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From Expectation To Experience: My Changing Identity As A Chinese International Student

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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Abstract

This autobiographical narrative inquiry investigates what we can learn from my experience as a Chinese international student in both writing and art-based ways, which can inform Chinese international students' expected supports that can improve their mental wellbeing. The study asks: Are my pre-departure expectations for studying in Canada different from the realities? If so, how and why are they different? And, what is my changing identity to be a Chinese international graduate student? The data sources of the study are my autobiographical memories, posts, blogs, journals, drawings and photography works. Intergroup relationship theories and identity theories are used flexibly as lenses to facilitate my autobiographical narrative along timeline. Multiliteracies theories are used flexibly as a method to write my stories. This study calls on Chinese international students to reflect on their identities; and shows a method to do self-reflection by reviewing social media posts and artworks.

Keywords

Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry; Chinese International Students; Pre-departure Expectation; Post-departure Experience; Aesthetic Experience; Self-reflection; Identity; Intergroup Relation; Mental Wellbeing.

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Prologue

My interest in self studies begins with my acknowledgement of the complexity of the self. Martin Heidegger (1962)'s existentially concerns about Being, one's own *Dasein* and its relationship with the Others, have inspired me to keep reflecting on the neglected self and my relationships with people in everyday life. I found myself more complicated than I thought. What is the Being of self? Who am I? It seems we are always being with ourselves, yet ourselves are strange sometimes.

I can only have one ethnic identity on my Chinese identity card, although my parents are from different ethnic groups. I left my hometown, Kunming, for Beijing to do my university study, and lived there for four years. Beijing has such a strong influence on current me, which has made me different from a typical Kunminger; yet, I am not a Beijinger, either. Not had I figured out who I was, I moved again, to Canada. And this time, I am here, as a student and a graduate researcher, I am facing much more "to be or not to be" puzzles. Here, "to be and not to be" is not referred to the question of to live or to die, but the tensions in many trivial yet important matters in my everyday relationships.

If we understand that education is for the wellbeing of humankind, then, in order to know what is needed in education, we need to have a better understanding of the people living in the current society. However, with a fast life path, I do not have enough time to try to make sense of my ongoing changing identity. In those tensions of "to be or not to be", I feel stuck in the between. The feelings are strong and seems impossible to be concealed or neglected. As described by a close friend of mine, I've always been a strongly sensitive soul, so I experience things with strong emotional intensity, making them hard to forget. Instead of being overwhelmed by my feelings, it is the right time for me to face them with a brave heart and honesty. As expressed by Luigi Iannacci (1998), "(a) lived life or unexamined story becomes insufficient in

fostering personal progress” (p. 6). I cannot wait to jump into the constant torrent of metamorphosis and becoming in doing this autobiographical study.

In my past experience, I have realised the importance of being connected with people and things surrounding us when I was questioning myself the reason of being alive. Personally, I believe the meaning of my life is not only in me, but also, more importantly, in the connections that I am situated in and the contributions that I can give to my surroundings. For many times, when I feel lost, it was my family, friends, and teachers who dragged me back into the stream of life; for many times, communicating with my family, friends, and teachers helped me to get a better understanding to myself; for many times, even by wandering in nature, it makes me feel motivated since I felt the strength of the mother nature and a sense of belong in my connections with it. These personal experiences seem to echo the commonly held assumption that identity is recognized in a social relationship or context (Moje, Luke, Davis, & Street, 2009, p. 419). For these reasons, in this study, I decided to seek for a better understanding to my ongoing changing identity in my changing connections with people and the world from China to Canada. It is an autobiographical study that allows me to put my stories in broader contexts, to relate my past with my present, and to connect my personal voices to other voices.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

A large number of international students are studying in Canada. From 2013 to 2014, there were over 120,000 international students in Canadian universities, in which China has become the biggest source country with the proportions of 40%, 25.5% and 16.4 % on bachelor's, master's and doctor's levels respectively (Statistics Canada, 2016). Although many Chinese international students (CISs) hire international education agencies to help them get prepared for studying abroad before leaving China (Su & Harrison, 2016), current literature shows that CISs continue to struggle in the transition to the new learning, living, and cultural environment with mental health concerns reaching crisis levels (Cheng, Liu, Zhao & Yeung, 2015). Under this situation, however, the problem of international education agents' service has not been discussed by researchers yet. In fact, as shown in my literature review (Chapter 2), current studies on CISs seldom focus on CISs' stories in preparation for studying abroad.

Besides, although some institutions have responded to CISs' transition challenges by providing CISs with pre-departure orientations, and adopting learner-centred pedagogies, these responses have not been adequately researched in terms of the ways in which pre-departure expectations and shifting identities are experienced by CISs. However, they are worthy exploring, as suggested by Ross and Y. Chen (2015), it is important for universities to be familiar with CISs' expectations to provide CISs with helpful support; and, according to Yi (2014), CISs should be self-aware of their identity to have better post-departure experience in transition. As an international graduate student from China, an emerging scholar interested in research in international education, I recognize the value of first exploring my own experience to provide stories located in my own experience as well as my changing identity as a

CISs through in-depth self-reflection, which may provide points of departure, inquiry, and reflection for others who come after me.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore my experience as a Chinese International Student with a goal of better understanding how my pre-departure and post-departure experience of studying in Ontario contribute to (or not) improved mental wellbeing. Exploring experiences through autobiographical narrative provides a rich process for me to critically and analytically reflect on my lived life. I will tell my stories related to studying abroad which happens in about a five-year length of my lifetime from China to Canada. At the same time, I will explore my own pre-departure expectations, the gaps between ideal and reality, and my ongoing changing identity. The following questions will be answered:

1. Are my pre-departure expectations for studying in Canada different from the realities? If so, how and why are they different?
2. What is my changing identity to be a Chinese international graduate student?

As an autobiographical narrative inquiry, different theoretical lenses will be used flexibly to match my storytelling flow. In this study, intergroup relationship theories and identity theories are two main categories of potential lenses to facilitate my autobiographical narrative along timeline. My narrative will be in lingual and visual ways. I will introduce methodology and theoretical framework more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research is important for it will uncover the myths of CISs' pre-departure expectation and their changing senses of selves, which will provide information for

educators to develop better orientations and learner-centred pedagogy for their CISs. Besides, potential CISs, parents, and international education agencies can get a clearer view of CISs' potential challenges and strategies in advance so as to get better self-prepared; or help their children/clients with pre-departure preparation in a more professional way. Last but not least, as an autobiographical narrative inquiry, this study will give me an opportunity to reflect on my stories as a Chinese international graduate student in Canada. In doing so, some of the puzzles, including emotional ups and downs, that I have had may be understood by myself. As said by Adams, Jones & Ellis (2015), "our ideas for research projects are often – perhaps always – guided by the ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions we have in and about our lives" (p. 26). By trying to reach and understand my own experiences, institutions may better understand international students who may share similar experiences and better prepare supports for them in the foreign university setting.

1.4 Definitions of Terms

Chinese International Students (CISs) - In this research, Chinese international students refer to Chinese students who are from mainland China and possess a student visa enabling them to study in universities abroad as resident aliens.

Personal Identity - "How a person regards themselves and how they, and others, relate to, or behave towards themselves" (Layder, 2004, p.7).

Post-departure experience - In this research, post-departure experience refers to Chinese international students' practical contact with facts and events in the foreign country where they are studying.

Pre-departure expectation - In this research, pre-departure expectation refers to Chinese international students' perception and hope for their study and life abroad before leaving mainland China.

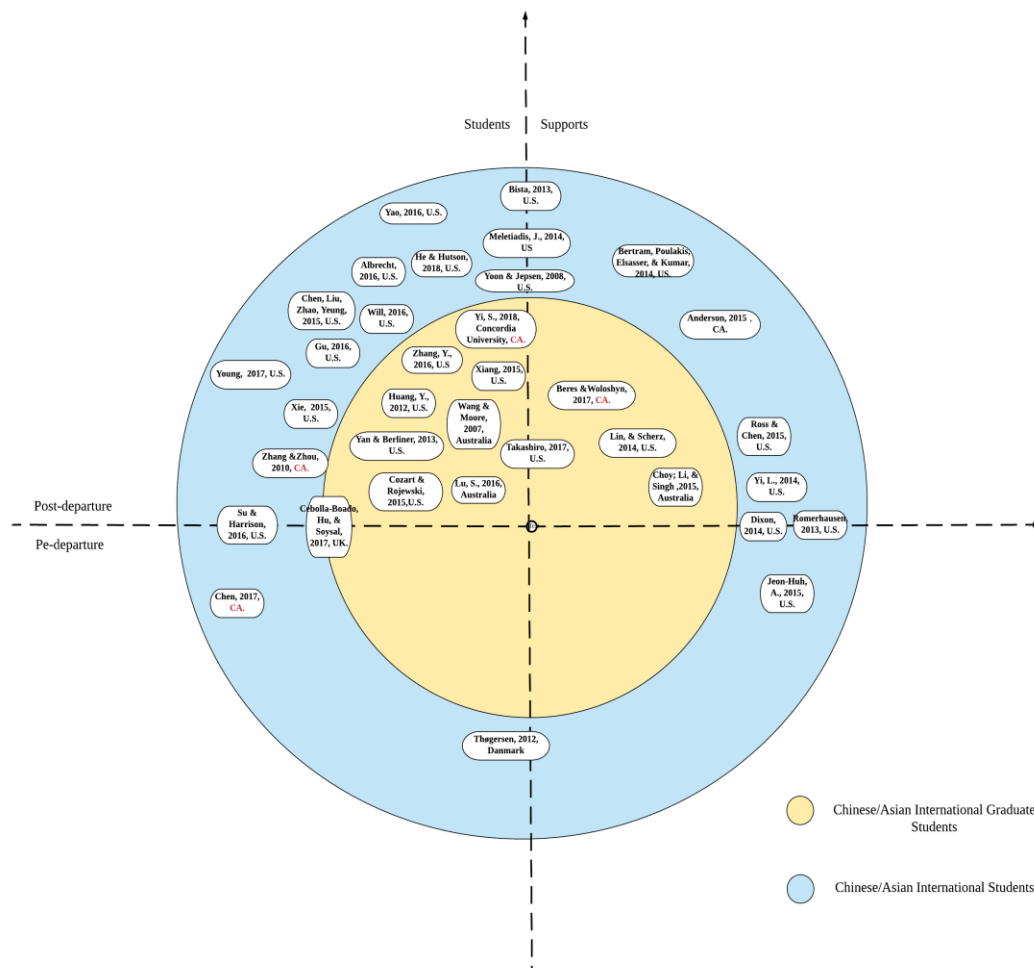
Social Identity - “That part of an individual’s self-concept which drives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255).

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, I have introduced the problem in current study, the purpose and research questions of my research, the importance of my research, limitations and delimitations, and the definitions of key words. In Chapter 2, I review literature on CIS and demonstrate the contribution that my research will make to the scholarly discussions taking place on this topic in the literature. In Chapter 3, I introduce autographical narrative inquiry and potential theoretical lenses related to my research. In Chapter 4, I present my narratives in written and visual modes. Inspired by Mol’s (2002) work, in this chapter, in-depth self-reflection on some of my stories, which is written in dark blue colour, are set in parallel with my story telling. This is to avoid repeating story telling, protect story telling from disturbing by reflection, and keep reflection close to stories. I suggest my readers to regard the two texts as a dialogue and read them at the same time. In Chapter 5, I offer conclusions, provide suggestions, evaluate limitations, for further research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

The research on Chinese international students (CISs) is well documented. I have located relevant research in following map to provide an overview of the recent studies (Figure 1). In the map, yellow circle and blue circle indicate research on Chinese/Asian international graduate students and Chinese/Asian international students respectively. The upper part of the map indicates research on international students' post-departure experience; and, the lower part indicates research on international students' pre-departure expectation. In addition, I locate research which focuses on international



students on the left side, while research which focuses on the supports that have been

Figure 1. Literature map.

offered to international students on the right side. Density of studies shows that recent studies are mainly located on CISs' experience after they arrived new countries.

Comparing with CISs' post-departure experience, fewer studies focus on supports provided to CISs to enhance their wellbeing. Very little research has explored CISs' experience and support offered to them before they left China.

In this chapter, I review literature on CISs' pre-departure and post-departure experience. At the same time, I state how current studies have inspired my study and how my study will contribute to current literature.

2.1 Pre-departure experience

Before leaving for Western countries far from China, many Chinese international students (CISs) have spent a long period of time preparing for their applications. In this section, I review the literature on CISs' pre-departure experience in preparation for studying abroad. Current studies show that extrinsic factors, such as parents' ideas, immigrant policies, universities' location and ranking, have a great impact on CISs' decision making. Their expectations of studying and living abroad are influenced by mass media and international education agencies, which can not necessarily reflect the realities of studying and living abroad correctly. Some universities have provided CISs with pre-departure orientations which are found to be helpful for CISs to adjust into new study environment.

2.1.1 Student motivations and pre-departure expectations of studying abroad

In current studies on CISs' mobility, few research has explored whether it is CISs' academic interests that drive them to apply for studying abroad. However, according to Jun Mian Chen (2017), external factors, such as immigrant policies, parents' persuasion, and study abroad agencies, have been believed as influential drivers for

CISs' mobility of studying abroad. In the same study, it also suggests that the huge pressure coming from university entrance examination, also known as Gao Kao, has contributed as a major pusher for CISs to make their decisions for studying abroad. Many students have chosen Canada for they believe Canada is a relatively safe country to live in; plus, Canada offers them more opportunities to practice English, work, and immigrate. The study also shows that the parents' decisions matter more on their children's decision to study abroad; but their children get more freedom to choose universities.

As for the choice of university, Jun Mian Chen's (2017) research in Canada shows that both the location and the reputation of the university are important for their decision-making. Cebolla-Boado, Hu, and Soysal's (2018) research in UK echoes Jun Mian Chen's (2017) opinion that university rankings and prestige appear as key elements when it comes to choosing universities. However, they also argued that some students' assumptions towards university prestige may not be necessarily correct. In fact, Su and Harrison's (2016) study shows that more than half of CISs tend to hire international education agents to help them with the application process. However, those agencies do not always provide their clients with thorough or critical information about the universities; neither do they consider their clients' academic interests as first priority. As a result of these problems, according to Xie (2015), international education agencies, most of the time, do not have positive influence on CISs' post-departure psychological well being. However, no researcher has thoroughly studied the problem in international education agency's service for CISs.

Many CISs cannot get thorough and critical information about the life abroad. Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, and Kumar (2014) indicated that before leaving for the U.S., many CISs gained information about the life experience in the U.S. from television, movies, and news resources. For example, many CISs believe in what they learned from media naively, which let them hold positive expectations in general. Although, their real study and life experience vary from person to person, some of the

participants found that the differences between their pre-departure expectation and the real experience were vast.

Are CISs truly passionate about their chosen program? Are CISs' sources of the information about university prestige credible? Why does university prestige matter for CISs? How does international education agency work? If CISs had been taught to have a more thorough and critical foreseeing about their study and life abroad, would they make the same decision? These are all questions worth further discussion. I will reveal the answers in my study for we can get a clearer view on CISs' initial expectations of the program through these questions. Like many CISs, I signed a contract with an international education agency. In my study, I will document my own pre-departure experience in choosing universities and programs and uncover my pre-departure expectations of studying abroad.

2.1.2 Institutions' pre-departure support

Some Western institutions have offered pre-departure orientations or handbooks for international students so as to help international students with their potential transition challenges. Studies show pre-departure orientations are helpful for CISs.

Romerhausen (2013) has analysed seven institutions' international students' handbooks, in terms of their introductions to U.S. classroom culture, instructional style, relationship with instructors, assessment and academic honesty. Dixon (2014)'s study on a pathway program, shows that the program is helpful for CISs' academic transition, English improvement, and social adjustment. Jean-Huh (2015) demonstrated that the CISs who have joined the pre-departure orientation have benefited from that since they got the chances to build connections with staff, faculty, and fellow students.

Some researchers have offered advice for improving current pre-departure orientations. These suggestions show the importance for educators to learn about the

students' pre-departure expectations, and the necessity for students to be conscious of their changing identities. For example, Ross and Y. Chen (2015) suggested that "a first step for institutions is to become familiar with the expectations and lives of all students on their campuses, perceiving and trying to bridge gaps between institution and individuals" (p. 33). Furthermore, Yi (2014) gathered information based on CISs' needs, in order to provide authentic suggestions to the institutions which would create new orientations for CISs. He emphasized that CISs should be positively self-aware of their identity when studying abroad, which means that they should be sensitive to the on-going changes of who they will be during studying abroad. In doing so, "the guided transition can be based upon self-preparation to meet the requirements of academic study and daily life in the community" (p. 173). My study will explore my changing identity in storytelling, which can guide CISs to predict their changing identities by considering their gained information before making any decisions to study abroad.

There is little literature about CISs' pre-departure expectation. When CISs' pre-departure expectations cannot be met, CISs may feel unsatisfied, and even depressed, for, as noticed by Mossakowski (2011), "[t]he sociological literature on stress and mental health has had a longstanding interest in the influence of unexpected, undesirable, and life-altering events on self-reported symptoms of depression" (p. 729). To raise awareness of CISs' pre-departure expectations may be helpful for CISs and international educators to see the gap between CISs' ideal and reality, so they can better address the gaps.

