

**Academic, Linguistic, and Socio-Cultural Experiences in the Acculturation of
Chinese International Graduate Students**

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Post-Graduate Studies in partial
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Abstract

An increasing number of graduate students are choosing to pursue their studies internationally and Canada is one of the principal host countries for these students, particularly students from China. The push by many Canadian universities to increase their foreign enrollment has led to new classroom dynamics. Chinese international students (CIS) are at the centre of this change. However, getting accepted into a Canadian graduate program does not necessarily mean that the challenges facing these students are over. Often, they encounter social, cultural, linguistic, and academic challenges that as they navigate the unfamiliar environments they find themselves in.

The purpose of this study is to use a conceptual framework based on the notion of *acculturation* to explore these challenges faced by four Chinese international students who have completed their Master's of Education degrees in Second Language Education. My goal is not only to provide a platform to highlight the voices of these students, but also to create a greater understanding of the challenges they face for the edification of their classmates, professors and university administrators.

The findings of this study demonstrate that my respondents encountered a variety of challenges during their graduate studies in Canada, both inside and outside of the classroom. Although numerous studies have been conducted that examine various aspects of the experiences of international students, none have used the Seidman (2013) three-interview qualitative method. This method provides opportunities for prolonged lengths of time to be spent with each participant, which therefore allows for greater depth of investigation to be reached with each. This study demonstrates how a sample of Chinese international students met and dealt with the socio-cultural, linguistic, and more particularly academic challenges they encountered in Canadian graduate-level courses.

Keywords: Chinese international students, international education, acculturation.

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List of Abbreviations

CIS	Chinese International Students
PGWPP	Post-Graduation Work Permit Program

Chapter 1: Introduction

A major focus of the university where the students in this study completed their graduate work is a document outlining the university's plan to increase the internationalization of its student body. Specifically, one of the university's main aims is to double the number of international graduate students in the next five years. With this in mind, it is essential that the decision makers at the university understand the experiences and expectations of these international graduate students they are going to host.

My research focuses on one of the largest and fastest-growing cohorts in this group: Chinese international graduate students. This thesis examines the experiences of Chinese international graduate students as they study in a second language and foreign context. The research question that guides this study is:

How do Chinese international students enrolled in a second language education graduate program construct narratives of their socio-cultural, linguistic, and academic experiences associated with studying at a Canadian university?

My choice of this research topic has been guided by my own educational and professional experiences as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and as a graduate student. I have lived and taught in Taiwan and China, as well as at two major research universities in Southern Ontario as an ESL teacher. Most of the

participants that I recruited for this research are my former classmates in the Master's of Education program.

In my role as an ESL instructor at the university level, I have been responsible for teaching English for Academic Purposes. The goal of these courses is to prepare international students (largely Chinese students) for their studies at Canadian universities. I have seen the challenges that are present before students enrol in their programs. As a student, I have seen how many of those same challenges are still present at the graduate level with my classmates. Both my students and my classmates have shown me that there is a need for greater understanding of their needs.

My time living and working in Taiwan and China, and my constant exposure to Chinese students over the past five years have given me some foundational understanding of Chinese cultures and a basic understanding of some of the particular English language challenges for Mandarin first language students. This understanding has given me certain advantages as a researcher, as I have been able to make cultural connections and references that would perhaps escape other researchers. In particular, my knowledge of Chinese cultures and my proximity to the research subjects was a beneficial position in the data collection stage. As Holmes (2005) states, "strong interpersonal relations between participants and researchers are especially important when the participants are ethnic Chinese, among whom interpersonal communication is predicated on trust" (p. 296).

I also feel that my background in journalism studies helped me to be an empathetic interviewer. During my undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Journalism), I conducted a number of interviews for the purposes of research. I hope that my own comfort level with the interview process helped my respondents feel comfortable in the interviews in which they participated.

As I will detail further in the methodology chapter, this research is epistemologically grounded in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1986). This epistemological view emphasizes the fact that knowledge is co-constructed. As is explored in the Chapter 4, the participants in this study were co-creating knowledge and meaning through their studies and interactions with their classmates and professors.

This thesis is subsequently organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 lays out the academic literature and context related to the study. I note that the increased influx of international Chinese students is a significant recent development for Canadian graduate programs, especially in terms of the site under study. I then summarize the literature in terms of the experiences of these students academically, linguistically and socio-culturally. I continue chapter 2 by outlining the conceptual framework for the study. The theoretical basis for framing the research was Schumann's (1986) *Theory of Acculturation*. Chapter 3 summarizes the study's methodology by describing the overall design, how the case was defined, its participants and instrumentation. Chapter 4 is a description of the findings, organized by participant. In reference to the study's conceptual framework, chapter

4 discusses these findings in terms of the academic, linguistic and socio-culture challenges faced by my respondents, and how these relate to *acculturation*. I have included quotes of unusually substantive length in this section to allow the participants to tell their own stories, and to provide an accurate depiction of their personalities and such characteristics as language level. I found longer quotes to be best suited to this study so that deeper understanding of each participant's voice could clearly be heard. Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, which focuses on the implications connected to this study related to teaching and further research. After the reference list, this thesis contains a number of appendices related to demographic information about the participants, ethics, recruitment emails and interview protocols.

Throughout the study, I use the label *China* to refer to Mainland China (and *Chinese International Students* as those students who originate from Mainland China). This is in line with Fong's (2011) work which specifies that "although Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao are recognized by most countries . . . as part of 'China,' they are historically, socially, economically, politically, demographically, and geopolitically quite different from mainland China" (p. 35). The respondents in this study all originate from Mainland China. Other labels such as "Oriental", "Mandarin speakers", "Chinese students" are either too restrictive, offensive, outdated or inaccurate to be viable options in this study, although these terms have been referenced in this thesis whenever they have been used by other authors or the participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I argue that the rationale for the present study results from an examination of the academic literature, which shows that there is a pressing need to concentrate research on the academic challenges for international graduate students. I further argue that the notion of acculturation is the best way to frame this work.

This chapter first outlines the literature related to acculturation in the context of the history of Chinese international student enrolment in Canadian universities. I then provide reviews of the academic literature related to the linguistic, sociocultural and academic challenges that international graduate students have commonly faced in general. As I argue below, there is a noticeable gap in the literature related to academic challenges, which have not been studied nearly to the same extent as those related to linguistic and sociocultural factors. Once establishing the fact that previous scholars have studied these latter two challenges in depth, I outline in detail the little there is in the literature that pertains specifically to academic challenges. I conclude this chapter by returning to the notion of acculturation with an explicit outline of the conceptual framework for this study.

In 1973, the first nine students from the People's Republic of China to be issued overseas study permits came to Carleton University in Ottawa. Forty years later, thousands of Chinese international students are studying across Canada and many other countries beyond China's borders. According to Basen's (2013)

documentary on the first Chinese international students in Canada, they “struggled with adjusting to Canadian life.” One of the students who came to Canada to study said, “our purpose was quite clear; we were there to study.” But this student also noted that, “Canadian students don’t need to study as hard; they will more easily get a good job; they didn’t need to work as hard as the Chinese students” (Basen, 2013). Many of the issues that faced those first Chinese international students more than four decades ago seem to still be challenges that face the Chinese international students who are studying at Canadian universities today.

