

I Decide Where I Will Live: The Lived Experience of Chinese Students Hoping to Study Abroad
by
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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

This thesis is a phenomenological description of the experience of planning to study abroad from the perspective of Chinese students who have not yet left their home country. The themes of Differences in Education, Career Prospects, Intercultural communication, Independence and Escape, Discrimination and Isolation, and Fulfilling Dreams emerged from their answers. The author discusses in detail the approach to the study and concludes with a discussion of the findings. Themes and findings generally indicate that meaning for students lies in an expectation or hope that they can be more self-reliant and in control of their lives and careers.

Keywords: China, Intercultural communication, International education, International Students Phenomenology, Study Abroad

Introduction

The decision to study abroad can be challenging and life changing for the student leaving their culture, undertaking studies in a new language and considering staying permanently in a new country and beginning a new life. This study attempts to interpret and understand what that means to a Chinese student by investigating the lived experience of making such a decision. What is on the top of a student's mind when they consider the impact of their journey on their families, education and career? How do they express their motivation and expectations? Most importantly, what does the decision mean to the individual?

International education is an increasingly important part of a globalized world. As companies move from national to multi-national entities and countries seek a skilled work force to develop resources and serve their citizens, international education is a key building block to meeting a variety of challenges (Altbach, 2004). Of the 90,000 international students in British Columbia over 15,000 come from China. Chinese students of all ages inject an average of \$400 million into local economies, which means Chinese students are a very important market segment for both institutions and governments (Kunin, 2011). However, this phenomenon runs the risk of becoming only a number, however significant, if we focus on economic impact and fail to explore the experience of the individuals who help to make up the large populations of international learners. In order to build programs, create living environments and even compete with the multitude of Western jurisdictions and institutions that draw Chinese students to an education abroad, recruiters, educators and governments benefit from understanding the lived experience of the young people who make this decision. This thesis explores the experience of decision and anticipation of studying abroad, rather than the lived or reflexive experience of

actually studying abroad, with the hope of gaining better insight to the experience of individuals who are choosing destinations and career paths.

This thesis begins with a literature review on the experience of Chinese students, such as travel motivations, destination determination and experience in education. While it is difficult to find phenomenological studies looking specifically at students who have yet to go abroad, some of the literature helps to frame the context for the participants of this study. It also acknowledges the gap that exists in discussing the meaning to, and lived experience of, individuals. Finally, the literature review acts as a form of the bracketing critical to phenomenology.

The thesis then outlines the chosen methodology of phenomenology and its aptitude for uncovering meaning and themes key to understanding the experience of the participants. Following this section, I outline the research design and sampling process, along with methods of data collection and analysis.

Further to this, as the only researcher involved, I explain my own experience and identity in an attempt to suspend any prejudice or design in advance of the analysis. The remainder of the thesis deals with findings and discussion on the key themes that emerged in student interviews.

Literature Review

The following literature review represents a diversified field of knowledge about Chinese international students because the thesis explores the entire experience of deciding to study abroad and the anticipation of the journey. There are a variety of aspects to consider because this thesis research touches on a wide range of issues to understand the students' experience as a whole; an experience that may last years, not moments. The review does not comprise Chinese

literature on the topic, as the scope of the thesis and ability of the researcher to read Mandarin do not allow for consideration of it.

In 2009, Chinese students represented approximately 25 % of the international students in Canada at 50,000 learners (Government of Canada, 2012). Canadian Minister of International Trade and for the Pacific Gateway Edward Fast told *The New York Times* that international students are more than just an economic driver that supports more than 80,000 Canadian jobs. They are “a vital link as we create the people-to-people ties that will grow our partnerships with countries around the world. As Canadians do more business abroad, we need these kinds of connections” (Smith, 2013). This significance explains the priorities the Canadian government places on securing the attention of students to enrich education through diversity, inject funds to domestic universities, and help fill skill shortages so important in global markets. However, encouraging numbers may be in suggesting that a vast number of Chinese students choose Canada’s open arms, competition for these students remains stiff, with the main countries of choice being the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Slethaug, 2010). As Canadian governments and institutions market more aggressively and strive to create affordable, desirable programs, it is important to consider the “complexity of Chinese learners inside and outside of China in many different countries and contexts” (Slethaug, p. 36, 2010). This suggests a constant and evolving field of study that can also benefit from a closer look at what Chinese expect from an international education.

Motivation on the part of the student to study abroad is also a key consideration of the experience discussed here. Altbach (2004) identifies a number of what he terms “push-pull” factors. These include “pushes” such as lack of opportunity for globally competitive graduate

studies in developing nations and political forces such as “discriminatory admissions policies” (Altbach, 2004, p.21). “Pull” factors can include the prestige of a foreign degree or the ease of acceptance to an “unselective U.S. institution” (Altbach, 2004, p.21). Although focused more on student travel, Xiye and Walker (2010) point out that the top two motivations for Chinese university students to travel are learning and escape from personal-social pressure. These factors paint a picture of students who are globally aware and see a disparity between local and foreign education.

Furthermore, Yunke and Banham (2011) suggest several important motivations for Chinese students choosing education destinations. Aside from the ever-important rankings, students seek institutions that can offer good graduate employment rates and affordable tuition that caters to China’s expanding middle class (Yunke & Banham, 2011). They also showed students’ need to be aware of favourable immigration policies and opportunities for future employment. This also points to the meaning an education abroad can hold for an international student: the opportunities for not only a prestigious education, but a life beyond the walls of the university.

