

RIS Audio Interviews

No. 3: On Stereotypes of International Students & Preparing for Doctoral Programs with Dr. Tang Tang Heng and Nannan Lu

[00:00:00] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Welcome to the RIS Audio Interviews, a reflective interview series where we have critical and caring conversations with our community members who research and work with international students. I'm your host, Asuka Ichikawa. For this episode, we will dive into the topic of stereotypes of international students with Dr. Tang Tang Heng and Nannan Lu, who are Chapter 4 co-authors of the RIS book. Dr. Heng is an associate professor at the National Institute of Education, housed in Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. As an avid traveler and ex international and geography student, she's fascinated by what happens when people or ideas move across borders. Her work examines interplays of pedagogy, culture, and student differences in an age of mobility. Nannan is a PhD student at the National Institute of Education, housed in the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Before pursuing her doctorate, she completed her master's degree in the United States and thereafter worked with international students as a lecturer in China. Building on these experiences, her research interests include international students both in China and abroad. Over the past years, and especially over the past months here in the U. S., where both of you have done your graduate studies prior to your current roles, we're seeing an increasing polarization nationally and internationally.

[00:01:28] Especially with regard to the discourse and policies around international students whom we work with, this is a very timely topic to talk about students' sense of belonging, as well as for their and or our mental and physical safety. So thank you so much again for being here today.

[00:01:46] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Not at all. It's a pleasure to be here, Asuka.

[00:01:49] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah, thank you for having us.

[00:01:51] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Um, right then, so, if I could just begin with, um, asking Dr. Heng um, could you set the ground by walking us through what exactly is a stereotype, please?

[00:02:04] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Yes. So, a stereotype is a typical image that comes to our mind. Um, When we think about a particular social group, and a stereotype, it draws on both implicit and explicit information to form certain perceptions of a group that can be positive or negative.

[00:02:21] At the same time, it can prompt us to respond in ways that align with our perceptions of behaviours or attitudes associated with the stereotype. So therefore, stereotypes can be problematic as they can trigger explicit actions or implicit thoughts around particular groups like international students, the group that we're talking about today.

[00:02:43] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you so much for this. Um, both of you also mentioned Edward Said's Orientalism, and the colonial mentality in your chapter, and I'm wondering if you could also tell us a little bit about this and how it's related to stereotypes.

[00:03:00] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** So we drew on the concept of Othering in Said's work, which is the imagination of differences to separate one group from another.

[00:03:12] The Other is typically seen in opposition to the colonialists and deemed as inferior and in need of saving. So to some extent, international students have been seen in similar ways. They are often portrayed in terms of the challenges they face and what they lack, not what they have. And they're also discussed in terms of how they need to integrate and gain the attitude, skills and ways of being of the host countries they're in, thus reflecting a colonial mentality.

[00:03:43] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you so much for this contextualization. Um, and to tailor it to the context of international students, um, Nannan, I was wondering if you could, um, share how can a stereotype happen and impact international students. And as noted in both of your work, uh, we are a diverse heterogeneous group. So I was wondering if you could, uh, share a brief overview and tailor it to the context of international students originally from China, that you discussed in the chapter, if that's alright?.

[00:04:16] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah, sure. Thanks for the question. So, as Dr. Heng mentioned, stereotypes happen when people simplify or generalize about a social group based on limited or biased information. And for international students, um, stereotypes can really influence how they are perceived or treated, often leading to unfair assumptions or behaviors.

[00:04:38] So, um, in our chapter, we focus specifically on stereotypes about Chinese international students because of their large numbers globally. Um, for example, they are often, um, viewed as struggling with critical thinking, um, being quiet or reticent or prone to plagiarism. Um, those perceptions are not only unfair but also fail to recognize the incredible diversity within this group.

[00:05:07] Because as we know, um, Chinese international students, like any other international student groups, come from a wide range of backgrounds and have very different experiences and ways of navigating their studies abroad. Also, when it comes to the impact of those stereotypes, they can foster an environment of prejudice.

[00:05:28] And in some cases, lead students to internalize those, um, negative ideas. So when this happens, it can result in self doubts or reluctance to fully engage in academic or social spaces. It can also lead to what's called a stereotype threat, where students become anxious about, um, confirming a negative stereotype, and that anxiety can undermine their confidence and performance.