My literature review began with ERIC database searches for the terms *acculturation, international students, internationalization, Chinese international students, international education, Chinese students abroad, international student challenges, and hosting international students*. There has been extensive research done on these topics, so I was able to be selective in my choice of studies that directly apply to my work. From the numerous articles related to my study, I selected 24 seminal studies, which I have cited below. I selected these articles for their relevance either to the topics of *internationalization, acculturation, challenges of international students*, their relevance to either the Canadian host context, or to the Chinese international student experience. Many of these articles used qualitative or mixed-method approaches to research. Many included a large number of participants with the goal of presenting themes supported by quantifiable data. Of particular importance were several qualitative studies (Lieberman, 1994; Desjardins & King, 2011) that featured similar approaches to the present research. In order to further understand the local and global contexts related to my topic, I

followed these searches with an examination of documents on internationalization at the university where the interviews took place and a perusal of books on international education.

Discussion of the experiences facing Chinese international graduate students is of special relevance when considering the great influx of international Chinese students into Canadian (and other Western) education graduate programs (Holmes, 2005). Indeed, between 1998-2007, the number of Chinese international students studying in Canada rose by 172%, with an increased number of those students studying in education faculties (Liu & Winn, 2009). By 2014, the number of international students studying in Canada was 336,497 (CBIE, 2015). China still remains the country that sends the most students to study in Canada, with a total of 95,160 students studying in Canada in 2013 (CBIE, 2015). As I argue in greater detail below, the need for increased awareness of expectations of this cohort of students, their classmates, and their teachers is essential to the success of these students, but also to the success of their programs of study. Any challenging experiences that arise are often directly based around the degree to which these expectations are realized.

I have focused on Chinese students in particular, as they make up the largest cultural group in the ever-growing cohort of international students coming to study in Canada. According to figures compiled by the Asia Pacific Foundation's 2010 report, 15% of Canada's annual intake was from China. That number has continued to grow since then. Approximately 50,000 Chinese graduate students study at

Canadian universities at any one time: a reflection of the fact that China has topped the list of source nations since 2001. The number of international students studying in Canada grew 84% from 2003 to 2014 (CBIE, 2015). The University of Ottawa has also accepted a larger number of students, and aims to double the number of international graduate students enrolled in all faculties by 2020 (University of Ottawa, 2015)

An examination of the literature indicates that Chinese students face unique challenges that are not necessarily faced by other international students. Gan (2009) highlights the fact that more widely “culture-based characterization of Asian learners tends to lead some practitioners to position Asian students as different and even problematic” (p. 42). Although Gan’s (2009) research focuses on Asian learners, I contend that the culture-based characterizations she explores also apply to the Chinese international students in my research context. The stark differences that are perceived include differing views regarding academic culture, social and academic norms and expectations, and student-teacher power relations. All of these factors have the potential to greatly affect learning, as well as teacher perceptions and classroom accommodations. Chinese international students face what some researchers have labeled as “academic culture shock” (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010, p. 210), or what others have called “learning shock” (Gu & Maley, 2005, p. 229). Both of these labels attempt to define the difficulties that Chinese international learners encounter when they are exposed to a new and unfamiliar learning environment. This adjustment is very much linked to the greater experiences of culture shock, and inseparably connected to each individual’s linguistic ability and confidence.

With an ever-growing population of Chinese students studying abroad, Western students, teachers, and universities must be willing to address the potential challenges faced by the influx of students from this cohort. Part of how this issue is being addressed is by recognizing the dramatic increase of the number of foreign-trained second language education (SLE) graduate students now enrolling in Canadian universities (Desjardins & King, 2011) and, specifically, by giving high priority to internationalization. Through dialogue and acknowledgment of difference, the educational experience will hopefully be more productive and richer for all parties.

Acculturation

Schumann's (1986) *Acculturation Model for Second Language* explores the processes which second language learners experience as they learn a new language in relation to the native speakers of that language. Schumann (1986) argues that "learners will acquire the target language to the degree they acculturate to the target language group" (p. 379). I have used this model as the central and guiding concept for this research. As I outline below, it forms the basis for my conceptual framework.

Schumann (1986) argued that the extent to which language learners acquire a language depended on their acculturation into the "target language group" (p. 379). Although Schumann (1986) mentioned the psychological elements that are involved in acculturation, it is his focus on the social elements and the proximity to the target language culture that is most relevant to my study. To an extent, many of

the texts in my literature review directly or indirectly deal with the notions of cultural distance through exploring the space between international students and their host colleagues, international students' familiar culture and their host culture, and of course the challenges involved in bridging those gaps in a new language.

The extent to which acculturation occurs for second language learners, Schumann (1986) argued, depends on many factors. These include social, affective, and personality factors, among others. The factors that my participants mentioned included dominance, motivation, language culture shock, and assimilation: all factors that Schumann (1986) highlighted in his theory (p. 380).

One of the earliest studies on the acculturation of international students (specifically how social distance affected second language acquisition for international students) was Maple's (1982). He explored how Schumann's (1986) acculturation model could be applied more broadly to a cohort very similar to the one in this study. Schumann initially argued that Maple's (1982) research participants (international students studying and learning English in North America) "did not constitute a 'community' as envisioned by the acculturation model" (Schumann, 1986, p. 388). Despite his initial reluctance to see the widespread potential of his original model across contexts that he did not originally intend, the success of Maple's (1982) work made Schumann realize that his model was "applicable to other groups" (p. 389). Schumann concedes, that in fact, his model has been proven to be applicable to a variety of groups, particularly "groups from one language background [and] students" (p. 390).

Shi's (2010) auto-ethnography is one of the few studies that looks specifically at acculturation issues of Chinese international students in a Canadian university context. Although her research method is very different from the method utilized for this study, my participants echoed many of the same points she made. In particular, even though Shi (2010) describes the challenges she faced as an international student under different headings, she does recognize that linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic challenges existed in her context as a Chinese graduate student.

Although the acculturation model was originally applied specifically to immigrants who were acquiring a new language, further research has been done to explore the specific experiences of acculturation for international university students. Weidman, Twale and Stein (2001) focus on the socialization process of graduate students, which they identify as "the process through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills" (p.3). This acquisition of skills and specialized knowledge is the process experienced by all graduate students, but it has additional challenges that are unique to international students. This process of academic socialization is referred to as *academic acculturation* by Berry (2002). While acculturation as a general theme has been explored in a variety of contexts, the notion of academic acculturation has only been explored specifically in the Canadian context in Shi's (2010) research. She quotes Austin (2002) as suggesting that Ph.D. students' socialization process include: "observing, listening, and interacting with faculty, interacting with peers,

and interacting with family and personal friends” (p.104). These ideas are central to understanding the acculturation challenges faced by the participants in this study.

