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Understanding Chinese International Students at a Canadian University: Perspectives, Expectations, and Experiences

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to understand perspectives, expectations, and experiences of Chinese international students studying in the graduate and undergraduate programs at a Canadian university, paying special attention to the challenges these students faced in the process of acculturation. Multiple data gathering techniques were used for the quantitative and qualitative data, including a survey questionnaire, individual interviews and focus group discussions. Findings related to the participants' adjustment to the new environment include English language proficiency, previous education background, communication with other students, and understanding of the local culture. The study found that participants experienced various challenges in their new learning and living environment and some recommendations are offered for improvements.

Résumé

L'objectif principal de cette étude est de comprendre les perspectives, les attentes et les différentes expériences des étudiants internationaux chinois de deuxième et de troisième cycles dans des programmes canadiens. L'article décrit également avec beaucoup de détail les défis que ces étudiants doivent relever lors du processus d'acculturation. Plusieurs techniques de collection de données quantitatives et qualitatives ont été appliquées dont un questionnaire, des interviews individuels et des discussions en groupe. Les résultats en rapport avec l'adaptation des participants au nouvel environnement incluent la compétence langagière en anglais, la formation antérieure et la compréhension de la culture locale. L'étude exposera plusieurs défis auxquels ont dû faire face les participants pour pouvoir s'adapter aux nouveaux environnements et quelques recommandations seront offertes pour faciliter ce processus.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the number of international students coming to Canada has been increasing rapidly. In 2007, more than 60,000 international students came to Canada, "representing a 4.6 percent increase over the previous year" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). Like many universities in Canada, the University of Windsor has also been attracting an increasing number of international students in recent years, and the population of international students from China comprises one of the biggest groups of international students at the University. At the time of data collection, around 400 international students from China were registered in the undergraduate and graduate programs, which is approximately 27 percent of the international student population of the University. It is very important for the university to clearly understand how

satisfied these students are with their learning and life experiences, as this information may directly affect the recruitment and retention of international students.

We learned from anecdotal sources that many Chinese international students at the University of Windsor are experiencing various challenges. Our consultation with staff at the International Students Center at the University confirmed this statement based on their observations, saying that one of the major challenges for the international students is their weak English language proficiency, which affects their acclimatization to the new learning environment. However, we were also informed of the observation that many Chinese students currently enrolled, especially those who are doing their undergraduate degrees, are fluent in oral English, yet still have a variety of problems adjusting to the new school life in the University, including communicating with local students, getting involved in the University activities, and more Chinese international students than those from other countries drop out, skip classes, and/or suffer from stress, a phenomenon that mirrors the findings in a study by Zheng and Berry (1991).

The objective of this study was to understand perspectives, expectations, and experiences of Chinese international students studying in the graduate and undergraduate programs at the University of Windsor, paying special attention to the challenges these students face in the process of adjustment. Based on our findings, we hope to generate some useful suggestions to administrations such as the International Student Centre, Student Recruitment Office, and the academic program committees across the university, so that services can be provided to best meet the needs of international students in general and Chinese international students in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have documented that international students face more challenges on campus than their domestic counterparts (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991), not only due to language barriers, but also because international students have different expectations and approaches to study from local students (Grey, 2002). Several studies have investigated international students' adjustment or adaptation to North American campus life (e.g., Dillon & Swann, 1997; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Liang, 2003; Yang, Noels & Saumure, 2006) as well as their engagement in educational practice (Jiao, 2006; Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005). Frequently cited challenges international students experience include difficulty with the English language, cultural differences, and loneliness (Berry, 1997; Kim & Abreu, 2001).

Adjustments for international students are related to their life and/or academic experiences, that is, they have to deal with life and academic stresses (Misra, Crist & Burant, 2003) in the new environment. Life experiences include social life, housing and practical issues (Sam, 2001) and academic experiences are related to their studies. As students' cultural backgrounds have an impact on their learning (Lambert, 1973), international students with different cultural backgrounds may perceive a learning environment differently (Koul & Fisher, 2005). For example, Asian students could be negatively affected by teachers who establish close physical proximity while teaching (Rifkind, 1992). Influenced by their previous educational experiences, international students may be more accustomed to listening and learning rather than speaking in class (Edwards & Tonkin, 1990). In regard of the education environment in China, a teacher-centred lecture method has been dominant in the Chinese teaching and learning culture for centuries (Gu, 2006). Although a social-constructivism approach that encourages students to actively participate in class has been promoted in recent years, education systems still put a lot of emphasis on examination scores (Zhu, Valcke, & Schellens, 2009), and for Chinese students who have been mainly taught by the traditionally behaviourist oriented teaching approaches, the social-constructivist learning approach, which is widely used in Western education environments, is new to them and they may find it challenging to adapt to such teaching methods.