Furthermore, both students and researchers should pay more attention to the changing nature of CISs' identities, in order to enhance CISs' self-preparation for new environment. However, the identities of international students are seldom discussed in literature. As one of thousands of Chinese international graduate students, I am encouraged to reflect on my own changing identity of studying abroad. In doing so, I can also open a window for researchers to see through this changing process inside of

me, which may offer some clues to educators who are seeking for more possible ways to offer CISs transition guidance.

2.2 Post-departure experience

When CISs arrived at new countries, they often experience transition challenges. For the CISs who finds it very hard to adapt into new environment, mental health has become a crisis (Justin A. Chen et al., 2015). In this part, I review current literature on CISs' post-departure experience. Current studies show that language barrier, cultural difference, along with other stressors, such as negative roommate relationships, visa problems, pressure from dating or marriage and financial pressures, influence CISs' wellbeing (Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yao, 2016; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Researchers hold different attitudes to CISs' home culture, which I will explain later in this section. The following research is helpful to explore the relevance in CISs' pre-departure expectation and post-departure stressors; CISs' holistic experience and mental health status; CISs' ongoing changing identities and their wellbeing.

2.2.1 Transition issues

A great number of recent research about CISs is located in CISs' transition issues (Albrecht, 2016; Bista, 2013; Gu, 2016; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Ramos, 2013; Ross & Y. Chen, 2015; Su & Harrison, 2016; Wang & Moore, 2007; Xiang, 2015; Xie, 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yao, 2016; Yi, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; etc.). This research show that language barriers and cultural differences are two main challenges for CISs.

Researchers believe that language barrier has negative influence on CISs' transition to academic (Zhang & Zhou, 2010) and social life in the West (Ramos, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2013). However, there are debates on which part of English language challenges CIS most. Yan and Berliner (2013) believe that listening comprehension

and oral communication are two big parts that CISs are struggling with, while Su and Harrison (2016) believed that “For many Chinese students, writing is more of a daunting challenge than speaking” (p. 912), especially for international graduate students (He & Hutson, 2018).

As for cultural differences, researchers hold negative, neutral or positive views about it. Many researchers view Confucius culture¹, as another barrier in CISs’ transition process in social environment and their adaptations to new learning environment (Albrecht, 2016; Xiang, 2015; Wang & Moore, 2007), because of contradictory values advocated between Confucius culture, in which modesty and obedience are admired (Kang & Chang, 2016), and individualist culture which “emphasizes the importance of a person's freedom and independence from society” (“The SAGE”, 2009, p. 253). Ross and Y. Chen (2015) have argued “culture, on its own, cannot wholly explain the complexity of student behaviours on college campuses” (p. 13), Their research has shown that institutional policies play an important role in shaping CISs’ engagement, thus CISs’ behaviour should be understood in complex cultural and institutional contexts. Nevertheless, some other researchers inquired the cultural strengths of CISs and the potential supports based on these strengths. For example, He and Hutson (2018)’s research indicated that parents’ authority on CISs’ decision making, rooted in Chinese traditional culture, contribute to CISs’ commitment and motivation to study

¹ According to Kang and Chang (2016), Confucius culture, grown from Confucius’s teaching, has following features:

[It] emphasizes the ties among individuals in a society, social hierarchy, and social harmony. Interests of family members and community surpass individual’s interests and it is the community and family that the life of an individual acquires its meaning or significance from. Parents have the highest authority in the family and the elders are highly respected following the virtue of filial piety.

well. In this study, some CISs “even commented on how, even though their major choices do not align with their interests, they would complete their program of study just because their parents thought the major would be the best for their future” (p. 103). These debates inspired me to see the tensions between collectivist culture and individualistic culture critically and put them in an internationalized context.

Besides, there are other emerging themes. For example, initial difficulties on arrival, including using public transportation and finding directions (Zhang & Zhou, 2010); residential issues, including CISs’ roommate relationships (Yao, 2016); high density of Chinese student which, believed by CISs, can restrain CISs from their initial wish of getting more chances to communicate with domestic students rather than other CISs at Western Campuses (Su & Harrison, 2016); other personal stressors, including visa problems, the difficulty of keeping long-distance relationships or finding the significant other in a different cultural context, much more expensive tuition fees and additional costs to live abroad (Yan & Berliner, 2013), have been weighing on CISs’ shoulders too. According to Cebolla-Boado et al.’s (2017) quantitative study, the cost of study does not seem to drive pre-departure CISs’ university choice; however, post-departure CISs are under financial pressures in Yan and Berliner’s (2013) research. However, no research has discussed that if the cost of study does not matter in choosing universities, why it becomes a stressor in CISs’ abroad experience later, or questions, such as, before application, have CISs got information about their tuition fees from university websites, international education agents, or any other possible resources, such as their friends studying abroad and social media? This gives me another reason to reveal the gap between expectation and experience. I will discuss these questions in chapter 4 by telling my own stories while linking back to literature.

Furthermore, mental health crisis in CISs is another theme that has been considered by many researchers. However, these researchers have hardly discussed the relation between CISs’ mental health crisis and various other challenges. These researchers emphasized CISs’ low mental health literacy (Cheng, Liu, Zhao & Yeung, 2015,

p.879); and their reluctance for counselling due to Confucian values, including showing obedience to parents' and teachers' authorities, avoiding behaviours embarrass oneself and others, and not bothering others (Chen et al., 2015; Yoon & Jepsen, 2008; Young, 2017). However, current studies on CISs' mental health issues are separated from those on CISs' pre-departure experience, normal transition challenges and extrinsic supports provided to CISs, which may lead to a deficiency in uncovering the relative causes for CISs' mental health crisis.

In fact, in many cases, transition challenges and mental health issues can be linked. For example, CISs who have language and financial problem may find it hard to attend social activities, which, from my experience, can reduce their chances to make new friends or build social connections. As a result, they may feel homesick, isolated, and depressed. Although many themes have emerged in current research, no research has further discussed how these challenges effect each other; or how these challenges influent CISs' identity shifts. Diverse themes of transition issues are intertwined together, and different people with different personalities face transition issues in different ways (Xie, 2015). It is questionable to separate transition challenges from each other, for experience is holistic; or to only simplify CISs' experience by classical cultural categories, since internationalization, one of the features of today's world, has shortened the distances between cultures. In my study, I will explore the connections among transition issues, pre-departure and post-departure events and emotions, and how these factors affect my sense of self and psychological wellbeing.

2.2.2 Pedagogical Supports

A learner-centred pedagogy has been recommended by some educators for enhancing CISs' engagement in class. Lin and Scherz (2014) recommended to apply global perspectives in a linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy for encouraging international student to contribute in class discussions by sharing their knowledge in global issues. Besides, in research of both Lin and Scherz (2014) and Beres and

Woloshyn (2017), using students' reported research experience, facilitating acquisition of subject-specific vocabulary, and fostering a collaborative environment were suggested to facilitate CISS' learning. On graduate level, Choy, Li and Singh (2015) suggested that in order to engage Asian international students better, curriculum should respond to the needs of Asian international candidates, by providing Asian international candidates with the intended, enacted and experienced curriculum and associated provisions. These learner-centred pedagogy requests instructors to be more aware of their international students' different expectation and unique needs. This requires international students' voice to be heard; their relative experience to be known; and their challenges to be cared, so that they can be better understood. And, all in all, more international student storytellers are needed.

2.3 Conclusion

In Figure 3, I summarize patterns located in recent literature. Although there are several deficiencies and debates in literature, my study will focus on pre-departure expectations and ongoing changing identities. In next chapter, I will introduce more about the methods and theoretical framework.

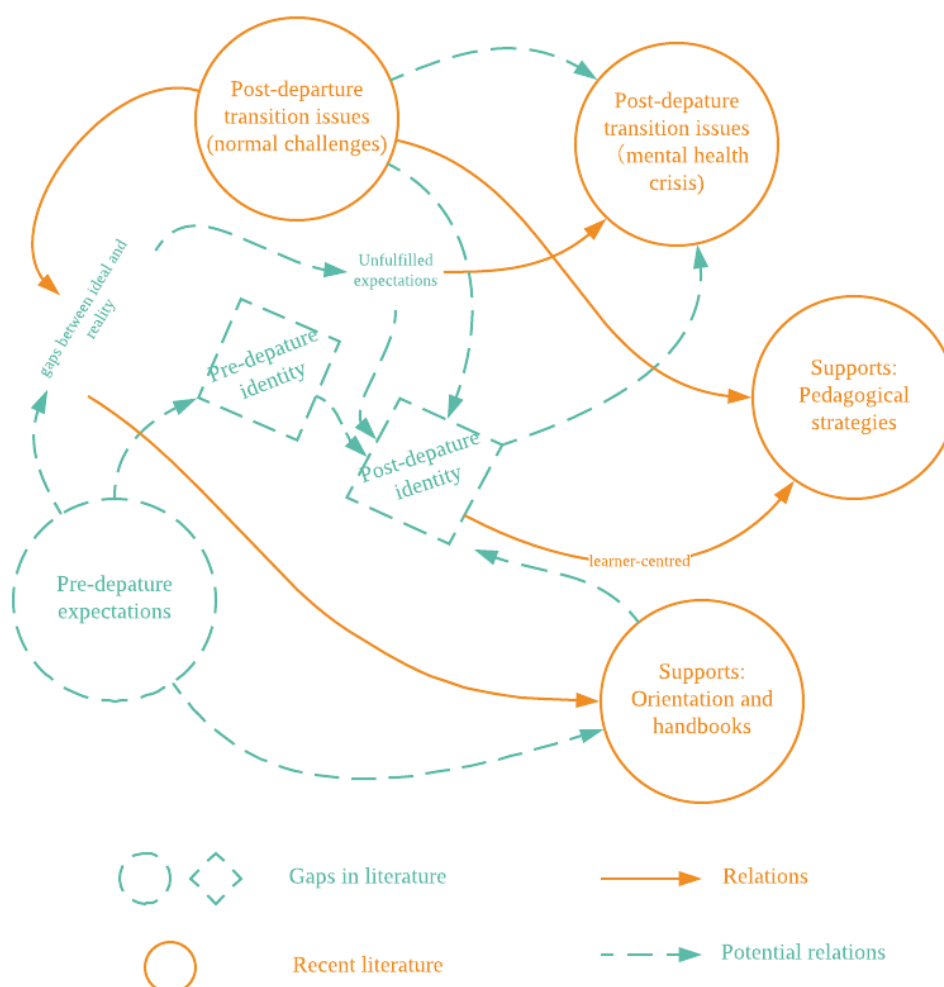


Figure 2. Literature review.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 From the Inquiry into Narratives to Narrative Inquiry

Hundreds and thousands of times

I searched for her in my dream.

Suddenly I turned around,

and there she stood, in the gloomy light.

——Xin, Qiji. Translated by me

To inquire into narratives is not new for me. Two years ago, when I was still an undergraduate student in Chinese Language and Literature, I was fascinated by the stories passed on by oral tradition along the Silk Road in different ethnic minority groups. In mainland China, Han Chinese is considered as the ethnic majority group. However, except Han Chinese, there are still other 55 minority ethnic groups. With mixed heritages of both ethnic minority and majority origins in my blood, I am interested in relationships among different minority ethnic groups and Han Chinese. The folk narrative literature seems to have opened a window for me to explore the connections between ethnic groups long ago.

I began to inquire into the narratives by comparing the folk stories about smart daughters in law, who meet certain expectation of demeanor and behaviour in their cultures, in several ethnic groups along *the Silk Road* and finding both similarities and differences in these stories. The stories I read described the tensions between the daughter in law, the husband, the father in law, and the social and natural conditions in the daughter in law's daily-life experience. Through those stories, I was trying to see how the understandings of what it means to be a smart daughter in law are different in

different ethnic groups. This research on narrative literature has extended the meaning of folk oral narrative literature by valuing narrative as a way for the story tellers to relate and understand their everyday experience.

However, I had not realised the folk storytellers' story-telling is, by nature, their narrative inquiry into their own lives, (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). For example, according to Baird (2012), "migrants make sense of their life history by composing their life around key energising themes which validate and explain their life decisions" (p.65). That is, we live and write, and we write to understand our lives. For a better understanding, the story of my adventure of studying abroad also worth a narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry draws on Dewey-inspired view of experience, from which its relational, continuous, and social features are given (Clandinin, 2013). As people's experience is full of relational tensions with other individuals, communities, and the world, narrative inquiry provides people with a way to reflect on these relational tensions. So, they can improve their living experience by trying to build better relations. However, the world keeps changing, so as people's relations with their environment; therefore, by its nature, narrative inquiry is not aimed to a categorical and close-ended answer. Furthermore, since "culture speaks through an individual's story and is embedded within each lived story" (Caine, 2010, p. 483), narrative inquiry is suitable for understanding cultural issues. These facts of narrative inquiry make it become the most suitable methodology for my proposed study on my pre-departure expectations and ongoing changing identity in my relations with people and this world.

3.2 Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

An autobiographical narrative inquiry will be a meaningful beginning in my own professional life as a narrative inquirer, because according to Clandinin (2013)

“narrative inquirers need to begin with personal justifications, that is, by justifying the inquiry in the context of their own life experiences, tensions, and personal inquiry puzzles” (p.36). Besides, as a special form of narrative inquiry, autobiographical narrative inquiry is also the best solution to my existing tensions and puzzles within my heart. In the thousands of Chinese international students in Canada, although we have different personal stories to tell, we are from similar cultural contexts, to different degrees, the many of us may face the similar struggles in the tensions between cultures, communities, and relationships.

The meaning in the lives and practice of many educators is also found in the threads of areas including understanding the nature of learning, the notion of reflection, and teachers as researchers (Loughran, 2002). Similarly, my experience as an international graduate student in education studies has provided me with rich sources of teaching and learning that can be learned about, reflected, and researched. Furthermore, in many stories of international education, my own story is the most credible one for my research. As “a story is not a story until it is told; it is not told until it is heard; once it is heard, it changes” (as cited in Adams et al., 2015, p. 54). Other people’s stories written by me will inevitably include my own recreation based on my own experience. Plus, from my experience, it is harder to request other people to be open and honest. In this sense, autobiographical narrative inquiry provides me with the most authentic and credible information for my proposed study.

3.3 No Weal without Woe

Just like the complementary relationship between yin and yang in Taoist dialectical philosophy, coming from the features of autobiographical studies, pros and cons inevitably exist at the same time. From my perspective, the two key limitations of autobiographical study lay on the limitation of personal experience and the limitation of language.

Our living experience is limited by current conditions; our autobiographical memory is limited by our sense of self (Prebble, Addis, & Tipett, 2013), and, how my stories are told is limited by my cultural conventions and language usage (Bruner, 2004). Therefore, as said by Connelly (2000), “both experience itself and the research texts that we compose to represent experience are partial and necessarily incomplete” (p.601). I am fully aware of this limitation of my study. Thus, in this study, I would hold open my conclusions to embrace further discussions and provide space for my stories to be retold by me and others.

The limitation of language brings fierce challenges into my study. First of all, to tell stories in a second language is never easy. Since literate practices are companied with the production of the self (Moje et al, 2009), using English to tell my lived experience in both Chinese and English contexts means that I have to face a constant conflict between the two cultural identities related to Chinese and English languages in my whole process of writing. Along with the messy living experience embedded with intense feelings and ambiguous situations, a written mode of narrative is not enough for me to generate deep understandings or to represent myself.

3.4 The Blueprint

In this part, I introduce the core structure of my narrative in terms of its order, content, focus, and modality. In the meantime, I also briefly introduce two main categories of theoretical lenses that are helpful for me to understand my experience, which includes intergroup relation theories and identity theories.

Although my present behaviours might be influenced by my history and my prospect of future, the present is always ordered by time and pushed by time. I would build the structure of my autobiographical narrative on the timeline from the first day I had an idea to do my master’s abroad to the day I complete my first draft of this research text. This period of time may be about five years.

On this timeline, I tell stories about my pre-departure expectations and explore how they were shaped and whether they were different from my post-departure experience. This is the content of my autobiographical narrative. It is important to notice that my autobiographical memory about the past is different from the naked truth of what has happened originally, as “the past is always told from the present time” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 195), and any autobiographical memory is constructed by elements from highly abstracted summaries of one’s whole life, knowledge relating to periods of one’s life, summaries of extended and repeated events, and specific, sensory-perceptual details of particular events (as cited by Prebble et al., 2000).

Intergroup relation theories discuss the formation of groups and factors that influence intergroup conflicts (Brewer, 2001). They are the most suitable lenses for me to negotiate puzzles and tensions in my experience. Since I was still in China, I had grouped people whom I might meet into domestic students, Chinese international students, other international students, etc.. Many pre-departure expectations that I held at that time were about my relations with them. Fathali Moghaddam (2008) has described the fundamental intergroup tension of 21st century in his intergroup relation theories. It is the tension between assimilation and dissimilation underlying today’s globalization. On the one hand, technological and economical forces drive a worldwide move from smaller to larger units; on the other hand, “this assimilationist movement is challenged by the psychological tendency of people to resist identifying with larger and larger groups” (p. 16). I have been living with this tension. Today’s globalization has also broken the fixed geographical space and national boundaries synonymous with the cultures in traditional cross-cultural comparisons. Moreover, intergroup relation theories are developed from psychological theories; however, they can be supported by other fields of study where psychological ideas are founded, such as philosophy and sociology. Thus, these lenses can provide me with rich reference to interpret the diverse and complicated situations with enough flexibility.