As students in China prepare to head to university, they are aware of the pull factors from the West. A study on high school students’ knowledge about the United States purports that Chinese students get information from a wide variety of sources and are relatively knowledgeable about America’s history, geography etc. The study also suggests that students, while proud of rapid development in China, “resent the education system” (Zhao, Zhou & Huang, 2008, p.22). Furthermore, the study points to the current generation in China having a more globalised viewpoint than previous generations. Zhao et al. put forth the notion that

continuing to understand such perspectives is important because we live in a world where countries depend more and more on each other and mutual understanding.

A 2006 study focused on Chinese students at British universities also points out the lack of studies that explore the student experience in detail (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). The study examined some of the difficulties Chinese students face in adjusting to life abroad and connected mental stresses from making social adjustments (eg. daily life, interacting with non-Chinese peers) to negative educational outcomes. The paper combines quantitative and qualitative data to explore the feelings of students and notes that the stresses of adjusting to student life are of course not isolated to international learners. However, studies of this kind show that once students are engaged in overseas study, factors of isolation and mental stress have the potential to jeopardize one's education.

Acculturation is a large and dynamic part of studying abroad, regardless of origination or destination. A recent phenomenological study addresses some of the issues of socialization experienced by Chinese students in Canada by examining how physical education helps them to adjust to the new host culture. The authors found value in sport as a key to integration (Brunette, Lariviere, Schinke, Xing, & Pickard, 2011). Brunette et al show how the interpretative framework of hermeneutic phenomenology allows for consideration of both the participants' culture and research understanding in the interpretation of the data. It also enables the student voice to define the issue and raise the themes that are most important for understanding. For example, by keeping questions on topic but open, themes such as "communication" and sub-themes such as "improving English," "Canadian culture," "making new friends" emerge (Brunette et al., 2011, p. 215). Relevant to this thesis, the study shows that a great deal of

emphasis should be placed on ways to assist students to adapt because of the extreme changes in culture.

These changes in culture also bring forward the need to promote intercultural sensitivity. Westrick (2005) shows how phenomenology can elicit general statements from consensus and the blending of unique stories, such as: “Students are able to develop intercultural sensitivity through a variety of life experiences of difference” (Westrick, 2005, p.117). The study also suggest that students in China are well aware of cultural differences and the need for mindfulness, as many of them were able to readily think of instances where service programs influenced their cultural sensitivity. Chinese students living at home may also be less willing to engage in communication with people of other nationalities (the study compared to Americans) according to a study from Georgia State University (Lu & Hsu, 2008). The study found that “Among Chinese, WTC [willingness to communicate] was positively related to self-perceived communication competence, language competence, immersion time and motivation being positively correlated and negatively associated with CA [communication apprehension]” (Lu & Hsu, 2008, p.75).

Another significant factor to a student intending to study abroad is of course their ability to fund such a venture, which is especially significant to the majority of students, those who are not recipients of scholarships or grants due to being only mid-performing students (Fan-Sing, 2010).

To summarize, there is a wide range of literature that shows a variety of factors and issues facing the Chinese student who wishes to study abroad. A large and diverse group from a large and diverse nation, Chinese students who decide to study abroad face a variety of

challenges, some of which they are aware beforehand and some of which they discover the true magnitude of once they undertake their studies. While wider surveys contribute clear overview to motivations and abilities, studies considering the student voice can provide insight to the issues (and perhaps therefore solutions) that matter to individuals. Phenomenology in particular provides a snapshot where key, clear themes can emerge for interpretation.

Methodology

In order to understand the lived experience of the participants, this study uses a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a term for both a philosophy and a research method. The founder of this school of thought was Edmund Husserl, whose work inspired others, such as Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to expand on his ideas and explore them further. Phenomenology as a research tool does not seek to explain the structure of a particular phenomenon. Instead, it looks to accounts of personal experience to find out how the people who experience the phenomenon live it, so that we can know what the phenomenon is like for them (Van Manen, 1990). Although intercultural interpretation intersects with the texts, this study focuses on the student voices to form a descriptive phenomenology instead of interpretive, using Park's (2006) dissertation on Asian students' experience in online learning as an example.

Bracketing my own experience

It is important to describe myself in the context of traveller, student and researcher in order to fully suspend any preconceived notions about the participants or the data they share. It is also important to the readers of this thesis, who judge for themselves where any of my own experience may influence the interpretation of the texts. I am a graduate student at Royal Roads

University, in the Master of Arts in Intercultural and International Communication program. This explains why I frame the phenomenology in an intercultural context, as opposed to, for example, a pedagogical or psychological context (Giorgi, 2012). This context will naturally intersect with the interpretation, but should refrain from focusing the questions or research design too narrowly. The inevitable way this affected the study is in undertaking the subject itself: as part of the program requirements, I travelled to China in the winter of 2012 for five weeks. This sojourn prompted a thesis that could take advantage of face-to-face access with students who have yet to begin their studies abroad, as well as an otherwise unavailable proximity to their lifeworld. Of course the latter necessitates further suspension or bracketing, as I have to ignore my own judgements about the participants' lifestyle, in particular aspects of their school life that were apparent to me.

