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## Learning Experiences in International Exchange Programs: Perspectives of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Canada

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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**

In this study, I explore the learning experiences of Chinese-origin undergraduate who completed an international exchange programs in Canada. Specifically, I use transformative learning theory and J.W. Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation model to examine how Chinese undergraduate students interpreted their learning experiences and how these learning experiences may have altered their perspectives and practices. I applied an interpretivist qualitative case study by collecting data from semi-structured interviews with six female Chinese-origin undergraduate students after the completion of their exchange program. The findings show that despite experiencing some challenges and acculturative stress, the participants generally rated their exchange opportunity as an excellent overall experience. The students reported transformative learning experiences, and generally adapted well to Canadian culture. This study concludes with wider implications for future exchange students, program developers, and policy makers in maximizing potential benefits of these international exchange programs in Canada.

**Keywords:** Learning experiences; International exchange programs; Chinese undergraduate students; Canadian HEIs

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

International exchange programs are increasingly vital for higher education institutions seeking to highlight their internationalization efforts. This study explores learning experiences of six Chinese exchange students in Canada. I conducted interviews with six participants who shared insights regarding critical learning opportunities, cultural observations, personal changes following the completion of the exchange, and overall reflections on their experiences. The findings suggest that although the participants all encountered gaps in their learning and some academic challenges during their exchange, they nevertheless enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to study in Canada. Their interviews provide further suggestions for future exchange students and program developers.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) is often described as activities that promote anything “international”, including international student recruitment, study abroad programs, international exchanges, and so forth (Knight, 2000, 2004, 2008). In many post-secondary institutions, international exchange programs are the flagship “international activities” — students are submerged into a new language and culture, thereby developing multi-linguicism and intercultural competences in a very short period of time. Hence, developing international exchange programs is a top priority for most institutions and one of the most effective ways in response to IHE (Atalar, 2000; Clinton, 2000).

Consequently, there is a need to better understand the learning experiences of international exchange students who complete these international exchange programs. Barnick (2006) defines exchange students as those who study away from their home university for “a period of study for one semester or a year, through a pre-arranged bilateral, or consortia agreement between their home university and the university where they plan to study” (p. 3). This study first explores the learning experiences of Chinese exchange students who completed exchange programs in Canada. It then analyses the sense making of learning experiences based on interviews of six participants. It concludes with insights for potential exchange students, program developers and policy makers. Overall, this study offers new insights into these

programs to ensure that these types of programs meet the needs of the students who are willing to join in.

## **1.1 Background**

China has been taking a massive move to internationalization since the late 1970s which was a significant turning point in China's modern history. After decades of seclusion, it sought to open up the doors and re-joined the world economy under the leadership of former President Deng Xiaoping. A key tenet of this strategy was pursuing internationalization. Since then, "studying abroad" has been seen as vital for Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) who want to highlight their internationalization efforts (Zha, 2011). Specific policies encourage this internationalization, such as "adapting China's higher education system to fulfill the internal demand to the global economy and the external obligation to be competitive on the global arena" (Zha, 2011) (p. 752). Combined with globalization pressure, HEIs in China actively encourage their students to participate in study abroad and exchange programs.

IHE in China, therefore, is fundamentally tied to the explosive growth of many students travelling abroad for further study or research. In 2018, the number of Chinese international students reached to 662,100, compared to 608,400 in 2017 (NBSC, 2018). Similarly, UNESCO (2017) also confirms the rapid growth of mainland Chinese students participating in international exchange programs has in recent decades, with 12,000 students sponsored in 2018 in terms of the data from the Ministry of Education

in China. The majority of Chinese students who study abroad attend English-language HEIs in Western countries.

A Canadian-specific report from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2016) notes that the benefits of IHE are reciprocal; increased numbers of international students studying in Canada have a positive influence on “Canada’s future prosperity, particularly in the areas of innovation, trade, human capital development and labor market” (p. 25). Due to these potential benefits, Canada welcomes international students from around the world. In 2018, Canada ranked as the fourth most popular higher education host destination following the United States, the United Kingdom, and China (CBIE, 2018). At the end of 2019, 642, 480 international students are studying in Canada, a significant increase from only 20,371 in 2008 (CBIE, 2012, 2020).

China was the top source country for international students studying in Canada for over a decade. While India exceeded China as the top country of origin for international students in 2018, China nevertheless remains firmly in second place of source countries. In 2019, 141,400 Chinese international students studied in Canada (CBIE, 2020), compared with 17,934 in 2010 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011). With the rapid and persistent increase of Chinese students in Canada, it becomes urgent to explore if they experience the qualifying education and undertake transformative learning.

As one of a few countries that has actively sought to re-build diplomatic relations with China, Canada has a long-term collaborative relationship with China —

particularly in the realm of education (Hayhoe, Pan & Zha, 2013). Joint projects include the former Canada-China Management Education Program (CCMEP), the former Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the former Canada-China University Linkage Program (CCULP). Thus, Canada has played a key role in China's opening up in education to the world. I was motivated by these findings to better understand the learning experiences Chinese undergraduate students studying in Canada through these exchange opportunities.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Educational theories generally posit sojourner learning experience as transformative, leading to significant improvements in language proficiency, learning methods, and mindset (Coleman, 2013). However, international students also experience significant challenges and cultural differences that can impact any transformative learning process. Chinese international students in particular, can experience challenges studying in Western countries due to the significant cultural differences (Jackson & Chen, 2018; Liang, 2003; Wu, 2013; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Consequently, it is important for qualitative studies to delve into the voices and learning experiences of Chinese international students studying in Canadian HEIs.

Current literature reveals that Chinese international students in Canadian HEIs report similar access challenges, including unfamiliarity with the Canadian learning context, insufficient English language proficiency, and the incompatible learning methods acquired from their past education in China (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012; Hu,

2010; Liang, 2003; Liu, 2016; Zhang, 2018). Such difficulties challenge students' transformative learning. However, a reoccurring theme in existing scholarship is that Chinese international students effectively apply coping strategies to overcome these difficulties, which ultimately supports the end process goal of transformative learning (Fedoruk, 2018; Liu, 2016). Importantly, Chinese learners serve as complex subjects (Watkins & Biggs, 1996), who cannot be simply stereotyped in brief terms. Thus, I build upon previous research on Chinese international students, to more specifically consider the experiences of Chinese international exchange students. This study focuses specifically on exchange programs in Canada to determine how Chinese international students derived meaning from their learning experiences, and how their perspectives and practices may have been altered.

Although previous studies have considered sojourner experiences of Chinese international students pursuing degrees in Canada (e.g., Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012; Huang & Cowden, 2009; Hu, 2010; Liang, 2003; Liu, 2016; Zhang & Zhou, 2010; Zhang, 2018), there is limited research on the perspectives of exchange students under the same context. Consequently, few studies have explored the learning experiences of this specific group. My research aims to better understand these learning experiences from Chinese students who attended international exchange programs in Canada.

### **1.3 Research Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the learning experiences of undergraduate students from China who participated in exchange programs in Canada.

Specifically, it considers their interpretation of such learning experiences. This study employs the research tradition of an interpretivist case study. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews; each participant self-identified as an undergraduate exchange student from China on exchange. All participants had completed their international exchange programs in Canadian HEIs at the time of the interviews.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Given the identified gaps earlier, I investigated the following research questions in this thesis:

1. What learning experiences did undergraduate students from China have in their exchange programs in Canada?
2. How did Chinese undergraduate students interpret such learning experiences?
3. How may these learning experiences have altered the perspectives and practices of undergraduate students from China?

#### **1.5 Significance**

The significance of conducting this research study is threefold. First, this research fills an important research gap by studying the learning experiences of Chinese international students in Canada, a particular host country for undergraduate exchange students. My study references widely researched fields such as Chinese international students' academic learning or language acquisition in a foreign milieu; however, it extends these theories to transformative learning theory and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008)

acculturation theory through the participants' transformative learning and acculturation process. Second, the participants who participated in this study had already completed their exchange programs. The ensuing interviews gave students an opportunity to reflect on their exchange experiences, enabling this study to analyze their valuable insights. Third, the participants' responses serve as a valuable asset for several audiences. Not only can it help potential exchange students better understand the Canadian education context, but the participants' experiences can benefit international exchange program developers and policymakers in improving the communications and services that potential exchange students receive before, during, and after their exchange.

### **1.6 Positioning Myself as A Researcher**

Creswell (2008) argues that a researcher's personal experiences and values closely relate to the research process, from data collection to data analysis, and even extending to the interpretation section. Thus, I must admit that my previous experience has shaped the outset of this study. I wanted to explore the learning experiences of college students on exchange because I was similarly given this opportunity as an undergraduate student at a Chinese HEI. Although I had the opportunity to exchange to Canada in my third year of university, I ultimately did not join in the exchange because I worried about my academic success. However, this sparked my interests in better understanding the learning experiences of undergraduate students who do take part in and complete these exchanges.



Presently, I am a young Chinese educator undertaking graduate studies at a Canadian HEI. This too has influenced many aspects of this research, such as selecting research questions, participant selection, and data analysis. My nationality, age, gender, educational background, and interest in exchange programs all served as entryways to establish rapport with my participants. Being an insider was beneficial in reassuring participants, encouraging them to share stories freely, and also more readily identifying some hidden information.

I recognize that my experiences and perspectives inevitably bring bias to this research. Given my own learning experiences in Canada, I personally understood the gaps of learning by contrasting the contexts of China and Canada because I also experienced academic challenges. In an interpretivist project, especially, which has its base in existential phenomenon of interest, researchers “must be fully aware of their personal biases and not let such biases interfere with their ability to present a fair portrayal of the phenomenon” (Bhattacharjee, 2012). To manage my bias, I always reminded myself to avoid contributing data during the entire research process. A further bias surrounds the rapport with my participants. At time, respondents “may not give a detailed answer especially if they feel the researcher knows what they mean” (Bilecen, 2013, p. 330). Therefore, I asked my participants to elaborate all responses to make certain that their answers were stated — rather than implied — to ensure the data richness.

## **1.7 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the research background and problem statement. It then describes the research purpose, research questions, the significance of the study, and the researcher's positioning. Chapter 2 summarizes relevant literature on recent IHE in Canada and China, and Chinese international students' learning experiences in Canada. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical frameworks applied to the study, including Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory. Chapter 4 details the research design, the participant selection, and the recruitment process. It also outlines data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Finally, it describes the validity and limitations of the study. Chapter 5 presents findings from semi-structured interviews. The discussion in Chapter 6 relates the findings collected from semi-interviews to my research questions, relevant literature, and the two stated frameworks (TLT and Acculturation). Chapter 7 concludes with a summary of this study, implications and recommendations for future exchange students, program developers, and policy makers. It also discusses the future directions. I conclude with personal thoughts and final observations.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2 Literature Review**

Given that my study is under the context of IHE in Canada and in China, I start this chapter by reviewing the recent background of IHE in both countries, respectively. Since my topic focuses on the learning experiences of Chinese international students in Canadian HEIs, I paid special attention to literature on this specific group. Following a general literature review, I look at the previous learning experiences Chinese international students accumulated in China and their language preparedness. I conclude this Chapter with the gaps and challenges of learning Chinese students experienced while studying in Canada.

Although there are extensive studies centering on Chinese international students in Canada, most focus on the domain of those pursuing full-length degree programs. Given the emphasis of international exchange programs in IHE strategies in both China and Canada, the learning experiences of exchange students in a foreign culture is an under-investigated research field. My study closes this research gap by studying the learning experiences of Chinese international students who completed an exchange program in Canadian HEIs.

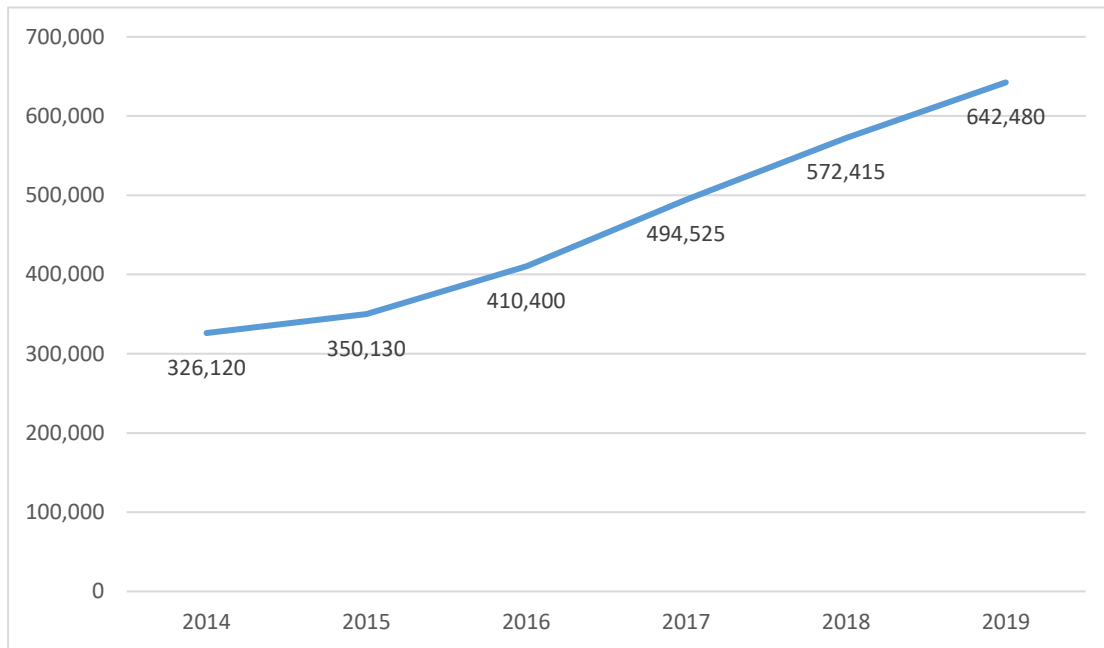
#### **2.1 Recent Internationalization of Higher Education in Canada**

IHE covers a broad scope of domains and educational activities across nations (Knight, 2000, 2004, 2008). This leads to confusion about IHE and how it permeates in everyday lives (Guo et al, 2010). Knight (2004) proposes the following definition:

Internationalization is a term that is being used more and more to discuss the international dimension of higher education, more widely, postsecondary education... it means a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers, international linkages, partnership, and projects; and new, international academic program and research initiatives (p. 6)

In line with Knight, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) (2014) defines IHE in accordance with the following five educational practices: “experiences of international mobility, international teaching, international research partnerships, the internationalization of curriculum, and the preparation of educators and leaders for other locations of educational practices” (p. 2). Consistent with these practice, my study focuses on the learning experiences of Chinese international students who complete Canadian curriculum during an international exchange opportunity.

Discussions about culture and identity must be situated within the learner’s context (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Canada is internationally regarded as a diverse country, which makes it an ideal setting for international students. Guo et al. (2010) found that Canada has sent and received the most international students since 1948. As figure 1 shows below, an increasing number of international students have chosen to undertake higher education in Canada (CBIE, 2020). In 2019, 642,480 international students studied in Canada, representing a 13% increase compared to 2018 and a 49% increase between 2014 and 2019.



*Figure 1.* International students in Canada by year (all levels of study) (CBIE, 2020).

Canada has prioritized the internationalization of education. In a 2014 survey by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), 95% of Canadian universities identified internationalization as part of their strategic planning and 82% identified it as a top five priority. Similarly, Larsen (2015) also found that the majority of Canadian HEIs view internationalization as a high priority. Besides, identified by 45% of Canadian HEIs, they put undergraduate student recruitment as the most common top priority for internationalization. The survey also found that China is a top focus in almost all internationalization activities (AUCC, 2014).