In narrating my relationships with others, I stay focused on my ongoing changing

identity to obtain a deep understanding to my experience from within. This is necessary, not only because an autobiographical inquiry into who the researcher is in relation to the phenomenon under study is crucial to begin any narrative inquiries (Clandinin, 2013); but also, because the fact that the question of who I am has always been fundamental to my relationships with others.

To discuss the question of “who am I”, identity theories are inevitably needed. With respect to identity, personal identity and social identity are two main aspects. Personal identity is linked to one’s unique sense of self; while social identity “is bound up with our membership of certain social groups” (Hopkin & Reicher, 2011, p.36). These two parts are hand-in-hand, because “although we can never stand completely apart from society, we nevertheless retain a certain amount of independence from it” (Layder, 2004, p.9). Additionally, since my experience with art has played an important role in my identity shaping, theories about art and identity (Benson, 2013; Botton & Armstrong, 2016; Cupchik, 2013; Funch, 2013; Johnson, 2013) are used to assist me with an in-depth self-reflection. Furthermore, it is necessary to notice that identity theories and intergroup relation theories are closely related, since “[o]ver the last two decades, social and behavioral scientists have increasingly emphasized the role of self and identity in the causes and consequences of intergroup hostility and harm doing” (Jussim, Ashmore, & Wilder, 2001, p.3).

The focus, the content, and the order introduced above will contribute as the point, the

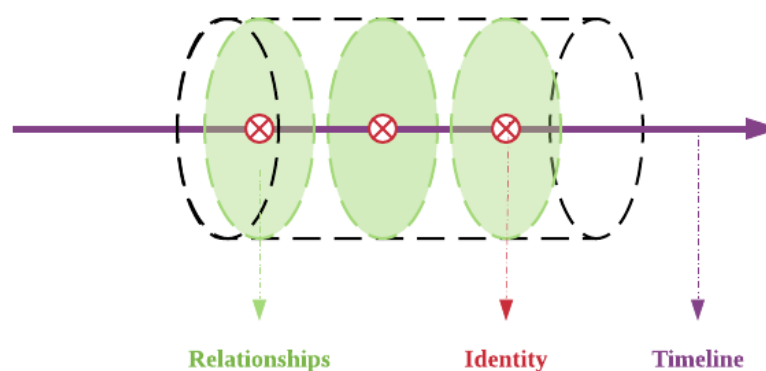


Figure 3. Thesis design.

plane, and the line in the structure of autobiographical study, which, will build a tridimensional space to embrace this autobiographical study.

3.5 Method

My stories are told in both written mode and visual mode. As social medias have been challenging people's ways to record their daily life, I have been using social medias, such as WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, Wordpress, etc., to express my intense feelings and intent understandings, often but not always, with pieces of music, my drawings or photography works. Many of these materials were created for fun, out of a subconscious yet authentic need of representation, without any other purpose.

However, as stated by Leitch (2006), "what is 'personal' and/or emotional can remain outside conscious awareness and yet still have strong influences on the experience, lives and identity of the narrator" (p.552), so, besides of my memories, those multimodal history of mine recorded by social medias should be reviewed and examined. Moreover, "there are times when putting things into words is a difficult, painful, if not impossible process" (p. 553), to use art-based methods in my narrative can liberate my meaning making process.

The New London Group (1996) introduced multiliteracies to people. Based on changing facts in people's working lives, public lives, and private lives, they introduced different modes of meaning making, which includes linguistic design, audio design, spatial design, gestural design, and visual design. At the same time, they have viewed the diversity in cultures, subcultures, and individual's multilayered lifeworld as resources for meaning making. Multiliteracies lenses should be borrowed, because, in these five years, I have been experiencing multiple cultures and

multimodal ways of meaning making. Furthermore, synaesthesia, or mode-shifting between written, visual, spatial, tactile, gestural, and audio meanings, naturally exist in our fundamental cognitive mechanisms (Kalantzis, Cope, Chan, & Dalley-Trim, 2016). As stated, using visual works to supplement the deficiencies of language, especially the deficiencies of English as second language, can help me to present a deeper and more holistic autobiographical narrative in this study.

3.6 Ethics

In my study, I will only tell my own stories. For those original stories which involve other people, I will only focus on my side of the stories. Although this can cause incomplete story telling, which is one of the limitations of this study, any other people as well as their identities and privacy will be uninvolved in this study.

On a more personal note, I sincerely appreciate my experience of studying abroad and all the ups and downs that have been coming along with it. No matter what or how I have been experiencing, it is what have been happening in my life that have been making me feel alive. Thus, I regard each moment of this adventure, as well as other parts of my life as the gifts that have been given to me. For this reason, I love any people who have appeared in my life. Through the happiness and puzzles brought by them, I see the colours of this world. So, I love them and wish them the best.

I am aware of the vulnerability of mine when I am doing this self study, as it contains my stories when I was going through emotional pain. However, I am fully comfortable to share my work in public, since I believe we all experience emotional pain in some periods of life, if we are open to value and talk about the sorrow in life, there will be more understandings and love in this world.

Chapter 4 Stories of Experience

4.1 On My Way to London

Roses are red, my love

Violets are blue

Sugar is sweet, my love

But not as sweet as you

Byron & Evans (1962), *Roses are red (my love)*.

4.1.1 Art, Aesthetic Experience, Self-development

It all started from the wall in my bedroom on March 4th, 2014. My wall is a magical place. At least I believe so. I stuck a piece of paper with the word “Beijing” written on it, on my wall in front of my desk when I was in grade 11. I dreamed to be able to appreciate the red leaves in Fragrant Hills Park and white snow in Forbidden City, as I was deeply attracted to photos of them that I had come across in random magazines. For me, Beijing, before I was physically there, had already been poetically beautiful in a classical Chinese way. Two years later, my dream came true. I flew to Beijing to begin a Bachelors in Chinese

My early experience with poetry in childhood has strongly influenced my way of understanding literature as well as other forms of art, which makes art, as an experience, so important to my identity. According to Benson (2013), “identity is best understood, not as something you *have* or something you *are*, but as something you *do* and *have done* to you” (p. 58). I was impressed by my Chinese literature

Language and Literature.

A part of my study was world literature translated into Chinese, including the Bible, the history of western literature, and western literary theories. Soon, my passion in literature aroused my curiosity in exotic cultures, especially ancient Greek heritage, Christian theology and continental philosophy. I felt an

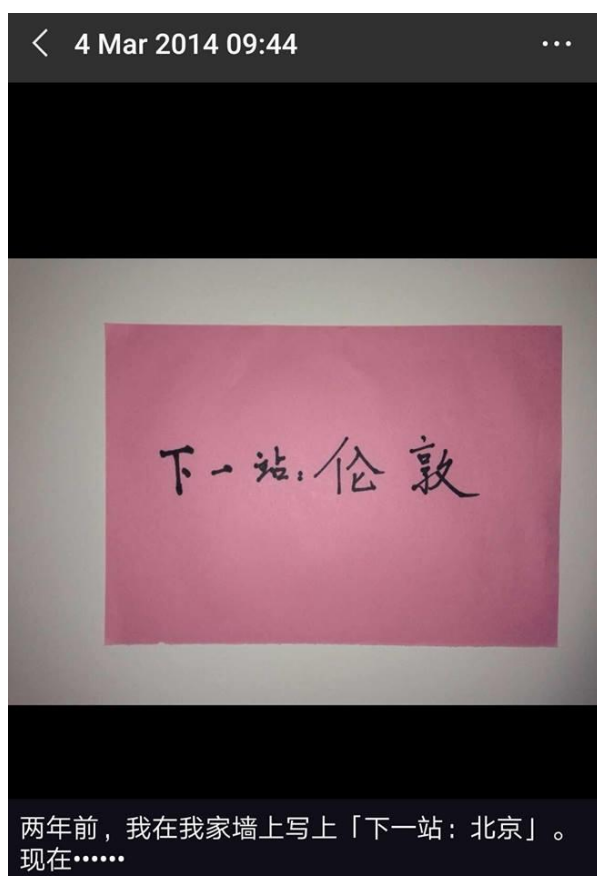


Figure 4. WeChat Post on March 4th, 2014. A note on wall.

urge to be international. For me, at that time, becoming international meant to travel, to explore cultural differences, different educational systems, to become a “bridge”

teacher’s passion toward Chinese ancient poetry. She used to read Chinese ancient poetry with intense emotion. By doing so, she led us to understand poetry by reading the inexpressible but meaningful feeling which attached to words but beyond words themselves. The feeling, or the “felt sense”, described by Gendlin, “testifies to the more-than-linguistic, more-than-conceptual dimension of meaning-making” (as cited in Johnson, 2013, p. 24). It was the first time in my memory that I was constantly and regularly guided to have an aesthetic experience. The most important thing I learned from my experience of learning poetry in elementary school is that feelings are counted as important as words, for which we couldn’t ignore the “felt sense” of literature. When I am trying to understand a piece of poem, I am also experiencing the aesthetic feelings attached to it. Therefore,

between cultures and to dedicate myself to cultural communication in today's world. This time, I wrote the word "London" (伦敦) (Figure 4²) and stuck it on the wall facing my bed.

Since learning, for me, has never been restricted to school, but happens in my everyday life, I considered London at that moment when I dreamed to study abroad. I had realized that the features of a city that I live in has a subtle effect on my learning. For example, as I was hanging out on streets and alleys in Beijing, I am appreciating the art of this city which is made by its natural scenery, unique history, modern social constructs and diverse people. All these features are embroidered in city view, reach a level of harmony and never stop changing, which become a charming "kaleidoscope" that attracts me to explore and understand. Sometimes I played with this "kaleidoscope" by taking a random bus to its destination and coming back, watching different buildings, views, people, and cars passing by. The charm of Beijing seduced me to understand the construction of

poetry, for me, is not only understandable but also experiential. Later, when I am facing other forms of art, such as painting and music, I am able to apply the skill of experiencing "felt sense" in them. By welcoming literature and other forms of art in my experiential world, I welcomed literature to influence my decision and directions in life, since through literature and other forms of art, I can see who I am and who I want to be. As Johnson (2013) suggests:

You learn who you are by seeing the patterns and content of what you have experienced – what matters to you, what you find appealing, what you find repulsive, and what you have undergone and done.

Therefore, through a work of

² My translation of the text in this Wechat post: Two years ago, I wrote next stop Beijing on my wall, now...

this city and the people living in the city, learn from them, and contribute to them. I believed that a city in the Western world which would be comparable to Beijing, was London, England. I have never been to London, but my imagination of it represented my whole fantasy of Western culture, for I was not aware enough of the differences in Western cultures at all until I came to Canada.

My interest in studying in U.K. is like many other interests of mine. It started with some enchanting feelings and gradually became a passion. Among all attractions, Zhimo Xu, a modern Chinese writer's experience of studying in U.K. has sparked my interest. He wrote one of my favourite poetries *Farewell Again to Cambridge* :

Quietly I am leaving as

Quietly I have come

Quietly I wave farewell

To the gold clouds in Heaven.

The gold willows on Cam River

Are like brides in dusk

And their reflections in the Cam

art doesn't directly tell you "who you are," what it can do is open a world of possible experience- an encounter with ways of being in the world. (p. 35)

Artworks provided me with opportunities outside of ordinary life to experience other possibilities of me, as Dewey (1968) observed, good artworks provide exemplary instances of deeper meanings that are not available in our everyday life. For example, I could enjoy a calm and peaceful feeling in a world mixed by nature, Chinese tradition, and modernity in a piece of photography, in which red walls in Forbidden city are gleamingly standing in white snow and a young lady wearing fashionable clothes is holding her camera while touching the red wall, although I had never been to Beijing. The calm and peaceful feeling I experienced from this photo could remind me that

Wave gently in my heart.

The green plants in the Cam

Are dancing elegantly in the water

In the gentle caress of the Cam

I would like to be turned into a grass

That small pond in a green shade

Is not a spring, it is a heavenly rainbow

That has been melted among grasses

With a sweet and colourful dream.

A dream? To take a long punt-pole

For searching more green in greenness

To carry a boatful of star-light

Singing in the marvellous starry night.

But I could not sing songs,

Quiet is the lute of leaving;

calmness and peace are something I lacked in my present self when I am encountering my massy and fragmental modern life, therefore I would try to include them in my future self. After finding similar calmness and peace in artworks about Beijing, as one of my efforts to weave calmness and peace into my identity, I moved to Beijing.

Aesthetic experience, again, has become one of my initial reasons for my dream of studying in UK. This time, it was the experience of being calm and elegant even when facing challenging occasions. For I was impressed by Zhimo Xu's inner power of being able to face unavoidable separate and uncertainty of life in a sensitive but calm and poetic manner, when I was reading his poetry and literature works related to his British experience. As for Downton Abbey, I remember I was attracted by the elegant feeling through out the

Even the summer insects keep quiet

Even Cambridge is quiet tonight.

Gently I will leave as

Gently I have come

Gently I wave my hands

Not to spoil the light of a cloud (as cited in
Li, translated by Li, 2012, p. 119).

Since the first time I read this piece of poetry, I have been moved by those feelings between lines no matter how many times I have read it. The scenery of Cam River, the beauty of sadness, and the peace of letting go which have been brought to me by the poem can lead me to an imaginary secret garden where my aesthetical desires are satisfied. In addition, Xu's diary written at Cambridge also impressed me. In my post on May 7th, 2014, I wrote:

I admire Zhimo Xu's writing, three years, never changed. I felt settled every time when I read his writing. No matter how many times I read it, there is no need for me to worry about a better choice of word, since he had made the best choices. And it seems we have the same tastes in words. A

whole series, although the show revealed some of big historic events that influences British society in 20th century, such as industrial revolutions, women's movements and world war I, the show presented these events in a not-fast-nor-slow pace with beautiful background music and scene design.

Through artworks and other medias about Britain, I gradually and unconsciously shaped an aesthetic sense of calmness and elegance towards Britain. In fact, calmness and elegance, even in chaos, are some main qualities I was truly thirsting for, which are more significant than Britain which is only a tool for me to reach the qualities I was seeking. Dewey's (1968) argument about "qualitative thought" can explain what happened to my mind well, as he found that it is the qualities we desire or detest that matters to us in life. Britain was attached with qualities I was desiring in

sense of elegance and sincerity are flowing in his writings.

Since I have always been a big fan of his literature work inspired by his experience in U.K., I wanted to trace his lived experience so as to understand his feelings while writing.

In addition, as many other CISs who are influenced by medias and foreign films (Bertram et al, 2014), *Downton Abby* has played an important role in my British fantasy, oh yes, people there live in castles, dress in stylish and elegant clothes, eat with many spoons and folks, speak English with a posh accent. Each detail in their life seemed to show a thick traditional cultural heritage that their ancestors have left for them, which was totally fresh and charming to me. Therefore, I chose to explore more British culture, rather than other Western cultures. I knew in Western countries, there were cities like New York, too, which had many tall buildings, different styles of dresses, burgers, and /ʒ/s in words. But I have unconsciously ignored the later one. When I surrendered to the charm of classical British style, which conquered my heart first and occupied my mind, I stayed away from the rest of Western culture.

my aesthetic experience where a total impression has overwhelmed me first. Therefore, on the one hand, the aesthetic experience I had helped me with personal transforming and connecting with inner power, as I realized the qualities that I need to become a stronger self through that aesthetic experience. As suggested by Layder (2004), by being in touch with higher self, people can control their responses to the things that happen to them and be free from fears and anxiety based on dependence on external things to increase their satisfaction and fulfillment in life. The quality of being calm and elegant no matter what happens is such a part of my higher self which can potentially lead me to a happier life. On the other hand, since my aesthetic impression of Britain is overwhelming, I could hardly get a clear acquaintance of the real Britain. For this reason, in my mind, Britain stays as a fantasy.

As for other countries in Europe, such as Greece, Italy, France, Germany and Scandinavian countries, they were out of my consideration since people there speak languages other than English. I found it very challenging to learn another language in limited time. Furthermore, as I already fell in love with my British fantasy, I thought, “anyway, U.K. is the best, I am not going to America or any other country. Why bother with it”. London, as the capital and largest city of U.K. soon became my dream city, for I thought it had enough historical and cultural heritage for me to explore; and it was big enough for me to enjoy my social life as I did in Beijing. University College of London (UCL) became my dream university to do my graduate studies, because it is located in London, ranks high globally, and is not hard to apply according to my friends studying there.