[00:06:01] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you, Nannan. It's really helpful to also know how stereotyping can impact students' mental health and their personal and professional performances as well. Um, I was wondering, thinking of these, um, cultural dynamics, in your chapter, both of you bring attention to how scholars have the responsibility to prevent producing and or reproducing stereotypes of international students by critically reflecting on the conceptual frameworks that are used in the research.

[00:06:34] Could you describe how researchers can do this in each step of the research process? If that is all right, perhaps from both of you, please. Thank you.

[00:06:47] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Yeah. So, as researchers, we often begin from a problem statement that is driven by care. And it's very natural because this is part of our training. So when we conduct research documenting the problems that international students face, we

are actually responding to our own education experiences and what our graduate process, you know, teaches us.

[00:07:11] But the issue arises when there is a glut of research with such focus. Or that draws from such a perspective. So when that happens, it paints a meta narrative of international students. So a meta narrative of international students that keeps talking about the problems or challenges that they face. So as such, for us as researchers ourselves, the first step is to do a rigorous literature review and to ask ourselves what are ways of seeing that predominate?

[00:07:45] And then are these ways of seeing that predominate okay? What are the problems with these ways of seeing? And then what are ways of seeing that are absent? And then how can we also fill in the absence with different perspectives through our work?

[00:08:03] **Nannan Lu:** I echo what Dr. Heng said about the importance of diversifying perspectives. And building on that, I think it's equally important to be aware of the assumptions and biases behind our own perspectives. Um, because as researchers, our personal experiences, world views, and even lived context naturally shape how we approach our studies, sometimes in ways we don't even realize.

[00:08:32] For example, if we subconsciously hold deficit-based assumptions, we might frame our research questions or interpret findings in ways that unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, like focusing only on students' challenges rather than recognizing their strengths and agency. So that's why I also feel like, also in our chapter, we highlight, um, reflexivity is so important and needs to be embedded throughout the entire research process. By constantly asking us, ourselves, where our perspectives come from and how they shape our work, we can better understand the affordances and the limitations of our own lenses. And I think this kind of reflection can also help us discover new perspectives or conceptual frameworks that could lead to exciting new directions for future research.

[00:09:31] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you so much to both of you. Regarding researcher reflexivity, part of this podcast program tries to highlight the personal journeys of researchers who come to do the work they do.

[00:09:44] So I'm really curious to dive into your personal journeys as researchers and also as persons. And so, as scholars who lived and were academically trained in both the West and the East, could you share how you have come to see your strengths in your intersectional identities and reflexivities as researchers?

[00:10:06] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Well, thank you very much for approaching this question from the assumption of strength to begin with. I think that's great. So for myself, I think it's a privilege to have experienced various ways of living and seeing in both the East and the West. For one, you know, one thing I've appreciated is the ability to think contextually.

[00:10:28] So I think growing up in Asia, I'm expected to be able to read situations as well as behave appropriately in different situations and contexts, be it in terms of how to speak to others, or thinking why people act or behave in certain ways, or thinking through the impact of my actions or thinking in terms of the relationships and how this relate to other people or how other people relate to each other.

[00:10:57] And all this, you know, aspects of contextual thinking has been very helpful as a researcher and in working with different cultures. So in my research, therefore, it's very natural for me to wonder about how different peoples and contexts, how these shape ways of seeing. And I think that that naturally feeds into my own reflexivity as a researcher.

[00:11:23] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you so much. This is really helpful to hear. Um, how about you, Nannan?

[00:11:28] **Nannan Lu:** Oh, yeah. Thanks for the question. It actually reminds me of, John Dewey's, saying, uh, he said, we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience. Um, because for me, studying in the U. S. and then Singapore and working with international students in China has really encouraged me to engage deeply in reflexivity. Like, I often find myself reflecting on how my background or positionality shapes the way I frame questions, interact with participants and interpret data. For example, in my PhD study on international students' experiences in China, I've come to appreciate how my positionality helps me navigate both insider and outsider roles.

[00:12:20] You know, as an insider, I share the identity of being an international student, which allows me to connect with participants and empathize with their lived experiences. And also, um, at the same time as an outsider, um, different from my participants in nationality, ethnicity, study destination, and many other factors, um, I'm able to take a step back, question assumptions and see things from a fresh perspective, which I find very helpful as well.

[00:12:52] And I've also learned that being open about my positionality not only helps me better understand myself within the research, but also builds trust with my participants and promotes accountability in our scholarly community, which I think is very important. Yeah.

[00:13:12] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you very much, Nannan.