It is suggested that the “social environment is one important aspect of the university experience that should not be ignored by university faculty” (Lacina, 2002, p. 26), and getting support from friends can be a strong noncognitive predictor for international students' academic achievement (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988). Montgomery and McDowell (2009) argue that international students can work together and help each other to get a successful learning experience at university even if they do not have a close social and cultural contact with domestic students. However, the phenomenon that Chinese international students only communicate and seek help from friends from their home country does not help these students gain learning and social experience from students of other origins (Jiao, 2006), which is one of the important benefits of studying in a different country as an international student.

With the advancement of new technologies, international students of today have different experiences dealing with homesickness and adapting to the new environment. The Internet makes it possible for international students to keep close contact with their family and friends back home, which helps them to overcome homesickness, but spending a lot of time online communicating with

those in their home country may also slow down the process of adapting to the new environment (Kelly, 2010).

The studies mentioned above report investigations of international students studying in different countries, and some of the studies are about Chinese students in Canada (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Jiao, 2006; Liang, 2003; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Kuo and Roysircar's study examined factors related to acculturation level and acculturation stress of adolescents of Chinese descent in Toronto. There were 506 participants in this study and 108 of them were international students. The case study by Liang investigated Chinese students who were studying or had studied in graduate programs at the University of Calgary. Zheng and Berry's study compared the psychological adaptation of Chinese sojourners in Canada and identified problems experienced by the Chinese participants. Jiao's study was conducted in the same university where the current study was carried out and the focus of her study was to explore the reasons for the phenomenon that Chinese students are "always seen staying within their own culturally homogenous circles (p. iii). In recent years, the University of Windsor has taken certain measures to improve its services for international students, but as the international students from China nowadays may have different backgrounds from those who came a few years ago (e.g., graduates from international schools in China, students with better spoken English ability), and the advancement in communication technologies that makes it easier for students to communicate with their family and friends back home, the current study was conducted with the hope to have findings that can make updated contributions to the body of knowledge on this topic.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research questions

We are interested in understanding the perspectives, expectations and experiences of the Chinese international students regarding their academic and social lives at the University, so as to come up with suggestions for the relevant university authorities on how to optimize their services to best meet the needs of Chinese students in particular and international students in general. The following two research questions guided our study:

1. What are the Chinese international students' perspectives, expectations and experiences of their studies at the University of Windsor?
2. What could be possible causes of the challenges these students may have encountered during their programs of study?

Research participants

The target population of this study was Chinese international students, whose immigration status was international students at the time of data collection, or those students whose immigration status was not currently international students, but they had been international (visa) students when they first came to Canada. Participants for this study were recruited to 1) fill out a paper-based or online survey questionnaire and 2) participate in an individual interview or focus group discussion. A total of 76 students completed the paper-based or online questionnaire, and 17 participated in individual interviews or focus group discussions. As the survey was anonymous, we are not sure how many participants did both survey and interview/focus group discussion.

Data collection

Multiple data gathering techniques were employed for this study. A survey questionnaire in both paper-based and online format was administered from January to February of 2009 to collect information about participants' perspectives, expectations, and experiences of studying at the University of Windsor. The survey also collected participants' demographic data, including gender, age range, number of years being in Windsor, their home city in China, types of high school (public/private/international) they graduated from, range of TOEFL or IELTS score, if they took any ESL courses in Canada, their GPA at the University of Windsor, if they had any close native-English-speaking friends, and if they lived in student residences. In January 2009, when the Chinese Students and Scholars Association at the University of Windsor had a Chinese New Year Celebration on campus, we attended the event and asked the attendees there to voluntarily participate in our study by filling out the paper-based questionnaire. There were about one hundred people at the event but only Chinese international students would qualify as research participants. At the end of the event, fifty-four (54) valid questionnaires were returned. Toward the end of the Chinese New Year Celebration, we used a poster to advertise the online version of the questionnaire (same content as that in paper format) and distributed paper slips with the web address of the online questionnaire on them, asking the attendees to pass on the slips to their friends. We also put up the recruitment poster about the online questionnaire in the Student Union Center and at the entrance of the residence buildings. We set up a prize draw to encourage participation. By the end of February, when the online survey was closed, twenty-two ($n = 22$) participants had completed the online questionnaire. That means, out of 400 Chinese international students, 76 completed an online or paper survey, which makes a return rate of approximately 19 percent.