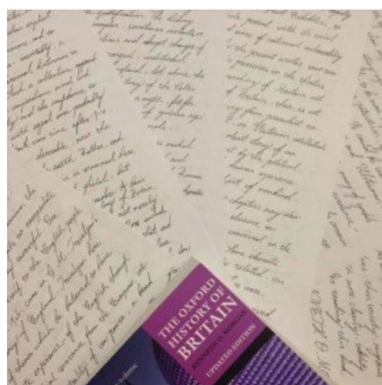
4.1.2 Fantasy, Politics, and Identity Crisis

Despite of the fact that, at the moment, I am not in the London I dreamed about, my London dream and the ambition to become a “bridge” between Western culture and Chinese culture have changed my university life. I visited a couple of international education agencies which are companies to assist Chinese students apply to study abroad. I was told Grade Point Average (GPA) and IELTS grade are two most important aspects while applying for graduate schools. It was since then that I have decided to work hard in my university. I chose many courses related to Western literature, Western history, Western religions, and Western philosophy. Any British author and work mentioned in my literature courses caught my attention. Shakespeare, with a high popularity in China and world literary history, became one of my favourite English writers. Therefore, I studied Shakespeare to obtain a deeper understanding to his works, which inspired me to think about educational issues and human development process. With a clearer purpose of studying cultures through literature and improving my GPA, I was highly motivated in the rest of my undergrad



AN 安 NA·胤

一周抽了三天晚上抄 The Oxford History of Britain. 终于抄完前言，边抄边学，照这种速度我不知道要到什么时候才抄得完这书，但是完成的部分清清楚楚，作为一个钟情大英文化的人，我觉得值！：）加油加油！



2 Apr 2015 09:55 Delete



Figure 5. A WeChat Post on April 2nd, 2015. My transcription of *The Oxford History of Britain*

years. And, in order to have a better understanding of British culture and to improve my English, I started to transcribe *The Oxford History of Britain* and listen to BBC. I chose this way to learn English instead of joining an IELTS class, not because it was the most efficient way, but because the aesthetic sense of calmness and elegance were flowing in my delicate handwriting (in fact, I bought copybook to practice writing English words) and beautiful British accent. However, not until now, have I realized this reason for my English learning preference. As shown in Figure 5, I wrote:

I spent 3 evenings per week to transcribe *The Oxford History of Britain*. Finally finished the preface part. I am learning while transcribing. I have no idea when I will finish transcribing the whole book. But I understand the finished part very well. As a person interested in British culture it's worthy of all the hard work!

Although it took me a long time to transcribe the thick history book, as shown in Figure 6, I felt motivated by my dream, and I began to value each day since I regarded it as one day which can take me closer to my dream future.

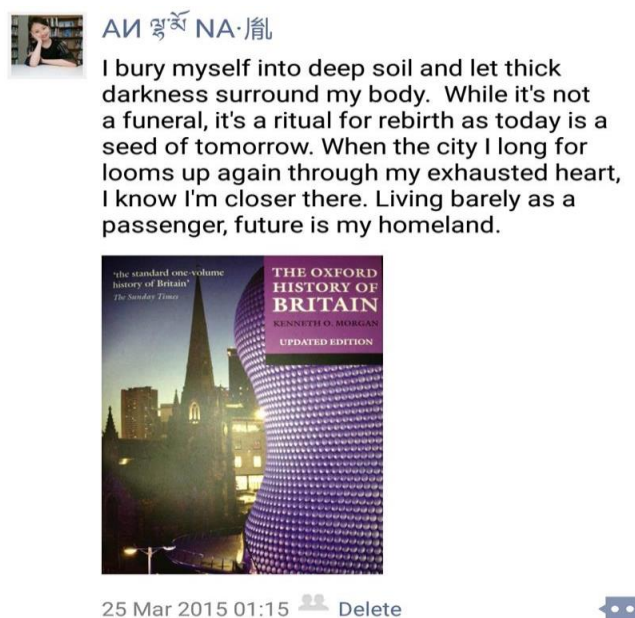


Figure 6. A WeChat Post on March 25, 2015. My understanding of today's role in tomorrow

At the same time, I chose courses related to Chinese traditional culture, too, not only because I believed that to be a “bridge” between two cultures, I must have a better understanding to both them; but also because I felt obligated to introduce traditional Chinese wisdom to the world, because I have been taught by teachers and medias to be proud of my culture and represent not only myself but also China as a Chinese citizen abroad. The Seal Cutting course was one of the most representative courses that I have



Figure 7. A WeChat Post on Dec. 21st, 2015. A seal cut by me.

chosen to learn about Chinese traditional culture. As

I have found two pairs of paradoxes in my international identity in this period of time. First of all, I had an obvious bias in terms of which culture I would stand by, and felt liable to introduce traditional Chinese culture to my friends from foreign countries; however, I considered myself as someone who were different from other Chinese. Additionally, seeing western countries as an outgroup, I wanted to be close to it, but also regarded the members of it as clearly “others”.

A universal reason for why I had bias to Chinese but considered myself different from other Chinese is that, according to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), as human beings, we have a need of

many of my readers may not be familiar with Chinese seal cutting, I would introduce it briefly here. Seal cutting is a traditional Chinese art that represents one's identity. In Mainland China, seals are still a vital part of today's society. There are two kinds of seals: one is for private use (i.e., people may use this seal as a type of signature on their paintings) and the other is for public use (i.e., government officials and companies will use this type of seal on official documents to sign contracts using their company stamps or tax authorities can validate income tax statements by stamping documents, etc.).

Figure 7³, is a seal I cut in my Seal Cutting class. I cut “上善若水” which means water has the highest virtue. This idiom shows traditional Chinese value of selflessness and peace, because water carries ship and benefits the life of plants and animals in the world. I chose this idiom because the meaning of it has impressed me very much.

As a part of my “bridge dream”, as well as a part of my preparation of studying in U.K., I made pen pals from Western countries to exchange our knowledge of home cultures. I certainly had the preference of

inclusion, which motivates us to assimilate into a larger impersonal social collectiveness; and an opposing need for differentiation, which motivates us to be different from others. That is, I had the need to be an ingroup member of Chinese, but I also desired to be different from Chinese. In addition, more importantly, a specific reason for my identity confusion comes from national identity. My national identity as a Chinese, in the sense of Zhonghua Minzu, a unified national identity in multiethnic China that has been developed by Chinese Communist Party (Leibold, 2003) is in the central point of these two pairs of

³ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Positive sculpture is more interesting.

I felt more nervous when I cut it more. I felt I was not cutting the characters but letting it show up from a stone.

making pen pals from U.K., but I talked to many people from other Western countries too, for I took for granted that there was little difference between cultures in the West. The personal reasons for this misunderstanding can be related to these facts: first, the West has been mostly introduced as a wholly cultural concept in my former education in China, but seldom introduced as individual countries. For example, in my politics class, the West was introduced as a group of capitalist countries; in my history class, the curriculum drew more attention to close relations between western countries rather than each country's different history; in my literature course, Western literature is, again, introduced as a whole. Secondly, in my everyday life, whenever I forgot which country I was talking about, I just used the word West instead, as the West seems to be too far away from China for its internal differences to be distinguished. The U.K., along with its culture, has attracted almost all attention from me so that I would focus on British context, instead of learning about the differences between other Western cultures and British culture in a bigger context.

On the one hand, I tried to learn from my pen pals, for I believe there are values in Western culture that I do not have in my culture. This can be true as one advantage of communication is to learn from each other. However, this was also because I believed that

paradoxes - I was conscious enough of this identity no matter whether I chose to stand by it or be different from it; and no matter which attitude I held to encounter western countries. Since I was young, I have been educated in both formal and informal ways that we are members of Zhonghua Minzu. This politically constructed identity is attached by an authorized and integrated version of culture that no longer fit today's fragmented, paradoxical, and ambiguous modern world, (Erikson, 2001). Therefore, the gap between politically influenced education about Zhonghua Minzu and modernized reality has confused me in social identification which is significant for arousing individual's sense of self as



Figure 8. Drawings. Lotus, cymbidium, bamboo, and narcissus.

Western countries are better than China from the impression that most developed countries locate in the West and most brands for high-tech products, such as, computers, cars, software, etc., are western. I assumed that the more developed economics in the West must have something to do with its culture. And I wanted to learn from it, so I can contribute more to my country, for we have been taught to be patriotic and contribute to China since young.

On the other hand, I tried to introduce traditional Chinese culture to them through art. For example, Figure 8 is a series of my drawings that I have sent to a British pen pal of mine. They are lotus, cymbidium,

an ingroup member
(Brewer, 2001).

As a result of my confusion about Chinese identity, my attitude to western countries and members of them were ambiguous.

According to Brewer (2001), it is this self-identify process towards social categorization that “accounts for the positive valuation of the ingroup and positive orientations toward fellow ingroup evaluation” (p. 21). Thus, if my identification towards national identity as a member of

Chinese/Zhonghua Minzu is ambiguous, my attitude towards the authorized and integrated

Chinese/Zhonghua Minzu culture, as well as other ingroup members is ambiguous too. This alone is not strong enough to lead

bamboo, and narcissus. They symbolize peace, honesty, humility and purity in Chinese culture respectively.

By studying both western and Chinese cultures, I was trying to grow my two swings as how I showed in my drawing A Glasswing Butterfly in Figure 9.

Obviously, western culture and Chinese culture were dualistic for me. I imagined myself to be able to understand the beauty of two cultures, interfuse

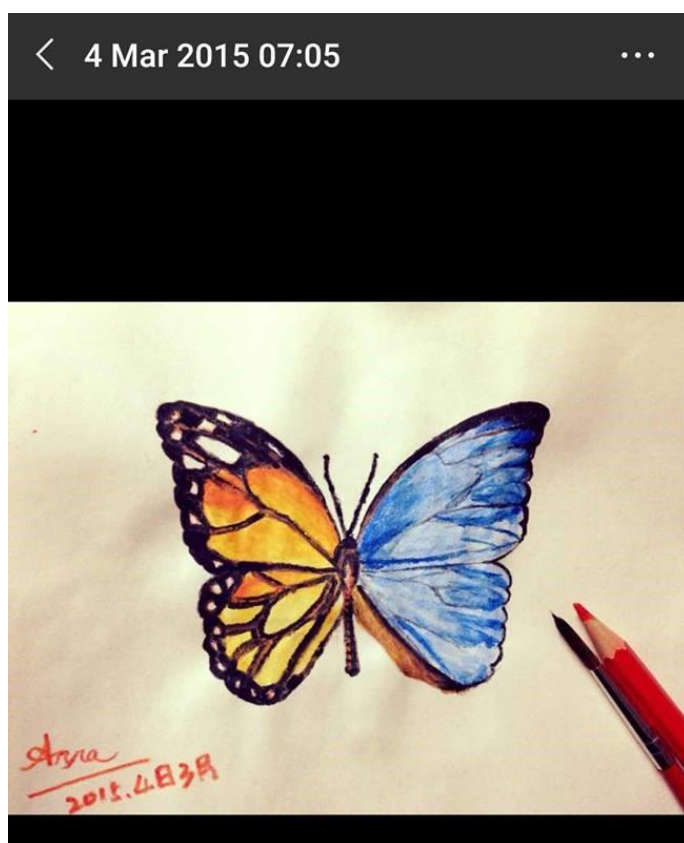


Figure 9. A Drawing. A glasswing butterfly.

advantages from both cultures in one integrate, and take a balance between them, which is also the ideal international identity that I had in my mind. If this butterfly drawing drawn on April 3rd, 2015 is still too

me to see western countries and people from western countries as the “others” that I should stay away from. However, how western countries were emphasized as a group of capital countries, with totally different political ideology, in my education and social media has sharpened conflicts between Communist China and Capitalist West in my mind. As Brewer has suggested that when groups are political entities, ingroup bias can be exacerbated into outgroup hostility and intergroup conflict to secure or maintain political power. Under this situation, western countries are regarded as a big group with little difference inside; additionally, although I long for being international and learning from outgroup

abstract, the following portrait of mine that I finished on November 5th, 2015 (Figure 10⁴) can delineate my



Figure 10. A Drawing. A portrait of me. ideal self as an international person more vividly.

The style of this drawing can represent my psychological status in that period of time, which is full of dreams, hopes and fantasies. It was a period of time that I lived mostly for my dreams and didn't need to worry about realities, as I was only in my freshman year and the beginning of sophomore, I had

cultures, I had set boundaries from myself with people from western countries unconsciously.

⁴ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Finally finished.

enough time to dream and simply enjoy chasing my dream freely in the ways that I like. Although I was shy to show myself in a goddess-like appearance, I loved this drawing so much that I wrote an introduction (Figure 11) when I posted the drawing on Facebook on July 1, 2016.



Figure 11. A Facebook Post on July 1st, 2016. An introduction to my portrait.

Today, when I was reviewing this drawing again, I found these details worthy discussion. First, my cultural dualism is obvious in this drawing – I have clearly divided the drawing into two parts to represent western culture and Chinese culture. I was not aware of the difference in western cultures, although I have learned about different cultural traditions, such as, Egyptian and Greek heritages, that exist in western culture. Then, it is not hard to notice that in the most part of this drawing, Western culture and Chinese culture have their own space separately, which is because I have hardly thought about the problems and solutions when two cultures

met each other. Finally, I dressed myself in a Greek dress, for at that time, I assumed that to be an international person meant I was different from other Chinese.

4.2 From London to London

4.2.1 Why Did I Change and Apply to Canada

London, England, eventually remained as a dream when I decided to study in Canada. This shift happened when I took my plan of studying abroad more seriously in the second term of sophomore. I talked with my parents about my wish to study abroad. They liked my idea of studying abroad, however didn't think that the U.K. was the best choice. They had heard from friends that studying in U.K. was very expensive and there was less chance to find a job after graduation. I did not argue much with my parents, although I longed to study in U.K. and make all my dreams come true. I believed my parents' opinions were the most important. My response to my parents' wishes echoes Jun Mian Chen's (2017) claim that parents play an important role on CISs' choice of countries to study abroad.

On the one hand, born in the Chinese culture, I respect my parents' authority. It has been said that in Chinese culture, filial piety is the most important of all virtue and it strongly influences Chinese parent-child relationship (Sun, 2017). I have hardly taken decisions against my parents' wishes since I was young. The only time I insisted my own preferences was when I chose majors for undergraduate studies. My parents wanted me to take police studies, but I rejected this as I knew I could never be a good policewoman. I have never considered myself to be a very athletic person (I could probably never chase a thief). Studying police sciences was too far away from my interests in art, history, and literature. On the other hand, I understood that money always matters in studying abroad. Since I was still financially dependent on my parents, their opinion about where I would study was linked to their decision about where to spend their money. Therefore, when they mentioned that studying in U.K. was very expensive, and after I have heard the same statements from my friends, I did not want to risk my dream and ended up putting too much financial pressure on my parents' shoulders. Moreover, western cultures did not have much difference for me at

that time, so to study in another western country culturally close to U.K. was not bad at all. I felt lucky and grateful that my parents would like to support me to study abroad.

Canada became my parents' and my best choice for these reasons. First of all, unlike programs in U.K., in which many masters programs are one-year in length, I learned from the media and international education agencies that most of the Masters programs in Canada last for 2 years. This means I have more time to experience the culture. Secondly, Canada's immigration policies have been a big attraction for many CIS (Chen, 2017). I didn't think I would immigrate after graduation at that time, but I couldn't foresee whether I would want to stay longer in Canada for working experience or immigrate in 2 years. So why not keep this option open? Thirdly, unlike U.S., firearms are restricted in Canada, after reading many news about shooting accidents in U.S., I was afraid to choose U.S. to study in. Fourthly, Canada has gained a good reputation for being open and embracing cultural diversity among my international friends over the world. Last but not least, I got the impression from media and international education agencies that Canada has cheaper tuition and living expenses which, experience has now shown me, I underestimated.

Since I was not used to searching for programs' information on Universities' websites, I had not realized, for example, that my program ran all year round with 3 semesters, rather than 2 semesters, which meant I would pay my tuition and other fees for 3 times per year. Besides, in all my former educational experience, I have only had fall and winter terms, and each of them last for 4 to 5 months. And, from senior high school, from grade 10 to 13, to university, I paid my tuition fee once per year. These previous experience made me take it for granted that I would pay up to twice per year. As a result, I was shocked when I found out this fact of paying tuitions three times per year, which was in my first term studying in my program. The information of tuition can be found on the university website, where I have hardly reached before, because I haven't got used to searching information on university websites and sending emails

to ask graduate assistant relevant information until I came to Canada. I remember how I felt scared and guilty to tell my parents about this cruel realization. I thought it was because of my carelessness that my tuition went beyond our budget. As for life expense, I had heard that it was expensive to eat in restaurants and buy certain goods. The thing I did not realize was how expensive the tax is for everything I bought in Ontario. In China, we never pay tax when we go shopping, so I did not ask about tax or have any concept of what it means to pay tax on everything I would buy, when I was applying for universities in Canada.

In fact, I have never traveled to any Western country, let alone Canada. I knew very little about Canada, except Henry Norman Bethune, the Canadian communist physician who dedicated his life in China when saving Chinese people from sickness and war wounds. I knew the maple leaf since it is displayed on the Canadian flag; and a I noticed a handsome prime minister who was popular on social media. I don't remember what else I knew about Canada. It was a country rarely on our news, but people say, "no news is good news". Most of my friends who planned to study abroad were going to Europe, Australia or US, since Canada sounded cold. However, the more I realized fewer people chose Canada compared to the other countries, the more I wanted to go to Canada to satisfy my need to be different from other CIS.

All in all, despite of the fact that U.K. remained as a dream, I believed it was a wise shift, because, it seemed that advantages outweigh disadvantages. Since before I came to Canada, I believed there was little difference in the western culture that can be found in different countries; Canada is still a British commonwealth country, so I was sure Britain had a strong impact on Canada in terms of cultural features. Therefore, I thought my initial wish of going abroad to explore western culture/British culture was not totally compromised, and my "bridge dream" didn't collapse.