The country of origin for international students in Canada has changed over time. According to Guo et al. (2010), “the region of origin of international students were more evenly distributed than today” (p. 76). International students studying in Canada are from Asia, Europe, Latin America and other regions in North America.

However, over time, Asian students in Canada have outnumbered international students from other regions (CBIE, 2018). China was in the top source of international students in Canada until 2018, when India emerged as the top source. Despite this, China remains firmly in the second place.

Integrating international dimensions in classroom learning and teaching has been a core feature in many Canadian universities' internationalization efforts. According to ACDE's survey in 2014, international teaching is a priority by 69% of Canadian universities, an increase from 53% in a 2006 survey. Of universities that view integration as a formal initiative: 82% coordinated activities to develop students' international perspectives; 53% integrated international students' opinions into classroom learning; 44% provided faculty members with professional trainings to better integrate international dimensions into their teaching. ACDE (2014) emphasizes that internationalization in Canadian HEIs seeks to promote multicultural educational practices of students, educators, and school leaders.

## **2.2 Recent Internationalization of Higher Education in China**

Since China's economic expansion the late 1970s, the country has remained active in pursuing IHE (Yang, 2002, 2014). Since 1977, the curriculum and educational theories have absorbed advanced elements from Western developed countries (including, but not limited to the U.S., the U.K., and Canada) (Deng, 2011). The Chinese government has also pursued a series of educational reforms. Instructor-centred pedagogy is slowly shifting to student-centred approach with a similar shift from knowledge transmission

to knowledge construction (Liu & Fang, 2009). Due to continuous contact with international communities, internationalization is present in Chinese classrooms. This includes materials such as the introduction of foreign-language textbooks and courses, which is regarded as one of five major achievements in IHE in China (Zhang & Liu, 2017).

Issued in 1993 by the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CCPCC) and State Council, *The Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China* identified the importance of IHE in China (Wang, 2014). The Outline states specific strategies in achieving the goals, including:

Promoting international academic exchange and cooperation; permitting cooperation between Chinese and foreign universities in running institutions; encouraging Chinese students to study overseas and to contribute to the modernization process in China either by returning to China or by other means; streamlining the admission process to Chinese universities for foreign students; promoting teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) (Wang, 2014, pp. 13-14)

Since enacting this document, a large number of Chinese students have pursued their studies in foreign countries, thereby increasing China's participation in the internationalization process. The market-driven neoliberal Western approach of the 1990s encouraged the Chinese government to implement policies encouraging students to take international education. Some Chinese families continue to send even their young children to English-speaking countries to receive a better higher education.

These decisions are aimed at accumulating social capital, which may promote the social status of the family.

In addition to encouraging overseas studies, the Chinese government has encouraged IHE through educational reforms. Presently, China expands significant effort to increase their national competitiveness and global power. This includes “attracting and utilizing a large number of talented people from abroad. Also, the concept and quality of human capital need to be internationalized because it can demonstrate that the country has the capacity to cultivate homegrown talent to compete overseas” (Wang, 2012, p. 2). These circumstances further reinforce the importance of IHE in China.

### **2.3 Chinese Students’ Learning Experiences in Canada**

With an increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, the learning experiences of these Chinese students is gaining prevalent attention in the field of international education. Regarding the purpose of this research, I focus specifically on the learning experiences of Chinese international students studying in Canada.

In what follows, I present four strands of previous studies to help me to examine my research questions. The first strand of literature identifies Chinese international students’ previous learning experiences accumulated in their home country. Previous academic experiences deserve considerable attention because they help contextualize the educational system differences between China and Canada, which lead to a deeper comprehension of exchange students’ learning experiences in Canada. The second



strand of literature focuses on language preparedness of Chinese learners. Although Chinese learners are diverse within their individual English language proficiency, language preparedness as a whole is important in comprehending the language barriers that international students experienced in Canada. The third and fourth strand examine the learning experiences of Chinese international students studying in Canadian HEIs. The third strand focuses on cultural differences and cultural adaption within the context of academic learning, while the fourth strand considers academic challenges and coping strategies.

### **2.3.1 Previous Learning Experiences Accumulated in China**

Previous academic experiences are integral in understanding the holistic learning experiences of studying in a new culture (Windle et al., 2008). Much of the relevant literature adopts a historical perspective in interpreting contemporary Chinese education and Chinese students (Hayhoe & Bastid, 1987; Hayhoe, 1992; Hartnett, 1999; Ng et al., 2002). Although Chinese HEIs have internationalized the curriculum content and pedagogical practices in recent years, traditional Chinese pedagogical approaches continue to impact Chinese students' academic experiences in both domestic and overseas studies.

Scholars have collectively linked the behavior of Chinese students to Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) (Chen, 1990; Hu, 2002; Oxford, 1995), persists as a fundamental influence on Chinese people's viewpoints and behaviors. Confucianism, as a complex and multi-faceted Chinese philosophy, has had a long-lasting impact on Chinese education (Li, 2009). That is to say, it plays a dominant role in Chinese higher

education, not only influencing its curriculum and pedagogy, but also its governance, mission and vision (Li & Hayhoe, 2012). Existing studies on CHC in education find that Chinese students are basically impacted by such CHC beliefs including effortful learning (Kuxin), reflective learning (Yongxin), and humble learning (Xuxin) (Wang & Byram, 2011).

CHC views effortful learning as a priority and a means to success. Hard work and perseverance are viewed as core elements that assist people in succeeding, rather than an individual's specific ability (Thakkar, 2011). Relevant studies on ethnic groups in multi-cultural learning environments find that Chinese students view hard work as a priority (Hau & Salili, 1991; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Yu & Yang, 1994). Employing a qualitative design, Hu (2010) conducted semi-structured interviews with six faculty members in Science and Engineering disciplines at University of British Columbia (UBC). Participant faculty members in Hu's research had all supervised or co-supervised Chinese graduate students, and reached a consensus in these interviews that Chinese graduate students are hard-working and tend to be well prepared for academic learning.

Reflective learning highlights the importance of critical reflection. In education, CHC requires students to read texts and reflect on them, instead of simply memorizing and reciting. CHC is related to continuous effort to foster independence of mind; this tenet encourages individuals to doubt both their previous own ideas as well as the ideas of others. Proposed by Confucius, "the teacher does not always have to be more knowledgeable than the students; and the students are not necessarily always less

learned than the teacher”. In spite of the importance of reflective thinking in CHC, Chinese students often fail to give it due attention in contemporary education. Many Chinese students simply memorize texts and recite essays in order to get high exam scores (Liang, 2003). This is contrary to Confucius’ value. Similarly, Guo and O’Sullivan (2012), through a hermeneutic case study, examined how Chinese students conceptualized critical thinking in a Canadian international graduate program. They offered insights into criticality as a challenging concept for Chinese students. Their in-depth interviews with Chinese graduate students who enrolled in an international student program at Brock University, found that Chinese students receive few opportunities to think critically in China. This makes critical thinking a challenging concept for some Chinese students during study abroad opportunities.

Humble learning is another salient feature in Chinese education that is influenced by CHC. As Confucius’ Analects goes, “When three are walking together, I am sure to find teachers among them. I will select their good qualities and follow them, abandon their bad qualities and avoid them.” Impacted by harmony, the hegemonic social value in China, many Chinese students sense the humble learning as a contradiction to the Western tradition of questioning (Guo & O’Sullivan, 2012). Humble learning reinforces a hierarchical form of learning, also known as teacher-centred learning, in which students regard instructors as experts. Consequently, students take notes of what instructors say rather than engage in dialogue with them. Chinese learners conceive this as behaving modestly in seeking knowledge. It is a

practice that entails respect, while questioning or disagreeing with teachers' opinions is regarded as antithetical to humble learning (Rawcliffe, 2016).

Academic research focusing on teacher-centred learning mode provides a different stance. Jin & Cortazzi (2006) found that Chinese teachers and students often form a relationship similar to an extended family in which the teacher who is regarded as an authoritative parent with absolute authority and responsibility for students' moral improvement. They argued that such relationships decrease Chinese students' willingness to participate in classes. In line with Jin & Cortazzi, Zhao (2014) agrees that teacher-centred learning promotes obedience and compliance. To this end, Huang and Cowden (2009) contend that Chinese students are frequently ignored in class when North American instructors use student-centred approaches. When instructors in North American HEIs lack intercultural knowledge and do not include Chinese students in the class, Chinese students report feeling devalued and that their favored learning strategies are dismissed.

### **2.3.2 Language Preparedness of Learners in China**

As a medium of interacting with Western countries, English is regarded highly by Chinese people. Pressures of globalization have further popularized English language instruction in China (Hu, 2001). At the beginning of this decade, there were about 400 million English learners in China (Chinarealtime, 2013); this approximates to the entire global population of native English speakers (Seargeant, 2012). Two 2001 policies support English education. One policy mandated English-language instruction as compulsory from Grade 3 onwards in elementary schools, beginning in the fall of 2002

(MOE, 2001). The second policy regulated that the proportion of tertiary courses conducted in English or other foreign languages to 5% - 10% within three years since the enforcement of the policy (MOE, 2001). Such policies have raised both public and institutional profile of English language teaching and learning.

English learning and teaching in China is often criticized for a number of limitations. For one, English teaching at secondary education level tends to focus on exam-oriented pedagogy, which stresses high scores other than knowledge application (Lam, 2002; Zhang & Zeegers, 2010). This type of pedagogy can create language imbalance, in which Chinese students are likely to be advanced in reading and writing, with underdeveloped skills in speaking and listening (Liao & Wei, 2014). Although there have been some efforts to increase the pragmatic aim of learning English, the current examination system remains unchanged (Gu, 2012). English learning instruction in China remains focusing on examining students' knowledge of textbooks. Since students learning English in China with limited abilities to practice their conversational speaking, students often lack experience communicating in English. This contributes to insufficient English language preparedness, which can challenge Chinese international students while studying overseas.

### **2.3.3 Gaps of Learning Experienced in Canada**

Scholars have identified several learning gaps by contrasting the context in Canada and China, particularly for Chinese international students studying in Canada (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2010; Huang & Cowden, 2009; Hu, 2010; Jiao, 2006; Liang, 2003; Li et al., 2012; Windle et al., 2008; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Existing literature finds two

particular reasons for this gap: different instructional strategies and different educational values.

In view of Chinese students' learning experiences, gaps on instructional strategies between China and Canada has been a frequently debated issue. Applying a qualitative case study approach, Liang (2003) collected in-depth data from 37 graduate students who were all from Mainland China studying at University of Calgary and asked them to consider the main features of their academic adaption. Liang illustrated that specific differences exist, such as different ways of designing and conducting classes, and different methods of achievement assessment. Corroborated by her participants, Liang also found that there are discrepancies in the course load between China and Canada. Comprised of papers, projects and presentations, incorporating abundant reading materials, the course load in Canadian HEIs is much heavier than in China. This contributes to differences in assessment systems. Whereas the Chinese education system prioritizes grades, thereby overemphasizing knowledge of texts in assessment strategies, Liang found that Canadian educational system tends to use a formative assessment system. Formative assessment strategies include multiple ways to evaluate students' performance, including papers, presentations, projects, texts, and so forth. Finally, Liang offered insights into Chinese students' preference for evaluation, which was a combination of Chinese and Canadian assessment systems.

These findings were mirrored by Jiao (2006)'s Canadian-specific research on exploring the reasons for Chinese student ethnic groupings. While Chinese international students have experienced plentiful assessment differences in Canadian

HEIs, their attitudes towards the Canadian assessment system were generally positive. Jiao's special consideration to different assessment systems found that a better combination of both assessment strategies would better support students' development and produce fairer achievement scores.

In a similar vein, Windle et al. (2008) elaborated on learning gaps caused by the different pedagogies in these two countries. Recognizing China as a country that predominantly employs instructor-centred pedagogy, the researchers found that "one recurring theme was participants' tendency to accept personal responsibility in situations where they encountered difficulties that resulted in their being excluded from discourses" (p. 78). Chinese students can have difficulty participating in classroom conversations and debates —a common Canadian instructional strategy. Huang and Cowden's (2009) arguments, echoing with those of Liang (2003) and Windle et al. (2008), suggested that group work and active student participation are an integral part of student-centred pedagogy in North American classrooms, but are significantly less common features of instructor-centred Chinese classrooms. Based on a mixed-method collection of Chinese international students at the University of Windsor, Zhang and Zhou (2010) further concluded that "group work is the most frequently mentioned differences they (participants) experienced" (pp. 53-54). Chinese students' silence in class participation is regarded as less contributive, which can negatively impact their instructor's evaluation of their achievement. Similarly, Huang and Cowden (2009) found that North American instructors often have insufficient knowledge to involve either Chinese cultural elements or Chinese students in the classroom. This can devalue

the learning experiences that students previously accumulated in China. Wu (2018) similarly discussed this increasing learning gap. Specifically, she identified the student-centred pedagogy and group work — meant to encourage critical thinking in Western classrooms — as overly benefiting domestic students to the detriment and dissatisfaction of Chinese international students.

Research on the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students completing a Master of Education degree in an international student program (ISP) at Brock University also considered the different instructional strategies in both countries. Analyzing data from nine Chinese students in this ISP cohort, Li, Dipetta, and Woloshyn (2012) found that their participants experienced learning gaps due to differences between Chinese and Canadian education systems. Although participants generally appreciated Canadian instructional strategies, including the student-centred pedagogy and the smaller class size, they were not without criticism. Li, Dipetta, and Woloshyn (2012) further discussed the appropriateness of Chinese instructional strategies for Chinese international students.

Learning gaps also occur at the level of educational values, which is rooted in the domain of cultural differences. A conspicuous gap relates to the instructor-student relationship, which is closely connected to cultural background. Liang (2003) argued that both education systems have different teacher-student relationships. In China, instructors are deemed as the authorities who cannot be challenged in class; conversely, students are encouraged to challenge their instructors in Canada. Hu's (2010) qualitative study makes a similar argument about faculty perceptions of Chinese



students' academic access in Canadian HEIs. Specifically, Hu found that Chinese students are reserved in class and less willing to express opinion. This stems from CHC, in which Chinese students learn to value obedience and politeness in teacher-student relationship; within this framework, debating instructors is both aggressive and disrespectful. Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) found that their participants felt similarly about classroom debates, and generally believed that debates with others, especially with professors, are disrespectful and inappropriate.

These feelings can make Chinese students afraid to express themselves freely or make mistakes. For instance, generally, Chinese international students — especially those who are new to North American culture — generally consider that it is shameful to admit ignorance (Hu, 2010). Consequently, students do not like to say “no”, especially with a strong academic background, because they want to keep face in front of the public. Students coming from collectivistic culture show more sensitive reactions toward the judgments of their peers and instructors (Chiu et al., 2016). Concerned about the potential judgments and loss of face, Chinese students show reluctance to speak up in class. Conversely, Canadian educational values emphasize the importance of questioning and debates. In the Canadian context, these activities demonstrate honesty and possibly a desire to learn (Hu, 2010).

Differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures are worth mentioning with regards to educational values in China and Canada, respectively. “In collectivistic cultures, compliance to the group norm is seen as a desirable quality” (Lee & Ciftci, 2014, p. 99). As a core philosophical concept in collectivistic culture, harmony

is practiced deeply both inside and outside of the classroom in China. Consequently, Chinese students are used to ridding themselves of strong thoughts in order to prioritize group harmony, thereby behaving uncritically in class discussion. Canadian education, on the contrary, is an individualistic culture that see students as unique individuals. Consequently, students in Canadian HEIs are encouraged to freely express and listen to ideas without judgments.