Traveling to China was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream of my own. Fourteen years ago, I was so interested in an international education myself that I applied to the University of Tianjin and planned to take at least a year to study there. I did not realize this dream, but it was significant to instilling in me a lifelong interest in Chinese culture. For myself, the journey and educational undertakings were a source of great anticipation. Like many of the participants I interviewed, my notions of the culture I would encounter were vague and based on broad generalizations of freedom and politics. As a Canadian, I assumed I was someone from a free and democratic society visiting a closed, one-party system that did not emphasize personal freedom. I was also aware of China's long and distinct history, hoping to draw new insight from a culture thousands of years older (and thus, in my mind, infinitely richer) than my own. Beyond this, I had little in the way of preconceived notions. In fact, when questioned about my

eagerness to visit China by a Chinese graduate student visiting our class, the only thing I could pinpoint concretely was my enthusiasm for the variety of authentic Chinese cuisine that I could find.

Once I made it to Jinan in Shandong province, I was struck hard by culture shock despite my anticipation of it. I became more withdrawn than I planned to be, feeling tremendous anxiety from a lack of personal space and street noise in public. I often retreated to my hotel room on the Shandong Normal University (SDNU) campus and sought solace in silence and Western media that I brought with me. Further to this, I was appalled at the conditions under which my buddy and his fellow SDNU students lived for the many years they would attend university. They fetched their own water from a pump house daily, washed their own undergarments by hand nightly and lived in a room with 3-7 other individuals. I perceived that they had less personal space than we allow for prisoners in Canada, and viewed their ability to sleep on unpadded metal bunks, take regulated showers and maintain a wardrobe of two outfits as singular and admirable. Indeed, foreign students at SDNU generally stayed at nearby hotels, which I understood, as I know I could not tolerate the conditions of the local students myself. However, the students at SDNU overall seemed happy, sociable and hard working to me. They were positive and seemed to hold a liberal, welcoming worldview. By the time I interviewed the participants, I knew that I could not refer to any of these observations in the interview questions. Furthermore, I had to suspend what I had heard from classroom panels and informal visits; notions of study versus play in university, power-distance between students and teachers, and physical conditions of a state-run university, such as food allowances and unheated, poorly appointed classrooms.

Bracketing intercultural assumptions about Chinese students/people

After discovering that respect for tradition ranked low for Chinese students and that participants in her study often exhibit individualist rather than collectivist values, Garrott (1995) cautions that “stereotypes cloud rather than clarify” (p. 223). This highlights the need to suspend many of the cultural values one might assume apply to Chinese people. While established cultural values, such as Confucian filial piety, provide some perspective on education decision-making (eg. Lee & Morrish, 2012), they are neither absolute nor predictive (Garrott, 1995). A good example of the stereotypes applied to Chinese students comes from Ruble and Zhang’s (2013) study on stereotypes American students held about Chinese learners at their mid-Western institution. They found that stereotypes included positive labels such as “hard working” or “smart”, as well as negative, such as “cliquey” or “oblivious”, results they noted were largely consistent with previous studies on stereotypes (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).

Aside from assumptions based on tradition or perception, intercultural scholars tend to mark Chinese culture as collectivist and high-context. Furthermore, Chinese people, in communication terms, often define their “self” in relation to others (such as work groups or family) (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998).

Suspending preconceived notions about the participants also necessitates relevant discussion of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. For a student of intercultural communication, Hofstede’s dimensions are an overarching, even foundational, aspect of how people’s cultures affect approaches to communication and experience. Despite the potential for these dimensions and their inherent values to work alongside sociological studies (Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), they work against a phenomenological inquiry by imposing strong

and longstanding assumptions about the values held by members of a culture. Hofstede's dimensions include: *power distance* ("the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally"), *uncertainty avoidance* ("the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and have created beliefs and institutions to avoid these"), *individualism/collectivism* (individualism being "a situation in which people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only" and collectivism being "a situation in which people belong to in-groups or collectivities which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty") and *masculinity/femininity* (femininity being "a situation in which dominant values in society are caring for others and the quality of life" and masculinity being "a situation in which the dominant values in society success, money and things") (Hofstede and Bond, 1984, p. 419). Hofstede adds a fifth dimension, *long-term orientation*: if a culture is long-term-oriented, it places value on pragmatism in family and work and "children learn thrift, not expecting immediate gratification of their desires, tenacity in the pursuit of whatever goals, and humility" (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 497).

Hofstede (2013) ranks the Chinese as an 80 (very high) in power-distance, indicating that inequalities are acceptable and authority is formally and largely unchallenged. China also ranks low on individualism, with a highly collectivist culture and in-group preference given for promotion in society, as well as prioritization of personal relationships over business. Hofstede defines China as a definitively masculine society, defining the education system as the starting point for a definition of success that favours the top performing segment. Leisure has low priority in such a society. In the case of uncertainty avoidance, Hofstede ranks China low, citing pragmatism and ambiguity as hallmarks of the Chinese approach to situations. Finally, Hofstede

sees Chinese society as extremely high in long term orientation, stating that they observe status and hierarchy with an eye towards long term investment and adapting traditions to suit situations (Geert-Hofstede.com/China, 2013). Again, while these dimensions may substantiate or contradict the meaning inherent to participants' experience, the researcher suspended them in the approach to the findings, as they are familiar and guiding principles to students and researchers of intercultural communication.