4.2.2 Desire, Satisfaction and Life Stories

Once studying in Canada became my goal, I treated it more seriously than my British fantasy. I told my teachers and friends about my plan to do masters in Canada when we were talking about plans after graduation, as I have been always honest and sincere to them. My teachers and friends in university, as well as my parents had confidence in me that I was competent to study abroad, so I would try my best to get at least one offer to not let them down.

Like other CIS studied by Harrison (2016) I have never thought of applying on my own without agents' help, because, at that time, neither was I confident enough in my English skills or experience that may be needed in gathering information from universities' websites and writing my support documents, nor did I think I would have enough time to go through each step without any help. Besides, the application for Canadian graduate programs were considered as much more complicated than the application for Australian or British graduate programs by all agents that I have talked with, because, according to them, besides of GPA and IELTS/TOFFEL scores, different programs have their unique requirements, such as work experience, admission from a potential supervisor, writing samples, etc. These items seemed unfamiliar and challenging to me.

I visited nearly all international education agencies that I could find in Beijing to gather some general information about their service, the programs that I am qualified to apply, and the process of application. After some research on agencies' history, rate of success in getting offers, and agency fees, I signed a contract with an agency which started their business with U.S. and Canadian university application. Coincidentally, it was also the agency I went for inquiry over 1 year ago when I was immersed in the British fantasy. At that time, I would never think that someday I would come back again with another country in mind. Although their agency fee for application was expensive, which was 27,000 RMB (about 5150 CADs), my parents sent me money

right away for they trusted me and believed the agency could improve the odds to get offers.

The service of my agencies included: 1) three courses to introduce each province of Canada in terms of its location, climate, universities and languages; different categories of universities and their rankings; the documents that I may need for program applications and visa application. 2) the service from one agent who assists clients to choose universities and programs. 3) the service from another agent who helps with writing documents for program applications and visa issues.

The location and the reputation of the university was important to me, as well as other CIS (Jun Mian Chen, 2017). I had only considered study in B.C., Ontario or Quebec, since Alberta and Manitoba were cold provinces according to my agents. I believed it was true because those two provinces locate in central continent with high northern latitude, in which the climate is introduced as colder in winter on my geographical textbook in senior high. As for choosing universities, I preferred universities belong to medical/doctoral category and ranking high globally, while tuition fees and life expenses were hardly considered. The three categories of Canadian universities were confusing to me. Although my agents told me that these three categories only show universities' features, it didn't mean medical/doctoral schools are better than comprehensive or primarily undergraduate schools; and, in Canada, the rankings of universities are not regarded as important as they are in China. However, I still got the feeling that medical/doctoral schools are the best for me, because I thought if a university is good at doctoral programs, as how its category was called, then it should be good at research, too. I thought, research, shouldn't it be the most important part for professors and students in any university? And I didn't care much about whether rankings were important for Canadians, for I was a Chinese student who might eventually go back to find a job in China. I couldn't ignore university rankings unless my future employers would ignore them. However, from what I knew about Chinese employers, it wouldn't happen soon.

To increase the possibility of obtaining at least one offer from the programs that we would apply, my agent assisted me to choose five programs from different universities. Based on their experience, they classified programs in different universities into 3 tiers in terms of the difficulty of obtaining an offer from those programs. Since the agency declared that they would get me fully refunded if I couldn't get any offer from Canada, they wanted to try their best to help me get at least one offer. Therefore, they highly suggested me to choose the programs in different tiers. For example, they suggested me to choose 1-2 programs that I could give a try but less likely can be admitted; 2-3 programs that just match my qualities; and 1-2 programs which is relatively easy for me to apply. Following this suggestion, I applied five programs in different universities.

Among those five programs, I only got one offer which is the offer from my current program. It's not from the university with the highest ranking or the lowest ranking, but the program I have thought that fits my background and interests best.

I think the service I got from my agency was

It was important for me to get at least one offer from Canadian graduate schools, not only because it was my wish to study in Canada, but also because it was my parents, teachers, and friends' expectation, too. It would make me feel wounded in mental security, which "refers to your connectedness with the world and how in touch you feel with reality" (Layder, 2004, p. 33) and self-esteem if I couldn't even get an offer. Since raised up in Chinese collectivist culture, where saving face and avoiding shame and connections with families and other in-group members are crucial to individuals (Gambel & Cianci, 2003), other people's expectations weighs heavy in my heart.

Layder (2004) believes that, among all ongoing changing needs, such as, foods, love, being loved, belonging, etc., security and self-esteem remain as basic needs of human beings. Personal living stories are written when different individuals choose different ways

helpful, but less meaningful than I thought. It was helpful for following two reasons:

1. It helped me to save some time to find information about how to apply universities in Canada and get a student visa. Since in China, I found many foreign websites are hard to access due to internet censorship. Sometimes VPN is needed in order to browse those websites. From my experience, free VPNs are usually slow and interruptible. My agency bought VPN for business purpose which could allow me to get information from foreign websites through them easily.

2. It gave me more confidence in the application process since I knew at least I could have agents to rely on and somebody who were professional in school application to talk with, which makes me feel safer.

However, the disadvantages of my agent service are obvious. First of all, commercial purposes are woven through their whole service. Since the international education agency that I worked with promised their clients to help them get at least one offer, their efforts mainly focus on getting offers to fulfill their promise, instead of facilitating students to fulfill their personal passions and dreams.

to satisfy their needs. Getting an offer from Canada was associated with my basic needs, and I decided to reach this aim by looking for help from an international education agency to increase my chances of getting an offer.

It seems money mattered least once we decided to apply Canadian graduate schools. Expensive agency's service fee, tuition fee, and life expenses in Canada were hardly considered by my family and me, although I am not coming from a wealthy family. One personal reason is because my education has been so important for my parents that they would do everything for me to send me to best schools since young, for they believe getting educated in good schools was the best way for me to get a good job and fulfilling life. Besides this, it is also because a person's success is associated with a family's success in Chinese collectivist culture (Gambel & Cianci, 2003), which could earn

My agent was trying to persuade me to apply for some “easier” programs in some universities that I was not interested at all. My rejections to those persuasion made my relationship with my agent became somehow awkward. Additionally, as my agents usually write statements, letters and other documents that universities request to complete application on their students’ behalf, students could lose this opportunity to get a feeling of Canadian university system and express themselves thoroughly. Therefore, universities may find it hard to know their applicants through those written documents, not to mention how hard it would be for universities to offer chances to real competent applicants. In this sense, an international education agency can be a problem lying between CISs and universities reducing their abilities to to know each other better at the pre-departure stage. This may be a reason why students who enjoyed their agents’ services more were reported to have less mental well-being during their study abroad (Xie, 2015).

In addition to working with an international education agency, in order to gain a better chance to be admitted to my dream program, I did more than a year internship at an

face and esteem for the whole family. As a result, Chinese parents consider about the success of application before their financial conditions. This can explain why, according to Cebolla-Boado et al.’s (2017) quantitative study, the cost of study does not seem to drive pre-departure CISs’ university choice; however, post-departure CISs are under financial pressures (Yan & Berliner, 2013).

However, although it mattered a lot for me to get at least an offer, I wouldn’t let my agent write my CV, letter of statement and letters to potential supervisors for me. This is because I believe that even though my agent was more professional in writing these documents in English, they could never know me better than myself, let alone to present me to others. Another belief I have was that honesty is the best strategy, for it makes life simple by letting the best match comes to me (or the unsuitable ones leave me on their own), no matter whether it is a

international English language centre whose students were mainly kids and teens. It was hard to work almost fulltime while studying in university. However, I am glad that I did it, for this experience has opened a window for me to see education from inside of an international after-school language centre. During my internship, for the first time I worked with both international and domestic teachers; and, I got the chance to take a glance at the difference between Chinese and western educational methods. For example, in a domestic teacher's class, I have noticed that more grammar was taught and the class was more quiet. However, in an international teacher's class, students were more engaged in interactive activities. Moreover, I have also noticed some conflicts between the administrative level and the teachers' level. These findings have led and inspired me to do more research in education.

friend, an offer, or a partner. As personal rules, these beliefs guided me in my interactions with my world, thus made my story/ life different from others, as suggested by Layder (2004), personal rules "express the need for the separateness and distinctiveness of the individual" (p. 95).

Moreover, these personal rules have been guided me to be genuine, that is, to be honest to myself, as well as the world. As suggested by Heidegger (1962), existentially, being has the ability to listen to the calling from itself through conscience when its authenticity is challenged by others, these personal rules just jumped into my mind to bring me back to who I really am when being myself is disturbed by my need of getting an offer. Therefore, although getting an offer is important to satisfy my needs of mental security and self-esteem, above all, there is a more existential need of living authentically.

4.2.3 The Joy of Aloneness

Besides of my efforts for application, I continued to attend workshops and events about western culture, make western pen pals, read books about western culture, theology and philosophy. It was a busy but happy time in my life. I enjoyed the place where I was standing and dreamed where I was supposed to go. Not until I started this self study, have I realised that kind of happy feeling during that time— simple but settled. I could feel happy from deep of my heart just by sitting nearby a window and transcribe a piece of poem written by Shakespeare or Wordsworth (Figure 12⁵); I could find beauty in cake crumbs (Figure 13⁶), water on floor (Figure 14⁷), and street

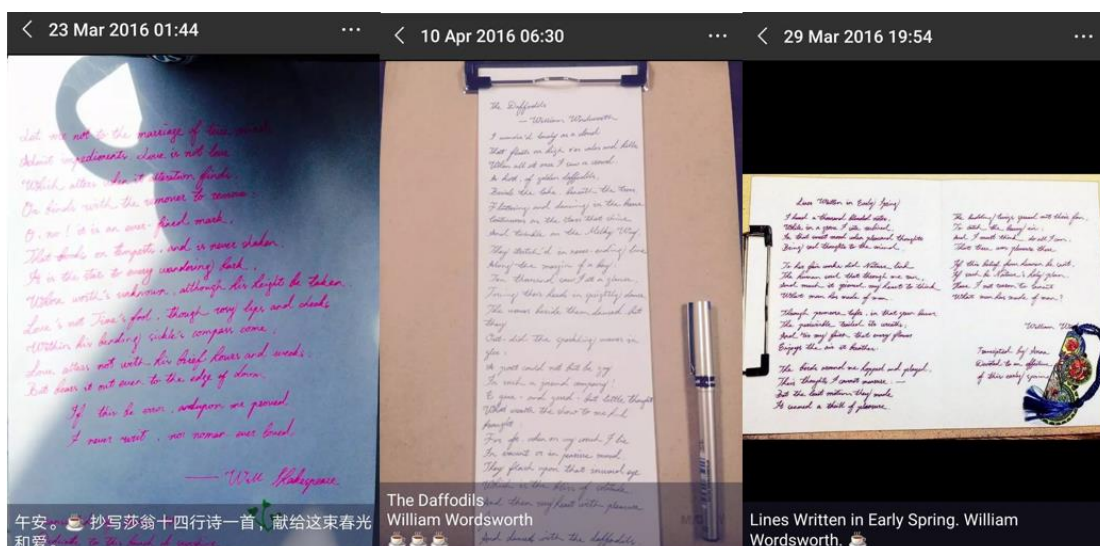


Figure 12. Three WeChat Posts from March 23rd, 2016 to April 10th, 2016. Poems transcribed by me.

⁵ My translation of the text in the first WeChat post: Good afternoon! A

Shakespeare's sonnet transcribed by me. Dedicate it to love and this bouquet of sunshine in spring.

⁶ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Fall apart after all prosperous. Red velvet, My favourite in cakes

⁷ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Shadow in water, upside down.



Figure 13. A WeChat Post on Dec. 21st, 2016. Cake crumbs.



Figure 14. A WeChat Post on July 21st, 2016. Water on floor.

light in darkness (Figure 15). Figure 16⁸ is one of my drawings at that time. In this drawing, there is a picture of delft blue which has always been loved by me very much for it is a result of the communication between western culture and Chinese culture. Nearby the “picture in picture” is a bunch of flowers which means vitality, elegance and the love of life for me. I can still smell the scent of peaceful calmness and light pleasure by looking at this drawing again, although three years has passed by. Besides of drawings, I have also challenged myself to write some poem in English (Figure 17), which has never happened again after I came to Canada.

⁸ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: On and off, finally finished this drawing. I couldn't feel time passing by, when I was drawing. Good night!

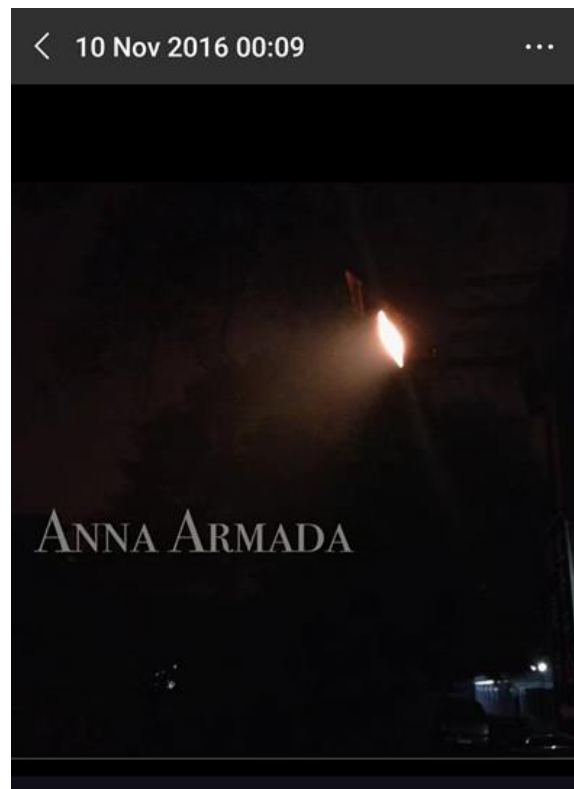


Figure 15. A WeChat Post on Nov. 10th, 2016. Street light.



Figure 16. A WeChat Post on Jan. 25, 2016. A drawing of Delft Blue and flowers.

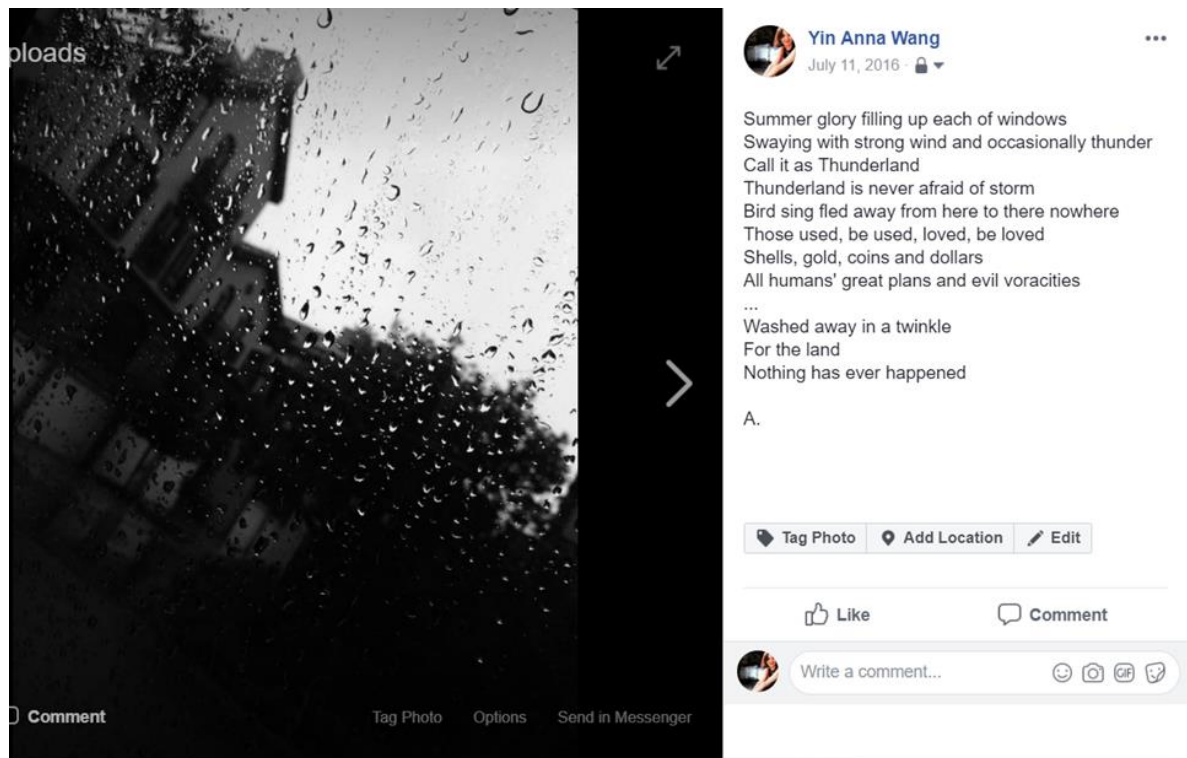


Figure 13. A Facebook Post on July 11, 2016. A poem written by me.

It was during that time that I began to be interested in Martin Heidegger and impressed by his idea of “poetic dwelling”. I started to think how a human being can live his/her life poetically on his/her “being-towards-death”. No one has required me to do so, but I was even trying to pick up some Greek on my own in order to understand Heidegger’s (1862) philosophy more (Figure 18⁹). Research, just like reading, writing and drawing, happened to me when I felt free and secure to follow the flow of passion.