#### **2.3.4 Challenges of Learning Experienced in Canada**

Academic studies on international students' academic learning pay considerable attention to challenges they experience in international contexts. International students encounter more challenges on campus than their domestic peers (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Zheng & Berry, 1991). Scholars have collectively regarded English language proficiency and cultural differences as key challenges for Chinese students adapting to a Canadian learning context (Guo & O'Sullivan, 2012; Hu, 2010; Jiao, 2006; Liang, 2003; Liu, 2016; Xue, 2018; Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

Language learning is a significant challenge for international students who learn English as a second language in foreign HEIs (CBIE, 2009, 2013). Numerous studies on Chinese international students identify a language barrier as a major challenge for Chinese students in academic settings. Even when Chinese students have achieved the required scores on standardized English tests (such as the IELTS) to enter Canadian HEIs, language barriers persist; consequently, students often need to continue working hard to improve their English proficiency (Coward, 2014; Johnson, 2008).

Language proficiency is a frequently debated issue that affects how Chinese international students adapt to Canada. Liang (2003) found that Chinese students in her study struggled with listening and oral communication in English, but found it easier in reading English texts. Hu (2010) echoes Liang's (2003) perspective, finding that a lack of practical English use makes it harder for Chinese international students to master presentations, in-class discussions, and group work. Additionally, Hu (2010) points out that limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with academic English writing including the grammar, format, and plagiarisms are significant language challenges for Chinese students as well. Zhang and Zhou's (2010) research furthers this argument. They contend that Chinese international students have difficulty with oral communication and writing in English. Interestingly, even some of their participants with a strong background in international education continued to view communication with instructors and peers as an obstacle. Building on both quantitative and qualitative data, Liu (2016) explored the learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in a Canadian HEI. This study concluded that Chinese students have challenges in reading and writing in English efficiently, as well as in oral communication. Overall, Zhang (2018) contends that English language proficiency is a persistent challenge for Chinese students throughout their learning abroad.

Even though language barriers are commonly described as the key challenge for Chinese students integrating to a Canadian community, cultural differences also contribute (Zhang & Zhou, 2010). As a consequence of the significant disparity between the CHC and the Western culture, Chinese students experience many cultural

challenges (Yan & Berliner, 2013). As described above, Chinese international students have experienced different instructional strategies and educational values in Canadian HEIs. Notably, although most Chinese international students appreciate Canadian culture and ways of learning (Jiao, 2006; Liang, 2003; Windle et al., 2008), students nevertheless experience challenges stemming from adapting to a new culture and education system. For instance, Guo and O’Sullivan (2012) affirmed that most Chinese students whose education was heavily influenced by CHC lack experience with philosophical and pedagogic traditions of critical thinking. Different cultures and instructional strategies restrain Chinese students’ development of criticality. Zhou et al. (2017) argue that unfamiliarity with the Canadian educational context and values, can make Chinese students feel overwhelmed in interactive classes, thereby limiting their class engagement.

Although these perspectives are well-substantiated in the literature, there are notable criticisms. Undeniably, impacted by CHC, some Chinese international students — impacted by the influence of CHC in their previous institution — are used to teacher-centred and lecture-based pedagogy. This can make them feel uncomfortable and stressed in interactive classes. Nevertheless, stereotyping Chinese students with certain views is problematic. Pervasive belief in “Chinese students as passive recipients” fails to consider the complexity of Chinese students (Grimshaw, 2007; Huang & Cowden, 2009; Jin & Cortazzi, 1995; Wu, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Chinese students may indeed act more “cognitive-centred” (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 744) in comparison to their peers from Western culture. However, Chinese international students cannot be described as

less engaged groups simply because they prefer operating in a receptive mode (Grimshaw, 2007). Additionally, Huang & Cowden (2009) found that professors apply a North American pedagogy that excludes Chinese international students unintentionally and can restrict their opportunities. Scholars including Hu (2003), Hayhoe and Mundy (2008), and Wu (2018), observe that a significant portion of Chinese international students are from developed regions and wealthier families that are conversant with Western learning culture and practices.

International students experiencing challenges during the process of cultural adaptation are subject to acculturation and acculturative stress. Acculturation is a “dual process of cultural and psychological that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Acculturative stress accompanies with individual efforts to adapt to the host culture (Berry et al., 1987); in this case, the two terms are used interchangeably. Berry (1997) argues that the acculturation includes handling a serious of challenges; if the individual has adequate coping strategies to overcome stressors, their acculturation will be relatively smooth (Berry, 2006). Research has explored international students’ acculturation in a North American context (e.g. Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Liang, 2003; Xue, 2018; Yang et al., 2006). Acculturation extends to academics as “the dynamic adaptation processes of linguistically and culturally diverse students engaging with the academic study cultures” (Cheng & Fox, 2008, p. 309). Language barriers and cultural differences are the two overarching stressors that Chinese international students face in the process of academic acculturation.

The academic acculturation experiences of Chinese international students are often marked by frustration, isolation, and even withdrawal. The stressors of language barriers combined with cultural differences constrain Chinese students' communication with instructors and local peers. In a narrative inquiry with Chinese international students who withdrew from doctoral studies in Canadian HEIs, Gao (2019) identified language barriers and cultural differences work as critical challenges for Chinese students. Although all the participants possessed sufficient English language proficiency in academic learning, they nevertheless experience challenge with cultural communication elements. Thus, the language barrier is a salient stress among all acculturative stresses faced by international students, because it relates to other stresses in both academic and non-academic aspects (Chen, 1999).

As previously noted, exchange students from China in Canadian HEIs are much less studied in comparison to Chinese students who pursue degrees in Canadian HEIs. Such a gap invites critical exploration on this specific group of learners. Although exchange students may share some similarities with general international students, important differences exist. My research attempts to better understand learning experiences in international exchange programs from the perspectives of Chinese undergraduate students studying in Canada. To this end, I further explore how exchange students perceive their learning experiences, and how these learning experiences may have altered their perspectives and practices.

## **Chapter 3**

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theories that guide my research study are transformative learning theory (TLT) and acculturation theory, drawing on the contribution of Berry (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008). In combining these two theories, I gain valuable conceptual insights in understanding exchange students' learning experiences in Canadian HEIs including transformative perspectives and practices upon exchange completed. In this chapter, I describe TLT and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory, with an emphasis on the connections between these two frameworks and my own study. TLT sees challenges as catalysts for change; it also emphasizes the importance of dialogue and the essentiality of critical reflection in transformative learning. Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory also acts as a useful lens. Specifically, I describe the main concepts and factors affecting acculturation to justify the value of this framework in guiding my research.

#### **3.1 Transformative Learning Theory**

TLT provides a way to understand the transformations of perspectives and practices within and across international learning experiences. One of my research questions ask how learning experiences may have altered the perspectives and practices of Chinese students in Canada; this is directly related to TLT. Students who participate in exchange programs not only gain knowledge, but also gain new experiences. This "gaining" process can change their established perspectives and practices, particularly when individuals critically reflect on their new experiences. That is the reason why

transformative learning is different from simple learning. It results in a fundamental change in individuals' worldviews and practices as a consequence of shifting from available information to reflective learning experiences that bring about new emancipation. TLT informs how most people create meaning for their experience. In this regard, TLT helps people develop a sense of and learn from life experiences.

First proposed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s, TLT has continually expanded over the last three decades in the field of adult education (E.W. Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Initial connection between TLT and international experience was proposed by E.W. Taylor (1994). Specifically, Taylor (1994) found that adults gained intercultural competence as they experienced a different culture, comprehended that culture, and then integrated the new culture with their previous perspectives. Lyon (2001) holistically applies TLT to explore American scholars' overseas experiences from leaving their home country, adjusting to another cultures, and then re-entering their home country. Both Taylor (1994) and Lyon (2001) agree with Mezirow's articulation of TLT. Consequently, TLT helps explain how the research participants I interviewed interpreted their international learning experiences and rebuilt their perspectives and practices. Benefiting from previous scholars' interpretations of TLT within an international experience, I employ this valuable scholarship to my own study on Chinese exchange students' sojourner experiences.

### **3.1.1 Disorienting Dilemmas as Catalysts for Transformative Learning**

Disorienting dilemmas, or trigger events, which may occur at various points while studying abroad in a foreign country, are regarded as catalysts for learning and change



(Lyon, 2002; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 1994). Taylor (1989) defines disorienting dilemmas or trigger events as, “Incidents or experiences that disturb the individual’s current view of reality” (p. 227). He further explained that disorienting dilemmas are events that require attention and cause individuals to stop and reflect. Mezirow (1990) further states that, “Perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma” (p. 3). Lyon (2002) highlights the links between TLT and cross-cultural adaptation, examining the period of time the participants spend abroad through the lens of transformative learning. He found that participants experience various forms of culture shock which can function as trigger events for transformation to occur. In my research, a transformative learning approach invites a nuanced exploration of how Chinese students integrate to a brand new Canadian culture. Language barriers and cultural differences are two main reasons that facilitate specific disorienting dilemmas. Linking the findings in Lyon (2002), the participants I interviewed experienced uncertainty within the Canadian culture and had fluctuating feelings. Throughout these struggles, international students had to adjust to academic learning in Canadian HEIs and negotiate new perspectives and practices.

Individuals’ previous experiences, perspectives, and individual indicators, such as age, race, gender, marital status, can have an impact on transformative learning. However, as Taylor (1994) noted, “It is a necessary precondition to change and growth, as individuals strive to regain their inner balance by adapting to the demands and opportunities of the intercultural situation” (p. 158). To this end, establishing a connection between prior personal experiences and the new perspectives gained in host

culture can lead to a transformation in perspectives and practices (Walter, 2016). In light of such understandings, I pay due attention to the participants' previously accumulated experiences in China. Recognizing and acknowledging learning gaps between the contrasting learning contexts of China and Canada can help international students better navigate challenges with academic learning.

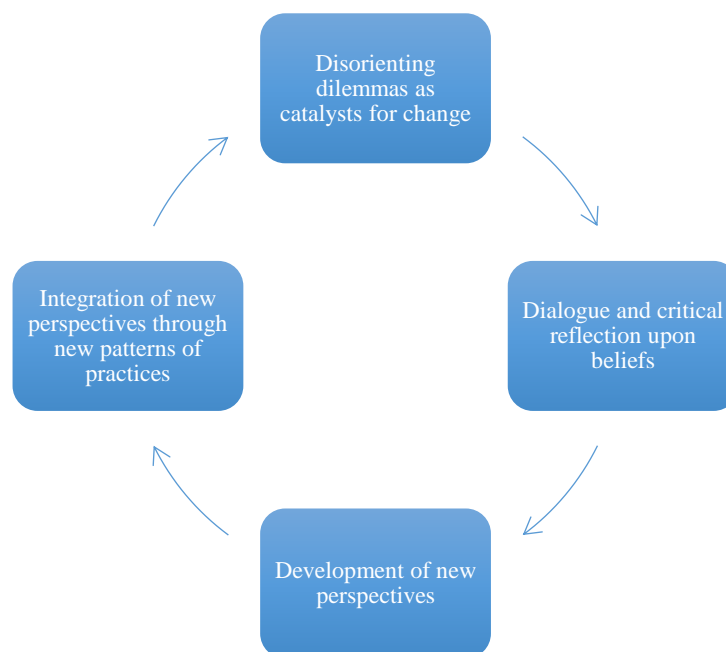
### **3.1.2 The Essentiality of Dialogue and Critical Reflection**

There are two main practices in establishing new perspectives and practices: dialogue and critical reflection. Dialogue and critical reflection help individuals adjust to new environments and subsequently try out new behaviours.

As a core concept of transformative learning, dialogue is regarded as an “essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed” (E. W. Taylor, 2009, p. 9). Taylor (2009) explains, “The dialogue is not so much analytical, point-counterpoint dialogue, but dialogue emphasizing relational and trustful communication” (P. 9). Dialogue is a reciprocal process wherein individuals output and input perspectives in communication. Although it happens in the moment, academic dialogue in class helps students think critically, thereby involving them into critical reflection afterwards. In my study, I use this framework to help participants identify moments where critical dialogue occurred during their sojourner period. In accounting for these moments during my analysis, I found that many of these dialogues occurred as participants applied coping strategies — such as asking for help from others.

Critical reflection, as a practice wherein individuals question the integrity of their deeply held previous perspectives and beliefs, is regarded as another important

feature in fostering transformative learning. Critical reflection is a distinguishing characteristic of adult learning, which enables individuals to “address the challenges, responsibilities, and complexities associated with adult life” (Kreber, 2012, p. 323). Consequently, I use this framework to assess the study participants’ capacity to reflect critically on challenges they experienced while studying at a Canadian HEI. I also use critical reflection in my analysis to better understand how my participants negotiated and reconstructed their perspectives. The simplified process of TLT is illustrated in Figure 2, below.



*Figure 2.* Simplified process of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1994).

### **3.2 Berry’s Acculturation Theory**

Acculturation was first defined as “groups of individuals having different cultures (who) come into continuous first-hand contact with later alterations in the indigenous culture

of these group” (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, pp. 149-150). Berry (2008) broadened the concept of acculturation by claiming, “Acculturation takes place in the settled or dominant group as well as in the non-dominant group” (p. 701). Acculturation can be reactive. That is, it is a reciprocal process wherein both dominant and non-dominant groups mutually impact each other.

### 3.2.1 Acculturation Process

The acculturation process happens at two levels: the group level and the individual level. At the group level, both groups understand what they are going to achieve. At the individual level, individuals can differ within their cultural groups; moreover, their perspectives are shaped by factors including age, gender, education, and pre-acculturation experience.

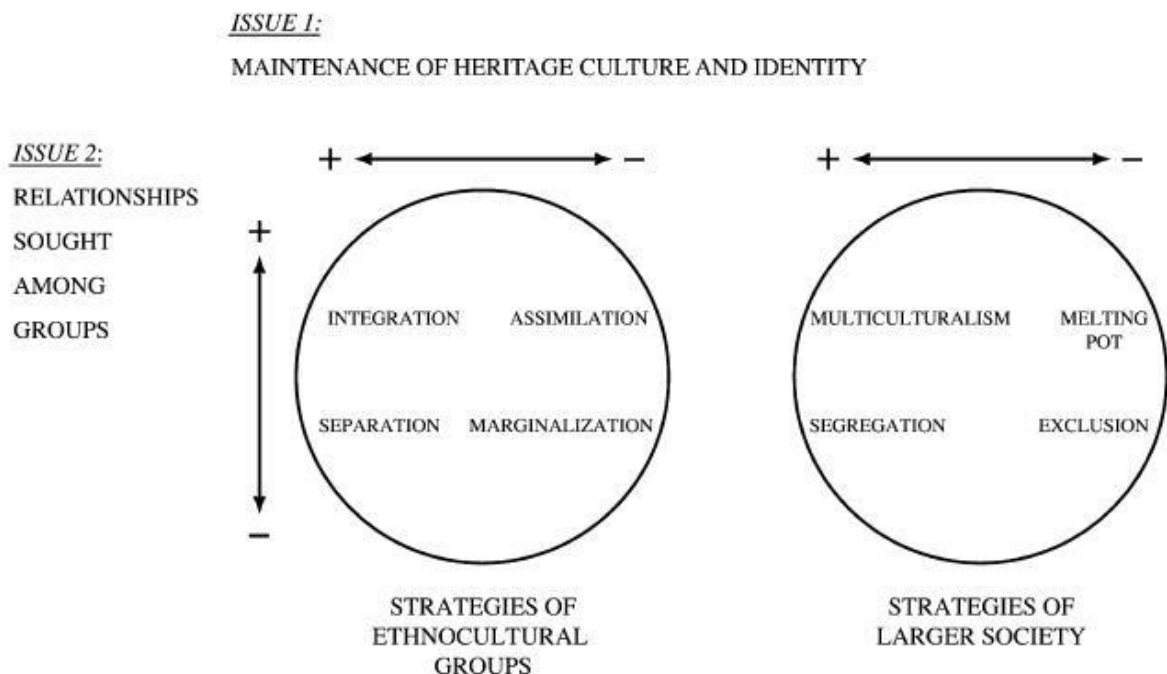


Figure 3. Acculturation strategies in ethno-cultural groups and in larger society (Berry, 2005).