Based on the survey data, semi-structured interview questions were developed for focus group and individual interviews to gain in-depth data to understand whether and how participants adjust themselves to the new living and learning environment. Special attention was given to the exploration of significant challenges they might have experienced, and possible causes of such challenges. The qualitative data collected from individual interviews and focus group discussions were used to triangulate the depth and breadth of the original survey responses. The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted “as a follow-up data collection, pursuing ‘exploratory’ aspects of the analysis” (Morgan, 1988, p. 35). The participants in one focus group were mostly students in the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) and the discussion was conducted in Chinese upon the request of the participants. All the interviews and discussions were recorded with digital voice recorders which were later transcribed (and translated) to text by a research assistant who was fluent in both Chinese and English, before the data analysis commenced. In accordance with the nature of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the interviewers used the guided approach to start each interview or discussion topic and allowed the participants to express their views (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). To obtain in-depth responses, the interviewers asked for elaboration on emerging topics.

FINDINGS

By analyzing the survey and interviews data, we intend to answer the research questions by interpreting the quantitative and qualitative data, and offer our discussions based on the findings related to the literature we reviewed.

Survey data

The online and paper-based survey attracted 76 participants, which represents about 19% of eligible population for the study. Given the low response rate, we feel reluctant to claim the validity and generalizability of the data. Selection bias might also be a factor that contributes to the limitations of this study. Following are some interpretations of the survey data.

Of the 76 participants, 62% are females and 38% males. A majority (95%) were under 25 years of age. Approximately 27% of participants were enrolled in the ELIP program, 68% in various undergraduate programs, and 5% in graduate programs. Approximately 62% graduated from public schools in China, 15% from private schools, and 23% from international schools. In terms of disciplines, half of the participants were registered in business, 25% in science, 19% in engineering, and 6% in other programs.

In order to examine participants' exposure to Canadian language and culture, the survey asked participants about whether they had native English speakers as friends, 78% reported that they did and 22% said they did not have any native English speakers as friends. Approximately 49% lived in student residences, 21% in off-campus apartments, 25% shared a house with other Chinese students, 1% shared houses with international students from other countries, and 4% shared houses with native English speakers. Regarding what they would do in their spare time, 17% reported hanging out with native English speakers, 50% reported hanging out with Chinese friends, and 33% said they would usually stay in their own rooms. When asked where they studied after classes, 35% reported that they studied by themselves in common spaces such as the library and the student center, 21% reported studying in these places with other students, and 44% reported studying in their own rooms.

Regarding their experiences of studying at the University of Windsor, 7% of participants were very satisfied, 23% were satisfied, 39% were somewhat satisfied, 19% were little satisfied, and 12% were not satisfied. Correspondingly, when asked about their feeling of studying at the University of Windsor, 3% reported feeling at home, 67% reported feeling "OK", 21% reported they were struggling, and 9% reported that they wanted to quit their program of study. Approximately 26% were very confident that they would successfully complete their programs, 31% said they were confident, 30% were not sure, 7% were not confident, and 6% did not believe they could successfully complete their program of study at all. In response to the question regarding their future plans, approximately 25% planned to stay in Canada for further study after they finish their current programs, 20% planned to stay and work in Canada, 15% planned to go back to China, and 40% were not sure yet about what they would do after graduation. In response to the question whether they would recommend the University of Windsor to their friends, approximately 58% reported that they would and 42% said that they would not recommend it.

In regard to their communication with family and friends back in China, approximately 34% reported using telephone, and 66% reported using online communication tools such as MSN, QQ, Skype, etc. No participants reported writing letters as a way for such communications.

The percentage of male participants who reported having native English speakers as friends was higher (37%) than that of female participants (21%). However, no significant difference was found between male and female participants in their overall satisfaction with their study experience at the university.

Inferential analysis of survey data indicates that the friendship with native English speakers was a significant indicator for participants' satisfaction with their studying experience at the University. T-tests between participants who had native English speaking friends and those who did not, resulted in significant p values for their satisfaction levels with their study experiences ($p=0.018$), their feelings about their study experiences ($p=0.023$), and their confidence levels about successful completion of their programs ($p=0.010$). Those participants who had made friends with native English speakers tended to be more satisfied with their study experience and had a higher level of confidence to successfully complete their programs. Other factors such as where they lived, where they studied after the class, and how they spent their weekend, which were used to measure participants' exposure to Canadian language and culture, were not found to be significant factors.