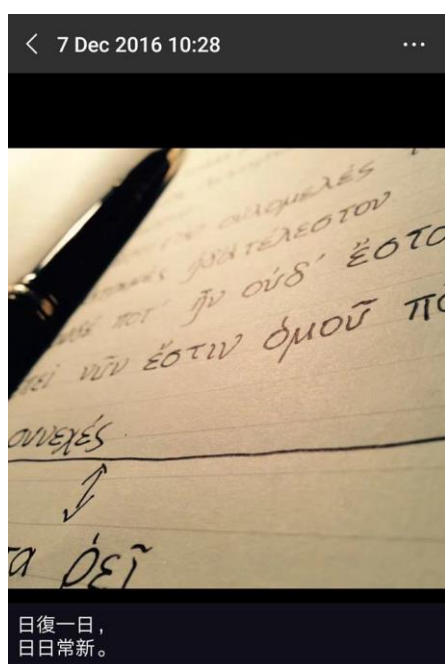


Figure 14. A WeChat Post on Dec. 7th, 2016.
Learning Greek.

During that unforgettable and delightful time, I tasted the joy of aloneness. Different from loneliness, aloneness offered me freedom and courage to decide which kind of person I want to be, and how to become that kind of person. I chose activities that can connect back to my initial aesthetic experience of calmness and elegance, such as transcribing poetries from Shakespeare and Wordsworth, discovering beauty in daily-life trifles, drawing, reading and writing. By doing these personal projects alone, I was trying to achieve myself by acquiring the qualities of calmness and elegance, which, as mentioned, are my desired qualities to live a happier life. I felt I am truly living while experiencing aloneness. Layder (2004) has demonstrated aloneness well

⁹ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Day after day, each day is a new day.



Figure 16. A WeChat Post on Sep. 14, 2016.
Snacks from friends.

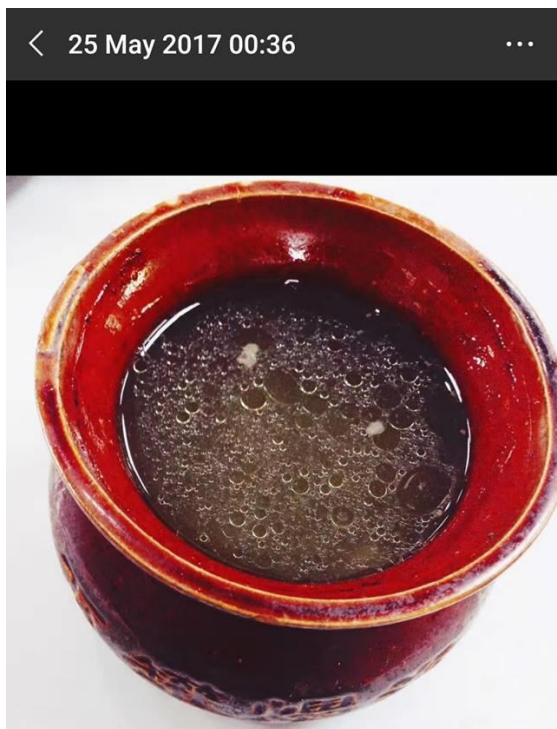


Figure 15. A WeChat Post on May 25th,
2017. Chicken soup.

It was a period of time that a sense of simple but

in following, which can explain where my delightful experience of aloneness comes from:

We are existentially alone in so far as we face death alone – no one can die for us – and I presume few sane people would attempt to dispute this. But it is exactly the same with life. Ultimately, no one else can live our lives for us even if we wanted them to. It is, in the final analysis, only you yourself who can live out your life, experience your experience and ask of yourself what you are capable of becoming. (p. 121)

This was what I realized when I was reading Heidegger's (1862) *Being and Time*. Therefore, I wished I could face world genuinely, achieve more potential as a person and

poetic happiness can be aroused easily in my daily life. I think this kind of simple happiness can never be found from outside, instead, it flourishes from inside. It is like a flower nourished and grown from the soil of overall wellbeing in one's soul. And this wellbeing came from the overall satisfaction of one's current life.

My life was purposeful and meaningful, and I was surrounded by a bunch of close friends. With them, we shared our dreams and fears, accompanied each other, heard each other and inspired each other. They surprised me with snacks when I felt down (Figure 19) and forced me to eat healthy when I felt sick (Figure 20). However, for many times, when I was not down nor sick, I tried to escape from them to enjoy my time alone, to do some readings and writings in a French-style café that I have never shared with any of my friends until my last month in Beijing. I call that café as the secret café. There, I read and wrote as much as I wanted, regardless of all distraction in the world outside of my secret place. It was the place where I finished my bachelor thesis, read many novels and wrote many WeChat posts or whatever else I was interested to write. Time passed by fast in my secret café. I could never forget that kind of soothing feeling when I just sit down there, order a potful my favourite pour-over coffee and read a

acquire those qualities I desired before death eventually takes me away, by then, I can say I lived and rest in peace.

Aloneness does not mean living alone or separating from others, because this kind of separation neglects the social side of human beings. In contrast, Layder (2004) suggests that aloneness subserves togetherness. This is easy to understand, since genuine connection is more possible to happen when genuine individual is represented in social interaction, and according to Layder (2004), achieving full genuineness cannot be achieved until one's acceptance of the fact of aloneness. Therefore, my precious friendships and those beautiful moments we shared together did not just happen, they are, at least to some

book from the first page to the last page without any tiredness, and order some food and a glass of wine to end up a day. My secret café closed at the same day when I left Beijing. Every time when I thought about this coincidence, a mixed feeling of sadness and beauty just filled up my heart, for remember the feeling when I feel free to be myself there but I have never found a café which could delight me so much since then. Later, when I was finding cafés in Canada, I believed I was actually finding the free, secure, settled and delight feelings that I have strongly felt when I was in Beijing.

degree, the results of my
understanding of aloneness.

4.3 Life as Flickering Candle Light

People are strange when you're a stranger

Faces look ugly when you're alone

Women seem wicked when you're unwanted

Streets are uneven when you're down

When you're strange

Faces come out of the rain

When you're strange

No one remembers your name

When you're strange

When you're strange

When you're strange

Morrison & Krieger (1967), People are strange.

4.3.1 A Stranger's Honeymoon with Hidden Danger

On August 20th, 2017, I flew to Toronto alone. I still remember how I felt when I went out from the airport vividly. Excited and a bit scared by this new country which I have stepped in. I felt that there would be many challenges waiting for me, but, at the same time, I was also confident enough and feeling prepared to face those challenges.

Although not until I encountered the challenges in my real life, have I had a clearer concept about what those challenges could be specifically. I took a cab to the hotel that I have booked for myself when I was in China, pretending I was quite familiar with the city. Sitting in a cab running on the highway with a strange driver and heading to a hotel with a strange name that I did not even know how to pronounce, I was trying to tell myself I was safe. “At least the highways of big cities all look alike, no matter whether it is Beijing or Toronto”, I comforted myself. I felt more realised when I found a big clue that we are on the right direction to downtown Toronto where my hotel should be, which was CN tower – looks the same as how it was in many pictures that I have viewed.

My hotel was expensive and my room was smaller than I have expected, but I have been very satisfied since at least the receptionist found my booking information in their system and checked me in successfully. As a person who has never traveled to another continent, I have found it amazing that internet could help me book hotels, transportation tickets and even rentals in another hemisphere that I have never been to. To be honest, I felt uncertain about whether everything I booked online could come true smoothly.

My train ticket to London, Ontario, where I was going to study and live for the next 2 years, was in the next day’s afternoon. It means I would have some time to explore Toronto before leaving for London. With a mixed feeling of excitement, happiness, a bit nervousness, and surreality, I fell asleep.

The following is the translation of what I posted (Figure 21) in my first morning in Canada when I was spending limited time hanging around in Toronto:

First morning in Canada. Many sea birds and pigeons. Many people are exercising or walking their dogs. Fresh air, comfy sunshine. One road is enough to separate the leisure rhythm from busy crowd. On the other side of the road, people in suits are walking fast. A mixed smell of perfume, Tim Horton's and

Starbucks is floating in air.

The beauty of this city was impressive. I couldn't wait to send pictures of it to my parents and friends.

I had a three-months of honeymoon time in Canada after classes started. In those three months, I felt excited to study in my new university. Foods, buildings, stores, and people walking on streets all fascinated me. I felt that the effort I put into preparing my

AN 93 NA·胤

在加拿大的第一个早晨。湖边遛狗，跑步的人很多，海鸟多，鸽子，鸭子都多。空气好，阳光很舒服。一条路足以将休闲的节奏隔断在周一的忙碌之外，路的这边，着职业装的人们步履匆匆，空气中充满香水，Tim Horton's 和 Starbucks 的味道。😊



Canada · Toronto

21 Aug 2017 08:47 Delete



application finally paid off.

Although there were some initial challenges, for example, I had no idea where I could go for grocery – I have never learned that what is called as “supermarket” in China can be called as “drug store” here. And instead of selling “drugs” which meant things like cocaine, heroin, and smokable methamphetamine, they sell various kinds of daily necessities of which I don't know even half.

Figure 17. A WeChat Post on August 21st, 2017. My first morning in Canada.

My international education agent introduced me to some students who are studying at the same

Things in the first three months seem to go well. New things in

Canadian university. Introduced by someone I knew from my agent, I worked with one of Chinese student associations in London in the first month, for I felt it was safer to connect with a Chinese community. From a friend there, I knew drug store was just what we called as supermarket in China. However, I thought it was quite bothersome for me to ask somebody follow me to grocery store to introduce those goods I didn't know to me or ask for help whenever I have needs. As a Chinese student, the last thing I wanted to do was to be bothersome, which made me, like other CISs, reluctant to seek help (Yoon & Jepsen ,2008; Young, 2017; Chen et al., 2015). Besides, I knew many Chinese friends of mine mainly shop in Chinese supermarkets and mainly connect with Chinese community although they have come to Canada for many years, which didn't interest me at that time. I thought one of purposes for me of coming to Canada was to experience western culture and all differences from Chinese culture. For the same reason, although I was doing well in the Chinese student association, I quit it fairly quickly.

Canada fascinated me; I felt confident enough to manage challenges in this new country; I tried to read, study, enjoy cozy time alone as before. However, the problem which was hidden under the peaceful surface was that I didn't realize there was any problem at all. I thought as long as my study went well, I would enjoy my life in Canada, because study was the purpose for me to come to Canada. But what happened after this honeymoon time has shown that I was wrong.

In fact, school study has never been everything for me in my previous experience before coming to Canada. Taking a look back to the first story, it is not hard to remember how the qualities of calmness and elegance drove me into the fantasy of studying abroad; how the quality of being genuine has shaped my

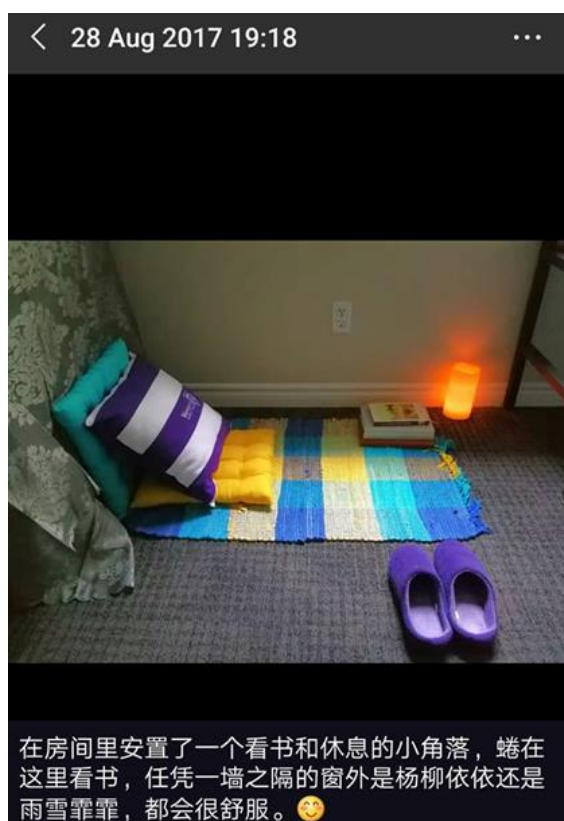


Figure 18. A WeChat Post on August 28th, 2017. A cozy corner.

In spite of the little challenges at beginning, it was a period of time that I felt I was fully in charge of my new life in Canada. I attended several workshops provided by university to learn about Canadian culture, Canadian classroom and teacher assistant skills. I decorated my room to make it cozy (Figure 22). In a related post, I wrote, “A corner in my room for reading and resting. Read and cuddle up here, no matter whether it's luxuriant or snowy outside, I shall be comfy!” The strength of finding simple happiness in daily life hasn't vanished yet in the hardships of living and studying in a foreign

personal beliefs which has influenced what I decided to do in my application. Although I have ambitions of getting my degree, finding a decent job and being a “bridge” between cultures, facing unavoidable death alone, it was these admired qualities that shows the being of myself. While I was trying hard to meet all pragmatic goals in my study, what has missed out was the beauty of aesthetic experience in daily life, as “[a]esthetic is not just about art, but is rather about all of our processes of meaning-making” (Johnson, 2013, p. 23), which, in my case, involves expressing the qualities of calmness, elegance and genuineness through daily trivial matters.

The deficiency of aesthetic experience in this story happened quietly when imbalance between the “Thinking-I” and the “Being-

country as a CIS.

I have been told by my parents and other people that Chinese international students work harder than any other students before I came to Canada. I tried my best to work hard by finishing most of course readings, joining course discussion actively and meeting requirements of my course assignments. In my first term, I spent nearly all of my awake time in study, because course reading, writing, along with discussion are all much harder than I had expected. The biggest reason for it is that I have never experienced reading, writing and discussing academic articles in English before I came to Canada despite having read some English books, attended some English workshops and having some English-speaking friends to hang out with in China. I found it important to have high-level thinking in academic reading, writing and discussion. However, high-level thinking in English was something totally new for me. It seemed like those connections and expressions I could make easily in Chinese just couldn't happen in English. To be honest, it was even impossible for me to remember the main idea of an English article after reading it for the first time in the beginning, let alone connecting it to other articles and ideas.

Moreover, education was a totally new field for me. Although I had some experience in the field, I had

I" occurred. According to Cupchik (2013), aesthetic happens in a complementary relationship of the "Thinking-I" and the "Being-I". The 'Thinking-I' is focused on an instrumental analysis and application of a set of pragmatically oriented skills to response challenges posed by physical or social environments; while the "Being-I" is focussed on the reflection of everyday life in order to find and develop oneself. In my story, the "Thinking-I" has dominated my life to help me meet goals in my study, while the "Being-I" has been ignored. This happened not only because the challenges of studying in a new country were severe enough for me to spend most of my time coping with it, but also because I had never been conscious enough of the "Being-I", for example, I have never reflected on my aesthetic experience in

never learned it systematically in a classroom. Lacking basic theoretical knowledge in education made me feel unsure and nervous about sharing my critical thoughts especially in a classroom with PhD students and other MA students who have bachelor degrees in an education related field. To compensate for the lack of knowledge in educational theories, I tried to find values in my experience and books that I have read when I was a Chinese Language and Literature Student and relate them to current study, which made me feel more

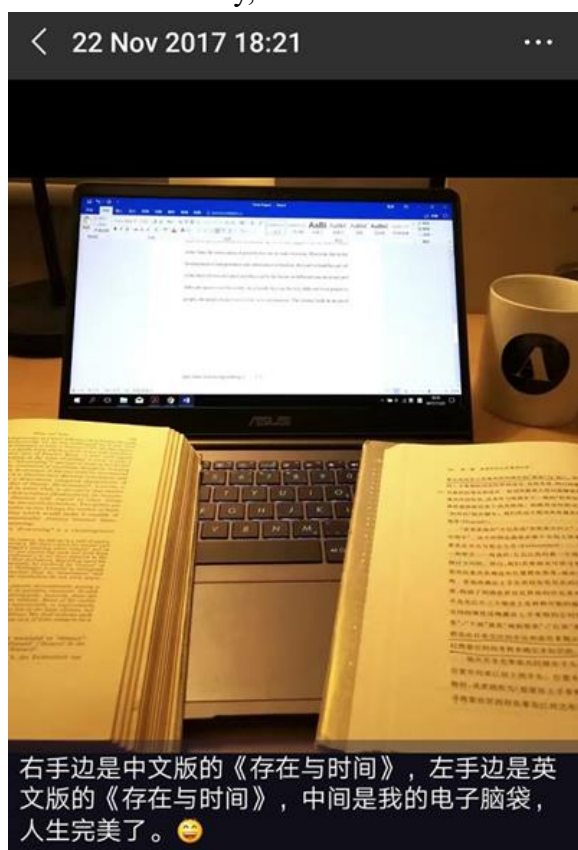


Figure 19. A WeChat Post on Nov. 22nd, 2017. Working time.

comfortable to contribute in classroom. For

literature and art; I have hardly thought about the qualities that I was seeking for behind my personal habits of writing, reading and drawing and the personal beliefs in application process; I have never reflected on the joy I have got in being alone. In short, I have never been conscious enough of who I want to become, in an existential sense, in my previous experience before coming to Canada.