[00:13:20] If both of you could still stick around, I was curious to hear, also, with a mindset of some prospective students, who may be interested in graduate studies or international education. Um, finding, uh, a mentor, um, in the graduate program is a big step, and also I'm wondering for any faculty audience, um, mentoring, a student is, uh, a commitment on its own and how to tailor that for each student, so I was really curious to see how both of you have come to meet with one another and how has that journey been so far? Um, as an advisor and advisee. So I was just thinking this can be another window to a conversation, if that's all right.

[00:14:07] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Yes. Uh, I actually think that I'm going to let Nannan start with this first, because she initiated the reaching out. So Nannan, would you like to say something first?

[00:14:16] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah. Yeah. I'm happy to chime in. Um, yeah, it's, um, I think it's still like a very exciting process for me, you know, um, that was, uh, in my second year working as a lecturer to international students in China. Um, at that time I was teaching international students the Chinese language and culture.

[00:14:39] So I was very fascinated about their education and their learning experiences in China. And also I feel kind of you know, the limitation in my own ability, um, to improve my

own teaching and also, the understanding of them. So I decided maybe, it's a good time for me to pursue a doctorate.

[00:15:05] So since then, I've been looking for supervisors in the field. And at that time, I was very interested in two areas broadly, categories. Um, so, international students' experiences under the internationalization of higher education category. And another is about teaching, which is about differentiated instruction.

[00:15:27] I had some lessons, um, some courses when I was doing my masters in the United States about differentiated instruction. So I was very interested in that area. So I kind of like using those two categories or preliminary research interests to help me look for a supervisor. And also at that time, I decided not to go back to the United States again, for many reasons.

[00:15:57] Uh, mainly because my family, uh, my husband's working in China, so I wanted to find a place that is close to, um, my home and also because of the COVID-19, you know, uh, to find a safe place. So I started to, uh, look at Singapore. And, um, fortunately, I would say very, very lucky I was, that I found, uh, Dr. Heng, my current supervisor. Her research interests include differentiated instruction and also international students' experiences. So when I was looking at her profile, I felt like, oh, this is the home for me, my academic home, you know. So I emailed Dr. Heng and briefly introduced myself like my background, like I want to pursue a PhD under her supervision and something. Then, um, like the beautiful conversations started from there.

[00:16:58] **Asuka Ichikawa:** This is amazing to hear. Thank you so much for sharing. I could definitely personally also resonate with that sense of academic home. Yes. Um, could I pass the mic to you, Dr. Heng now?

[00:17:11] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Yeah, I guess, you know, summarizing for what, um, Nannan had mentioned earlier, you were asking about, um, potential advice or tips to, potential students, right?

[00:17:22] So if I were to summarize, you know, uh, what Nannan did, I would say that it's really to have a certain clarity of what you want to do. I mean, it doesn't have to be perfect, you know, in terms of knowing what you want to do, but at least have a certain, um, sense of what your interest is. I always tell my students, you know, what is your itch?

[00:17:45] What is this itch that you have at your back that you keep wanting to go back to scratch? And I think starting from that, that can really help to drive, you know, our motivation subsequently in terms of what we want to study. And then the second thing is to do the research on potential supervisors. So as Nannan actually was doing the research, so she was thinking of two things, right?

[00:18:08] Either differentiated instruction or working with international students under internationalization of higher education. And so with these two broad areas, she started doing her research on potential supervisors. And somehow that landed her with me. Um, together with the fact, you know, she was contemplating where she wanted to study and so on and so forth.

[00:18:28] So, I would say definitely do that research with potential supervisors because oftentimes I would get um, emails from potential supervisees who are interested in doing

their doctoral studies and then some of what they propose would have nothing at all to do with my work. And it's very natural that if it's nothing to do with my work, or your potential supervisor's work, likelihood would be that they would tend to reject or say no.

[00:18:53] So on the grounds of a potential supervisees, I think that really means, you know, they would have to really do their research. And by that, I think doing research can also mean talking to other students. So I would say, um, feel free to email or write maybe the director or the officer or the program leader in charge of the doctorate program that they're interested in applying for and ask if they can be put in touch with other doctoral students who are actually currently in the program so as to reach out to them to have a conversation to talk to them.

[00:19:25] So I think that can be very helpful. So for myself, um, I often upon interviewing a potential doctoral candidate and finding that this person is suitable. I would tend to also, um, ask my current doctoral students to talk to them, or introduce my current doctoral students to these potential supervisees.