Data collection and interview protocol

The researcher located participants through word of mouth amongst students in Jinan. Most were attending language classes throughout the local area and came from a variety of Universities, Normal Universities (language study institutions), International English Language Testing System (IELTS) overseas study, and immigration preparation school. The non-probability technique of network sampling or gathering personal recommendations helped to locate students of both genders, ranging in age from 18-27, and with a variety of study intentions in the United States, the UK and Canada, including language, economics and pathology. The following restrictions also applied to the selection: students must be certain they would study abroad, they must be planning to attend a university in a drastically different culture (ie. Western), and they must not yet have travelled overseas in their life. These restrictions ensured that the students would be responding from personal (in)experience, defining their expectations and so on only according to the perceptions of a Chinese student. The notion that relationships come before tasks in China influenced the protocol. Therefore, everyone who participated in the study met the researcher beforehand in a local restaurant. Teachers and advisors were welcome to join in order to meet the researcher and understand participation and privacy. The researcher

hosted the meals, and the emphasis was on fun, food, and questions for the researcher. Several of these lunches took place for different participants, some individually and some in larger groups. Interviews took place in a hotel, in an empty formal dining area, far-removed from the usual surroundings of the students. Interviews took place in English, with participants able to use Chinese when necessary and have it translated by a facilitator. While the researcher never dressed in a formal way to emphasize role disparity, the participant and facilitator sat across the table, while the researcher carefully laid out the laptop, notebook and pen on their side of the table to denote the different roles. New surroundings were also a loose attempt to help the participants experience some of the discomfort of adapting to language and new environment. Participants had opportunity to review and sign a consent form (see Appendix C) as well as review questions before the start of the interview. All students had assurances of privacy and anonymity and all chose new English names for the publication of their statements. The interview questions began with basic questions about study intentions, decision-making and moved on to probe repeatedly about cultural, and educational expectations (see Appendix A). Questions intended to explore the experience from beginning to end, from conception of overseas study and decision to questions around positive and negative expectations. This was so the student could decide what was relevant to discuss. The researcher probed answers for clarity, confirmed meanings and pressed students repeatedly on similar questions of cultural expectations to find more information on their feelings and knowledge. All interviews concluded with an opportunity for students to directly say what they thought the potential for overseas study meant to them and to bring up any thoughts they had that may not have arisen in the conversation to that point.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed basic structures of phenomenological reduction. Moustakas (1994) summarizes the essentials of the process as follows:

“... the steps of Phenomenological Reduction include: *Bracketing*, in which the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question; *horizontalizing*, every statement initially is treated as having equal value. Later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the *Horizons* (the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon); *Clustering the Horizons Into Themes*’, and *Organizing the Horizons and Themes Into a Coherent Textural Description of the phenomenon.*” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 15))

Following a transcription of the interviews from six student participants, the researcher used horizontalization for each participant’s responses. This step involved singling out individual significant statements, with equal value on each statement, as every horizon that “comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (Moustakas, p.13, 1994). After consideration of this data, the researcher created textural-structural descriptions of the statements (see Appendix B). Each student received a basic textural-structural description as a form of member checks to validate the data. This gave them an opportunity to see that the researcher grasped their meaning, and to correct in places where the researcher had misread the intention. Structural elements (meaning) of the statements were

not extensively complicated by imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990) to avoid confusion during the member checks. Finally, the researcher clustered each student's non-repetitive statements into six common themes. A composite of the themes and textural-structural descriptions formed the final description from the participants' voices, which we can consider the findings of this study.

Findings

The six main themes emerging from the participants' statements are: *Differences in Education, Career Prospects, Intercultural communication, Independence and Escape, Discrimination and Isolation, and Fulfilling Dreams.*

Differences in Education

For Ian, studying abroad means access to a University that rivals the finest in China, something that he could not achieve by staying at home.

Ian – “In China I can't go to the very top university such as Beijing university or QinHua university but in Canada I can - you know Toronto university is better than Beijing university.”

Ian does not feel that university in China provides a good environment for learning. This is not only because of the quality of education in China, but because there are too many peers in China who are not dedicated to their learning.

Ian –“ ...some of them just think I should go to study abroad because the universities in China are not very good and the students are lazy they got nothing to do so if I want a bright future I should go to study abroad.”

The destination schools also represent more than an optimal learning environment or prestige. As a future pathologist, Tom wants to learn the most advanced techniques and he is hopeful that he can return and contribute to medicine in China.

Tom - The main reason I choose the United States is because their medicine is so strong. I heard the story that just as I mentioned my classmates who went to Nebraska the doctors will do the operation by the robot sometimes so I want to learn that technology so maybe someday when I go back to my country I can use that technology here.”

Students also alluded to a difference at their local university for postgraduate entrance that they feel is a deterrent to higher education. David points out corruption he perceives in the exams. He says he does not participate in the system, which means that he did not have the money or connections to pass despite his best academic efforts.

David –“ I wanted to apply for the postgraduate program at Shandong University but in China there is a lot of stories of an inside plot, like you should give money or you should have some acquaintance who works in that departments in that school. But I didn't do those kind of things so I fail the exam.”

In addition to the unfair practices, David notes the lack of opportunity for personal growth due to the system. He points out the disparity and opposition he perceives between Western and Chinese student lifestyles. He implies that Chinese students miss fun and that college becomes a

time to escape scrutiny from authorities. He believes the effect of this is that Chinese students are not properly equipped to plan a career or even choose their majors in college. This implies a great deal of regret and frustration, along with hope for another chance.