We used t-tests to compare study experiences of participants who graduated from public schools in China and those who graduated from private schools. Statistically significant differences were found to indicate that public school graduates had a higher level of satisfaction with their study experience ($p=0.006$) and felt much more comfortable with their current study status ($p=0.000$).

Interview and focus group data

Seventeen Chinese international students from different academic programs participated in one-on-one interviews or focus group discussions. A few themes emerged from the interview and focus group discussion data, including reasons for choosing the University of Windsor, initial difficulties at arrival, residence issues, perspectives of life in Windsor, challenges, learning differences, the impact of prior educational experiences at public, private or international high schools, and their suggestions for improvements.

Reasons for choosing Windsor

A variety of reasons was given as to why they chose the University of Windsor for their education in Canada. Some participants made the choice because of the academic programs offered, for example, mechanical engineering and business. Others, especially those enrolled in the ELIP program, said they had friends studying at the University or that their parents made the choice for them, reasons being reasonable living cost or the location, i.e., close to the USA. A majority of the undergraduate participants came to the University of Windsor because their high schools have a relationship with the university. Those schools are usually

international schools using the curriculum of a Canadian province, mostly British Columbia, Ontario or Newfoundland.

Initial difficulties on arrival

Most participants flew to Toronto before they transferred to Windsor, some by airplane and others by bus or train. The University has a Soft Landing Arrival Program which allows international students who arrive in Windsor after the university business hours to stay at a nearby motel for the first night and then take a free taxi to the campus the following morning. Participants who used the Soft Landing Arrival Program appreciated the service but many of the participants stated that they had difficulty finding directions on campus. They had to run from one office to another to get the paper work done, often having to haul their luggage to different places. Getting used to the food served on campus was mentioned as a challenge for many participants. There are some food services on campus, but the choice of food is limited. Most participants said they had known very little about public transportation in Canada, and as a mid-sized city Windsor provides public transportation that is disappointing for most Chinese students who were used to more convenient public transportation in their home cities. They had never learned that they had to call a taxi by phone because in China you usually hire a taxi by waving your hand on the street.

Residence issues

About half (49%) of the participants were living in a student residence and many of them indicated that they were planning to move out for various reasons. Noisiness was the factor mentioned by most participants, especially those who had arrived not long before. They said they could hardly bear the loud music from their neighbours on the same floor late at night or the noise from people who held parties outside the building. When asked if they had tried complaining to the RA (residence advisor) on their floor or in their building, some of the participants said that often times the noise was coming from the RA's room so they thought it was part of the nature of residence life, and they had to learn how to live with it or move out. The compulsory meal plan at the residence also received quite a number of complaints. The food was believed to be too expensive and the choice was too limited. It was a challenge for some of the participants to get along with their roommate or neighbours, mainly due to different life styles or class schedules. Culture also appears to play an important role in the misunderstandings or conflicts. One female student who had come to the university not long before said that she chose to have a native English speaker as her roommate in her residence application but now she was wondering if she

had made the right decision:

My roommate is Canadian and she is nice. She is also patient with me. When I first arrived, she tried hard to help me, when I had questions. She even brought her friends to our room and introduced them to me. She thought I was homesick and lonely and she wanted me to make friends with those people. But I found it very hard to make conversations with them. I don't understand their conversation topics. Some topics are not interesting to me. Now I seldom talk with my roommate. Maybe I should have a Chinese student as my roommate. (Focus group discussion)

Perspectives of life in Windsor

Many of the participants used the word “boring” when they were asked to describe their life experience in Windsor. They described the cost of living as reasonable but as they did not have many friends, and there are not many places to go, so they felt bored in their spare time. There are a few shopping malls in the city but because of the limited public transportation what they could do on weekends was limited to watching movies online or sleeping in.

Challenges

Some of the challenges the participants experienced were related to their academic life while others were related to social life. Language barriers, especially oral communication in English, was perceived as a major challenge for many participants. Those who graduated from international schools had their high school education in English and their courses were mostly taught by native speakers of the language, but they still found it difficult to communicate with instructors and, especially their peers in class. Many courses require a lot of group work and during the first few weeks many participants found it hard to actively participate in group discussions as they had difficulty clearly expressing their ideas.