As indicated in Figure 3, when acculturation experience happens to individuals in non-dominant groups, they experience four strategies: Assimilation, Separation, Integration, and Marginalization. In terms of Berry's (2008) definition, Assimilation occurs when individuals who seek interaction with the dominant culture do not wish to maintain their own cultures. By contrast, if individuals value their origin culture and do not interact with people from the dominant culture, Separation occurs. Integration occurs when individuals decide to both maintain their heritage culture and interact with other groups. Notably, Integration only occur when the dominant group is inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity. Thus, the dominant group needs to adapt national institutions, such as schools, health, and workforces, to better meet the needs of all groups. Meanwhile, the non-dominant group should adapt to the fundamental values of the larger society (Berry, 2005). In addition to those strategies, Marginalization occurs when individuals are not interested in either cultural maintenance or interactions with other groups. I use acculturation strategies in my research to explore Chinese exchange students' new perspectives about Canadian culture so as to better comprehend their learning experiences in Canada.

Berry's (2005) acculturation strategies, however, confront criticism of adopting "one size fits all" approach (Rudmin, 2003). Several psychological research on acculturation (e.g., Berry, 1980; Phinney, 2003) implies that individual differences in acculturation outcomes are the results of specific strategies they chose. Although individuals are at choice when they experience acculturation in a new culture, their understanding changes moment to moment. Thus, separating individuals' experiences

neatly into these four quadrants seems problematic. Based on Berry's (2005) model, a more nuanced way that can adjust to variations among individuals may access to more applicability than a "one size fits all" approach (Chrkov, 2009). Reflecting on this criticism, I agree that researchers need to apply a more nuanced approach when exploring individuals' acculturation experiences. Consequently, I aimed at exploring students' new perspectives about Canadian culture with the guidance of Berry's (2005) model, but avoiding separating them into four quadrants accurately.

Acculturative stress, at the individual level, is generated by efforts to adapt to the new culture during the acculturation process (Berry et al.,1987). In addition to stresses from academic learning, economic independence, identity construction, and psychological issues, all of which are issues that domestic and international students alike may experience, Chinese international students must also contend with stress stemming from cultural differences. According to Leong (2015), cultural stress is usually accompanied by cultural adaption to the host culture, in which the individual overcomes challenges in language proficiency and academic learning. Overall, these theories help me to better understand the in-depth perspectives of my participants. Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory helps frame my participants' learning experiences in Canada.

### **3.2.2 Factors Affecting Acculturation**

At the individual level, each individual's acculturation process differs in terms of age, gender, education, pre-acculturation experience, and so forth. Few scholars have discussed the relationship between gender and acculturation. Carballo (1994) found that

women seem to have more acculturation difficulty than men. However, Sumer et al. (2008) denies a relation between gender and international students' acculturation. Since all of my participants are female, I do not see the need to argue this statement here.

Although there is limited research on the correlation between age and acculturation, studies that found that older individuals will experience higher levels of acculturative stress. For example, Beiser et al. (1988) proposed that the acculturation process is easier when it begins at an early age, especially prior to primary school. When individuals experience acculturation during adolescence, substantial issues emerge (Berry & Sam, 1997). Even though there is no clear reason proving this relationship (Berry, 1997), it is possible that younger students may be more flexible and thus adaptable, to a new culture. This to some extent echoes Arendt's (1961) argument on education, in which she believes that young children can be indoctrinated in ways that adults cannot.

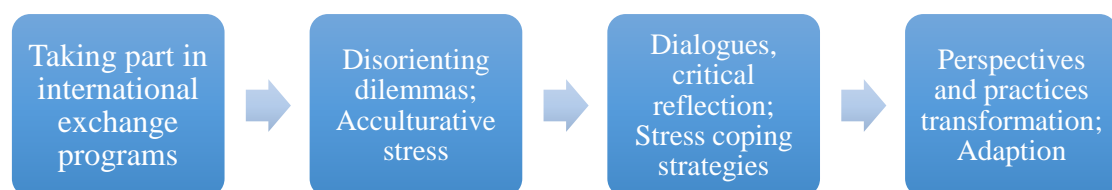
In terms of education and acculturation, Beiser et al. (1988) found that a higher level of education is associated with a positive adaptation to a new culture. The higher the level of education that individual has achieved, the lower the stress they are likely to experience in acculturation. The most voiced explanation is that individuals with higher levels of education may have more ability to overcome challenges and access resources for help.

Pre-acculturation experience also affects individuals' acculturation process. Yeh and Inose (2003) illustrated that higher levels of English proficiency prior to going abroad are also associated with lower levels of acculturative stress. When students are

more fluent in English, it is easier to communicate with instructors and peers. This makes the acculturation process smoother. My analysis follows Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) framework and considers age, education, and pre-acculturation experience in analyzing their impact on individuals' acculturation. The semi-structured interviews helped me determine the impact of pre-acculturation experience on participants' respective acculturation process.

### 3.3 Summary of Theoretical Framework

TLT and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory work together to guide critical exploration on Chinese exchange students' learning experiences in Canada. These two theoretical frameworks help me better understand students' own interpretations of their learning experiences, accompanied by transformations in their perspectives and practices.



*Figure 4.* The process of transformative learning and acculturation.



Significant connections exist between the two theories in my study. As Chinese students who completed international exchange programs in Canadian HEIs, these study participants were exposed to an intercultural situation wherein transformative learning and acculturation was possible. Adopting TLT and acculturation theory assists me in better comprehending the disorienting dilemmas and acculturative stress that students experienced. They also informed the nature of my semi-structured interviews, which focused on academic dialogues, critical reflections, and stress-reduction coping strategies. This is to determine how my Chinese students interpreted their learning experiences and how these experiences may have altered their perspectives and practices upon completing the exchange.

## Chapter 4

### 4. Methodology

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology guiding this research. Specifically, it details the research design, the participant selection, and the recruitment process. I further outline data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the validity and limitations of the study.

#### 4.1 Research Design

In this research, an interpretivist qualitative case study was best served, because I seek to understand the meanings and actions of my participants as constructed through their learning experiences in Canada and interactions with others (Creswell, 2012; Crotty, 1998).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) define interpretivist research as a research paradigm that interprets social reality through subjective perspectives of the embedded participants in a specific positioned context. Manning and Kunkel (2014) elaborate that an interpretivist paradigm is “a methodological paradigm with the focus on understanding individuals’ interpretations of social actions in authentic contexts” (p. 1). Therefore, the interpretivist approach fits the purpose of my study, which explores learning experiences within the context of completing an international exchange programs in a Canadian HEI.

Methodologically, the present study aims to complete an in-depth exploration of how certain groups “attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena in a natural setting” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3), which is qualitative. Under the guidance of an

interpretivist qualitative approach, I gain deeper insights into how Chinese students interpret their learning experiences in international exchange programs in Canada.

Under the umbrella of an interpretivist qualitative approach, this study was directed by case study research. The case study research methodology arises out due to the desire to understand complex social phenomena in a real-world milieu (Yin, 2014). According to Merriam (1988), the purpose of a qualitative case study is to gain “insight, discovery, and interpretation,” and to analyze “a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 10). That is to say, a case study stresses the value in creating new information from data collection rather than deducing from previous theories. Yin (2014) proposes that case studies are particularly appropriate in answering *why* and *how* questions. *How* questions, in this case, require explanatory answers. In this research study, I present each participant’s story as an individual case study, and integrate the six stories to gain insight into what this group of exchange students share as common characteristics.

Creswell (2013) describes a single case study as when, “the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue” (p. 99). Rather than applying the six stories to a multiple case study, I analyze each individual’s learning experience on exchange. This retains the integrity and complexity of each participant’s story.

#### **4.2 Participant Selection and Recruitment**

I employ purposeful sampling for this research, because it seeks to find a certain population with rich information about the phenomenon to be studied (Patton, 2002).

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1. Chinese undergraduate students who have finished exchange programs in Canadian HEIs. 2. Length of exchange programs they took should be no less than 3 months and no longer than 12 months. 3. The time from the completion of the exchange to the interview should be no longer than 2 years.

I selected these participants for their unique learning experiences in both China and Canada. Since there have been limited studies emphasized on undergraduate students in international exchange programs, especially those from China in Canadian HEIs, these participants are better situated to bridge the research gap. The length of time in the exchange program was supported by Barnick (2006), who defines exchange students as those who study away from their home university for a period of learning for one semester or a year. The criterion was limited to students who completed their exchange within two most recent years to ensure their memories were fresh.

I applied a passive snowball sampling to help recruit participants who meet the criteria. Although “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 244), I planed to recruit six participants to endure a range of data within limited time frame. Thus, I considered six participants sufficient to provide crucial information about learning experiences in Canadian HEIs. After obtaining ethics approval (Appendix A) from Western University in November 2019, I initially reached to two potential participants who I knew from previous interactions. I sent them an invitation to participate in my research with the Letter of Information (Appendix B) via emails to clarify that the participation was voluntary and confidential. Both agreed to participate

in this research, and signed and scanned the Consent Form (Appendix C). I gave existing participants the recruitment information to describe to their network as applicable. Potential participants could then contact me directly if they were interested. This process continued until I found all the six required participants.

One of the participants' biggest commonalities was that all of the six participants were females ranging in age between 20-24. All of them were undergraduate students during the period of exchange. Although I built strong relationships with students of either gender, female students seemed to be more willing to share their learning experiences and personal feelings. It is possible that as the researcher is female, female students felt more comfortable in the interviews than they would with a male interviewer.

Crucial differences between participants also existed. Although none had visited Canada on trips prior to their exchange, two had prior experience studying abroad. Ming had studied in a language centre in the United States for 2 weeks during her high school year, while Hannah had spent 6 months in pre-college courses in Spain before attending university. All of the participants were in different years of study while conducting the interviews. Claire, Lin, and Mia were in their last year of university studies; Ming was in her third year; Hannah was a graduate student; and Kerry just had graduated from the graduate school. Their areas of study also varied considerably, ranging from Biological Science, Chinese Linguistic Literature, double major of Business English and International Economics and Trade, Food Science and Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering, as well as French Language and

Literature. Their profiles are listed in Table 1 as follows. It is worth noting that all participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

*Table 1: Participants' Profiles*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Area of Study</b>	<b>Duration of Exchange</b>	<b>Year of Study on Exchange</b>	<b>Time from Exchange to Interview</b>
Ming	Biological Science	3 months	Sophomore year	3 months
Hannah	Chinese Linguistic Literature	4 months	Fourth year	2 years
Kerry	Business English; International Economics and Trade	4 months	Fourth year	2 years
Claire	Food Science and Engineering	8 months	Third year	8 months
Lin	Materials Science and Engineering	8 months	Third year	8 months

Mia	French Language and Literature	8 months	Third year	8 months
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### 4.3 Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in the form of interviews. As Patton (2002) explains, “Interviewing is seeking to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (pp. 340-341). Merriam (2009) also stresses the importance of the interview, noting that “Interviewing is important when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to conduct interviews when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 88). I conducted semi-structured interviews as a data collection technique. This means that most part of the interview was guided by a list of questions, but neither the exact vocabulary nor the order of questions were decided ahead of time (Merriam, 2009).

The semi-structured interview guidelines (Appendix D) include ten questions, which gave participants significant opportunity to express their ideas. I invited the participants to provide basic information about themselves to start the interview. The interviews were then conducted dialogically with the researcher. The first four questions established the context of the exchange. The other questions related to their learning experiences on exchange.

All six participants were given the Letter of Information (Appendix B) and the Consent Form (Appendix C) before the interview. Once I received scanned copies of their signed consent forms, I scheduled the interview date and time. Each interview

took approximately 45 minutes with audio recorded based on voluntary consent. Since each of my participants was identified Mandarin as their first language, I conducted interviews in Mandarin.

Although I preferred the person-to-person encounters, I also facilitated frequent remote interviews due to distance. I conducted a person-to-person interview with one participant (Ming) at the rest area in her faculty, which was chosen for convenience, comfort, and privacy. The other five participants were interviewed virtually with the help of Skype for Business or Zoom. Participants were assured that interviews would be anonymous; that is, pseudonyms would be used to protect their privacy.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

With regard to data analysis, Merriam (2009) notes that, all qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative, rather than merely intuitive affective feelings. Since the interpretivist paradigm was employed to guide the research, the first analytical step occurred simultaneously in the process of data collection. Specifically, I completed a rudimentary analysis while collecting data to correct potential errors or adjust my interviews to participants' interests. While preparing for subsequent interviews, I analyzed data from earlier interviews and wrote memos for potential use in the final report. This supports Merriam's (2009) assertion that data might be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming for the researcher without ongoing analysis. After I finished all my interviews, I transcribed all the interview data verbatim in Chinese beginning with the pre-announcement and the participants' verbal permission.



I then organized the data by clustering similar topics together and abbreviating topics with codes. Consistent with my interpretative case study, I then themed such codes to explore participants' meanings and actions in a real context and identifying the units of analysis. According to Foss (2007), units of analysis can illustrate data themes, thereby helping the researcher focus on certain aspects of data while coding. The units of analysis in this research were shaped by my research questions, theoretical frameworks, previous literature, and interviews. They included learning gaps in the contrasting Chinese and Canadian contexts, challenges and coping strategies, cultural learning, as well as perspectives and practices transformation.

I employed a constant comparative method to permit analysis of the data I collected. I made regular comparisons between the new data I collected and the existing data from previous literature (Cohen et al., 2011) to determine which themes needed further exploration. A comparative method also ensured that I did not merely establish categories, but also broke them down into small meaningful units, thereby recognizing the full complexity of the data. I rely on comparing data to advance the reliability of the findings.

#### **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

This thesis strictly followed Western's ethical research guidelines to ensure a safe and sound research could be conducted. Prior to carrying out any research practice, I sought to get ethics approval from the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board. Upon receiving ethics approval in November 2019, I started to collect data.

During the recruitment stage, the Letter of Information (Appendix B) and Consent Form (Appendix C) were given, signed, and returned before the interviews. I also verbally explained to my participants that I would protect their confidentiality by using pseudonyms. All identifiable information provided by participants, such as their real names and email addresses, have been omitted from this study, thereby retaining the participants' privacy.

I explained to all participants that the interview would be audio recorded and be transcribed verbatim. I also reminded participants that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence if they felt uncomfortable participating in this research. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored in a password-protected electronic device to further ensure confidentiality.

Finally, I explained the benefits for both the researcher and the participants. The data I collected would help me finish my study. For participants, sharing their experiences could help them reflect on their experiences for the benefit of future exchange students and policy decisions. During the data collection process, I avoided sensitive and leading questions. My task as an interviewer was simply to gather data (Patton, 2002).

#### **4.6 Validity of the Study**

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers are required to take procedures to validate their research findings. Qualitative research has to ensure its validity by

determining if the findings are accurate from the angle of the researcher, the participant, and the readers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In highlighting the importance of validity in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) stresses the researchers' attention on credibility, conformability, transferability, and dependability.

To ensure the credibility of my research findings, I used theoretical triangulation (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014) and member checking (Merriam, 2009) to foster the accuracy. I combined two theories, TLT and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory, to guide the present research. I shared data and interpretations with participants to clarify accuracy or misunderstandings. I also contacted participants and asked them to confirm major findings prior to data analysis. A member checking process like this clarifies elements such as credibility, trustworthiness, inconsistencies, or misunderstandings (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, I also presented and discussed negative information in the research, which furthers the validity of the findings.