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic challenges in the classroom are common issue for students at all levels who are studying in their second (or additional) language. Although many researchers have contended that linguistic support in the form of grammatically-based second language training is what international students need most (Hennebry, et al. 2012; Holmes, 2005; Tian & Low, 2011), recent studies have closely linked linguistic challenges to a lack of self-confidence in the target language or unfamiliarity with new academic cultures.

Although many international students do not actively participate in class, which may cause them to appear to have language difficulties, studies have found that this hesitancy is often a result of other factors. Zhou, Knoke and Sakamoto (2005) found that the Chinese international students they interviewed agreed that “English proficiency [was] a primary barrier” (p. 294) to the commonly observed reluctance on the part of Chinese international students to participate in class discussions. However, these researchers also found that a lack of *confidence* in one’s second language linguistic ability was an even more significant contributor to this behavior.

There are also factors that link linguistic challenges to culture. Holmes (2005) points out that while silence in the classroom may be perceived as lack of engagement, interest, or ability in the eyes of teachers and classmates, in the

Chinese educational tradition, “maintaining silence during a conversation is an expression of respect as well as willingness to listen” (p. 294).

Zhang and Li (2014) contend that English instruction in China is currently dominated by deductive grammar and form-focused pedagogy. In other words, students in China learn English as if it were a matter of memorizing the structural features of the language as explicitly provided by a teacher. There are a number of reasons for the dominance of this approach. The first is the fact, as discussed above, that deductive and didactic approaches dominate Chinese pedagogy in general. The second is that studying a second language in a foreign context presents few opportunities for meaningful communicative practice of the target language. The third relates to traditional notions within Chinese pedagogy about what actually constitutes language learning in general. It is this third factor that has special importance for the specifically linguistic challenges faced by Chinese international students.

Unlike in the West, where the concept of language change and fluidity has long been accepted, Chinese models of language learning emphasize traditional forms that resist change. Thus, grammar (whether it be in Chinese or English) has been conceptualized as an unchanging set of rules that must be memorized. As Yihong, Yuan, Ying and Yan (2007) argue, this has meant that the identities of Chinese language learners are tied up with the mastery of explicit grammatical knowledge.

However, Zhang and Li (2014) note that in the West, little value is placed on

explicit grammatical knowledge, especially in the field of second language education (SLE). Since the adoption in the 1970's of the communicative approach as the most commonly accepted SLE methodology today (Allen & Widdowson, 1979; Hymes, 1966), there has been a concentration on function rather than form, where one learns "rules of use as well as rules of grammar" (p.141). The goal in such pedagogy is to create a realistic context for language learning in the classroom through pedagogical tasks that emphasize practical communication. Going hand in hand with this is an expanded notion of what constitutes language. As exemplified in Canale and Swain's (1980) highly influential model of *communicative competence*, language is composed not simply of linguistic elements, but also those pertaining to socio-cultural, strategic and discoursal factors.

Chinese international students have to go through the common challenges of mastering a second language. Learning English often presents specific challenges related to unique sound patterns, an unchanging subject-verb-object word order, inconsistent pronunciation, antiquated spelling and a complex vocabulary structure highly influenced by socio-cultural factors. Depending on one's first language background, some of these challenges are more daunting than others. Mandarin speakers, for example, have difficulty with English articles since these features do not exist in their first language. Other features of English, however, are much more easily learnt because they are similar to those in Mandarin (an example would be rising intonation in question formation).

However, Zhang and Li (2014) argue that Chinese international students

have to learn an entirely new paradigm when it comes to language. They must learn to understand language as a fluid and changeable system that can only be mastered through concrete use.

Linguistic and cultural differences can make the acculturation process to a new academic environment difficult for Chinese international students. Although the nuanced understanding of the new academic culture is essential to success, ultimately, that goal is unattainable without high English language proficiency. Requiring higher English standardized test scores from Chinese international students may not be the answer, considering that students' actual language ability may not be represented accurately by language proficiency tests (Hennebry, Lo & Macaro, 2012).

Lin & Betz (2009) argue that such students do not need more explicit language knowledge based on grammar rules or sentence structure, but better training in communicative skills in the target language. They contend that development of these communicative language skills is what is likely to "enhance the process of acculturation" (p. 452).

Sociocultural Challenges

Challenges for Chinese international students are not limited to the classroom. Due to linguistic and cultural differences that may press international students to have low social confidence, integrating with host national students can prove difficult. Lin & Betz (2009) note that one of the many sociocultural realities is that, "international students interact in two 'worlds,' one in which they must speak

in a non-native language and the other in which they may speak in their native language to others who share their ethnicity” (p. 468). If international students are constantly resorting to communicating in their first language, it may be perceived as a desire to stay within a safe and familiar social context.

Indeed, the stereotypical view of a typical foreign student as being weakly socially adjusted is related to the fact that when an English-speaking person relates to the international student, that student “is at a disadvantage in terms of social confidence” (Lin & Betz, 2009, p. 468). This may be manifest in group or pair work, but also translates beyond the classroom to social situations.

Lin and Betz (2009) define social self-efficacy as a person’s confidence in his or her ability to begin and sustain social interaction. The ideas of what constitutes normal social self-efficacy behaviors are very culturally specific, and can be confusing to both parties when two cultures with different views are blended. Lin and Betz (2009) found that a low level of social self-efficacy among Chinese international students was manifest by the low probability of “approaching versus avoiding social interactions with host nationals” (p. 453). Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto (2005) recount that similar experiences were common in the Canadian context. They found that although many international students believe that interacting with Canadian peer students in social situations beyond the classroom would “enhance knowledge of one another, increase comfort in communication, and indirectly improve their [classroom performance],” (p. 297) they also found that for Chinese international students, “after-class interactions [with Canadians] were

difficult and superficial” (p. 297). The Chinese international students in Zhou, et al.’s (2005) study claimed that the main reason for these social barriers was a lack of linguistic and socio-cultural familiarity (Zhou, et al, 2005). A major challenge for Chinese international students seemed to be understanding that “the rules of social engagement are implicit, informal and unacknowledged” (Cho, 2009, p. 306). Beyond learning explicitly taught content within the classroom, it becomes essential for Chinese international students to also become aware of the implicit sociocultural norms of their new environment.

One of the common barriers to social interaction at the graduate level is that many of the host national students often already have established social groups. They have social groups with colleagues and family responsibilities, while the Chinese international students are arriving without any of these, but often looking for them. Considering this, it is understandable that Chinese international students will socialize with others in the same situation, or with other international students in similar situations. In an Australian case study (Briguglio & Smith, 2012), one Chinese international student observed that it was difficult to build deep social relationships with Australians for these reasons. One respondent reported that, although having a very positive view of Australians, that beyond the classroom, “the white students always talk with the white students and our students we always talk to each other” (p. 28). Bridging this social gap in some way could do nothing but improve cross-cultural understanding between students, but could also improve international students’ understanding of sociocultural norms both in and beyond the classroom.