David – “I can’t say we don't know anything, but we barely know about that, so when we choose our majors we don't know which one is adapted to us, it just depends on the name. Maybe we don't have any interest, maybe we like music and movies, but that is not interest for a job. We all face that situation where we don't know anything about which major is adoptable for us so we just choose some kind of names. Finally, after four years I find out I'm not good at it and I want to choose again.”

Lincoln also alludes to the fact that his success on exams does not define him because he feels that the system (and perhaps society) ignores other talents that may be more unconventional.

Lincoln – “China has a tradition to have exam. Chinese always consider the children who have a high score on the exam are good children. They ignore the other experience, the other abilities.”

Alan echoes this sentiment of overlooked abilities and unfair standards. He expressed a long time frustration with the education system in China. This indicates an underlying need for independence and creativity. He refers to the strictness of high school and the focus on studying rather than play. This frustrates him because he feels that the focus in China is on school and not on the individual’s ability to create or be imaginative.

Alan - “When I was in high school I want to go abroad to study because I can't stand the education in China. I think it's too strict and resists our ability to create.”

Career Prospects

The meaning of choosing to study abroad also represents different opportunities for life. Students felt that the impact on their career could be drastic. Ian feels that the practical knowledge and experience he gains abroad will be beneficial to his career.

Ian- The people who have experience in working abroad, then it's quite easy to find a job to get a high income. If they study abroad and get a job abroad before then come back to China it is easier to get a job. My mom told me that. I think the company is concerned with experience - if they got experience it will be easy for them.

Tom also perceives an education abroad will be a strong advantage in the eyes of prospective employers, setting him apart from the crowd.

Tom - Maybe if I go to say, the United States or some country else to study they will admire me, they will think the guy is good he has some experience abroad maybe he can teach me something new, bring some new technology, or new concept.

David goes so far as to say that the experience even outweighs the education itself, regardless of whether he returns to China.

David- "I never thought to live there for a long time but if I have more foreign work experience for me there it's better for me. I mean not only in China but for all around the world work experience is more important than the degree."

Intercultural Communication

For many of the participants, the decision to study abroad means an opportunity to branch out socially in a globalized world. Nearly all of the participants expressed this desire.

Ian feels that China will be more multicultural in the future and that it is “the future.” Because so many foreigners will look to China, Ian believes that it is important to understand their culture too.

Ian—“... my mom wanted me to go to study abroad she said I will enrich my knowledge and make some friends and also I will know how to communicate with especially the foreigners she said that is very important in the future. I just think that the future is in China but in the future more and more foreigners will come to China. We will not be just in Chinese cultures, we need to know the western cultures and so the best way we can do that is to go abroad and study.”

Ian thinks that this intercultural communication will come natural to him. He appreciates diversity and feels that he can adapt and tolerate. This also implies a difference from the status quo at home.

Ian – “The Chinese are very shy many of them are afraid to make new friends but I don't; I like making new friends. I never worry about making friends. I'm very tolerant, I can make friends with any kinds of people, any type.”

Tom also looks forward to the diversity abroad. His personal perspective is global, and he feels that all nations can benefit from trading ideas and learning from other cultures. He also thinks that Canada and the US will be more accepting of diversity than China. *Tom* – “I want to talk with different people and not just stay in one place for a very long time; your thought, your ideas will be narrow and just similar to the local people. I think the

world is becoming more and more complex and too many different kinds of people we should contact with them and we're not living in this one place; it is the whole world.”

Tom – “Different cultures, different traditions makes me feel very happy, new festivals maybe new ceremonies. This time as I have mentioned to you the homosexuals in Canada: I think that is good. The people are very different from each other but diversity of our world is natural so we should accept that. The people refuse something just because they don't understand it.

Lincoln expressed what many of the students and cultural dimensions purport. This shows a good knowledge of the differences in communication approaches.

Lincoln - “Canadian people don't always bury their thoughts in their mind, they are very direct. There is an ancient Chinese idiom that if you knock the east the west will also ring. You just express your opinion in opposite way. Because Chinese people consider that if you speak the truth that will hurt you. But Canadian people do not have this kind of ideology I'm not sure if I'm right.”

Alan also shows disdain for the rules surrounding friendship in China, saying they are too restrictive and are a burden for him. He would rather have simple, straightforward relationships that focus on honesty and emotion.

Alan - “I think in China of the people can't speak straightly what they want to say. Because there are lots of factors, for example, if you say something you could get revenge or punishment from someone, other people. The relationship between people is very complicated. I don't want to be that sophisticated or tricky.”

Alice also feels that people in Western culture enjoy greater equality and are more able to pursue friendship or personal fulfillment. She places this above Chinese society, seeing it as better. She seeks a more genuine, authentic lifestyle where people are honest with each other. She also seeks a less materialistic life and expresses a desire for authenticity in all aspects of life.

Alice - Western culture in Chinese people's minds is more civilized, more lofty. People are relative to make a friend and how to solve a problem and to face questions. In China there are so many bad customs I can't stand. There's no truth in China. In the media and in the social life, no truth.

Independence

The discussions of changes in culture lead directly to further expressive feelings about the desire to learn more about self-reliance and escape from the current culture.