Researcher reflexivity ensures conformability. In an interpretivist research, conformability is demonstrated with regards to "inter-subjectivity" (Bhattacharjee, 2012). I sought my participants' agreements with the inferences derived from their interviews by myself. They generally held the same opinions with my inferences about their learning experiences in Canada.

Rich and thick descriptions enhance transferability. During data analysis, I offered various perspectives to enrich descriptions while listing themes to extend the findings from one case to other similar cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

An interpretivist research can be seen as dependable or reliable when the researcher observing the same phenomenon for several times and reaching similar conclusions or the conclusions are confirmed as the same by two researchers. This thesis was proofread by several researchers with different fields of expertise and they agreed with my inferences.

#### **4.7 Limitations**

My study is not without limitations. Because of the time limitation, this study involves only a small number of participants. The learning experiences of six exchange students is certainly not sufficient to explain the experiences of all exchange students from China in Canadian HEIs. If possible, more exchange students' voices are needed in future studies. Further investigation should extend beyond one specific ethnic group to better compare experiences between exchange students from different countries.

Further, more kinds of triangulation could have been applied to enhance research trustworthiness (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014), such as data source triangulation and methods triangulation. Implementation of survey data and document analysis could also decrease potential biases caused by interviews in future studies.

A final concern is that all participants in this study are females. The research findings therefore might be gender-specific, because it did not include any male perspectives. A possible way to recruit male participants in future research would be to disseminate recruitment emails to a larger number of potential participants.

## **Chapter 5**

### **5 Findings**

In this chapter, I detail and analyze the findings from the interview data of my six participants. The participants who were interviewed share crucial similarities and differences. I organized my findings according to TLT, Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory and units of analysis, which produced six themes stemming from the collected data: motivations for choosing Canada as an exchange destination, critical moments of learning, challenges, strategies for overcoming challenges and differences, changes upon completion of exchange, and suggestions for future exchange students, program developers, and policy makers. This chapter starts with motivations for choosing Canada as a host country to complete an exchange.

#### **5.1 Motivations for Choosing Canada as an Exchange Destination**

Exploring the motivations that drove the participants to Canada provides insights into their sense of self, which is necessary for a transformational learning to occur (E.W. Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Assorted reasons were given for choosing Canada as their exchange destination. The answers can be categorized as follows: 1. Interprovincial academic cooperation between China and Canada provided a context for exchange; 2. Academic purposes; 3. Economic factors.

A majority of the participants mentioned that they came to Canada because the province or the municipality of their home institutions had a relationship with a Canadian province or a specific host institution. For instance, Claire, Lin, and Mia came from Jiangsu Province in China. This province has a cooperative student exchange

program with Ontario, which provided them with an opportunity to exchange to Canada. Mia explained the specifics of the exchange program as follows, “It’s an interprovincial exchange program. There are like about 12 universities on both sides (Jiangsu Province and Ontario) involving in this project.” She decided to study in Canada mainly due to this bilateral cooperation.

Academic purposes were another factor affecting participants’ choices. Kerry thought exchanging to Canada was a good chance to get involved in Western education. Claire echoed Kerry’s point and further explained:

I have been dreaming of studying in Western countries for many many years. Canada is a good choice because you know I don’t need to learn a total new language. I have learned English for a long time in China.

In Ming’s case, she exchanged to a Canadian HEI in order to keep studying her chosen field of study: “I was considering the United States, because I had studied in there for a while. I feel more similar with the U.S. However, no HEIs in the States offered exchange program in Faculty of Kinesiology at that time. Then, I changed my mind and went to Canada.” Hannah stated that she came to Canada mainly due to the strong reputation of her host institution, at which her favourite movie star had also studied.

Economic factors also motivated two students (Kerry and Claire) to choose Canada as their exchange destination. Kerry and Claire’s home municipality and province provided sufficient scholarships for exchange students spending their exchange period in Canada. Almost all of their living costs were covered by the local governments.

## **5.2 Critical Moments of Learning**

For perspectives and practices transformations to occur, it is important to learn how the participants navigated their sojourner learning experiences compared with previous ones. Thus, asking them to recall their critical moments of learning in Canadian HEIs is an efficient way to access their learning experiences. Events that trigger transformative learning emerged when they recalled critical moments of learning. As the participants were asked to describe their critical moments of learning while engaged in the exchange programs, almost all of them recalled stories regarding the different learning environment between China and Canada, and the challenges they faced during the exchange.

### **5.2.1 Learning Gaps in Contrasting Chinese and Canadian Contexts**

While recalling critical moments of learning, all participants reached a consensus that they encountered learning gaps due to contextual differences between China and Canada. Although they all experienced gaps of some sort, specifics varied among participants. The gaps occupy two categories: different instructional strategies, and different educational values.

**Different instructional strategies:** Acculturating to new instructional strategies is usually a significant difference that international students experience in a new learning context. All of my participants experienced such a difference. Three participants were particularly impressed by formative assessment in Canadian HEIs. Students in

Canadian HEIs are assessed by various factors, such as presentation performance, reflective responses, quizzes, class participation, mid-terms and final examinations. Some participants related it to the student-centred learning method in Canada. As Mia indicated, “I like this way of assessment. It keeps students working hard during the whole semester. And the class participation is much more active than in Chinese classes. In China, students are only busy with finals.” Lin echoed Mia’s perspectives by saying, “It helps me to get to know my learning process and progressive achievements I gained.” Conversely, instructors in Chinese HEIs apply the summative assessment to assess students’ performance, which is almost always centered on final examination and attendance. Kerry explained her home institution’s summative assessment way as, “They assess students based on two aspects. Final examination accounts for 70%, and attendance accounts for 30%.”

In addition to differing assessment methods, participants noticed the difference between student-centred pedagogy on exchange compared with the more typical instructor-centred pedagogy in Chinese HEIs. In fact, “student-centred learning” was the most frequent phrase participants mentioned when recollecting their critical learning moments on exchange. Below, Lin described the autonomy of choosing courses as an important facet in student-centred learning:

College students in Canada are allowed to choose courses other than their own faculty. They choose courses in terms of their interests, which by contrast is impossible in my home institution. I took two courses in the business field on exchange which was a brand new field for me.



She also mentioned the freedom of dropping classes:

I find that it is common for Canadian students to drop courses after auditing once or twice. I could say it's hard to see that in Chinese HEIs. But this freedom is a double-edged sword I think... Students may not put much effort on learning due to the free-dropping strategy.

Hannah and Claire too shared that they felt more autonomy in choosing courses on exchange, and for this reason chose some courses that seemed "irrelevant" to their area of study. Kerry spoke highly of this strategy, because those courses taken purely for interest added to her professional background while applying for graduate school. However, not all participants experienced the same freedom. For example, Ming's courses were pre-arranged as a package by the host faculty and she did not get to exercise any course selection options.

In line with "student-centred learning", Lin and Mia benefited from the outlines that instructors distributed before class. Lin observes, "The Canadian instructors would provide course outlines in their first class. I think it's great because I could gain a whole comprehension of the course in the very beginning, and kept it in track." Similarly, Mia also spoke highly of the using of outlines and described it as a core of learning feature.

Within their academic life, participants observed that Canadian classes were fraught with various activities such as discussions, seminars, presentations, and numerous creative activities, all of which are relatively rare in Chinese classes. Some reflected on the specific activities they experienced on exchange, which were seen as trigger events in transformative learning. As Ming said:

In my psychology course, I remember one day we went outside and had some group works in the gym. The instructor allowed us to feel what was “coordination” by practices. Such activities may be seen as a waste of time in my home institution.

Although previously taking part in teamwork in her home institution, Kerry nevertheless noticed several differences in practicability:

I think the teamwork in Canadian classes are more practical. For example, I was involved in a group work for making a digital marketing plan, which required us to cooperate with the global business. It based on real enterprises and cases.

I don't have such an opportunity in my home institution in China.

Claire was also impressed by the various activities in her host institution. She appreciated that instructors created different activities to assist learning. In one instance, which she believed was a trigger event in transformative learning, she remembered:

He asked us to post opinions of reading materials on Twitter, and he would grade us in terms of the number of “likes” and “comments” we got. Another thing is, in order to explain the concept of “impossible burger”, he came to the U.S. to buy a bunch of impossible burgers, and fried them in the class, which was the opposite of a more formal and...I could say, boring learning environment in my home institution.

For Mia who exchanged to a French language faculty, she too sensed the inspiring learning mode in Canada, such as watching French movies to learn pronunciation.

**Different educational values:** Participants noticed differences in educational values between the two countries. In particular, most of them described more freedom in exchanged classrooms, such as expressing their opinions during class. Claire stated:

Students in Canadian HEIs are free to voice any ideas coming to their mind, and the instructors never interrupt them to save time. Chinese instructors always worry about the teaching efficiency, thus they don't give students enough chances to express their thoughts, thereby preferring an instructor-centred teaching style.

Ming mentioned the classroom circumstance in her home institution as passive. Whereas students in her home institute were used to keep silent during class: "Canadian peers just say what comes up with their mind and seem like they don't care about the outcomes of giving wrong answers." Chinese students often act more reserved in class participation because many worry about making mistakes in front of the public, which is rooted deeply in the traditional value of "keeping face". Kerry shared her feelings about offering opinions in class, stating: "My face would turn all red while I spoke in public, so I was not willing to participate in discussion." Meanwhile, Hannah explained the differences as follows: "I can hear different voices in Canadian classes, and that's the most difference between Chinese and Canadian educational values. It's more open than our domestic education." Lin, however, did not have the same feeling. She felt that the classroom freedoms depended on instructors and courses rather than countries.

Claire, Mia and Hannah expressed feelings supported by their instructors, and felt that they were seen as unique individuals in Canadian HEIs. Hannah shared the following story:

My Latin language instructor would like to use a blank paper to cover the quiz paper for protecting our own grades. But in China... scores are not seen as a privacy, like everyone is able to see each other's scores. I remember I was not doing well in a quiz. That instructor wrote a comment like "if you have met any difficulties you could come to my office hours and talk with me." I feel I am being taken care of by seeing this.

In Mia's words, "In my host institution, instructors pay much attention to the development of each individual. While in my home institution, they focus more on collective development."

Some participants noticed significant differences in the instructor-student relationship between Canadian and Chinese HEIs. The status of instructors is much higher than students in China, due to the prevalence of an instructor-centred learning philosophy. Hannah commented on the Chinese teacher-student relationship by observing that:

Instructors are seen as the authorities, which means everything they say would be right. They convey knowledge in the front, and the only thing students need to do is to write them down. It's possible due to traditional Chinese culture. We've been taught to respect teachers since the very early age.

Lin noted differences in “correct answers” by claiming, “In Canada, there’s no correct answers. You could disagree with instructors’ thoughts, which by contrast may not be allowed in China.” Some participants found that education in Canadian HEIs has some similarities to a “customer service”. Kerry specified an example of this, by illustrating:

They focused on every individuals’ development, like when I went to the professors’ offices and asked for some advices, they would make suggestions to me based on my current situation and previous background. It’s like I paid and got good service.

Similarly, Claire and Lin remarked that they felt their exchange time in Canada exposed them to a more creative learning milieu. Claire explained, “When I completed the experiments, I found that instructors only directed students to a certain degree and more work was left to students themselves. While in my home institution, students are directed hand by hand.” Lin mirrored this sentiment by stating that she thought educational values in Canada leaned more heavily on developing students’ initiatives.

Some participants observed differences between course outcomes and attitudes toward knowledge. Claire compared the two countries’ attitudes toward knowledge:

In Chinese HEIs, grasping knowledge is deemed as the primary task, so the learning contents were relatively broad. On the contrary, Canadian HEIs recognize the importance of discovering the knowledge. In this regard, students are required to make sure that they understand the knowledge point before moving to another knowledge point.

Ming expressed a similar point by mentioning that knowledge acquisition is the primary educational task in Chinese HEIs. Moreover, the instructional content in one course would not be mentioned in other courses. Ming found this to be different in Canada:

I find there are some courses which are set to help students to organize the knowledge they have learned. I feel it's useful for laying a foundation for future studies.

Hannah and Mia were inspired by the separation of work and life in Canada. Hannah disclosed the inconvenience she had experienced in her home institution: "I thought it's outdated in China, because you know, we still used personal social media to discuss learning matters, and contact instructors or classmates." Additionally, Mia also appreciated the differentiation between work and life. She noted that, "It's convenient that all matters related to school are communicated by the university mailbox in Canada."

Meanwhile, Claire also referred to the academic integrity as a significant lesson she took away from her exchange experience. She had witnessed junior students directly use senior students' experiment data for their own papers in her home institution. She was impressed by how much attention was paid to academic integrity in Canadian HEIs. She told me that if the repetitive rate in her assignments was quite high, then a TA would come to talk with her.

### **5.2.2 Challenges**

Participants experienced critical moments of learning as illustrated by challenges they encountered on exchange. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned the language

barrier as a major challenge during exchange in Canada, with the exception of Mia who studied in a non-English instructed program where she did not encounter any language barriers. In addition to the language barrier, some participants stated that differences between the educational contexts also had some adverse impacts on their learning.

Undergraduate students from China who are able to exchange to Western countries generally have a good foundation in English; nevertheless, difficulties persist in class discussions, understanding English terminologies, academic readings, and writing. For example, Kerry majored in Business English in her home institution and advanced a 7.0 on the IELTS examination. Nevertheless, she was still not confident in her English proficiency. She said, “I was not willing to participate in class discussion due to my lack of confidence in talking in English.” Hannah and Claire too discussed problems with English vocabularies and terminologies. Hannah stated:

I was confused about the professional vocabularies, especially in my Anthropology course. There were lots of professional vocabulary words that I had not heard. That was the most troublesome.

Claire mentioned her limited English vocabulary constrained her learning, thereby requiring her to put more efforts into it. She elaborated:

I couldn't keep pace with others because I didn't understand those terminologies in English. Additionally, they would say something related closely to Canadian culture and life knowledge since childhood, which we exchange students hadn't known. That's another challenge.

To this end, participants' reading efficiency was also affected due to their insufficient English language ability. Ming and Lin both shared their own experiences regarding the reading efficiency. Lin said:

While I was familiar with how to do the experiments, I did them wrong in my host institution for the first few time. It's because I didn't understand the requirements which were written in English.

Ming also complained about a similar difficulty. She said that she did not perform well in some quizzes due to misunderstanding the questions.

English academic writing includes specific formatting and formal requirements which also bothered some of my participants. Hannah said that she did not receive any formal English writing practice, and that she had to write her first paper entirely in English while on exchange:

I had known nothing about like how to do citations in a paper, and how to write a reference. So I need to learn them from the very beginning while writing my final paper, which was quite overwhelming for me at that time.

Notably, none of the six participants enrolled in my study mentioned daily communication as a troublesome. In fact, they reported feeling more comfortable in daily communication than in class discussion.

As discussed above, different learning contexts was another significant challenge for almost all participants. For Kerry, this challenge occurred when she first exchanged to her host institution. She expressed this awareness about the Canadian learning context as follows:



I felt the pressure when I came to Canadian HEI at first, like I had to put 120% effort in class...I couldn't sneak off even for a while, otherwise I would miss something important. It's totally different from the inattentive learning environment in my home institution.

Claire also mentioned the different class organizational system, and said it was quite hard for her to build friendships with classmates without a fixed class organizational system. In Canada, students attend class and leave immediately after it finishes. That makes it harder to socialize with peers.

### **5.2.3 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges and Differences**

The most crucial factor in the participants' successful acculturation in Canadian HEIs were strong coping strategies for overcoming challenges and differences. I concluded that the participants used two main strategies: asking for help from others and making additional individual effort.