The typical Western role of a university professor is not congruent with the expectations of many Chinese international graduate students. Zhang and Xu (2007) explain that in China, classes tend to be largely lecture-based and didactic, with the professor being the provider of facts, rather than the facilitator of socially constructed knowledge (as is often the goal of Western professors). Zhang and Xu (2007) also point out that the North American power and authority distance is smaller in North America, and the teacher-student relationship is less strictly hierarchical than it typically is in China. They claim that when compared with China, “the free atmosphere and the interactive element in the teaching/learning process [in the North American classroom] indicates that the social distance between the professor and students is small” (p. 155). Becoming accustomed to new accepted ideas of social distance and power relations between teacher and student can be difficult, but is essential to successful negotiation of an unfamiliar North American academic culture.

Li, Chen and Duanmu (2010) claim that the Chinese style of teaching is very authority-centred with little collaboration between students. For many newly-arrived Chinese international students, the idea of active collaboration and student interjection in class are unfamiliar concepts, which may perpetuate the habits of staying silent in class, while others who are familiar with the educational culture play the role of “active student”. Jenkins (2000) found that teachers might misinterpret or misunderstand certain behaviors of Chinese students, such as the preference toward silence. This misunderstanding and misinterpretation may result in Chinese students feeling isolated, and may discourage classroom participation. It

is not the expectation that the professor be a personal mentor to every international student, but it is essential that the professor recognizes and addresses the differing cultural approaches to “learning, knowing, communicating, and being” (Holmes, 2005, p. 309).

Chinese international students may not understand the social roles and boundaries in their relationships with professors (Holmes, 2005), but it is essential for these students to establish relationships with professors, which Cho (2009) found allows for “quick progression in the disciplinary enculturation process” (p. 304). By connecting with professors early in their programs, Cho’s (2009) participants became more comfortable with other aspects of becoming familiar and comfortable with their new academic environment.

Professors should not necessarily be expected to adapt their curricular expectations to meet the needs of Chinese international students. Although some special accommodations may be made, all students (regardless of academic cultural history) must be held to the same academic standards. Beyond the necessity for assessment equality, it is mainly the responsibility of the professors to provide the extra help needed for international students (Angelova & Riazentseva, 1999). This can include (but is not limited to): academic and classroom support.

Professors may find that increased explanation of expectations within the classroom, as well as assessment practices and participation expectations would lead to a more transparent and understanding classroom experience for all students. Although the role of professors was not the focus of this thesis, it would be

a disservice to completely discount the importance of the professor in the academic acculturation of Chinese international students.

There are many non-academic issues which Chinese international students face, which do not fall neatly into the aforementioned categories, but are often linked to them. Among the most pervasive non-academic issues faced by Chinese international students are: loneliness, discrimination, pressure from parents, financial burdens, and issues with accommodation and transportation (Smith, 2011, p. 704). Although these issues did not form part of the specific focus for this study, I wish to emphasize that they were a part of my respondents' experiences as told through our interviews. My participants clearly corroborated the findings of the above studies in terms of the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges. However, as I argue below in relation to the literature review, conceptual framework and findings, this study concerns itself primarily with the academic challenges facing these students.

Academic Challenges

Studying in a new country and in a new language, is not simply an experience in a new subject, it is also a process of negotiating new content with the added challenge of doing so within an unfamiliar academic culture. Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010) claim that this "academic culture shock" (p.210) is directly affected by a lack of familiarity with classroom style, assessment techniques, and student-teacher power relations, among other factors. They argue that, "international students from Asian countries, whose only study experience has been with their home countries'

educational systems, may feel significant difference when they start their studies at a Western university” (p. 394). Incidentally, it is clearly problematic to group “Asian countries” together as these researchers do. One should not assume that the diverse sets of cultures, language and nation-states that make up the continent can be studied as a monolithic whole.

Be that as it may, the literature shows that there are unique shared academic experiences among Chinese international students who have studied abroad at the post-secondary level. Lin (2006) found that for Chinese international graduate students in the United States, the “institutional differences between the two cultures, such as the differences in educational systems, were found to be significant sources of stress and anxiety to Chinese students” (p. 133). This lack of familiarity with the expectations of a new academic culture is closely related to other factors including linguistic competency, cultural familiarity, confidence when interacting with non-Chinese classmates, and lack of content knowledge (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005; Tian & Low, 2011; Hennebry, et al., 2012). Significantly in view of the experiences of my participants, Huang (2011) highlights the fact that “majors that involve more language usage, such as education [. . .] seem to cause greater levels of academic anxiety than those majors that rely more on graphs, tables, numbers and symbols” (p. 35).

Adjusting to a new academic culture is a very complex process. Language is certainly a major challenge for many students, but for others, classroom dynamics can be just as challenging. Liberman’s (1996) study of Chinese international

students at an American university, for example, found that international students experienced challenges associated with the interactive style of teaching and the expectations of critical thinking, even though they found that addressing these challenging experiences ultimately benefitted learning. Cortazzi and Jin (1995) found that, from the outset, the expectations of students and teachers in British and Chinese higher educational systems varied widely. They highlighted that “British academic culture has an individual orientation . . . [while] the academic culture of the Chinese emphasizes relationships and hierarchies” (p. 78).

For Chinese international students, it is easy to feel “foreign” in an unfamiliar academic environment with unfamiliar classroom norms and teacher expectations. Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto (2005) found that beyond language issues, the classroom participation of Chinese international students was “compounded by their unfamiliarity with the Canadian educational context (including pedagogy) as well as the Canadian/Western culture” (p. 295). In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, the idea of a monolithic Western culture is an oversimplified concept that does not accurately or completely represent the cultural reality that international students face when they arrive to study in Canada. One is reminded of how Asian educational systems are similarly represented in a monolithic fashion (as noted above). Despite the limitations of this label, “Western culture” is still used in much of the literature concerning the international student experience. Although it does not accurately capture all the nuances of cultures that exist within Canada, it is a term that perhaps more accurately captures the new (if imagined) culture in which international students see themselves studying in, and perhaps hoping to be

included in. Certainly, my respondents often referred to the “Western” academic approaches as the ones they were attempting to master by coming to Canada. In this regard, I prefer to use the notion of “Western countries” (and cultures) as Fong (2011) defines them (Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and North America since it avoids “conflating ‘Western’ with ‘developed’” (p.17).

In some ways, studying in an unfamiliar academic context with unfamiliar expectations is very much a shift in identity as a student, in relation to both classmates and teachers. Adjustment to a radically different academic culture does not often happen quickly. For many newly arrived international students, the implicit academic cultural expectations can be difficult to negotiate. Although assessment expectations, grading systems or classroom rules may be relatively easy to adjust to, the implicit rules of when to speak or ask questions, the boundaries of when it is polite to interject, and the limits of critical questioning are both difficult to learn, and perhaps impossible to teach. In addition to these concerns remains the fact that all of these negotiations need to be made in the Chinese international students’ second language.

Holmes (2005) contends that language issues often cover-up other problems around cultural unfamiliarity. He argues that as host cultures assert dominance over other cultures in the classroom, Chinese students can become even more reluctant to speak. This perpetuates low self-confidence in language use. Even though there is certainly not one monolithic “host culture” among students, there is a host culture in terms of academics. Canadian classrooms have sets of norms that are generally

understood by students and teachers who share similar academic backgrounds. Holmes (2005) found that the international students who participated more in class (taking on more of the perceived identity of a typical Western student) tended to be more academically and socially successful.