Writing papers was also a big challenge for many participants, especially those enrolled in humanities or social science programs. Most of them, especially those who had graduated from international schools, felt they were not well prepared in their high school years for writing papers. One female participant stated that:

I remember in my first semester, I was taking three Political Science courses. It was horrible. The textbooks seemed easy, but the course requirements were really high. We were asked to write three papers. Each one was more than 2000 words. And before that, I did not write any papers in high school. So I had to learn APA style, and learn everything from the very beginning. The Academic

Writing Centre is not that helpful, I think. Even in my second year, I was taking theoretical courses, and I was asked to write an essay. I should admit that I rushed it, finished overnight, just one night, so I didn't care about my grammar. And I just got a C-, and I was shocked. It's my lowest essay mark I've ever got. So I just went to the TA's office, and she said "Are you an international student?" I said "Yeah." And she said "Even though you are an international student, we still reduced your grammar scores. We don't care about it [We have the same requirement for everybody]. You have the responsibilities to figure it out." So that's really frustrating for me at that time. I didn't write any paper in China. What is a paper? I don't know. (Focus group interview)

In terms of social life, the participants generally agreed that they found it hard to make friends with local students or international students from other countries. Several participants asked the researchers during the interview or focus group discussion for the definition of "friends" because they thought that even though they were getting along with some of their classmates they did not think they had a relationship close enough to be called friends. They said that as they did not have close friends to associate with in their spare time, homesickness and loneliness were the challenges they had to face, especially during the first few semesters.

During an individual interview, a male participant said that before he came to Canada he had thought that he would have a lot of Canadian friends to hang out with and to study with. But later on he found it hard to make friends with local friends because it was hard to find common topics to make conversations with them. The possible reasons he gave include different cultural backgrounds and the university system. In China a class usually has the same group of students during their program of study, but in Canada students have different classmates in different courses, so they found it hard to get to know their classmates really well as they did not spend time with the same people for a long time.

Some participants expressed their frustration regarding the relationship with peers and course instructors. Although some of the participants were quite at home in English and did quite well in their coursework, they reported that their opinions were usually not valued by other students in their project groups, and they had unpleasant experiences communicating with instructors and/or Teaching Assistants.

Learning differences

The participants reported various differences in their learning in China and in Canada. Group work was one of the most frequently mentioned differences they

experienced at the University of Windsor. They reported that it was challenging for them at first because much of their previous learning was mostly an individual effort, and they had to learn how to cooperate and collaborate with other group members. Two participants in a focus group commented that:

... I am majoring in social science and there're not many Asian people in my major. And the foreign people, like, they have their group, and it's really hard to get into it.

...Yeah, I also have difficulties with my teamwork, because in the business school, we have teamwork with them [local students]. And I'm concentrated on HR, so there's more local people in this program. So I always work with local people, like White people. Most of them know each other from different classes, or they're friends from high school, so they're always together. You don't have topic[s] to communicate with them, so it's hard to get into the group. You just talk what you did for the topic, but you can't talk [about] other things with them. And they're friends together, you can't say "Oh, stop talking. Because I'm here, you have to talk to me." That would be unfair for them too. (Focus group discussion)

In some cases language barriers prevented these students from participating in group discussions as much as other students, while in others they had to get used to negotiating meanings by working together with others students. Most participants also thought the programs were more demanding than similar programs in China, especially because of the laboratory work for science and engineering students which requires a lot of time and effort, and essay writing for social sciences majors. When they looked back and reflected on their high school curriculum, the participants expressed their wish that they had been given more training in essay writing and experiences in group work.

I felt [it] very hard. I didn't need to take language classes here, the ELIP. I just arrived here and taking regular courses. It was really hard at the very beginning. [I] [s]till had language problems, and [especially] oral English. At first I just couldn't understand what the professors were saying in the lectures. If he or she had [an] accent, or spoke very quickly, I couldn't understand. Even the course requirements I couldn't understand. But I just forced myself to adapt to it. Because I didn't have any Chinese people [in my class], I didn't have somebody to ask with, I needed to figure out by myself. (Individual interview)

Type of high schools attended

Public high schools in China use a national curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education while private and international schools use curricula of their choice. Private high schools in China are usually owned and operated by individuals or

private organizations. By international high school, we mean the high schools in which the curriculum of a foreign country is taught by instructors who are mostly native speakers of the official language of that country, or a program which physically resides inside a public high school but the curriculum and instructors are structured the same way as an international school (these schools belong to the category of so called “schools inside schools” in China). It seems that students who graduated from private or international schools felt more comfortable in terms of social life and they experienced fewer challenges in their process of adjusting to the new environment than those graduated from public high schools. Another difference we noticed was that many graduates from public high schools mentioned education quality as a factor for their school choice while very few international high school graduates mentioned this during the interviews. This was because the international schools often had agreements with Canadian universities on student recruitment.