[00:19:48] Because I find that it's very useful and helpful for them to come in with their eyes open. So I guess this is one tip I would give to other supervisors as well who are supervising or who are working with potential supervisees to really have them talk to their current doctoral students so that, you know, all supervisees come in with their eyes open.

[00:20:09] I think it really does help with building the relationship subsequently. Yeah.

[00:20:17] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Thank you so much for sharing that. Um, is there anything that you wanted to add to this?

[00:20:24] **Nannan Lu:** If I may, I wanted to add on, um, what Dr. Heng said about the connection between the current students and also the potential PhD students.

[00:20:36] Um, so I, um, just like Dr. Heng said, I spoke to some students from China, they wanted to be the PhD student under the supervision of Dr. Heng. And I feel like it was a very, very helpful process, you know, for the students to know more about, um, what doing a PhD is like.

[00:21:00] And also, um, you know, because supervisors they are very busy. They can't, you know, spend lots of time. And also, I feel like Dr. Heng is very mindful of the considerations of students, like also the power relations between the supervisors and students. So, every time I talked to the students and they said, they are so grateful for the, uh, for the offer to talk with me and to learn more about my personal experiences and also the program that they're coming. Um, so I would also recommend to other supervisors about this.

[00:21:37] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Definitely, especially for, how shall I say, um, there are a lot of interpretations of first generations, but sometimes, um, many international students, uh, their parents, um, have not become international students.

[00:21:50] So oftentimes we share that kind of experiences in navigating this academic space. And so I really appreciate how you talked about the culture of academia and what is, what does it mean to do a PhD and it's also about people you're going to work with.

[00:22:07] So it's really good to do that research.

[00:22:09] Uh, I've also noticed some international students from China have English names sometimes from their religious or spiritual faith, but also just individually having English names and oftentimes I hear, um, it's because people have trouble, pronouncing their names, so they come up with English names.

[00:22:29] And I think in recent years that has caught a lot of attention and rethinking about, um, this identity and, uh, respect for the original names. But, um, anyhow, that's just something that came up in my mind.

[00:22:44] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Yeah. I mean, I think in a way, remember I was talking about this idea of contextual thinking?

[00:22:49] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Mm hmm.

[00:22:50] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** This to me is in a way a reflection of contextual thinking, which is that the international students or Chinese international students who actually, uh, use an English name, um, may be thinking contextually in this context because that's how, uh, Americans or the British or how the West operates, you know, with these English names.

[00:23:16] So it might be easier for me, therefore, then, you know, to use these names so that it's easier for them to remember my name and to be called and so I may not want to trouble them. I mean I'm guessing a part of it could be because of that? Another part of it could be because of this colonial mentality that we're discussing as well which is that um I have to have this English name so that um, I have to make it easier for you, right?

[00:23:46] I have to be able to fit in. Yet, you know, then the question is, okay, who does the work now, you know? Should not the host also do some work in understanding and learning names because it's a reflection of different cultures. So I guess for myself, I've never given myself an English name. So I don't know about you, Nannan, have you given yourself an English name when you were studying overseas?

[00:24:11] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah, I think, um, in the first month when I was in the US, I introduced myself like Jessie to like an English name, to people because I feel like it's easier for them to remember. But, um, gradually, like, I prefer to use my real name because I feel, I'm kind of, this is my identity. And also, another thing is about, uh, I think my name is quite easily pronounced by the, um, Western people, so I just use my original name.

[00:24:44] But it also reminds me of something that I want to share about international students who are studying in China. So, you know, they're from different countries, like African countries or some countries that they use different, they don't use letters or characters, like, so it's very, it's very complex, like, um, it's very difficult for us to remember their names, but when I was teaching them, it's kind of like a dilemma, um, for me, like, um, if you cannot call the students, how you teach them and how you reach out to them in a class, like ask a question, but I also feel like when you, like, give a name to the student. Some students, they feel like I don't like the name. I don't know the meaning of the name and why I have a surname, you know, in China, we have a surname. If you don't have a surname, it's very weird. So, um, it's kind of a dilemma for me um, about the naming, but yeah, I don't know. Um, what's your opinion, like, uh, do you have some solutions to this?

[00:25:54] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** I think, to me, I think the solution is always to ask the students themselves what they prefer. And I feel like, you know, Maybe it's okay to be honest about it and say that, you know, um, because you have this number of students in your classroom and it's a bit difficult for you to remember the names and especially if the names are very long.