Ian holds a very strong opinion that China has many inequalities and that life may be better abroad.

Ian - "This is very unfair. The people in China are not allowed to say something about the government. And also the history books is not real, the history of the Chinese people is not real."

For Alice, the restrictions go beyond freedom of speech or information. She expects a total lifestyle change from studying abroad.

Alice - "I think western life like Canada's life must be free, more free than China. In China we are always busy, always busy. We have to get up at seven and sleep at twelve. In Canada there'll be no one pushing us and in China there are so many people pushing us: teachers or maybe someone from our family. In Canada, no one push us. More time for

fun and for job.”

Alice also expressed a very poignant thought to conclude her interview that summarizes the independence that she hopes to gain. This was in response to the overall meaning of the experience to her.

Alice – “It means a more comfortable life, high quality life. God decided where I was born but I decide where I will live.”

Alan envies his friends who have been able to go abroad for their newfound freedom, not just from a restrictive education system, but also from his parents at home. He feels that because his father is also an educator, he is strict about school as well as life. He also points to a difference in political values, implying that his parents are more conservative than he is, which causes conflict between them. Alan feels a generational and ideological conflict with the main authority figures in his life, as well as those close to him.

Alan - “Some of our friends go abroad to study and I admire them because they have freedom and they can do what they want over there. They can control their lives and their parents won't get involved in their lives. I think my parents always control me. Because my father is a professor he always told me what I should do. Sometimes I can't stand this. I think I'm a little different from my mom and dad they are very traditional and I'm not as traditional as them. I always have conflicts with them.”

Tom, like all of the participants, was very clear about whose choice it was to go abroad. No matter how students found out about the option, every one expressed the independence of their choice.

Tom – “Yes it's my choice. Since I was a little boy my mom and my dad they wouldn't affect my choice they wouldn't order me to do something. They just give me the freedom to do anything what I want.”

Finally, the choice to study abroad means an opportunity to test one's own mettle against the world without interference from parents.

David – “From the day I was born there are six adults around me: two couples of my grandparents and my parents. I'm not spoiled, but I have never faced a tough situation by myself. The truly meaning tough times, I've never experienced before. So this travel to America, I will do myself even though I know it's difficult, even though I know it's hard. So it will make me better, improve myself.”

Discrimination and Isolation Abroad

Participants were concerned with a number of random issues when questioned about the things they were worried about encountering abroad, but socialization concerns were chief among these.

Tom felt concern for being able to gain acceptance personally and professionally.

Tom – “The white people, I don't know that it's true, they always consider they're the first class of race in the world. Actually we are all the same yellow or the black one so I am a little worried about the racial discrimination there. And the third thing I worry about is whether I can adapt to that environment. Maybe I wanted to adapt myself to that new environment I want to make new friends there but they will not accept me. I wonder if I'm

a doctor there will you trust a Chinese doctor or a native doctor there. Some people may only trust the people from their countries.”

Alan expressed concern for isolation and disconnection from the host culture, but is critical of the information he receives. He recognizes that his experience has the potential to be different from those of his friends.

Alan – “My friend tells me the Canadians will not make friends with you. When she was in high school in Canada she always hang out with Chinese people, other Asian people and the Canadians won't deal with them. I don't know if it will be a similar situation in university.”

However, some of the participants, like David, who considers himself very open minded and tolerant, were more positive about their prospects because of the different culture. From his firsthand experience with foreigners, David thinks that they are more “open” than Chinese people. He thinks it is a favourable way of interacting professionally and appreciates the ability to connect with teachers on a personal level.

David – “I need to improve my oral English and my listening skills so I signed a contract with that school and I learned there. The teachers there are all foreigners, they all come from Canada, America, or even New Zealand and Australia. I made a very good friendship with some of the teachers. Through stay with them, I learned they are very open, not like China or traditional. They're very open. I mean the way of thinking there is humanism, very respectful to each other. In China and you know especially when you working in an office they are not so friendly or so open to each other.”

Fulfilling dreams

Students also consistently pointed to the significance of the experience for them overall, often referring to dreams and hope. They spoke of family, future families and their own youthful hopes.

David points out that as a teenager, the idea of going abroad, particularly to North America, was not a goal or realistic dream. His perception of the west was as a place to live a celebrity lifestyle or denote achievement, not a place he thought about going as a student.

David – “Yes, of course I dreamed about it, but not exactly, just like rock star dream or movie star dream. I like rock music, you know Canada, I like Simple Plan you know. So when I was young, in my middle school or even in my high school, I dreamed about going abroad. Not for study but for career things, crazy career things; not for real, just dreaming about that.”

He also refers to his good fortune in having the ability to go abroad.

David – “So I'm thankful I can get another chance because maybe this is my last chance to define my life. I want to share this feeling-so I'm lucky, maybe I failed my postgraduate exam I still feel lucky. This a very precious experience for me.”

However, rather than fulfilling his own dreams or aspiring to success, Lincoln points out that there is much more at stake than his own success and that it is not only his own decision.

Lincoln – “Every parent wants their son to be a dragon. The hope for two generations is on me. I go to study abroad to fulfill the task of my parents and grandparents. Not just according to my own opinion to formulate my life.”

Alice also feels a responsibility to her parents and family to succeed. She feels the not only

pressure of achieving an education, but a new life for her family.