Analysis of the data indicates that those who graduated from international high schools or language training programs that are mostly located in big cities in China prior to their arrival in Windsor have more confidence in their English language competency. Students from smaller cities usually have to take the ELIP (English Language Improvement Program) before they are allowed to register in degree programs. In terms of programs of study, the number of students who came to study business, science or engineering is much larger than that for social science or humanities.

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, one of the important factors that affect international students’ acclimatization to the new learning environment is their English language proficiency. However, among the Chinese students who are currently enrolled, especially those who are doing their undergraduate degrees, many are fluent in English and feel comfortable using English for academic purposes, yet they still have a variety of problems adjusting to the new school life in Canada, including actively participating in the learner-centered classes and communicating with local students, which is consistent with the findings of Jiao (2006) and Liang (2003). The findings of the current study point out that even though Canadian curriculum is taught in the international schools that some of the participants had graduated from, the writing ability of these students was not adequately developed. This could be an important topic for future research. University authorities and teaching staff need to consider learning differences of international students in curriculum design and course delivery at both course and programs levels so as to best meet the needs of these students.

Most participants chose to live in a student residence when they first arrived, but as they got themselves familiarized with the learning and living environments, many would move to shared rental apartments/houses as they are quieter and the cost is comparatively lower. The majority of those who shared off-campus accommodation chose Chinese students as their roommates. This does not necessarily mean something bad as these students have many things to share and they can help each other (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). However, since they come to the host country to learn the culture as well as academic subjects, staying together only with students from their home country may limit their communication with local and other international students (Jiao, 2006). The residence services of the university should find ways to improve the environment (e.g., reducing noise level and providing more choices for food) so these students may choose to stay in residence, where they could have more opportunities to communicate and work with international students of different origins and local students, so as to enrich their international study experience.

Regarding communicating with family members and friends back in China, the most popular method was online chatting with MSN or QQ (an online chatting system widely used in China). Some used their cell phones to send and receive short text messages and used pre-paid phone cards to make international calls. Because of the time difference, they had to get up early in the morning or stay late at night for the communication, which could mess up their normal schedule for their studies. Usually such communications were more frequent during the first few months of their arrival, during which period they had to spend more time overcoming homesickness. As Kelly (2010) suggests, the online communication with family and friends back in their home country may help to reduce homesickness, but it could also slow down the international student's process of adjusting to the new environment. So the university should organize more activities to help students overcome the challenges they face during their acclimatization.

Like other international students, many Chinese international students came to Canada with the expectation of making friends with local students (Jiao, 2006), but for various reasons, it is not easy for international students and local students to work together smoothly, let alone making close friends (Jiao, 2006; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). Although 78% of participants responded in the survey questionnaire that they had native English speakers as friends, most of them stated during the interview or focus group discussion that the friendship was "superficial" (Jiao, 2006), and few mentioned they had close friendships with other international students, as described by Montgomery and McDowell (2009). University authorities need to make efforts to not only provide service to

international students, but also encourage domestic students to get involved in events and activities organized for international students, so that both categories of students can benefit from the diverse learning environment.

CONCLUSION

Among the array of factors that are relevant to Chinese international students' studying and living experiences at the University of Windsor, language barriers, previous learning and living experiences, and cultural backgrounds were among the most frequently mentioned. English language proficiency and cultural differences caused barriers to their willingness and attempts to make friends with native English speaking friends, share residence rooms with them, and become fully involved in group work. Although language proficiency was mentioned by many participants as one factor that influenced their full engagement in the academic and social life on and off campus, it was often cultural differences that thwarted their efforts to be a part of the large community. It is not surprising that international students feel more comfortable making friends and seeking help from students from their home country, but if the university can find ways for international students to communicate not only with their own cultural circle, but also with other international students and domestic students, more useful and meaningful learning and living experiences will be offered to both international and domestic students. This study provides a basis for the university studied and universities elsewhere to address the issues this research raises. It points to the need for future research to explore topics such as how language proficiency and cultural differences are intertwined with the process of Chinese international students' adjustments to Canadian campus life, and in what ways communication and friendship between domestic and international students can be facilitated so as to improve international students' academic and life experience in the new environment.

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