Instead of associating with the inner power coming from the “Being-I”, my confusing identity, as demonstrated in 1.2 as a Chinese international student shaped before coming to Canada has decided my attitudes towards Chinese culture, my fellow Chinese international students, domestic students and international students from other countries. For example, I tried to keep distance from other Chinese

example, as showed in Figure 23¹⁰, I tried to find educational enlightenment in Heidegger's work Being and Time which has interested me since I was in China. In fact, the Chinese version of this book was one of few book I brought from China. I read it along with an English version that I have found in university's library to do citations in my papers. I also tried to introduce wisdoms from Chinese traditional culture to my classmates. For example, I wrote a paper on my seal cutting curriculum which I chose to study when I was an undergraduate student in China, not only because I was familiar with this curriculum, but also because I wanted to introduce seal cutting, along with its cultural meaning to my classmates in Canada. Additionally, I enjoyed sharing my experience and feelings as an international graduate student here. Here, I would really appreciate my audience, that is, my instructors and classmates, who have been patient and interested when I was telling stories in my second language, which helped me to be more confident to express myself.

I found it much easier to express myself in online courses, since, most of the time from my

international students, for I thought I should be away from them to become international; I tried to introduce Chinese culture in classroom because I felt obligated to do so; and I faced other students in a competitive manner which was not only against my desire to acquire the qualities of calmness and elegance, but also had negative influence on my relationship with other students, especially domestic students.

The disaster of being disconnected with the "Being-I" and potential friendships I could have got from other students didn't show up until my honeymoon time ended after the first three months.

¹⁰ My Translation of the text in this WeChat post: The Chinese version of Being and Time on the right; the English version of Being and Time on the left; my digital brain (this is how I call my laptop) in the middle. Perfect life!

experience, students and course instructors communicate by reading and writing, which avoided the instant listening and speaking. I could read my peers' posts many times using a dictionary or other online sources to help me understand it better if it was necessary. Despite having a much heavier course load than that in China, I enjoyed the online courses as they allowed me to learn at flexible time and place. I appreciated the flexibility it provided me with possibilities to work at more convenient time and place after dealing with stresses from other courses or new life in Canada.

I have to admit that, at first, I tried to compete with my peers as it was what I used to do in my learning experience in China- I have to be one of top students, which means to "beat up" my classmates to get scholarships, better scores and opportunities. Besides, I felt I represented not only myself but also my country whenever I was abroad I felt the importance to study better than other students, as I didn't want my country to be looked down upon. However, I found it different here for my classmates all have different interests in education studies and our instructors encourage us to learn from each other and help each other to improve our understandings and expand our horizons in educational fields. For example, I talked to another international student in my class who is from Iran about my difficulties with the course readings. It really made me feel better to know she was also facing the same challenge. Since then, we have been sharing sources we have and helping each other in our study and life. Besides, I have also got writing support from a domestic student in my first semester, which helped me feel more confident in writing my papers. In return, I helped her with her research on Asian students.

4.3.2 Loneliness in “Others”

In general, coursework wasn't very hard for me. Even though there were challenges in English skills and cultural context related to study, I could manage it by spending more time, putting more effort and seeking for help. However, as time went by, I didn't feel I was as happy and motivated as at the beginning. I felt sick to be called as an international student. Since when I was classified into international students, I felt I was regarded as the “others” who are less competent in study and working places. In spite of many supports for international students that were provided by the university, I felt too exhausted to ask for help from them, since it was energy-consuming to communicate with domestic staffs, because I have to reach out to another cultural context and use English to communicate with them like how I was challenged in every day life here.



Figure 20. A Picture of My Meal.
Funny face, lonely face.

On the other hand, I didn't want to go back to Chinese community as well, just because I didn't want to give in. I tried to accept the fact and enjoy myself doing everything alone. As shown in Figure 24, I made a funny plate

I would argue that being categorized as a Chinese international student had side effects in my mental wellbeing during transition for these following reasons:

- 1) Being categorized as a CIS is a “top-down” trend toward establishing larger and larger groups (Moghaddam, 2008), because the main impetus for this categorization is from nationality, that is, a political feature, rather than from the



Figure 21. A WeChat Post on Feb. 3rd, 2018. A broken me.

to try to cheer myself up when I had to eat alone. However, it didn't really work. As a result, for a period of time, I felt so unconnected, isolated and lonely. Besides, I felt even worse after I broke up with my ex boyfriend, which can be partially blamed on long-distance relationships. I remember how I hid myself under my blanket to escape from these cruel realities when I woke up in those mornings. I could still work, and I was grateful that at least I had some work to do. But except work, my life was falling apart (Figure 25). I couldn't "dwell poetically" nor

desire of CISs' everyday lives. For example, I was wishing to study abroad but to be identified as a CIS was not my choice. Moghaddam (2008) suggested that psychological barriers exist naturally in human beings when they are identifying themselves with the larger groups. Thus, the group of international students, as an undesired, unfamiliar and large group, was naturally hard for me to identify with. Besides, I had been confused with my national identity as a Chinese/Zhonghua Minzu in today's changing world. Therefore, when the difficulties of identifying myself with international student appear, I felt more confused about my biggest identity as a CIS in Canada and felt less happy, for "a sense of group belongingness provides a crucial component for a person's social identity and self-esteem" (Horwitz &



Figure 22. A WeChat Post on Nov. 25th, 2017. My life in B&W.

get hygge¹¹ in life, instead, I felt that I dwelled nowhere, which made me feel less than myself. My present life became colourless (Figure 26¹²). I lived in memories. Those good moments I had with friends or alone in Beijing made my eyes full of tears.

My unsettled and detached feelings in life influenced my study finally. After I finished

Rabbie, 1982, p. 241).

2) International student has been my first and dominating identity in Canada, as except for being an international student, I hardly had other roles to play when I just came to this new country. The identity of international student has been always with me no matter whether I was in classroom, or socializing with domestic students in university. The fact that I was only mainly involved in international student community restricted my connections with other communities (Brewer, 2001), becoming members of multiple groups could reduce the intensity of the individual's dependence on any particular

¹¹ According to Wiking (2016), the Danish word “hygge” is:

[A]bout an atmosphere and an experience, rather than about things. It is about being with the people we love. A feeling of home. A feeling that we are safe, that we are shielded from the world and allow ourselves to let our guard down.

¹² My translation of the text in this WeChat post: Lichtung.

my coursework, I was supposed to think about my own research project. However, for a long time, I was stuck. I didn't know how and where to begin to do my own research, which is not because I didn't know how to do research, but because I felt that my life in Canada is so meaningless that I couldn't concentrate on doing anything on myself. Therefore, anything time-consuming, not only my research, but also my hobbies, such as writing and drawing, seemed like impossible to accomplish for me at that time.

I have tried to get a couple of friends here to help me adjust to new environment, but I hardly hung out with them. There were several reasons. First of all, I didn't feel they were as close as my old friends in Beijing. Most of my domestic friends have never lived in an Asian country for over half year, and I was still new in Canada, so there was few topic that we could talk about. I felt more lonely to be with them sometimes, for I thought I was one of "others" to them. Besides, few domestic friends I made would invite me to go out. Instead, in the most of time, it had to be on my own initiative to ask them to do something together, which was tiring. I was close to a catholic group in

ingroup, thereby, could increasing tolerance for outgroups in general. Besides, as an international student, I felt I was less competent in English language skills, thus, less competent in competitions with domestic students in terms of good class scores, daily socializing, and job hunting. This sense of competition that I adopted from my experience in China built another barrier between me and domestic students., Brewer (2001) suggests intergroup conflicts are increased when groups are competing for the same important resources.

As a result of the two reasons above, not only had I regarded other people as others before I communicated with them, but also, myself has become an unfamiliar other in my identity confusion as a CIS, which contributes to my feelings of loneliness and unauthenticity as a CIS. Layder

London and had some catholic friends. I wanted to find a welcoming community that would care about me and my feelings. But soon I kept distance from the group for I figured out I was not passionate in Catholic church. I didn't really belong there.

Different from human friends, I enjoyed mother nature's company. I have always appreciated the beauty of nature, but I had never found it as attractive to me as then. I was grateful that at least those trees and little birds kept me company. My drawings and photography at that time reflect my special relationship with nature at that time.

Wild animals were often personated by me to remedy my dissatisfaction with interpersonal communication. The Canada goose is one of most common birds in Canada, I have heard that they haven't earned a good reputation for their bad tempers, but I enjoyed visiting them. Figure 27 is a photo I took of the geese in winter.

It is one of my favourite photos that I have taken in Canada, for I thought it somehow reflect my feelings towards the challenges to study in Canada alone as a CIS. I wrote an introduction to it in my following Facebook

(2004) argues that full authenticity, which increases the sense of being alive and the sense of living a meaningful life, can only happen when the fact of aloneness can be accepted by oneself. It is harder for one to face the fearful fact that existentially we all live alone, if the person has been suffering from loneliness. As stated before, staying calm, elegant, and genuine in life has been my desired qualities since I planned to study abroad; therefore, I upset myself when I realized that my real life in Canada was far from my expectations for myself.

post on January 17, 2018 (Figure 28). I find myself trying to find strength from learning from wild animals, for we shared same struggle – we all struggle to survive, although their struggles are more biological and mine was more mental. In addition to it, wild animals also entertained me. For example, I enjoyed talking to them or making conversation for them.

I



Figure 24. A Photo Taken by Me. Walking on ice.



Yin Anna Wang

January 17 · London · 🧑🏻👤

Don't know why it took me twenty-two years to recognize how much I love nature. Canada helped me. Today I noticed geese looks different. Yes, they do have different faces. Probably they should have their names so I can call them as how I call my friends. I was trying to remember their faces. The ways how they walk seem to imply their stories as well. Everybody has stories. I know! It's already not easy to reach the current footprints. I know, I know! So **congratulations!** We are living and we are here

Figure 23. A Facebook Post on Jan. 17th, 2018. About the photo.

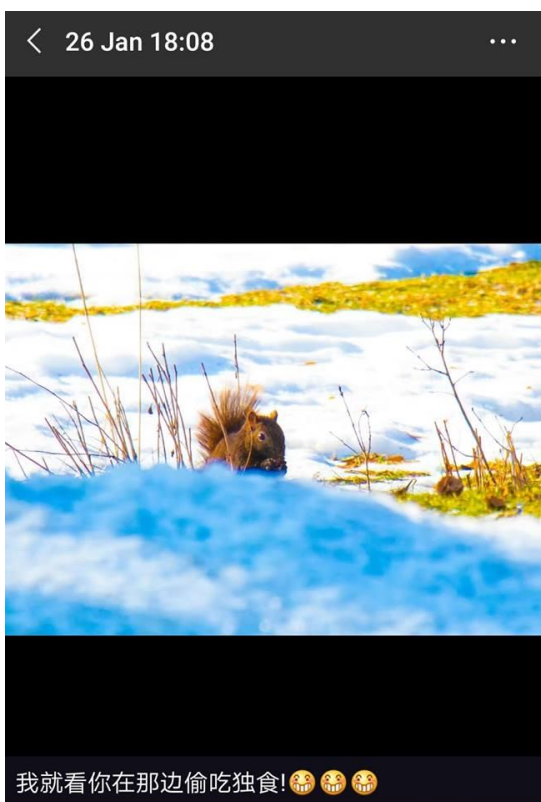


Figure 26. A WeChat Post on Jan. 26th, 2018. A squirrel.

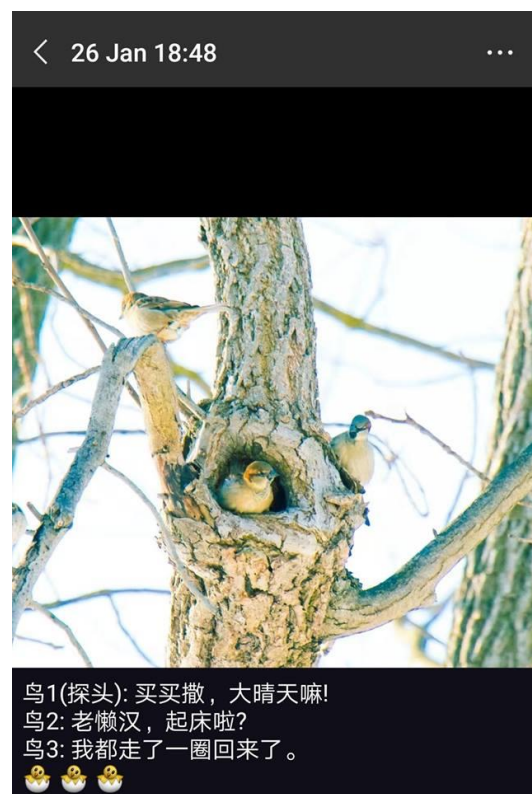


Figure 25. A WeChat Post on Jan. 26th, 2018. Three birds.

wrote "I am just watching you enjoying your food alone over there" in Figure 29. It is hilarious, because, in china, we believe people who don't share food will get stomachache. So, I used to joke like this with my friends. And in Figure 30, I wrote:

Bird 1 (reach out head): My my! A lovely sunny day!

Bird 2: Lazy guy, finally get up?

Bird 3: I came back from morning exercise already!

As for trees surrounding my house, I appreciated that they were always there even in my worst days. I imagined to become a tree, to become one of them, because, as trees, they are and will be always standing at the same place with other trees that they knew for a life-long time. Following (Figure 31) is a portrait I drew at that time.

It was a frozen and long winter, as cold and dark as my feelings, I was looking

forward to spring.



Figure 27. A Drawing of Mine. A portrait of me.

4.4 Rolling Ahead and/or Reflecting back

You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely
But you know you only used to get juiced in it
And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street
And now you find out you're gonna have to get used to it
You said you'd never compromise
With the mystery tramp, but now you realize
He's not selling any alibis
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And ask him do you want to make a deal?

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

Dylan (1965), Like a rolling stone.

I experienced the most excited and most frustrated moments, when I asked myself what did my life look like? After that, Bob Dylan's "like a rolling stone" just jumped into my mind. Attending the finest schools, everything seems to be fine, but when I had to face my life completely alone, how did it feel? I remember, in my statement letter to apply for admission before I came to Canada, one of my reasons of doing education studies was to have a clearer idea towards the unknown. Since education is about future and future is about the unknown. As human beings, we have fears towards the unknown. However, the unknown in my own life scared me. I didn't know which friend I was closely connected with; I didn't know what I could do and how to do it to make me feel better; I didn't know who I was, where I stood and where I was going; for a moment, I even didn't know what I was passionate about in my study. "Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone".

Things got better when I accepted the fact that I was lost in loneliness. Sometimes we need courage to accept the fact that our life is imperfect. Not pretending to be strong anymore, not escaping from the problem anymore. To give in sometimes can be a good thing. I started to re-decorate my room into a warm and calm style (Figure 32), meet new people

Self-reflection on emotions is a method I have used in my own healing process and this study. Based on my stories, I would argue the importance of it in enhancing mental well-being. I emphasize emotions rather than things, because happiness is a kind of mood instead of a specific thing. Certainly, we can find happiness in doing some certain things. But it is through emotional engagement that different things can influence our sense of happiness. As argued by Funch (2013), "[a]ny phenomenon that represents emotional value has existential importance; people do not just relate emotionally to their world, they are emotionally engaged with it because the phenomenon in question

and



Figure 28. A Photo of Room Decoration. A warm and clam space.

make plans to travel around, now that I couldn't focus on my study, at least I could go out instead of hiding myself under my blanket. Indeed, these activities added more colours in my life, but, when night comes, I still cried. It was like my life then was in vain, the feeling of wasting time drove me crazy.

Fortunately, as long as we are still living, time pushes things ahead. We never know what will happen in the next moment will change our life. Believe it or not, I met my love of life during that darkest time of my life. It was like a miracle how we found each other and shared the same feelings with each other. Since

has some kind of importance to their lives". That is, emotion has the potential to help us reveal what matters in our life. Self-reflection prevent this potential from being wasted, because, according to Funch (2013), when a person is active in tasks and events, it is impossible for the person to watch what he/she is doing at the same time. "Without self-reflection there would probably only be a feeling of something, but not of what"(p.181). In my cases, although I have experienced the feelings of urgent need, excitement, loneliness and getting better from my pre-departure expectation to todays' post-departure experience, without reflection, I could never get the chance to connect dots and find relations between

the first time we met each other in person, I have got

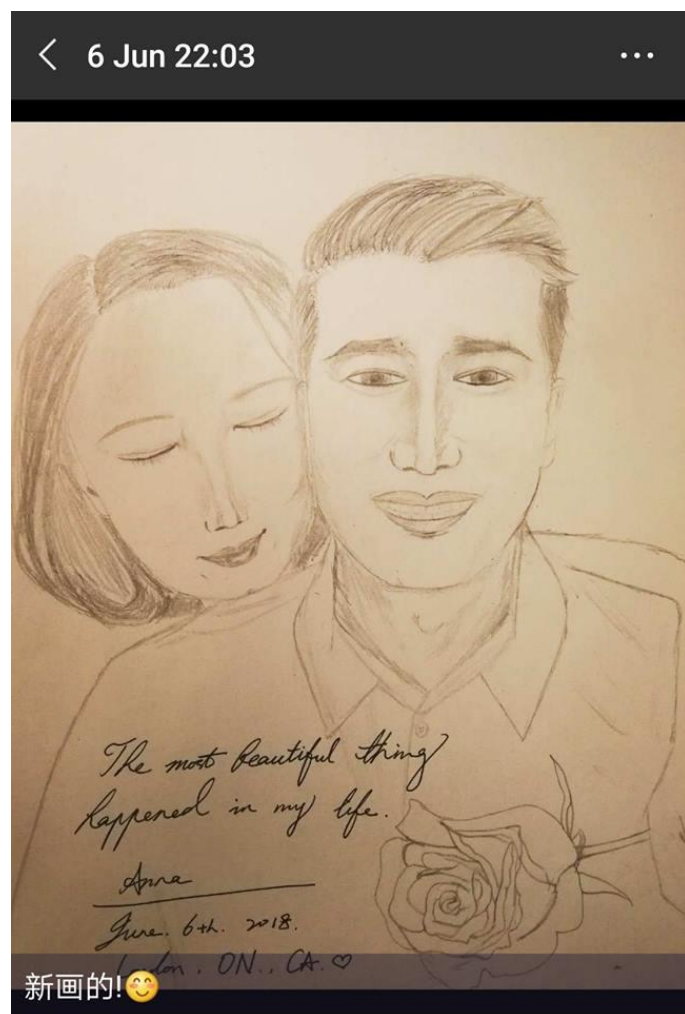


Figure 29. A WeChat Post on June 6th, 2018. The most beautiful thing.

a special sense of connection with him. He joined the trip I planned for myself on our second date. I gave up all tickets that I have bought for myself to get on his car and drive to Quebec City together. Four months later, we traveled to China to visit my family and friends. And, around Christmas time of the same year, we got married. I said that he was the most beautiful thing that have happened in my life (Figure

things, in order to understand my feelings and explore the ways to make myself feel better.