**Asking for help:** In my interviews, asking for help emerged as one of the most common methods participants used to overcome academic challenges. Although all participants commented that they were comfortable asking for help from others, each participant had different experiences asking for help. Some would like to make a close relationship with their professors and instructors due to their professional aspirations. Ming and Kerry pointed out that talking with professors or instructors enriched their knowledge. Ming said:

I like to talk with my instructors after class, you know, they are all great researchers, so talking with them could not only solve my problems, but enrich my knowledge.

Kerry illustrated her close connection with one of her professors:

I always went to his office during the office hours to ask questions. At that time, I wanted to apply for graduate studies in his area, so I wanted to grasp every opportunity to talk with him.

Notably, Ming mentioned that there was a small number of exchange students from China in her class who liked to ask professors questions: “It is possible that they were shy to talk with professors, or they were not used to talk with them in English.”

Hannah and Lin often discussed concerns with Teaching Assistants (TAs), who they perceived as relatively easier to communicate with than instructors or professors. Hannah, in particular, benefited from her Chinese TA. She said:

I liked to discuss with the TAs because they were more like peer guides. My TA is also from China, so she could explain me things in Chinese. She really helped me during the finals.

Lin also liked to talk with her TAs as they were at the same generation and it was easier to communicate with. She expressed:

I was probably willing to ask TAs questions, because you know, they were at my age. They were really nice and patient to clear my confusions.

Participants also described asking for help from peers. Some preferred asking for help from other Chinese international students who shared the same cultural

background with them. Claire said it was more convenient for both communication and comprehension.

Furthermore, as international students coming to a new learning environment, they hoped to receive support and help from their host institution. Some of my participants were aware of the campus services, while some did not know what type of help was available from different organizations. Mia described knowing that she could receive help from the Writing Support Centre in her host institution:

I was involved in an English writing course for international students provided by the Writing Support Centre. I figure that's really helpful for my academic writing. And I could talk with the classmates from that course, like I got extra practicing with my spoken English.

Claire also sought help from the the International Student Centre, which held interesting activities for international students to make friends and learn from seniors. She went for some coffee chats for several times, which helped her practice her spoken English. Conversely, in Kerry's words, "I didn't notice such services. I didn't have spare time to socialize with others. I had to handle with my coursework and my application for graduate school at that time."

**Making additional efforts by themselves:** Almost all of the participants described needing to solve their own problems pertaining to language improvement and educational context adaption. Hannah and Mia reported accessing to different resources

individually. Hannah shared her own strategy in coping with difficult English terminologies:

Terminologies was a big obstacle for me when I first came to Canadian HEI. Struggling with them for several weeks, I asked my mom to buy me a Chinese version of the book we used for Anthology course, so that I could read it before class for getting an overall understanding.

Echoing Hannah's perspective, Mia told me she would not ask others for help as she was not confident in her spoken English. She stated:

I would review the slides professors used after class by myself. If some terminologies confused me, I would search their meanings through Google.

Claire provided a detailed explanation about how she handled challenges. Although she did seek assistance from professors, local peers, and especially her Chinese peers, she also felt that English learning was a process, which could not be enhanced without personal effort. She explained, "I may watch the course videos which my professor took and posted on YouTube repeatedly for better understanding, or look through the slides."

### **5.3 Cultural Learning**

Multiple factors affect each individual's acculturation process, including their perception about Canadian culture and their efforts to adapt culturally. Canada, which features its diversity and inclusiveness, provides a relatively smooth context for exchange students to acculturate. Nevertheless, exchanging to Canada still exposes them to a foreign milieu. Consequently, there are various processes that each participant

had to undergo before adapting to the new culture. When asked about cultural adaptation, participants shared their perspectives on Canadian culture as well as their adaptation process.

### **5.3.1 New Perspectives about Canadian Culture**

All participants mentioned that they felt Canadian culture was rooted in diversity and inclusivity. “Diversity” was the most frequent word used to describe their understandings of Canadian culture. Ming, Hannah, and Mia shared their own understandings of diversity. Specifically, Ming discussed Canadian diversity:

The population is diverse. The city I went for exchange was one which had a large number of immigrants from different countries. And I have to say that Chinese immigrants takes a large part. So I didn’t feel a strong Canadian kind of culture atmosphere, especially comparing with the U.S.

In addition, Hannah mentioned that instructors and students were diverse in Canadian HEIs. Mia mirrored this observation by reflecting that her classmates were from different countries: “It was a diverse class. All of them had different cultural background.”

With regard to discrimination, a frequent issue that international students encounter, all of the participants said they felt they were treated equally to domestic students and did not receive unfair treatments during the exchange. Lin concluded that this is due to inclusiveness in Canadian culture:

Instructors and students come from countries all over the world. Some of them may have a strong accent, but no one cares much about it. They just focus on academic or teaching ability.

Claire also shared her understanding of “inclusiveness” in Canadian HEIs: “On Open Club Day, I found that there were several clubs whose members were from the same races or religions. They’re allowed to do some memorial activities from their cultures. And the university was totally fine with that.” Such a sense of “inclusiveness” had impressed her until the moment we had this interview.

### **5.3.2 Cultural Adaption**

As noted above, all six participants had positive comments about adapting to Canadian culture. They believed it was relatively easy to get involved in social and academic events in Canada. One significant reason they did not feel excluded was the considerable impact and influence of the surrounding Chinese community. Ming and Kerry both went to a city rooted with many Chinese immigrants and described the Chinese community as a large part in their daily life. Ming stated, “It was like I didn’t go abroad, you know, I could see Chinese people and hear Chinese all the time. It didn’t take me much time adjusting to the new environment.”

Making local friends is an effective way to adapt to the host culture. In my interviews, five participants expressed their desires to make local friends and develop a social circle. Some tried and succeeded, while some did not succeed. Ming, Hannah, and Lin shared their successful experience. Ming went to a club on Friday night and made some local friends there. She remembered that it took much time to integrate into

Canadian social community, and that it was a funny process. When asked her about how she maintained the friendship, she said:

I used foreign social medias to build connections with local friends, like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Posting pictures on Instagram and writing comments below others' posts were an effective way for me to maintain contact with them.

Lin also shared her positive experience of making local friends. These friends were her schoolmates who she knew from student activities. She stated:

I always checked my mailbox where I could get updated information on student activities. I went for some activities interested me, and made friends there... Chinese friends and local friends.

Finally, Hannah shared how she made friends in a religion club:

I went to a Christian club. It always held different kinds of activities. I feel they were good chances to make friends with local students. I tried to make friends with local people, and I had some, but I felt more close to Chinese friends.

The other three participants describing making friends in Canada, but only with Chinese students. Claire pointed out:

I went to the school association activities as well, they opened my mind and practiced my ability to communicate with strangers, but they are not that helpful in making me local friends. It's hard to really fit in with Canadian community. We have different social circles.

Echoing Claire, Mia also revealed that she had difficulty integrating with the Canadian community. Although she said she joined some student activities such as a “drawing to de-stress” event, she stated:

It’s hard to really merge into Canadian students’ circle. We are just classmates but not friends.

Kerry was the only one who did not make attempt to make friends with local students. She said she had no time to join in student activities or socialize with others, because she “felt the academic pressure all the time”. She had to spend significant time on her course load to while preparing her graduate school application. Consequently, she felt quite overwhelmed and no spare time was left for her to hang out with friends, either Chinese or local.

## **5.4 Changes upon Completion of Exchange**

Upon completing their exchange, participants described some new perspectives and practices. These included improved English proficiency, new learning methods, and a mature mindset. Different participants experienced different level of changes.

### **5.4.1 English Enhancement**

All six participants agreed that their English proficiency had improved upon finishing their exchange at host HEIs. In particular, spoken English and English listening comprehension skills significantly. As Claire explained:

I became more confident in communicating with people in English. It might not happen in the technical level, but the fluency has been improved.



Lin said her listening comprehension skill, spoken English and reading ability has been improved to some degree:

I took an IELTS exam when I came back to my home institution, and I got a high score in the listening part. I felt the dialogues in the listening exam were very familiar, and they sounded like it was happening in my daily life.

Importantly, only one participants described improvement in her English academic writing skills. Hannah said she was now much more familiar with the formats and citations in academic writing. Lin, a science major, cited a possible reason why her academic writing had not improved significantly. Students in her major did not have much opportunity to practice academic writing like students in Humanities or Social Science subjects. Lin was unfamiliar with writing in English and she refused to try things that she was unfamiliar with. Thus, when team work was required, she asked other team members to complete the writing part, while she completed experiments.

#### **5.4.2 Learning Methods**

In terms of learning methods, participants had insights from the courses they took and the class instructions they experienced in Canadian HEIs. Ming described new insight into accessing resources. She said, “I found that there were lots of learning resources we could take advantage of for free, like the university’s database. And I had never noticed it until I heard it from my instructors in host institution.” She further talked about the learning efficiency: “I was really surprised that how they (her local peers) managed their time. After talking with them, I realized the importance of improving

studying efficiency.” Hannah and Kerry also discussed effective time management.

Hannah said:

I learned how I can manage my own time properly from my Canadian classmates. I would like to mark the due days on my calendar, and list a to-do tip every morning to remind me of that day’s workload.

Kerry echoed Hannah’s point. She stated, “The exchange experience improved my ability of time management. I learned it from balancing the course load and the preparation for graduate school.”

Meanwhile, Claire stressed the importance of academic integrity. She pointed out:

Almost all professors I took courses with in my host institution stated the importance of academic integrity. It has raised my awareness. I am doing my own project for the requirement of graduation, and I lay much emphasis on that.

Finally, Claire said that her ability to extrapolate useful information from literature has improved.

However, the three participants who completed the exchange in their third year of university found few opportunities in their home institutions to apply the learning strategies they acquired in Canadian HEIs. In Lin’s words, she had few courses left when she returned to her home institution, so there was minimal time left to put new strategies into practice.

### 5.4.3 Mindset

Through their exchange opportunity, participants were exposed to a foreign milieu, which permitted them to have new worldviews, ways of thinking, and behaving. Ming told me this experience increased her ability to accept difference. She said:

I'm definitely more open to accept difference among different people. Some senior students I met from student activities were those top students who had excellence academic performances. They acted totally different after class, like doing pole dancing in the club. You know, in my traditional value, those who are good at studying are more looking like a nerd. I think I will not make assumptions in terms of stereotypes.

Hannah commented that exposure to a foreign environment permitted her to see a larger world and gain a different worldview. This would be a significant lesson for other Chinese college students who normally study and remain living in the hometowns where they were born.

Claire shared her changing mindset about competition, "I used to make comparisons and compete with my peers. I didn't accept being left behind. But I started to just focus on myself and become more peaceful after exchange." Similarly, Mia and Kerry described feeling more confident. Mia said she now felt comfortable talking in public, which she had never thought about doing before going abroad. She told me that she was touched by Canadian students' confidence. Kerry also discussed learning how to be more outgoing. She said living in a foreign environment forced her to talk with people from different cultural backgrounds, which was beneficial.

Additionally, Kerry further described gaining clarity about her future plans following the exchange experience. She stated, “I was pretty sure that I would like to pursue my future studies in Western countries.” Similarly, Lin said she gained more direction for future plans and was no longer confused about her educational pursuits anymore. She stated that she did not want to get stuck in the traditional path that most of her peers coming back from exchange take, which is graduating from university and applying for a Masters. She plans to take a gap year after graduation so as to have time to think about what she really wanted to do.

## **5.5 Reflections on Exchange Experiences**

Critical reflection on exchange experiences, as a core part of enhancing transformative learning, requires due attention. When speaking about their feelings on exchanging to Canada, all six participants spoke highly of the ongoing benefits they gained through exchange, albeit with some reservations. Nevertheless, they highly recommended the value for potential students to participate in such an international exchange program.

### **5.5.1 Benefits to Exchanging to Canada**

All six participants believed they had a meaningful experience in Canada. Ming, Claire, Mia mentioned gaining more direction on future studies. Ming also shared her own future plans:

I was not so into Biological Science before I exchanged to Canada. I like Kinesiology. After exchanging to Faculty of Kinesiology for three months, I feel like I am able to combine those two subjects. And it deepens my desire to

continue my future studies in Kinesiology area. It (the exchange experience) also inspires me when I think about me and my Canadian friends are working for our futures in difference places.

Claire also discussed how the exchange opportunity inspired a passion for her field of study:

Exchanging to Canada was a precious experience for me. It inspires my learning passion in the Food Science field that I had not been interested in before. I like the free atmosphere in Canada. I am thinking about continuing my studies and even working there.

Mia said the exchange opportunity gave her an independent space that allowed her to ponder and make future decisions.

For Kerry and Hannah who have already attended graduate schools, they described how the exchange experiences benefited their graduate studies. Kerry explained:

I gained reference letters from the professors in my host institutions. The exchanging experience made my resume more competitive than peers in my home institution. It benefited me a lot when I applied for the graduate study.

In Hannah's words, her exchange experience was like a trial. She gained advantages from her exchange experiences. When she subsequently attended graduate school in Canada, she was more familiar with the Canadian education system than when she came to Canada for the first time.

### **5.5.2 Demerits to Exchanging to Canada**

Although the participants enjoyed their learning experience in Canada, there were still some concerns about being away from their home country. Three participants mentioned difficulties they faced when they returned to their home institutions. Ming mentioned having difficulty returning to the common study in her home institution. And worried about returning to a stressful leaning environment.

Claire and Lin, who studied abroad in their third year, said they had missed crucial professional development courses. For instance, Claire was concerned about her credit conversion and the missing courses when she came back to her home institution:

Credit transfer is not fair for us exchange students to Canada. The credits I gained from my host institution were all transferred to 80.0, which might have a negative impact on my GPA calculation. Additionally, I missed the professional courses given by my home institution for juniors, and when I returned to my home institution there was not re-entry course for returning students.

Echoed Claire's view, Lin also stated that she missed professional courses while exchanged to Canada.

### **5.6 Suggestions for Future Exchange Students and Program Developers**

Suggestions for future exchange students may have the potential to enhance the participants' transformative learning, since it give them opportunity to make reflection on their learning experiences. Participants in this study provided a wide range of suggestions; they were also asked to list some fields that could be developed to better

support students on exchange and to give specific advice for future students. Insightful suggestions included, but were not limited to academic, daily, and social life. Ming and Lin argued that it is important for undergraduate students to get out of their comfort zone. Ming suggested:

I think communicating with people from different cultural background is of great importance for we young generation. So future students, if you decide to go abroad, then don't use any excuse to limit yourself in the Chinese community.

If you just plan to spend your exchange time in your house, you're going to waste this opportunity.

Lin also talked about the importance of communicating with domestic students. She thought it could help exchange students to comprehend the host culture.

Hannah and Claire promoted the value of school services. Hannah encouraged future students to make use of the resources that the host institutions offers, such as asking for help from the International Student Centre, the Career Centre, the Writing Support Centre, and so forth. She says: "Don't be afraid of asking for help. They are really kind to answer your questions". Claire furthermore encouraged future students to try more possibilities and open their mind. She notes:

Some of my peers didn't choose to exchange abroad just because they were afraid of the GPA reduction. I think this kind of opinion is silly. My advice is don't think about that too much. Just try it. You'll gain something valuable than your high GPA.

Additionally, Mia gave a suggestion regarding academic learning. She shared: “I will suggest them to choose courses that they are interested in and good at, otherwise it’s hard to survive in the English-lecturing classes. Talking with course tutors, they’ll give you useful suggestion. In terms of improving English, I recommend you to participate in student activities as many as possible.”

In addition to feedback for students, participants also provided profound suggestions to program developers as well. These suggestions mainly related to pre-departure, adaptation, and re-entry planning. Ming commented:

I think they (program developers) need to know each individual’s special needs.

Like for me, I would like to share a dorm with a domestic student other than a Chinese international student to practice my spoken English. They should consider that kind of personal needs when arranging dorms.

