors and PG students in China is simply a result of this difference, and unrelated to cultural issues.

Similarly, practical factors could affect the distance/closeness of tutors and PG students. Despite considerable variation in both Britain and China in the number of students taking a given master's degree course, on the whole Chinese tutors seem to teach fewer master's students than British tutors do, and this could obviously affect the degree of closeness that can develop. Moreover, tutors and PG students in China often live in close proximity to each other, because universities typically provide accommodation on or near the campus for both groups, which means that the practical possibility of frequent contact between them is high.

However, although these factors are clearly important, I do not believe that they are the key determinants of the results of this study. In terms of power, if the main causative factor is the tutors' rank, then Chinese PG students studying in Britain would have similar conceptions to British students. Although I did not administer the questionnaire to such students and thus investigate this possibility empirically, several studies (eg Watt, 1980: Hawkey & Nakornchai, 1980; Channell, 1990) report comments from British tutors which indicate that British tutors perceive overseas PG students (including Asian students) as more deferential than British students. This suggests that ideological factors are more important than rank per se. This interpretation is supported by the qualitative data obtained in my study : the British respondents questioned the legitimacy of the power differential, whereas the Chinese subjects related it to Chinese customs and culture.

The Chinese respondents' comments on distance/closeness also suggest that cultural beliefs play a vital role. For example, several of the interviewees drew attention to the kinship nature of the tutor - student relationship in China, quoting a well-known Chinese saying: *Teacher and student are like father and son* [shitu ru fuzi].

Moreover, differences in the educational systems (with their associated differences in practical factors) cannot explain the different ways in which British and Chinese interrelate power and distance/closeness. Both the statistical results of this study, and informal comments from British people, indicate that British people associate informality with closeness, and formality and deference with distance. If this were the case in China, then a greater power differential between tutors and PG students (for whatever reason) would lead to a more distant relationship than in Britain.

It seems more reasonable, therefore, to interpret the present study as providing support for the claim that Asian leadership differs in quality from Western leadership. A range of studies (e.g. Misumi, 1985, cited in Smith & Bond, 1993; Taiwanese studies cited in Bond and Hwang, 1986; see also theorizing by Hsu, 1965; Pye, 1985; Wetzel, 1993) have found that the preferred leadership style in Asia is one of expertise which is combined with benevolence. And as Smith and Bond point out, this contrasts with traditional western thinking:

> Western theorists, from Lewin et al (1939) onwards, have long been in the habit of contrasting autocratic with democratic leadership and thinking of hierarchy as the opposite of participation.When we find that, in many parts of the world, power distance and hierarchy are part of a social structure which is also collectivist and participative, we must then begin to look carefully at the generality of the western model.

Smith & Bond, 1993:157

Yet in British universities, western academics still tend to evaluate overseas students' behaviour from a western perspective. For example, they may judge deferential behaviour negatively, regarding it as a 'problem' for effective study, as illustrated in the following comments about Thai students studying in Britain:

> Disagreeing with teachers is probably the worst of all crimes [to Thai students]. This does not mean that they always agree with the teacher's view, but rather that they are disinclined to show their disagreement. Here respect for teachers seems to have a negative effect on students' performance. … when asked to give opinions, they tend not to give straight criticisms, because of what may seem to be an undue concern for 'politeness'. This seems to create a problem for teachers in the UK as well as for Thai students studying here, since teachers can get little feedback from students, which makes it difficult for them to assess their actual academic performance.
>
> Hawkey & Nakornchai, 1980:77-8

Jin and Cortazzi (1993:94-5), in a discussion of relationships between British academic staff and Chinese students, point out that British tutors naturally expect overseas students to move culturally towards them and learn to fit into British culture, but also point out that Chinese students 'have some expectation, from their own academic cultural background, that the tutors will move towards them: helping them, instructing them, and caring for them.' They suggest that both parties should be willing to change and adapt. This is obviously a laudable ideal, but since the variables power and distance/closeness seem to be evaluated so differently in the two cultures, it is not easy to identify ways in which this can be implemented at a practical level.

Meanwhile, similar studies need to be carried out in other high and low power distance societies, to check the effects of this culture-level value, and to increase our understanding of the interrelationship between fundamental dimensions of interpersonal behaviour, such as power and distance/closeness, and basic culture-level values, such as power distance. It would also be interesting to extend the study to other types of unequal relationships, including other types of teacher - student role relationships (for instance, research supervisor - research student; undergraduate lecturer - undergraduate student, high school teacher - high school student) as a check on the generalizability of the current findings.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items used to probe Tutor Superordination & Distance/closeness

1. A PG student visits his/her tutor at home.
2. A tutor tells a PG student that s/he disagrees with him/her.
3. A tutor desires to keep in personal touch with his/her PG students after graduation (e.g. by writing personal letters, etc.).
4. A PG student corrects a tutor over an academic matter.
5. A tutor tells a PG student to do something (relating to an academic matter).
6. A tutor and a PG student talk to each other about their respective families.
7. A PG student advises a tutor on an academic matter.
8. A PG student helps his/her tutor with personal, non-academic chores (e.g. housework, personal shopping, etc.)
9. A tutor criticizes a PG student's academic opinions.
10. A PG student reproves a tutor for failing to fulfil his/her academic duties.
11. A tutor tells a PG student that his/her work is unsatisfactory.
12. A PG student tells his/her tutor about a personally upsetting experience.
13. A tutor advises a PG student on an academic matter.
14. A PG student challenges a tutor on his/her academic viewpoint.
15. A PG student tells his/her tutor about his/her girlfriend/boyfriend.
16. When a tutor is annoyed with a PG student, s/he lets the student know s/he is annoyed.
17. A PG student tells a tutor to do something (relating to an academic matter).
18. A PG student instructs a tutor in a given academic theory.
19. A PG student tells a tutor that s/he disagrees with him/her.
20. A tutor challenges a PG student on his/her academic viewpoint.
21. A tutor corrects a PG student over an academic matter.
22. A PG student gets to know his/her tutor's family quite well.
23. A PG student asks a non-academic personal favour of his/her tutor (e.g. to borrow a household possession, etc.)
24. When a PG student is annoyed with a tutor, s/he lets the tutor know s/he is annoyed.
25. A tutor and a PG student feel genuine, long-term concern for each other's welfare.
26. A PG student critizes a tutor's academic opinions (i.e. to his/her face).
27. A tutor reproves a PG student for failing to fulfil his/her academic duties.
28. A PG student has a meal at his/her tutor's home on several occasions.
29. A PG student tells a tutor that his/her teaching is unsatisfactory.
30. A PG student shows genuine and practical concern for his/her tutor's health (i.e. concern in both words and action).
31. A tutor instructs a PG student in a given academic theory.

Items 1,3,6,8,12,15,22,23,25,28,30 were designed to tap distance/closeness; the remaining items were designed to tap tutor superordination. Item 12 and the pairs of items 10 & 27, 11 & 29, 16 & 24 had factor loadings of less than .5 and so were discarded in all summation analyses. Items 1,3,6,15,25,30 were used in the distance/closeness summation analysis reported here.