[00:26:18] So, perhaps a halfway ground could be to meet them and say, do you think you can meet me halfway by, um, shortening your name, um, to, uh, one or two syllables, you know, but in a way, that is something that you are comfortable with and because in a way that will be helpful. So I guess I'm coming from point which is you know to always ask them what they prefer perhaps and I feel like, that may be a sign of that that will be a sign of respect, you know,

[00:26:50] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah yeah I agree.

[00:26:51] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** You know, what is your preference and what are you comfortable with?

[00:26:54] Do you think we can meet halfway so that you know, it can be a little easier for me as well So I guess in a way maybe this talks about that, that power relationship as well, you know, in terms of thinking about more actively, you know, how both sides can work with each other. I'm not sure. I don't know. Asuka, do you have any ideas or thoughts on this?

[00:27:15] **Asuka Ichikawa:** This is a great conversation segway and I'm also nodding here because I think asking each student what their preference is is probably the best approach in a respectful way. And I mean, for myself, I'm also thinking about, um, the sense of identity that both of you have mentioned.

[00:27:38] And for some people, they might go through the journey and thinking, maybe they had English nicknames or things like that, but then come to, your own original name, but some people might actually resonate with multicultural or multilingual other, um, plural sense of identities and may want to have that fluidity of using this name in this context, that name in this context.

[00:28:02] Um, so yes. Thinking in that terms, I think it might also be best to ask the student, um, in the context that you're meeting with the student, what their preferences are, um, and, I mean, even I used to work as a resident advisor back in college times, I'm still not very good with remembering names so accurately, so I may have to carry like a sheet of paper with me all the time to refer to that, but I'll just say sorry for that.

[00:28:32] But still I would, you know, try to like to make the effort. And so, um, yeah, that's what, again, I don't have like a perfect answer or solution to this, but I also appreciate this space, like thinking about this as we encounter, um, students and just reflecting our own journeys with our names and identities.

[00:28:51] Yeah. Thank you.

[00:28:52] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** So just one thing that really helps me, I find is when in my class, um, in my first session of class, usually I will ask my students what are their names and what are the meaning behind their names or how they got their names? I think this is a

great activity to open up the space to understand everyone's histories, you know, and their cultures as well. And what I have found helpful is whenever they share about the meaning behind their names or you know who gave them their names, the history behind it, that somehow helps me with better remembering their names.

[00:29:25] It's not that I'm good at it myself as well but that's definitely something that can be quite helpful, I find, as a mentor.

[00:29:32] **Asuka Ichikawa:** I, I love that. Yes. I sometimes ask the meaning of the names to some of the like participants in the study so that I can better understand their identities. And if I may, could I ask the meaning of your, names, uh, from both of you, if that's all right.

[00:29:51] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** Sure. So Tang, “Dan” (丹) in Mandarin is actually Tang. As in mudan dan (牡丹), which is a colour, you know, and the colour is actually crimson. So I suppose, you know, it does, it means something like a crimson heart or, you know, to be passionate about something and leave behind, you know, this crimson legacy or something. Yeah. So that's the meaning behind my name.

[00:30:18] **Asuka Ichikawa:** That is beautiful.

[00:30:20] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah, it's interesting. Like, Dr. Heng's name is about like a flower, and my name is about a tree.

[00:30:27] **Asuka Ichikawa:** Oh, wow. .

[00:30:29] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah. Yeah. So my name, Nan, uh, represents, uh, nanmu (楠木) in China, which is a kind of tree, uh, which is very straight and green, and strong. So Chinese people like the texture of nanmu and made them into, um, kind of furniture. So my parents gave this name to me, hoping I can be strong and to be straight and, you know, and when I grew up, just like a tree, facing sunshine or something.

[00:31:06] **Asuka Ichikawa:** That was beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing that and maybe on that note, uh, perhaps we're coming to the close of the show,

[00:31:15] I know you were conferencing and, and traveling for all of these academic events. So thank you for taking time during your busy schedule. I'll wrap it up now, but I just wanted to thank you so much.

[00:31:30] **Dr. Tang Tang Heng:** I do appreciate this very organic way in which you have posted the program today, Asuka.

[00:31:35] **Asuka Ichikawa:** That means a lot. Thank you.

[00:31:37] **Nannan Lu:** Yeah, the same here. Thank you so much for having us.

Asuka Ichikawa: That was Dr. Tang Tang Heng and Nannan Lu on stereotypes of international students. Please see the episode description for their co-authored chapter in the RIS book. Thank you very much for tuning in. Please take care, and see you next time.

References mentioned in the episode:

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