Alice – “It's my mom's dream, my mom dreams to live abroad. So I have to try my best to immigrate. It's also my choice. It's my mom's dream but when I heard this I think it's a beautiful dream and it suits me so it becomes my dream. I hope to stay in Canada and get a job there. I think maybe I can take my parents to Canada as well. This is the dream and education is just a part of this.”

For Tom, there is a hopefulness of what he can achieve by fulfilling the dream. He does not look at becoming a doctor for personal financial gain; the dream represents a global contribution to humanity and the opportunity to understand others.

Tom – “It means the process of realizing my dream. People usually have dreams and nobody should spare any efforts to realize their dreams. Means a new world a new environments a new way of life a new group of friends and new group of teachers and I would like to accept that. I think I can do something good. I'm a person who carries my beliefs, my mind, and I can deliver my experience and my ideas about the world to different people.”

Discussion

The composite of significant statements above is the description of meaning from the students' voices. To summarize their expressed experience of decision, anticipation and expectation, the description leads from a place of frustration to one of hope. They express frustration as a sense of powerlessness in their home country, saying that their individuality and self-expression is stifled, even before post-secondary education. They feel restricted in their ability to create as well as their ability to explore their own interests and values. This leads to an even more restrictive path

for higher education because they do not have a clear idea of what will suit them in the long term as they choose a major. On top of this loss of control, they have to contend with a system that they feel does not favour those without a great deal of money or connections. They view achievement in university and the job market as closely linked to these connections and say it is unfair. Furthermore, the education they feel is available is outdated and often “untrue” and they show a general distrust for the quality and the practicality of such an education. When they consider their families, a very interesting duality emerges between independence and obligation. While every single participant expressed proudly their hand in the decision to study abroad, they often expressed a desire to achieve on behalf of their family and even country. Some also felt that the experience of deciding to study abroad was the fulfillment of something their parents would like to have been able to do but never could. The duality of independence alongside collectivism echoes again in the students who felt the need to seek an alternative to the restrictions and poor learning environment, while hoping to translate their achievement into a better life for their parents and even their home country. As they look toward a newfound freedom, students also recognized the isolation they may feel in a new country, and generally regarded the undertaking as challenging and difficult. Despite the language barriers and general lack of knowledge about what they might encounter socially, the students still maintained a general air of hope and positivity about the future. Whether they planned to return to China or bring their families to the West, there is a notion of hope for a better life and contribution to a better society through global sharing of knowledge. Here lies the essence of the experience, the underlying theme that we can isolate from all areas of this wide experience: hope. The students feel hopeful about change, hopeful about sharing and developing their sense of self and hopeful

about achievement. While they express feelings of restriction and fear, hope for independence, freedom and a positive experience arises consistently in the student voice. Ultimately, the hope is that by seizing the opportunity to study abroad, they can decide for themselves how their life will turn out.

Conclusion

The description of the lived experience as a largely hopeful experience points to high expectations on the part of the international student. Individuals making the leap are betting everything that their new home will provide unprecedented opportunities for independence, cross-cultural relationships and educational achievement. This indicates opportunities for recruiters and institutions to emphasize their support and consideration of student life as much as their opportunities for academic rigour. For example, marketing materials may seek to highlight programs for cultural exchange and integration. Although consideration of family in the decision-making process can be important for recruiters of Chinese students (Lee & Morrish, 2013), the findings here point to a pride and hopefulness concerning independence and learning that may resonate with many individual learners. It would be useful to expand on phenomenological research with Chinese international learners and probe deeper into instances of experience (ie. cross-cultural relationships) that emerged thematically from the findings. Studies exploring the voice of the individual involved in international learning could also prove useful with other cultural market segments in order to discover aspects of the lived experience that may contradict assumptions about the culture in question.

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Appendix A – Interview questions

1. How did you hear about studying abroad?
2. Where did you decide to go?
3. Why did you choose _____?
4. What materials or advertising did you see from the university you chose?
5. Why do you want to study abroad? (Do you want to?)
6. Was it your choice to study abroad?
7. Why do you think you are able to go?
8. How do you feel about living in a new culture?
9. What do you think your friends think about your trip?
10. How does your family feel about your trip?
11. What impact do you hope this will have on your career?
12. What impact do you hope this will have on your family?
13. What are you happy/excited for?
14. What are you nervous/worried about?
15. What do you feel are the greatest pressures on you?
16. What aspects of your host culture do you know about? Nervous/excited? Expectations?
17. What do you think will be the biggest changes in culture?
18. What differences in culture are you worried about?
19. Is there anything you hope to find? Avoid?
20. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about your upcoming experience?
Anything we haven't discussed or that has come to mind while we've spoken?

Appendix B – Sample Textural-Structural Analysis Approved by participant

Participant 8

Textural – Structural Description

Independence

Participant 8 expressed a long time frustration with the education system in China. This indicates an underlying need for independence and creativity. She refers to the strictness of high school and the focus on studying rather than play. This frustrates her because she feels that the focus in China is on school and not on the individual's ability to create or be imaginative.

1. "When I was in high school I want to go abroad to study because I can't stand the education in China. I think it's too strict and restricts our ability to create. "

Participant 8 envies her friends who have been able to go abroad for their newfound freedom, not just from a restrictive education system, but also from her parents at home. She feels that because her father is also an educator, he is strict about school as well as life. She also points to a difference in political values, implying that her parents are more conservative than her, which causes conflict between them. Participant 8 feels a generational and ideological conflict with the main authority figures in her life, as well as those close to her.