More recommendations included adding introduction activities before departure. Five participants’ suggestion could be summarized into one theme: the importance of having a more supportive system. For instance, Mia thought it was necessary to introduce future exchange students to the curriculum settings in host institutions ahead of selecting courses. Similarly, Hannah pointed out: “I think it would be better if they offer more workshops, introducing us how we could adapt to the host institution.” She also mentioned that program developers should pay much closer attention to exchange students’ mental health. To this point, Kerry also shared her own experience:

I think continuing care is required. Program administrators in home institutions can’t just leave exchange students in a foreign country like I experienced. I think



they should know every exchange student's recent situation, even at host institutions.

Claire pointed out that there was minimal experience sharing in home institutions. She would like a place to share her own experiences and highly recommended home institutions develop re-entry seminars or workshops to share their stories and experiences.

## Chapter 6

### 6. Discussion

Using the research findings combined with TLT and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory, this chapter provides a critical analysis of the learning experiences that participants in international exchange programs reported. This research identifies that participants in Canadian HEIs shared similar learning experiences, with some key differences. Common learning gaps between China and Canada, academic challenges, and cultural learning greatly impacted their learning experiences and transformative learning.

The purpose of this study explores the learning experiences in international exchange programs from the perspectives of undergraduate students from China studying in Canada. Specifically, I consider how they interpret such learning experiences, and if their perspectives and practices may have been altered. This chapter turns back to the research purpose and research questions. Based on a constant comparative analysis method, my analysis captured three main themes: 1. Navigating learning experiences in Canadian HEIs; 2. Cultural learning experienced; 3. Transformative learning experienced.

#### 6.1 Navigating Learning Experiences in Canadian HEIs

This theme arose from comparisons in the research findings between participants' critical learning moments in Canadian HEIs. As international students exposed to an unfamiliar context, which is Canadian HEIs in this case, they gain international experiences. International students depend on previously established perspectives to

make sense of the unfamiliar. According to Taylor (2009), for transformation to take place, individuals have to progress past academic dialogue and critical reflection, which then allows integration of prior assumptions and new perspectives. Supported by Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory, my study contends that navigating learning experiences is essential in understanding participants' acculturation process and stress.

Findings in this theme suggest the ways that participants learned to navigate and cope with their learning experiences. During the interviews, participants shared critical learning moments during exchange, including specific events that trigger transformative learning. Based on this detailed information, their answers on critical learning moments mainly focused on three aspects: gaps in learning, challenging moments of learning, and learning strategies.

These results answer research questions 1 and 2: What learning experiences did undergraduate students from China have in their exchange programs in Canada? Second, how did Chinese undergraduate students interpret such learning experiences?

### **6.1.1 Gaps in Learning**

As mentioned in the literature review, previous scholars have described learning gaps by contrasting Canadian and Chinese contexts. In my research, participants similarly noticed significant differences between educational processes in China and Canada. Although existing literature has covered the main aspects of learning gaps through delving into different instructional strategies and different educational values, the present research provides more detail to supplement previous studies.

All participants showed appreciation toward the “student-centred” pedagogy in Canadian HEIs. This is visible from the frequency with which they mentioned the phrase “student-centred”. Three participants acknowledged that the assessment systems in Chinese and Canadian HEIs are different. Kerry observed that summative assessment still accounts for a large proportion of evaluation in her home institution; Chen’s (2015) recent study support Kerry’s claims by finding that although formative assessment has started to make its way to Chinese classrooms, the culture of assessment in China remains heavily organized around summative assessment though. Three participants indicated that formative assessment makes it possible for them to develop a learning process and gain progressive achievements. Their comments stated that formative assessment, “keep me working hard during the entire semester” and allow me to “grasp the learning process and show progressive achievements”. This affirms Liang’s (2003) conclusions that Canada heavily relies on formative assessment to evaluate students’ performance. However, what differs from Liang’s (2003) arguments is while that my participants preferred formative assessment, most of her participants preferred a combination of the Chinese and Canadian assessment system.

As identified by many participants, various class activities promote learning enthusiasm. Canadian instructors encourage students to make creative developments and promote meaning-making abilities by conducting interactive discussions or debates during class time (Barnes et al., 1994; Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Although some participants were not comfortable with class discussions due to their shyness or insufficient English proficiency, most of participants said creative activities benefited

them. Put differently, their learning interests were enhanced and cognitive skills were developed. Similar discussions can be found in the works of Windle et al. (2008), Huang and Cowden (2009), and Zhang and Zhou (2010) who find various benefits from activities in the student-centred pedagogy in Canadian classrooms.

Underlying the “student-centred” pedagogy, participants in this study appreciated the self-responsible learning strategies in Canadian HEIs. Participants’ narratives described enjoying the autonomy of selecting courses outside their study areas, which — for two participants — further prepared them for graduate studies. Participants assigned to an international student cohort like Ming do not experience this autonomy, because her courses were pre-arranged by the faculty as a package. Li, Dipetta and Woloshyn (2012) in addition to Liu (2016) described several limitations of these pre-arranged international student cohorts. Chiefly, they argued that little interaction with domestic peers is problematic; this segregation can prevent Chinese international students from making friends with native students, thereby lowering acculturation progress to some extent (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993). In my study, Lin and Mia championed the benefits of receiving a course outline at the outset of the course. They described this outline as a core learning document. As Carbaugh and Donber (2016) note, students are assigned relevant readings and multimedia materials before class discussions; consequently, learning in Canadian HEIs is not a passive process. Rather, this pedagogical strategy encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. In navigating the gaps between student-centred and instructor-centred

learning contexts, participants gained new perspectives and practices (E. W. Taylor, 2009).

Consistent with previous literature described above, my participants' educational values were imbued with accumulated learning experiences from China. Many participants identified teaching in Chinese HEIs as organized around knowledge acquisition, rather than knowledge production. As a result, instructors have the absolute authorities in Chinese classrooms. Chinese students, thus, are less willing to express personal opinions which could be aggressive. This speaks to the standpoints of Guo and O'Sullivan (2012), Hu (2010), and Liang (2003), who find that Chinese students are often reluctant in class. Although the participants in this study generally expressed appreciation for the freedom to speak in class, it nevertheless took significant time to adapt to this educational model due to the pervasive influence of traditional Chinese educational values. Despite the overall difficulties in adaptation, individual differences exist. Ming, who had studied in the U.S. briefly during her high school years, is an exception. In her words, she "adapted to the discussion-based pedagogy smoothly". To understand her views, it is important to consider her previous academic experience, age, and her out-going personality. As Jackson and Chen (2018) illustrates, researchers need to avoid putting students in boxes based on traits generally associated with the cultural group to which they are affiliated. Although one's social and academic environment may shape their learning practices and attitudes, this is not the full picture. This is similar to arguments on individual factors affecting acculturation. Described above, acculturation process describes other individual factors, such as age and pre-

acculturation experience. Ming, identified as the youngest participants, may be more flexible and adaptable to the new Canadian culture than others. Besides, she had had previous overseas learning experiences. Although it was a short sojourner experience, it may nevertheless have prepared her to a foreign environment. Notably, one participant — Lin — did not describe significant differences between Chinese and Canadian learning context, broadly. Rather, she argued that it depends on instructors rather than educational values in the two countries. In her words, “it’s common for students in my home institution to voice their thoughts freely in class time”.

New to the literature, some participants concerned that class efficiency that may be compromised due to excessive class activities. Although teamwork is accustomed to collectivistic approach of learning, some participants nevertheless described that they did not experience effective teamwork in Chinese class. Many participants mentioned that they had joined in teamwork activities in their home environment in a rigid way. Kerry found teamwork to be more practical and active in Canadian HEIs. That might be a potential explanation about why they thought ineffective teamwork could be a waste of time.

Another finding surrounds the discussion between collectivistic and individualistic cultures in both countries. Claire and Mia felt they were treated as unique individuals and taken great care of in Canada, which is always unrealistic in China due to its huge population and different cultural values. This connects to Liang’s (2003) discussion framing Canadian education as a “customer service” in which students are seen as unique individuals receiving service from their instructors and institution.

Participants' perceptions of differences in the Chinese and Canadian contrasts are the initiation point for transformative learning. This helps participants make sense of new experiences based on their previous perspectives, followed by their willingness to create academic dialogue and make critical reflections.

### **6.1.2 Challenging Moments of Learning**

When participants recalled their critical learning moments, some challenges quickly became evident. These challenges help answer my second research question, which ask how participants interpret their learning experiences.

All participants except for Mia reported struggling with some level of English language barriers. This challenge existed in their everyday academic learning, such as class discussions, academic reading and writing. This finding affirms the conclusion reached by Liang (2003), Hu (2010), Zhang and Zhou (2010), Liu (2016), as well as Zhang (2018), that international students often have difficulty understanding lectures, engaging in class discussions, and writing academic papers. Meanwhile, four participants reported that their English vocabulary articulation is insufficient. This is in consistent with Kuo (2011)'s research findings which note that the lack of field-based English terminologies, leading to reading difficulties for international students whose instructional language was not English.

All six participants had passed English language examinations required by the host institutions. Kerry, especially, took Business English in her home institution and received a high score in the IELTS examination. Chinese students' inability to apply English language at the tertiary level is pre-documented in relevant studies. Zhang



(2018) explains that an essential reason is due to the exam-oriented English teaching and learning in China. This strategy neglects the importance of learning English for pragmatic aims. Nevertheless, the participants in my study expressed minimal challenges with daily communication in English. A possible reason is that daily communication is often conducted in an informal and relaxed way which has less power distance. Chinese students, thus, have less need to concern about making mistakes and losing face in front of the public.

Importantly, lack of sufficient English language proficiency may reduce international students' opportunities to communicate with native peers, thereby triggering isolation and in turn acculturative stress. Leong (2015) confirms the negative impact of language barriers on adjusting to host culture.

Challenging moments necessitate a wider understanding of cultural differences. Consistent with Liang (2003), Jiao (2006) and Windle et al. (2008), I found that all my participants appreciated Canadian ways of learning, despite enduring tensions and conflicts while adapting to a different culture. Cultural difference is another concern that contributes to acculturative stress. As illustrated described in Chapter three, based on Berry's (2005) acculturation strategies for individuals in non-dominant groups and the further "one size cannot fit the all" thought, I made an inference that the general ideas my participants had toward Canadian culture was appreciation. Participants like Ming was keen to establish interactions with the host culture, her opportunities with somewhat compromised by the arrangement of her cohort. Furthermore, since she spent the shortest relative period in exchange, she may not have enough time to ponder how

to integrate host and home cultures. Hannah, Claire, Lin and Mia all made efforts in building new relationships in Canada while maintaining their Chinese heritage culture; they took advantages of both Canadian and Chinese cultures. Notably, Kerry did not have any special feelings toward Canadian culture. In her words, she was rarely interested in either cultural maintenance or establishing a social network with domestic Canadian students because of her heavy workload.

Associated with TLT, I argue that the English language barriers and cultural differences trigger disorienting dilemmas that the participants had to navigate. All the participants had their own strategies to overcome these disorienting dilemmas and continued their process of transformative learning. Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory posits that these challenges were translated to acculturative stress. Nevertheless, the participants in this study made great efforts to persevere through this stress.

### **6.1.3 Overcoming Challenges and Differences**

As a vital part of the transformative learning process, students have to overcome challenges in order to experience transformations. In this study, each participant put efforts into overcoming challenges and differences, which enabled the process of transformative learning and fostered transformations. Their efforts to engage in critical dialogues and initiate critical reflection on their own also promoted the transformative learning process.

Asking for help from others is a major strategy for overcoming English language challenges. Participants developed communication skill by creating academic

dialogues with one another. Ming and Kerry described seeking support from professors or instructors, while other Chinese peers chose to ask help from their TAs and peers — especially who shared the same cultural background with them. They reasoned that TAs or peers were much easier to communicate than professors and instructors. In understanding why Chinese international students rely on each other for help, I posit two potential reasons. First, the students share similar English language barriers. Second, they have a common shared experience that promotes strong belongingness. These shared experiences accommodate participants in solving problems, albeit restrained to communication with domestic and other international students (Jiao, 2006). Additionally, some participants appreciated the campus services provided for students. Specifically, some participants in this study benefited considerably from the Writing Support Centre and the International Student Centre. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that asking for help is often easier said than done. All the participants shared ways they self-initiated efforts into overcoming academic.

All participants completed additional individual works to overcome academic challenges. This perspective relates closely to a key Chinese educational value, which is diligence in learning. Hannah, Mia, and Claire noted that they spent significant time reviewing knowledge after class. Ming's narrative vividly described study sessions, "I heard from my Canadian friends that the faculty would set up courses to review previous knowledge systematically in junior and senior years of study. That's great for knowledge construction." Initiating additional study time to review concepts also

affords additional time to reflect critically and make sense of their learning experiences, which further initiates the participants' transformative learning.

## **6.2 Cultural Learning Experienced**

This theme arose from findings regarding participants' attitudes toward the Canadian culture. These findings explain the strategies that participants applied through their acculturation. They also help to answer the research question 2: how did Chinese undergraduate students interpret such learning experiences?

All participants hold positive attitudes about their Canadian exchange opportunity. Although they encountered various challenges in Canadian HEIs, they valued this exchange opportunity as a benefit for either their personal growth or their future academic studies. All of them encourage future students to similarly join an exchange program.

In Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) Acculturation theory, acculturation occurs when someone goes to live in a different culture than where they were raised. My participants have experienced acculturation to different degrees, depending on previous life events. All participants had a general comprehension of the Canadian culture, which featured diversity and inclusiveness. They noted that they were treated equally as local students and they did not experience discrimination. Their perceptions of acculturation diverged from some relevant literature which report a hard acculturation process for many international students (Rawcliffe, 2016; Wu, 2013; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). This difference could be explained by the fact that short-term exchange students do not have

to fulfill as many as academic and social responsibilities as fulltime international students. Consequently, they are less exposed to the host culture. Notably, my participants had completed several years of higher education in their home institution. In terms of Beiser et al. (1988), higher levels of education may reduce acculturative stress. Moreover, half of the participants were living in host cities in Canada with strong Chinese communities, which likely makes their acculturation process smoother than for others. However, spending too much time with a Chinese community in a foreign context is sometimes regarded as a resistance to change. To prevent this situation, my participants sought to engage with the Canadian community. Despite such efforts and Canada's inclusive social context, many participants nevertheless found it hard to really integrate into Canadian social circles.

### **6.3 Transformative Learning Experienced**

All the participants indicated that they have experienced personal change while in the exchange programs. They shared various areas of personal change, including English language proficiency improvement, learning methods development, and mindset change. These changes are explained by TLT, which describes how experiences transform individuals' perspectives and changed behaviour into transformative learning. These findings echo the discussion of Bossard and Peterson (2005) whose participants reported that they gained broadened perspectives and improved communication skills upon the completion of their exchange. This discussion on transformative learning

assists in answering the research question 3: How may such learning experiences have altered the perspectives and practices of undergraduate students from China?

All participants in my research reported that their English proficiency improved upon completing exchange in Canada. Participants who spent two terms in host institutions described more English improvement than participants who stayed for one term in Canadian HEIs. My participants generally did not describe any communication problems in daily life. They did also note improved listening comprehension skills. In Lin and Claire's cases, they shared that their scores on the listening part on the IELTS examination had increased. This finding is consistent with previous relevant research. As illustrated by Dwyer (2004) and Vande Berg et al. (2009), the longer the period that international students spend in overseas institutions, the greater second language skills they gain. Unfortunately, academic English writing remains a hurdle for my participants. Lin mentioned that she was so afraid of writing in English, that she deliberately took other parts in teams in Canadian HEIs.