Posts on social media are extremely helpful for my self-reflection on emotions because they were my self-expression strongly related to my emotions at that moment. As an artistic person, I have plenty of art creation, including photography, drawing, poetry, decoration, etc., which have been used as objects to be reflected on in my self-reflection. This is because art has certain functions, which are remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth, and appreciation, according to Botton and Armstrong (2016). Except growth, which is a function more

33¹³). The most precious thing which comes with his love is that he makes me feel much more settled. It helped me to reconnect to my life in Canada. I was still homesick and hard to make progress in my study, but at least I got attached to somebody in this country and found a new direction in life.

I understand that I was lucky to find my husband here and this luck doesn't happen to every international student. However, self-reflection is something all international student can work on. My self-reflection under my supervisor's guidance was another important event which has made a big change in both of my life and study. As the time for writing the thesis proposal came, I confessed to my supervisor that my interest in my study had changed to international student's wellbeing, for it was a problem that I was facing. With my supervisor's support, I started this self-study. Starting to reflect on my own, for me, was a progress to reconnect to my study, others' studies, my life, others' life, my old interests, my past, feelings, thoughts and new findings. I have been trying to find meanings in my past life by making connections. This process makes me feel I am doing something which is for my needs, and meaningful for the field. Life is still rolling ahead, but at least it has a glancing direction now.

associated with viewing art works, which happened when I was doing this self-study through reviewing my previous artworks, for example, when I was reviewing Figure 9, I had an inappropriate feeling towards my dichotomous thinking about Chinese culture and Western culture represented in the drawing, as I have had a more multicultural experience in Canada. Figure 9, in this sense, helped me to be aware of my misunderstanding and, in fact, inspired me to have another drawing (Figure 34). The other functions are common in my art creation, that is, when I was creating art to express myself, what I was expressing can be feelings I wanted to remember

¹³ My translation of the text in this WeChat post: A new drawing.

Moreover, it made me feel more comfortable to be a CIS when I realized that I have never been less than myself, if anything, I improved a lot by having experience in Canada. I realized it during my trip to China for the first time. We know ourselves not only by self-consciousness reflection, but also through other people's reactions. When my friends and teachers were attracted by my stories and opinions regarding studying and living abroad, I felt I have earned priceless things, such as broader horizon, the inner strength to face challenges, independence, better skills to have conversations with different people, and so on. Thanks to tears in life as a CIS, I grew.

After I came back from China and started this self-study, I felt more comfortable to be called as an international student. I have visited the international office at university more often than ever for seeking for help or giving advice. At the same time, although I am still more interested to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, for I still have a strong interest in different cultures, not like before, I acknowledged, to be an international person doesn't mean I am not Chinese anymore. Instead of forcing myself to eat western food, listening to English songs and watching English movie all the time, I have finally crossed my mental fence and can walk into

(Figure 33); feelings I hope to possess (Figure 30); sorrows in life (Figure 27); feelings compensate my emotional status (Figure 32); understandings to myself (Figure 10); or feelings I wanted to appreciate (Figure 31). By asking which function and feeling are behind my art creation, my self-reflection on emotions become easier.

However, not everybody has an artistic and creative personality, so not everybody has their own art creations to be reflected on. Instead of reviewing one's own art creation, by tracing the feelings behind the art we are consuming, for example, feelings of chilling, energetic, romantic, minimalist, etc. in music, clothes design, home decors, or even small patterns on notebooks,

Chinese restaurants, put on Chinese songs and movies in my leisure time.

It has been a long time since I couldn't settle down and spend some time alone to accomplish a well coloured drawing until these recent months. Figure 34 is my first drawing after a that period ended. It is a colourful rose which represents my understanding of Canada's multicultural environment. From my experience in Canada, I have experienced different kinds of cultures, such as French heritage, British heritage, German heritage, Persian heritage, Chinese heritage, Japanese heritage, South-east Asian heritages, and so on. My life here reminds me of diversity of cultures and communications between them. Therefore, in my drawing, the different colours of petals embrace each other. At last, as unique individuals living in this international world, I think we are on the same boat to explore diverse universe.

blankets, mugs, and so on,
our self-reflection on
emotions can still be
facilitated.

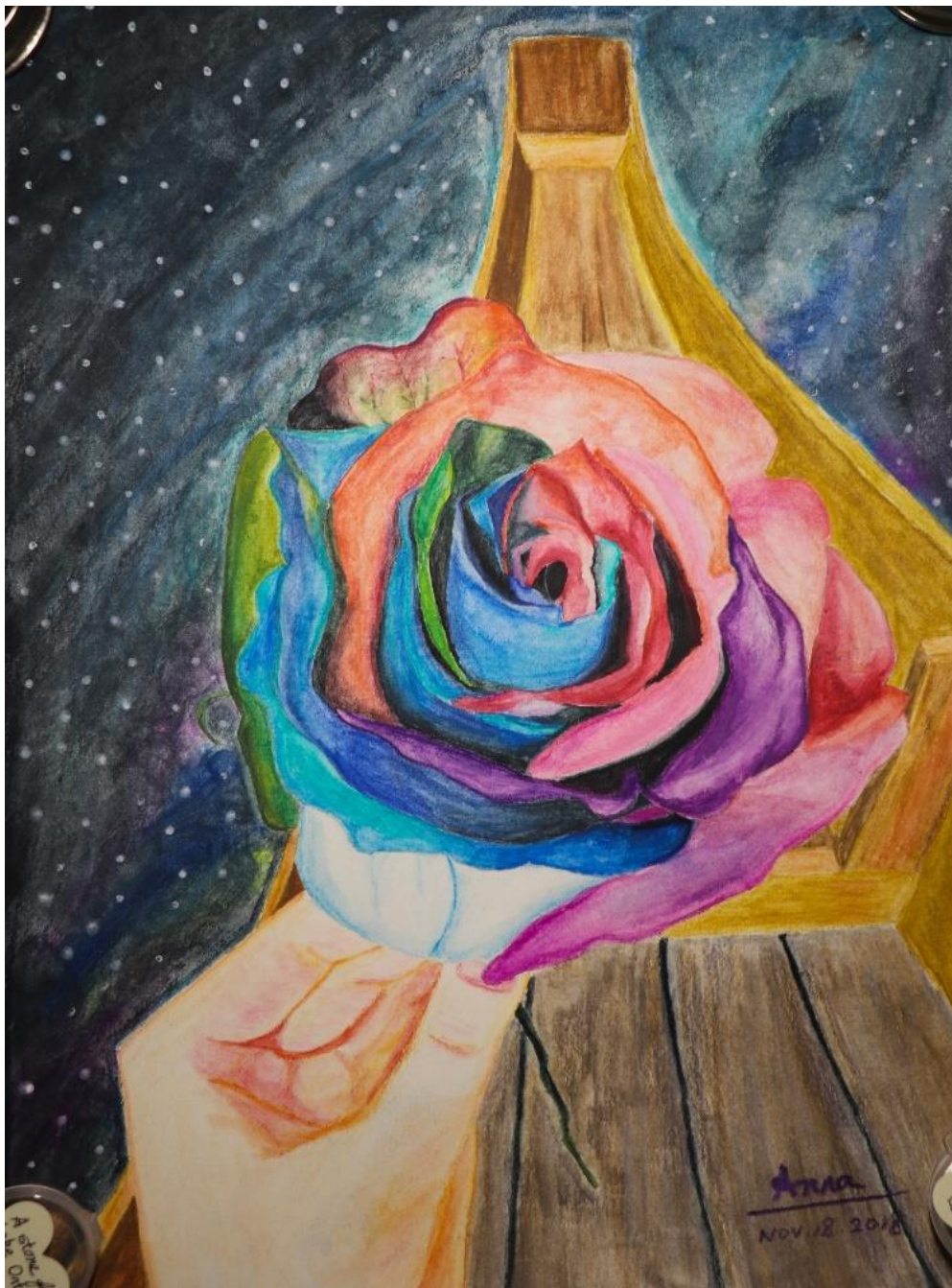


Figure 30. A Drawing of Mine. A rose of multicultural Canada.

Challenges in life never end. Since I am pregnant and the date to graduate comes closer and closer, I have been challenged to find a better balance between life and work, at the meantime I am still exploring my identity as a CIS. My life is still rolling ahead, just like yours. Every person has different life and different stories, this is just my way to reflect on my stories to make life better.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 Summarized Answers to Research Question

My story telling and self-reflection has helped me to gain a better understanding of my expectation and experience; as well as my changing identity as a CIS. Although the answers of this exploratory self study will keep open, in order to generalize some key points which have appeared in my narratives, in this section, I provide summarized answers based on my current studies to the research questions of this thesis.

5.1.1 From Expectation to Experience

My pre-departure expectation of studying abroad was like a fantasy which was started with my initial curiosity of exotic cultures and motivated by some artworks with feelings of calmness and elegance. Without realizing that the qualities of calmness and elegance, other than Britain or Canada, were what I was longing for, instead of spending more time doing research on what was it like to study and live abroad, I have chosen to prepare for studying abroad by reading literature works and creating artworks related to life abroad in Western countries, which represent the qualities desired by me. Therefore, the real image and potential challenges of studying in Canada had remained very unclear to me until I had to face them in person.

In Chapter 4, I have discussed the potential challenges that I had not been aware enough of before coming to Canada but had influenced my mental wellbeing until I was brave enough to face them. In brief, they include following:

1. The difficulty of making friends with other Chinese International Students and domestic students;
2. Higher expense of studying and living in Canada;

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3. The difficulty of keeping my personal hobbies and being authentic self;

In spite of these challenges and the professional knowledge that I gained in my program, my experience of studying in Canada gave me some happy surprises as well:

1. A better understanding of Canadian culture and better cross-cultural communication abilities;
2. A more intimate relation with nature;
3. A meaningful experience of self-reflection and an attempt of self-development in dealing with chaos;
4. Big bonus: a loving husband and a baby.

5.1.2 My Ongoing Changing Identity as a Chinese International Student

From pre-departure expectation to post-departure experience, my understanding of what it means to be a Chinese international student has changed a lot. At the beginning, I believed that to be international meant to be a “bridge” between Chinese and Western culture. In another word, international, for me, at that time, was a dimidiated cultural concept. Although it sounded so cool that it became my dream to be an international person, I have never thought about how to handle Chinese and International, these two features of the identity, well. In fact, even though I had never realized it, I have been confused about how to be a Chinese/Zhonghua Minzu in today’s changing world. This confusion has made it harder for me to be a CIS, that is, my attitude towards other CISs and domestic students was ambiguous. Then, when I came to Canada, my confusing identity as a CIS has increased my feeling of isolation as I regarded both Chinese and domestic as “others”. Moreover, as I felt international student has been a classification that underlying most activities I have had to

differentiate me from Canadians, with the already shaped feeling of loneliness, I felt frustrated and meaningless to be a CIS. Finally, things get better when I decided to face my frustration and reflect on my changing identity. The process of this self-reflection helped me to connect my current story with my history; connect me with the environment surrounding me. Therefore, it helped me to find my authentic self by combining the pieces of me that has fallen apart into integrated one piece.

5.2 Implications for Practice

In this section, I provide following suggestions to domestic and international students, instructors, international education agents, CISs' parents and international offices of universities.

1. I agree with Yi (2014)'s suggestion that it is important for international students to be aware of their identities. I suggest Chinese students who plan to study abroad to start to reflect on their international identity before leaving China, as my autobiographical study has shown an example that how a CIS's identity can be confused by personal fantasies; Chinese politics; expectations from parents, teachers and friends in pre-departure period, which can have negative influences to CISs' attitudes and behaviours towards Chinese and domestic communities in post-departure transition. Those Chinese students can do such a self-reflection by asking themselves questions such as: What motivates them to study abroad? What qualities are they thirsting for in their adventures of studying abroad? What factors have influenced their perspectives towards themselves as a CIS? As CISs' identities will keep changing in their expats' adventure, it is necessary to keep self-reflecting after leaving China. My self-study has shown a method of such a reflection, which is by reviewing my own posts on social medias and artworks. As mentioned in 4.4, for people who don't create arts on their own, it will be helpful for them to be aware of artworks that impressed them in daily life, in order to find out the qualities that they are representing or desiring.

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2. In addition to reflecting on their own identities, CISs should spend more time gathering reliable information about study and living in their designate countries. They should, especially, search for first-hand information, for example, tuition fees, on destinate universities' websites, instead of only asking their friends or agents for their second-hand information.
 3. Parents of CISs should gain a clearer understanding of CISs' possible cost of study and living abroad before application, as according to my own story, my parents have focused more on whether I could get any offer to study in Canada, rather than whether they could afford the expenses of study and living abroad.
 4. International education agents should care more about students' interests of study instead of their own commercial benefit. They should never promise their students to get at least one offer, and never write documents for their students. Instead, I recommend international education agents to assist students to reflect on their identities as international students, find out their passions of study, match the programs fit their interests best, and encourage students to write documents that represent themselves best.
 5. I suggest international offices of universities to hold pre-departure workshops in some big cities in China, such as Beijing and Shanghai, as Jean-huh (2015) and Romerhausen (2013) have suggested that pre-departure orientations and handbooks are helpful for CISs. Besides, international offices of universities can also set up online platforms for pre-departure international students to communicate with international officers, other international students and domestic students who would like to connect with students from other countries. By communicating with pre-departure CISs on the platforms, universities can be familiar with international students' pre-departure expectations.
 6. I recommend instructors and supervisors to provide students, including both international and domestic students, opportunities and guidance to reflect on

their ongoing changing identities in internationalized classrooms and this globalized world. This kind of self-reflection is important to domestic students as well, because internationalization is not only faced by international students, but also a factor impact everybody in an internationalized classroom. By encouraging domestic students to reflect on their international identities, it encourages domestic students to connect with international students in an international classroom where, not like before, there are voices from different countries. Moreover, having domestic students joining self-reflection can also reduce international students' feelings of being distinguished as outgroup members when asked to reflect on their own stories.

7. To reduce intergroup conflicts between domestic and international students, university instructors, staffs and domestic students should be more careful when using "international students" to address students from other countries. Instead of it, a new concept of "international students" can be described as students who share international interests, including those who are domestic students.

5.3 Implications for Research

This autobiographical study revealed the fact that my pre-departure identity has played an important role in my post-departure transition; however, as shown in my literature review, CISs' pre-departure stories have been hardly studied. Therefore, more research on international student's pre-departure stories should be done by future researchers who are eager to understand and support international students better. Besides, my personal story cannot represent CISs' story in general. More CISs' pre-departure and post-departure stories should be heard, so some common issues of CISs' can be possibly revealed in their story telling, in order to provide more helpful support to enhance CISs' mental well-being in general.

In addition, this autobiographical study has shown a method to explore self-identity

by drawing attention to posts on social medias, artworks and personal feelings. As argued by Funch (2013), it is hard for people to do self-reflection and understand one's feelings in busy daily life, this study shows a possible method for future researchers who are interested in this kind of autobiographical works.

5.4 Limitations

The biggest limitation of this research is related to its scope. Although this autobiographical study provides me with feasibilities of in-depth analysis, as every CIS's experience is unique, my story cannot generalize the story of all CISs. Also, my understandings and interpretations will be inevitably limited by my own experience and emotions at that moment of writing. Besides, it is impossible for me to remember everything happened in my life clearly; our memories over time fade, or take on new meaning. Moreover, decisions about what to include, and what to exclude are made by me, and therefore some experiences others might view as central to the study may have been excluded. Additionally, some stories in Chinese may not be translated in English precisely due to cultural difference and the limitation of language. As a result, some suggestions that I have given may not be applicable to CISs in general. Therefore, this study is a beginning; the conclusion of this study keeps open.

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