2. "Some of our friends go abroad to study and I admire them because they have freedom and they can do what they want over there. They can control their lives and their parents won't get involved in their lives. I think my parents always control me. Because my father is a professor he always told me what I should do. Sometimes I can't stand this. I think I'm a little different from my mom and dad they're very traditional and I'm not as traditional as them. I always have conflicts with them."

Although she relies on her parents to help her make the step to go abroad, Participant 8 expresses a desire to change that reliance. She wants to explore her own self-reliance for both money, lifestyle and ideas and be sure that she can take care of herself.

3. Of course my parents support me financially. I feel I can be independent and I want to learn more about my ability.

Changes in Culture

Further to the conflict with authority and family, she also explains that the general culture and accepted social norms in China are unsuited to her. Just as she feels that valuable energy is spent on study, she also feels that the rules surrounding friendship in China are too restrictive and are a burden for her. She would rather have simple, straightforward relationships that focus on honesty and emotion.

4. "I think in China of the people can't speak straightly what they want to say. Because there are lots of factors, for example, if you say something you could get revenge or punishment from someone, other people. The relationship between people is very complicated. I don't want to be that sophisticated or tricky."

Changes in Education Quality and Career Options

Participant 8 feels distrust for the international education agencies that assist students with arrangements to go abroad because they place profits ahead of benefits to the students. In choosing her school in Canada, she exercises her own research and judgment.

5. "Also because this university was not recommended by the overseas study agencies I think it's more reliable."

Participant 8 also feels that her career plans are still uncertain, something that she can change by studying abroad. She does not feel that Chinese students are able to contemplate career choices because of the restrictions in the Chinese education system. She also says that she would like to stay in Canada until she feels that her career is more resolved. She feels some guilt over this, but again recognizes that she already has different values from her parents and friends.

6. "I have no notion about my job. After I graduate from university I can get a job in Canada and work for maybe a while two years and if I'm good enough I can come back. I think it's a disadvantage in Chinese children because they always study and have no chance to face this problem."

7. One of my friends thinks I should go to Canada to study and come back to China to work but I want to work abroad. She thinks we are Chinese so we should contribute to our own nation but in my own opinion I prefer to have a simple life. Maybe it's a little selfish but I don't think everyone should be so generous she is generous I think. She is patriotic and I think I am maybe neutral.

When considering her future family, Participant 8 expresses a desire to stay in Canada so that her future children will not have to go through the same system as her.

8. In the future I want to have a child abroad because he or she can get a good education. And I don't want him or her get pressure under the Chinese education.

Participant 8 expressed concern for isolation and disconnection from the host culture, but is critical of the information she has received. She recognizes that her experience has the potential to be different from those of her friends.

9. My mission is studying so that will take a top priority. My friends tell me the Canadians will not make friends with you. When she was in high school in Canada she always hang out with Chinese people other Asian people and the Canadians won't deal with them. I don't know if it will be a similar situation in university.

Appendix C – Consent form sample

Consent Form

Royal Roads University
School of Communication and Culture – MA in Intercultural and International Communication
Researcher: Justin Schneider
Supervisor: Joshua Guilar

Study on the Meaning of an International Education for Chinese Students Aspiring to Study Abroad

You are invited to participate in research pertaining to the meaning the decision to study abroad holds for Chinese students. This research intends to describe the meaning of an international education experience from its inception to understand more fully the experience of international students. The potential application of this knowledge may also assist international educators, institutions and recruiters in marketing and shaping their product. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to discuss your experience and decision at length. The minimum interview time commitment will be approximately 2 hours. You may be given some questions to ponder in advance of an in-person interview. Besides basic questions about your involvement with international education (eg. application processes, contact with marketing material) you will be expected to provide personal statements about your feelings towards your intercultural experience and perception of peer opinion on your upcoming studies. For example, in order to understand the full meaning of your upcoming studies to you, the researcher will ask how you what your parents think of your decision as well as how their opinion makes you feel. If you feel uncomfortable with certain questions, they can be excepted, although this research mainly depends on your personal meanings associated with the decision to study abroad. Audio recording of the interview will be supplemented by any written answers you provide.

Recordings and documents may be shared by the researcher with advisors for interpretation, but otherwise kept confidential and digitally secured (encrypted) on a laptop. Numerical coding of results will ensure anonymity. Results will never be intentionally destroyed, but will remain digitally encrypted. The researcher will share results as well as selected quotes with you and you can remain anonymous if you desire. You may also choose to provide only written answers. The only cost to you is your time. If any information you share can harm your reputation or is otherwise objectionable, you can choose to make the statement anonymous or have it removed from the research. Hopefully, you will benefit from your own reflection and the statements of your peers. If you choose to withdraw from the project at any time, you are free to do so without consequence and any information you provided will be deleted from the project. The researcher remains open to any questions you may have prior to proceeding with the interview and you may contact him, his supervisor or Royal Roads University at any time with your concerns. Your

answers will be published in a thesis, which may in turn be published in an academic journal. Prior to final submission of the thesis, you will have at least one opportunity to view the document electronically. I have read and understood the above and give my consent to participate in the study given the aforementioned conditions.

Name of participant (Please print and date)

Signature of participant