Participants reported acquiring varied types of new learning methods in Canadian HEIs. The interview data also showed that participants benefited from new learning methods at different levels. For example, Hannah and Kerry, for whom it had been in nearly two years since completing their exchange, still spoke highly of the Western ways of learning they experienced during exchange. The advantages of Western educational pedagogy not only benefited them in their graduate studies, but also in the labor market. Conversely, Claire, Lin, and Mia — all interviewed in their final year of university — did not report significant learning method changes. Possible

considerations include the completion of their remaining studies at their home institutions. Since they had only a few additional courses to complete at their home institutions, they may have had fewer opportunities to apply new learning strategies. An additional reason may be their focus on a graduation thesis or project in their final year. Thus, it may not be the ideal time to investigate changes in their learning methods, since they may not have had time to reflect and notice any changes. In this regard, I deduce that they have likely acquired new learning methods that have put “on hold” after returning to home institutions. As they continue with their academic studies, I suspect they put these changes into practices.

The participants’ mindset did change as a result of their learning experiences, albeit in different ways. Transformative learning requires individuals to become more reflective, critical, and receptive to others’ opinions (King, 2003; Mezirow, 1994). In particular, a great mindset change occurred in terms of confidence. Participants commented that they have more confidence now to deal with the unexpected and unwilling changes and events. As previously described, none of the six participants had ever been to Canada before their exchange. Thus, they gained significant exposure to a new cultural and learning context with different worldviews and ways of behaving. As a result, participants became more accepting of differences and also more interesting in further developing their global awareness. Participants learned that they could make friends with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, even in spite of language barriers. Furthermore, all participants gained insights into their future studies and career plans. Overall, this experience gave participants a clearer idea of what they wanted to

achieve in the future. Throughout the interview, all participants shared their transformation readily and noted their appreciation for the personal changes brought about by the exchange experiences.



## **Chapter Seven**

### **7 Implications and Conclusion**

In this concluding chapter, I summarize my study and then discuss some implications for future exchange students, administrators, and policy makers. Following this, I offer possible directions for future research. At the end, I link these findings to my own personal perspectives and experiences.

#### **7.1 Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences of undergraduate students from China who participated in an exchange program in Canada, how they interpreted such learning experiences, and how their perspectives and practices may have been altered. To achieve this aim, this research positions the learning experiences of exchanged Chinese students at its centre. The following three research questions guided my study:

1. What learning experiences did undergraduate students from China have in their exchange programs in Canada?
2. How did Chinese undergraduate students interpret such learning experiences?
3. How may such learning experiences have altered the perspectives and practices of undergraduate students from China?

I applied TLT and Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory to guide my study. TLT helped described the disorienting dilemmas that Chinese international students encountered could be served as catalysts that foster transformative learning. Academic dialogue and critical reflection also served as

overarching factors that support transformation. In light of Berry's (1987; 1997; 2006; 2008) acculturation theory, my study findings showed that Chinese students experienced an acculturation process in different ways. In considering their individual acculturative stress, I extracted individual factors impacting their acculturation.

The research purpose supported a single case study approach incorporated with an interpretivist paradigm was used to explore each participant's learning experiences in a Canadian HEI. The semi-structured interview was the main method to collect data. All of the interviews were conducted after receiving ethics approval from Western University. Participants were recruited through purposeful snowball sampling and six participants eventually enrolled in this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy.

## **7.2 Implications**

Although Chinese international students' learning experiences have been studied and well-documented by scholars, specific research on Chinese exchange students in Canadian HEIs is still insufficient. My study gives future exchange students and administrators insights into these six participants' learning experiences in Canadian HEIs, how they interpreted such experiences, and how their perspectives and practices were altered. Such implications could contribute to enhance international exchange programs by providing potential student with better services.

By exploring the learning experiences of six participants, this study has several implications for future exchange students from China in several regards. First, although

exploring participants' prior learning experiences in their home institutions was not included in the original research design, the participants' descriptions of challenges they experienced in their post-*Gaokao* era in their home institutions were touching. HEIs in China are highly selective in admitting students, even though some students do not pull in full efforts once they receive admission of universities. In Kerry's instance, she mentioned that she and her Chinese peers do not put a lot effort into individual classes. Such a post-*Gaokao* learning sickness make Chinese exchange students feel uncomfortable and stressful when they first come to Canadian HEIs. I hope this study will make future exchange students discern the importance of putting effort into everyday learning at their home institutions. Not only will this reduce end-of-year stress regarding summative assessment, but it may also reduce stress if they ever study in a different learning context — such as Canada.

For students seriously considering an exchange opportunity, I highly recommend analyzing the feasibility of studying abroad. Not everyone can succeed in international education, especially when the host country has such a different cultural background with China. Previous research often shares the positive impact of study abroad which sometimes may mislead future students. Considering the negatives is important to ensure that students — and their families — thoroughly consider the decision. For those who ultimately decide to embark on an exchange experience, I recommend making certain preparations before coming to Canada. This helps ensure that the student is mentally prepared regarding the difficulties they might experience in their sojourner journey in Canada. Additionally, it is important for prospective

exchange students to improve their English language proficiency, particularly spoken English skills, in order to comprehend culture and daily life in Canada before departure.

Upon arriving in Canada, I suggest establishing a support network with peers from different cultural groups. Making connections with local students is necessary. As Trooboff, Cressey and Monty (2004) suggest, “To go abroad and not get involved in the local culture, even with good grades, misses the point of the experience” (p. 204). All of my participants mentioned the importance of being open-minded. Additionally, students should build relationships with instructors and TAs for two reasons: first, they support the learning process; second, they can contribute to a positive learning context. I then suggest making use of the university services, such as attending to workshops and events. These are useful in releasing pressure, increasing cultural awareness, and improving academic performance.

Furthermore, in terms of TLT framework, I highly recommend that future students take time to reflect on their learning experiences while abroad, such as writing a reflection diary and talking with others about the confusions. These benefit transformative learning.

Transferring credits from host institutions toward home institutions also needs special attention. While there may be legitimate differences in the grading policies of different HEIs, some participants’ home institutions do not transfer exchange students’ grades by applying a grade equivalency table. Take Claire’s example, wherein all her grades were transferred to 80.0 when she came back to her home institution. This

inevitably had a negative impact on her GPA calculation. Future exchange students should be cognizant of this grading system before they pursue an exchange.

Administrators play critical roles in supporting exchange students. However, administrators in both home and host institutions seemed un-informed about the previous learning experiences of exchange students. My participants reported some degree of sadness due to feeling “abandoned” in foreign country. I hope this study reminds administrators of their duties, which is to function as a contact point for outgoing students and be available when they need help. Additionally, administrators in host institutions should better consider international students’ specific learning preferences and feelings. As in Ming’s example, although would have liked to live with domestic native peers rather than Chinese international students, she did not have this option. I suggest administrators in host institutions take the time to talk with exchange students so that they can better understand their personal requirements.

Program developers in home institutions should also assess participants’ needs before they leave for exchange. This includes informing future students about the educational model at the host institution, such as the credit transfer system, and courses they may take. These information sessions are the responsibility of program developers. Finally, program developers should also keep in closer constant contact with both the outgoing exchange students and the administrators in host institutions.

Program developers should also support returning exchange students, such as by providing networking opportunities to share their sojourner experiences. This also helps returning students complete their transformative learning. As mentioned in

Chapter 5, participants had some difficulty re-adjusting to courses in their home institutions. In addition to workshops, re-entry courses could also be useful.

Host institutions have the responsibility to take care of exchange students in their institutions. Thus, better activities could help welcoming exchange students and help them fit in. These events could include orientation programs for exchange students, and information sessions upon arrival. Additionally, social events such as picnics or cultural trips, give new students chances to meet each other and domestic peers. Last but not least, program developers should inform exchange students about the academic rules, since some students may not be familiar with academic regulations in their host countries, such as academic integrity.

Returning exchange students are key sources for program development. As mentioned in Chapter 5, my participants noted that they had few opportunities to share their sojourner experiences in their home institutions. They learned new learning strategies and had a refreshed mindset, but no one heard their stories. I hope this study can open a window for exchange program developers to hear the experiences that exchange students have in host institutions. Utilizing these resources could benefit not only future exchange students, but also their domestic peers.

At the policy level, I suggest changes to international exchange student recruitment. Specifically, I advocate for more guidance from both the Chinese and Canadian governments when Chinese students apply for international exchange programs. For example, governmental institutions could give potential exchange students with a comprehensive introduction to the Canadian educational system and

their respective host institution, so that students can make an appropriate choice rather than only considering exchanging to a Canadian HEI out of curiosity or interest.

### **7.3 Future Directions, Personal Reflections, and Conclusion**

This present study explores the learning experiences of a specific group of Chinese international students by focusing on their own stories. It is limited in some ways including the number of participants and the scope of argument.

Future directions for this work require further analysis of groups of Chinese exchange students, such as current exchange students. Additional research would allow for a comparison between the learning experiences of current students compared to returned ones.

Future research could apply a mixed method approach. This is because I encountered some challenges in recruiting participants; an expanded scope in recruiting participants may have mitigated this.

It would also be beneficial to add the voices of program administrators and faculty members in exploring Chinese exchange students' learning experiences in Canadian HEIs. Comparing the perspectives of exchange students, program administrators and faculty members could provide more comprehensive feedback leading to better services to future exchange students, thereby nurturing these international academic partnerships.

Conducting this research has been a precious experience for me. It not only enriches my understanding of exchange students from China and internationalization

of higher education, but makes it possible to connect my personal experiences and perspectives with my study.

I came to this research as a Chinese international student. I am a college graduate from a language learning university in China who could have joined in an exchange program to Canada during my undergraduate studies. Presently, I am a graduate student pursuing a Master's degree in the field of education in Canada. After giving up the chance of exchanging to Canada, I asked myself several times whether I have made the right choice. As a potential student, I had my own concerns about exchange programs. However, as a current graduate student I have had an overall positive learning experience. Completing this research study has allowed me to recognize that there is no definite good choice or correct answer. I believe this perspective will also benefit future exchange students.

My study generally corroborated the previous literature on relevant topics. The participants described learning gaps in contrasting the Chinese and Canadian contexts, challenges, and strategies for overcoming difficulties. Additionally, the participants shared critical learning moments in Canadian HEIs; these reflected different perspectives consistent with their previous learning backgrounds, study areas, and the amount of time they spent in Canada.

Findings have also confirmed that Chinese exchange students experienced acculturation while on exchange. Students applied different strategies to cope with acculturation, and the findings suggest that participants adapted well in Canadian culture, despite this acculturative stress. Similar findings applied to transformative



learning as well. Participants experienced disorienting dilemmas and achieved transformative learning through creating academic dialogue and making critical reflections. They experienced transformative learning in three aspects: English proficiency improvement, leaning methods enhancement, and mindset transformation. As students' mindset cannot be transformed completely in a short sojourner program, there are still many ways that Chinese education could fulfill the requirements of internationalization.

In conclusion, international exchange programs have a positive impact on Chinese students with respect to academic learning and personal growth. Despite limitations and challenges, participants generally enjoyed studying in the Canadian educational system. Participants described several benefits of these programs: fostering more autonomy and self-responsibility for learning; providing clarity regarding future studies and career plans upon completing the exchange programs; and a transformative learning experience. Ultimately, participating in an international exchange program in Canada was a beneficial experience overall for my participants. Consequently, such exchange programs are useful tools in preparing Chinese students for the internationalization of higher education.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics Approval Notice



**Date:** 18 November 2019

**To:** Professor Jun Li

**Project ID:** 114850

**Study Title:** Students' Learning Experiences in Exchange Programs: Perspectives of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Canada

**Short Title:** Students' Learning Experiences in Exchange Programs: Perspectives of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Canada

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** December 6 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 18/Nov/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 18/Nov/2020

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Dear Professor Jun Li

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Debriefing Form	Debriefing document		
Letter of Information and Consent Form	Written Consent/Assent		
Semi-structured Interview Questions	Interview Guide		

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No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 0000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## **Appendix B: Letter of Information**

### **Students' Learning Experiences in Exchange Programs: Perspectives of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Canada Letter of Information**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jun Li

Affiliation: Western University

Email address: [REDACTED]

Telephone number: [REDACTED]

Additional Researcher: Xue Ji

Affiliation: Western University

Email address: [REDACTED]

Telephone number: [REDACTED]

You are invited to participate in this research study about exploring students' learning experiences in exchange programs because of your valuable experiences associated with student exchange programs in Canada. The purpose of this study is to explore the learning experiences of Chinese undergraduate students who have finished exchange programs in Canada and returned to China already and how do they make sense of these experiences, which have not been well researched. This study will last around 6 months, and during this period you will be contacted for a 45-minutes interview for discussions on experiences with regard to this topic. This interviews will be taking place at your convenience place or via remote technology. The interviews will be audio-recorded. If you do not agree to be audio-recorded, you cannot participate in this research. The data will only be used for the research purpose. Your personal information will NOT be revealed in no circumstance and all the data is under the protection of confidentiality.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this study. You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole which may help potential Chinese exchange students understand Canadian educational context and improve the program administrators' services provided to potential participants.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you will not be compensated for your participation in this research. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study. Even if you consent to participate, you do not have to answer individual questions, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g. by phone, in writing, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you.

Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Your full name and telephone number will be collected for distinguishing with your pseudonym and contact. Nobody else expect for the researchers will have access to your personal information as a participant. The data will be stored on a secure server at Western University and will be retained for a minimum of 7 years. A list linking your pseudonym with your name and your telephone number will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file. With your permission, quotes will be used in the dissemination of results. You may (or may not) be quoted directly in the results, but once you are quoted, your pseudonym will be used and any information that could identify you will be removed. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact the Principal Investigator of this research: Dr. Jun Li (Email: [REDACTED]). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, please contact The Office of Human Research Ethics [REDACTED], [REDACTED], email: [REDACTED]. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

## Appendix C: Letter of Consent

### Students' Learning Experiences in Exchange Programs: Perspectives of Chinese Undergraduate Students in Canada Letter of Consent

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jun Li

Affiliation: Western University

Email address: [REDACTED]

Telephone number: [REDACTED]

Researcher: Xue Ji

Affiliation: Western University

Email address: [REDACTED]

Telephone number: [REDACTED]

1. I agree to be quoted in the dissemination of results on the premise that a pseudonym is used.  
Yes  No
2. I consent to be contacted for future studies.  
Yes  No

I have read the Letter of Information and have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (DD-*MMM*-YYYY): \_\_\_\_\_

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Print name of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_ Jun Li \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (DD-*MMM*-YYYY): \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Questions**

### **Questions to establish the context of exchange:**

1. What was your previous educational background prior to exchange to Canada?

Had you ever studied abroad prior to participating in exchange programs?

2. Why did you choose Canada as your exchange destination? Had you visited Canada on some other trip prior to exchange?

3. What year of study were you in when on exchange?

4. What were the dates of your exchange? How long did your exchange program take?

### **Questions about learning experiences on exchange:**

1. Describe significant learning moments you experienced while engaged in exchange programs. Why these learning moments significant?

2. Tell me about the challenges you experienced with the Canadian educational system during your exchange. How did you deal with those challenges?

3. What do you think the differences are between Chinese and Canadian classes?

### **Questions about making sense of learning experiences:**

1. Looking back your time on exchange, in which ways you have changed (mainly in learning aspect)?

2. What have you learned from your learning experience in Canada?

3. Any suggestions for improving this experience (suggestions for future exchange students and for program developers).

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Xue Ji

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2018-2020 M.A.

Tianjin Foreign Studies University  
Tianjin, China  
2014-2018 B.A.

**Honours and Awards:** Excellent Undergraduate Thesis  
2018

**Related work Experience:** Online ESL Teacher  
Likeshuo, Meten International Educational Group  
2020-present

Substitute English teacher  
The Attached School of Nankai University  
2017