It is important in this research to take into account what Kubota (2002) says is “the implication that a certain racial and linguistic norm exists for how students should function in academic situation” (p. 87). My aim here is to avoid stereotypical generalizing in this study, although the existence of stereotypes is explored as the respondents explicitly make reference to them. These generalizations can be placed in two categories: the stereotypes that the Chinese international students identify as embodying themselves (for example “the silent student”), and those that were perceived by others (being studious, being good with technology, and being quiet). These stereotypes are explored in terms of the students’ own recollections of their experiences in and beyond the classroom.

Holmes’ (2005) notes in her study that by being actively engaged in class, the “active” students were able to make sense of the implicit cultural norms, while the less active students remained unsure of appropriate classroom behaviors. This study identifies some of the commonly perceived characteristics that differentiate the traditional Western classroom from the traditional Chinese classroom pertaining in particular to the roles of class discussion, critical questioning (and critical reading of texts), presentations, and group work. Holmes notes that for students with a history of studying in a more “Western” style, none of these may be

daunting, but for a recently arrived Chinese international student, these classroom norms may seem strange and threatening. These points are echoed by Anderson (1993), who argues that adjusting to new academic norms are particularly difficult for students coming from China, “[which] is known for its traditional, teacher-centered, book-centered . . . methods, with emphasis on rote memory” (p. 472). Zhang and Xu’s (2007) corroborates these claims in their research on Chinese graduate student acculturation in the United States. The students in their study reported that “in most of their graduate classes [in China], the lecture was the only form of instruction, and students seldom participated in the instructional process” (p. 152). Zhang and Xu’s found that although students recognized that American classes also had lectures, there was also the unfamiliar and important element of student participation and class discussion that was expected. In short, these studies show that there is a dramatic shift involved in asking students to move from simply being an observer/recorder (typical role of a Chinese student in the classroom) to being a participant/creator (expected student role in a graduate level Western classroom).

Zhang and Xu (2007) also found that Chinese international students regarded a number of behaviors in Western classrooms that would be unthinkable in China. They noticed that students often spoke up in class, asked questions of a professor, or even interrupted the professor to make a point. Some of the Chinese students explicitly regarded such behavior as being either “brave” or “rude” (p. 152), an observation that often reinforced their reluctance to speak out in class.

In fact, many reasons were given to avoid speaking in class ranging from knowing the answer (but not knowing how to say it in English), to avoiding potential embarrassment, to avoiding potential mockery of other students. There was common agreement in these studies among the respondents that they would not speak publically unless they were definitely sure they were providing the right answer. They noted, however, that native-speakers were more likely to speak out in class or ask a question in ways that were much riskier (Zhang, & Xu, 2007).

Wang and Beckett (2014) noted that group work is another common element of many graduate level curricula in Western universities that is almost unheard of in Chinese settings. The act of presenting in a group can be challenging for international students who are not in the habit of being presenters of knowledge, to their classmates, especially for those who have reservations of even speaking in the classroom at all. Wang and Beckett also noted in their study of Chinese students in the United States that “Chinese graduate students’ prior academic experience offered few opportunities to practice making oral presentations” (p. 93).

Holmes’ (2005) noted that in addition to the nervous apprehension involved in conducting the actual presentations, international students face challenges pertaining to the preparatory group meetings commonly associated with them. In her research of Chinese international students’ intercultural communication while studying in New Zealand, Holmes pointed out that although there is typically a strong cultural inclination towards being involved in group work in China, those habits do not easily translate to the Western idea of what is needed for successful

group work. She pointed out that an essential aim of interpersonal communication among Chinese students is “the need to retain harmony among social groups” (p. 293). This goal of maintaining harmony would definitely affect willingness to engage in classroom communication, which can often be critical or personally opinionated. Holmes’ research found that “retaining [this] harmony in in-group relationships becomes particularly problematic where group work is concerned” (p. 293). Reluctance to speak within a small group context is also closely linked to what Lin & Betz (2009) identify as a lack of “language confidence rather than proficiency” (p. 452).

Chinese students in Holmes’ (2005) study found that group work meant different things to them than it did to their classmates in New Zealand. In China, group work often meant working through problems together, making decisions together, and frequently consulting one another. In New Zealand, the idea of group work often meant dividing the work with each member working on his or her own section independently, a common collaboration method in Western contexts. Particularly in these small group meetings, and in group discussions, Chinese international students tend to engage in careful self-monitoring, hoping to avoid perceived criticism or disagreement with the work and perspectives of their classmates (Carson & Nelson, 1996). Among the usual practical challenges of working with classmates towards a common goal, the experience of working in groups with students from differing academic cultural histories can prove to be problematic when host national and international students have conflicting ideas about what collaborative work should be.

Holmes (2005) claims that, among Chinese students, there is “cultural preference for interdependence in group work” (p. 303) as opposed to working separately towards a common end. In Holmes’ (2005) research, she found that Chinese students showed a preference (due to the aforementioned reasons, as well as linguistic challenges) toward working with other Chinese students in groups, claiming that other Chinese students would understand them better. Besides these very valid reasons, Holmes (2005) discovered that host national students (in her case, New Zealanders) thought that working with Chinese international students with poor English would “undermine their grades in group presentations” (p. 303).

Expectations towards critical thinking can also prove to be problematic for some Chinese international students who are not used to presenting their own critiques publically in class. Tian and Low (2011) claim that Chinese students’ passivity in class (and perceived lack of critical thinking) is not based on coming from a culture that “rejects independent thought and encourages wide-scale passivity in all areas” (p. 72), as stereotypes may suggest. Cortazzi and Jin (1995), in fact, explicitly avoid the word *stereotype*, instead saying that the “expectations” (p. 79) of Chinese international students is that they “prefer to listen to the teacher, as an expert [and] strive for agreement and harmony in a group” (p.79). Indeed, this reluctance toward public displays of critical thinking is also deeply connected to the unfamiliarity in their new academic context, and the lost comfort of their familiar educational culture (Tian & Low, 2011; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

The central notion within the conceptual framework for this study is Schumann's (1986) *theory of acculturation*, which argues that there are different types and levels of "social and psychological" (p. 380) acculturation based on many factors, including a learners' willingness to adopt elements of "lifestyle and values of the target language group". Although Schumann states that it is not necessary to acquire the target language, participants in this study reveal that they are trying to adopt elements of Canadian social and academic culture by using English names and engaging in social activities with Canadians. As the participants in this study explain to me, they did face challenges while trying to acculturate linguistically and socially into the new host culture. As I have argued above, there is a gap in the literature as to how academic acculturation specifically is negotiated by Chinese international students. The recognition of that gap provided the focus for my approach to this study's data collection and analysis.

As Shi (2010) explores, there are barriers to academic acculturation in the early stages for international graduate students. As she expresses it, "the assumption is that the socializing process of immigrant Ph.D. students requires more soft skills, which are difficult to be transferred to a new academic environment. This adjustment from their educational experiences in their homelands to the largely different educational practice here in Canada can be a long, painful and devastating process." (Shi, 2010, p. 138). Carson (1998) makes a point that is specifically pertinent to understanding the acculturation difficulties of international students, particularly in understanding the shock between their

academic expectations and their lived realities. Carson (1998) states that “beneath the happy gala of ethnic and cultural diversity [in the classroom], there may be an invisible torrent of misconceptions, misrepresentations and misunderstandings both on a day-to-day life basis and at deeper intercultural and ‘intercivilizational’ levels, which may jeopardize a globalized higher education” (p.1). When considering the importance put on the internationalization of so many Canadian campuses, this is an important point to highlight.

Connecting with Canadian classmates has been shown to be a difficult aspect of academic acculturation (Huang & Klinger, 2006). This is not only important to feelings of inclusion, but Perrucci & Hu (1995) highlight that this is also a “significant indicator of international graduate students’ satisfaction with their program[s]” (p. 495). As will be shown through the interviews below, the participants in this study struggled to make meaningful connections with many of their non-Chinese colleagues in the classroom and beyond, particularly in the first few semesters.

Berry (2002) argues that inter-cultural integration only works when “the dominant society has an open and inclusive orientation toward cultural diversity” (p. 24). Although integration was the classroom expectation for the participants in this study, the reality was something quite different, and the level to which each participant was able to interact with their Canadian colleagues had a direct impact to their level of academic acculturation.

The figure below depicts the relationships between the main themes in this study. Central to this research is the theme of acculturation, which essentially, the

theme that underlies the myriad experiences of the participants. The three types of challenges (linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic) are linked to acculturation. There is a constant interplay and overlap between these challenges. None exist disconnected from the others.

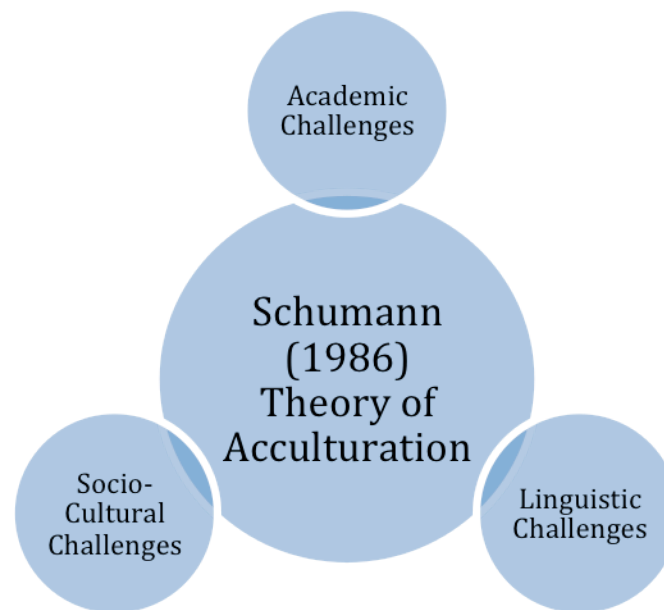


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The above framework was applied from the outset of this research project. After the completion and analysis of the interviews with the participants in this study, the conceptual framework was modified to better reflect the lived experiences of the students, rather than the expected realities from the researcher. Academic challenges became more prominent for the participants, and that is reflected in greater detail, and described, in *Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework* on page 110.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the study's research methodology, which I have organized into sections pertaining to: design, participants and context, selection of research site, and instrumentation. I justify my methodological choices in terms of the study's goals, research question and conceptual framework.

I wish to point out at the outset of this discussion that the rigor of this study has been enhanced through a number of means, including the full transparent disclosure of the data collection process that appears below. As this account notes, my participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and invited to edit or comment on them. None of the participants indicated that edits were needed. In addition, participant viewpoints have been arranged in full and accurate descriptions in my findings chapter. This has been organized by respondent in order to ensure that the reader has access to the full range of opinions expressed, and not simply to those that support my findings. Finally, in my description of the methodology and in my conclusion, I have been reflexive, in the sense that I discuss how my participants may have been influenced by my presence as a researcher.

Design

As this research is grounded in personal experience, I opted for a qualitative narrative research design. In choosing this methodology, my aim was to allow my respondents to tell their stories rather than strictly be counted and categorized. As my goal is not to generalize beyond the limitations of my study, but to explore

personal experiences, this methodology is most suited to my research. This design allowed me to explore the rich and complex experiences of my participants. As Creswell (2012) states, “narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (pg. 71). This provides overlap with Wenger’s (1998) work of communities of practice in that respondents can tell the stories of how they see themselves, and more specifically, how they see themselves within the larger community. I chose a semi-structured interview format to provide an appropriate platform for students to highlight the critical incidents of their personal experience. I feel that this pushed the data beyond the impersonal generalizations of similar studies to data that better captured the complexity of the stories and the subjects. Richards (2009) notes that interviews “can provide insights into people’s experiences, perceptions, and motivations at a depth that is not possible with questionnaires” (p. 187). More specifically, I applied Seidman’s (2013) *three-interview series*. This interviewing method consists of three 90-minute interviews, each with a specific goal. The first interview focuses on the respondent’s life history, which inserts the experiences of the participant in a wider context. In this interview, I asked respondents to reconstruct the experiences that had led them to their current program of study in Canada. Particular attention was given to academic and linguistic backgrounds (in their home country and in their adopted country). The first interview qualified as “*the life history interview*.” As outlined in Seidman (2013), the second interview focuses on *details of experience*. In this interview, the questions dealt with the respondent’s current situation, and the ongoing reflections of their experiences,

upon which opinions may be formed. During this interview, respondents were asked to reflect on the experiences that they are still in the process of living. The third and final interview has a focus, which Seidman (2013) calls a *reflection on the meaning*. The questions in this interview provide respondents with the opportunity to make connections between their academic life and personal lives, both intellectually and emotionally. This final interview also allowed the respondents to reflect on the first two interviews to discuss their future goals and aspirations.

This *three-interview series* model of interviewing allowed time and opportunity for the respondents to explore three separate facets of their experience, while allowing the researcher time and opportunity to create a rich picture of the lived experiences of the respondents. Furthermore, the first interview informed and directed the second interview, and both the first and second interview informed the direction of the third. By the third interview, the interview questions were much more informed and focused than if only a single interview was conducted. As Seidman (2013) describes it, this three-interview method is both in-depth and phenomenologically based. He emphasizes that the strength and goal of this particular interviewing style is to have respondents rebuild their experiences over the course of the interview series. In order to provide more nuanced descriptions of these students' experiences, a narrative design was also be central to this research, keeping in mind Creswell's (2008) notion of using narrative interviews to include rich insights from participants. Creswell (2013) says that narrative study "reports the stories of experiences of a single individual or several individuals" (p. 76).

Combined with the phenomenological design, this study explored the individual stories that make up the larger shared aspects of this phenomenon.

This builds on Creswell's (2013) definition of phenomenology, which he explains as a study that "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (p. 76). The experience of living as a Chinese international student in a Canadian second-language graduate program provided the space for common meanings to be explored. A further benefit to the *three interview series* is that it allows the researcher time to reflect and reformulate the focus of the research based on the respondents' answers. I had time to do some foundational analysis between interviews to better inform my questions and focus on the following meetings with my respondents.

Upon completion of the data collection (all three interviews), I conducted a member check. This was an email correspondence with my respondents, which allowed them the opportunity to review the transcripts of our interviews.

Building on a similar model to Gao's (2010) research, narrative extracts were used to allow the experiences of the international students to be told in their own words. Gao (2010) found that his proximity to his subjects (colleagues at his university) allowed his respondents to feel comfortable in telling stories and not simply recounting facts. My hope was that my proximity to my research subjects would produce a similar result. Angelova and Riazentseva (1999) also used narrative elements in their research to highlight the stories of international students' experiences of acculturation into American academic writing style. The inclusion of narrative elements allowed the rich personal stories of the respondents

to speak for themselves, and made them easily comparable. I aimed to achieve a similar result by including narrative elements in my research.

In some cases, I have quoted the participants at length. This is done in the interest of including particularly illuminating illustrations from the data, and allowing the reader to get a deeper understanding of each participant's language ability.

Although there are certainly benefits to studies that include methodological tools like surveys, or studies that include a greater number of participants, completing this study with four participants allowed me to spend a significant amount of time with each participant and to understand and their experiences more deeply than would have been possible with a larger group. As Creswell (2015) argues, it is "typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases" (p. 209). Creswell (2015) also notes that a sample size should be determined by the explanatory value extracted from the sample. In the case of this study, I judged four participants to be sufficient to present the complexity of the site. Adding to the sample size would not have provided significant additional insights to the phenomenon in question. In fact, adding more to the sample size would have made the study unwieldy and would have unnecessarily lengthened the time needed to collect data. This is something that Creswell (2015) cautions against, arguing that a greater number of respondents may lead to "superficial perspectives" (p. 209). For my purposes in this research, an in-depth examination of four respondents was sufficient to illustrate the phenomenon in question.

Epistemologically, my research is based on social constructivism, which is the notion that knowledge is co-constructed between interlocutors within social context (Vygotsky, 1986). This is apropos to my study because my respondents were not simply adopting or acculturating, they were co-constructing meaning and knowledge. The participants in this study were not uncritically adopting Canadian academic norms; they are viewing those norms through the lens of their previous academic discourse and experience, and then co-creating new norms with others in their new academic context.

Participants and Context

The participants of this study were Chinese international students enrolled in or recently graduated from a Master's of Education (M.Ed.) program specializing in second language education at a large research university in Eastern Ontario. This university has a student population of 42,580 (4,546 of whom are graduate students). Of these, roughly 34% are international graduate students. This particular cohort is important to research in view of the large increase of the number of foreign-trained second language education (SLE) graduate students who are now enrolling in Canadian universities (Desjardins & King, 2011). This group of Chinese international students is particularly important due to the high priority that internationalisation has been given in the site university's five-year plan. Chinese students constitute the largest group of international students at this university, and therefore, the findings of this research will not be overly limited in future applicability. These students were all my classmates, as I am graduate student in the

same faculty. It should be noted here that all data collection occurred after I had completed my coursework, so there was no chance that we would be classmates after the interview process.

Four Mandarin-speaking student respondents were recruited. The majority of students enrolled in this particular graduate program are female, and three of the four respondents in this study are female. As noted above, each respondent was interviewed in three, semi-structured, 90-minute interviews. I focused on students who were nearing the end of their degrees, or had already completed their degrees to get an understanding of how experiences differ at different points in the degree. The respondents could reflect on their entire degree. There was no selection criteria based on region (the program has Chinese international students from many regions of China), socio-economic position, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or political belief.

Interviews were conducted in the order outlined above (according to Seidman (2013)). Interviews were scheduled a minimum of two days, and a maximum of five days apart, to allow time for reflection by the researcher and participant. All interviews started in the same week, and ended within a few days of each other. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. I considered doing an inter-rater reliability check to insure accuracy in the transcriptions, but instead, I opted for a member check. As the participants confirmed that the transcriptions were accurate, I believe that this was sufficient for this study.

It was clearly stated at all stages of the research process that participation is completely voluntary and that the identities of participants would remain confidential. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants. Prior to formal recruitment, all research and data collection material was approved by the university's Ethics Board (see Appendix E). Participants were made aware of this approval. At no point in the research process did any professor in the university's Faculty of Education have any knowledge of the identities of the students involved in this project. Professors were not involved in recruitment of respondents, nor did they, at any time, have access to the data. This anonymity acted as an ethical safeguard, which allowed students to speak freely, knowing that their participation would have absolutely no affect on their course grades.

Selection of Research Site

The research site for this study was the University of Ottawa. The University of Ottawa is a major research university with an increased influx of Chinese international students that has recently signed partnerships with universities in China to promote cooperation and collaboration between students, faculty, and programs in Ottawa and in China. The University of Ottawa was a convenient research site, due to the location of my own studies and work with international students at the institution. However, the university was not chosen simply out of convenience. The University of Ottawa is an ideal site because it has had a long tradition of second language instruction and research linked to the fact that it is the largest bilingual post-secondary institution in North America. Although it is not a unique site, it is a typical institution when compared with other universities of its

size, in that it has focussed on increasing the internationalization of its campus and classrooms.

Instrumentation

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were used for this research. The interviews were conducted in person, at the site university at a place and time of the respondents' choosing. The in-person interviews were audio recorded. The face-to-face interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders and a computer audio recording program (VLC). All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The analysis of the interviews was a process that was conducted as each interview was completed. In order to pose relevant questions in the second and third interviews, it was essential that I reviewed the themes in the first. These themes included the themes and theories included in the conceptual framework. I was specifically interested in the linguistic, academic, and socio-cultural challenges that each participant faced, and how these experiences spoke to the notions of community of practice, acculturation, and how the participants' previous cultural and academic experiences affected their experiences in Canada. By keeping these themes in mind, I was able to refer to earlier comments made by the participants, and revisit statements that were unclear or incomplete. In this way, and by referring to data collected in interviews with other participants, I was able to see both common themes and differing experiences.

There is always a power balance present during one-on-one interviews. As the researcher, I am aware of this power dynamic, and realize that it is highly

affected by both language and culture. I aimed to subvert some of these potential challenges by acknowledging them and by realizing that I was in a unique position, as all of the participants were my former classmates. I hope that our shared classroom experiences, as well as my own experiences living and teaching in China, helped participants to be comfortable enough, both culturally and linguistically, and allowed them feel comfortable enough to be candid and open while recounting their experiences. Chen's (2011) work on power balance and ability to collect genuine data claims that interviews are affected by the fact that the interviewer is either a native or non-native speaker of the interview language. In some ways, the non-native speaker is able to elicit deeper answers, as the interviewees need to consider that the interviewer may not fully understand them (Chen, 2011). Chen emphasizes that especially during interviews where linguistic concerns are present, power is always negotiated. I remained mindful of, and sensitive to, this power negotiation during the in-person interviews.

The narrative sections that I have included from the participants, as direct quotes, are recorded as they were spoken to me. Grammar mistakes have not been corrected in an effort to portray the true voice of each participant.

The trustworthiness of this study has been enhanced through a number of means. I make no claims as to the generalizability of the findings for this study. However, the transferability of the findings has been clarified through my discussion of the institutional context. I am aware of and make explicit to the reader that this study is of a limited sample of Chinese graduate students in a second

language education program. The reader can clearly draw conclusions as to the applicability of my findings to other contexts.

I have chosen to use the word “experiences” rather than “challenges” in the title, and throughout, as I felt that by using the label of “challenge” from the outset might limit the respondents to focusing on negative experiences. In order to avoid narrowing the stories of the participants, the use of the word “experiences” allowed for

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion: Challenges and Opportunities

In this chapter, I introduce the participants in the study and go over the findings in detail as they pertain to the linguistic, socio-cultural and academic challenges my participants spoke about. I conclude this chapter with a discussion that links these findings to my conceptual framework.

In what follows, I allow my respondents to speak for themselves and to describe their own experiences. In the interests of transparency and completeness, I have decided to present the findings in detail for each participant in turn. My discussion draws conclusions in relationship to the themes findings that were derived from my analysis of the overall findings.

The notion of highlighting the personal narratives of the respondents is one of the central goals of Seidman's (2013) three-interview qualitative approach. Each of the participant findings is subdivided into the following sections: *background* (providing demographic information, as well as educational background and other essential contextual details to introduce the respondent), *linguistic challenges* (focusing on linguistic challenges the students faced in Canada, particularly in the classroom), *socio-cultural challenges* (which often begins in the classroom, but focuses on social and cultural challenges experienced at the university and beyond it), and *academic challenges*, (with particular focus on challenges faced meeting the requirements and expectations of written assignments, group discussions, and presentations in the classroom), and. The final section for each participant is a *summary* which highlights the main themes that emerged from each participant. For

further specific demographic details about the participants in this study, please see appendix D ('Participants', p. 146).

Larger narrative sections are included in the following section to make the students' voices clear and to allow them to speak, while minimizing the filter of the researcher. Grammar has not been corrected with the goal of presenting an authentic reading of each respondent's natural voice. I have provided lengthy excerpts from the data because of their value. I did not want to put words into the mouths of the participants, so I have included longer quotes than would normally be the case to allow the participants' genuine voices to speak. The chapter has been organized by participant, and further subdivided in the following sections: background, linguistic challenges, sociocultural challenges, academic challenges, and summary. The summary section highlights the main points from the preceding findings of each respondent.

Profile of Participants

Bei Ou

Background

Bei Ou was a 25-year-old woman from Jiangxi, China. From the outset of her graduate studies, she chose to be known by her Chinese name while she studied in Canada rather than adopting an English name:

I have an English name in China. It's [Kerry]. But here, I want to use my own name, my original name, my Chinese name. I think it's kind of weird for Chinese people to have an English name here in Canada.

Like other respondents, Bei Ou made a conscious and calculated choice to use her Chinese name. She explained why some of her classmates use an English name while they are studying overseas:

Maybe, originally, they had one, so they use that one naturally. Another reason is that they want to assimilate into Canadian or American culture by having an English name. I think it works. Sometimes a Chinese name is very hard to pronounce, but an English name is very easy to remember for local people. I don't think I'm 'Kerry'. I'm sure I'm not Kerry. It's my identity. It's my Chinese identity. I want to teach them to pronounce my name, to know my culture and to know what's *me*.

Bei Ou mentioned her identity, but more specifically than that, her comments speak to the fact that she is looking for her identity within her new context. She had an identity in China, with her Chinese name. The uncertainty she expressed is the challenge in finding her identity in her foreign surroundings. When she arrived, Bei Ou felt as though she was a peripheral member of the community she was joining. She saw her choice to keep her Chinese name as an important part of that process. Further, by using the phrase, "assimilate into Canadian [. . .] culture" she was highlighting the idea that naming is also a part of acculturation (Schumann, 1986). She was recognizing the importance of choosing or not choosing an English name as

linked to not only becoming a member of a community of practice within the academic context, but also becoming acculturated into Canadian culture.

Bei Ou said that much of her early English education was “very traditional Chinese,” but a particular interest in English-language media, that she pursued independently, made her interested in pursuing her studies (and later her studies overseas) even further:

I had some exposure to English in media before university. That is a TV series that had a big influence on me. That was very popular when I was in junior high. I watched one episode every day – secretly because my parents forbid me to do that. When I watched that I thought wow. . America is like this . . .very free. And people can even do some anti-government actions and English is such a very beautiful language. The pronunciation is very different from our teachers.

Bei Ou described her early exposure to English as being as much a cultural window as a linguistic one. Since her high school years, she has remained interested in the role English can play in allowing her to understand and participate in foreign cultures. This enthusiasm for using English made Bei Ou a very active student in her undergraduate studies in China. She was the leader of the English Club, and the organizer of the English Corner, a group that would meet to practice spoken English outside of class. These early experiences help to highlight how Bei Ou’s path to studying in Canada was greatly influenced by her early exposure to the English

language and North American culture. Her prior experiences in English affected her experiences when she got to Canada and began her studies.

Despite her positive experiences studying English in China, she said she had apprehensions speaking English with native-speakers, even her own teachers. She said that she would get very nervous, and even in Ottawa, that feeling only subsided after being in the native-English speaking context for a few years.

Linguistic Challenges

As highlighted in other studies of Chinese international students, (e.g. Zhou, Y., Knoke, D., & Sakamoto, I., 2005) Chinese students often struggle with being silent in a North American classroom. Bei Ou described her feelings towards speaking in her first few classes:

When I came here, I became the silent student as other Chinese students, because I was not so confident talking in front of the native speakers and I'm afraid of making mistakes and asking stupid questions . . . even if I realized that all the students can ask what they want, I was still afraid of asking questions.

Bei Ou described her apprehensions towards speaking in class as a combination of a lack of confidence in her English language ability and the cultural idea of doing something embarrassing in public, which she highlighted as a central notion in Chinese culture:

I think I'm afraid of losing face in front of all the native speakers. And I'm afraid they will think of me as stupid or something. I was not so confident and if I ask stupid questions, I would feel people will judge me . . . I just remember all the people stare at you and it's not a good feeling. Your mind becomes blank and at the same time you have to organize the language and it's so different from when you speak your native tongue. If you ask questions to your Chinese teachers, you just speak very naturally and you don't need to think about the language, but when you are here, you need to think about the question itself and the proper language.

What Bei Ou was explaining here is note-worthy. She was highlighting the fact that she was having a different experience from others in the class. She did not feel as though she was a member of the community of practice in the same way a native speaker would be. She was also marking the differences between Chinese academic culture and Canadian academic culture, and noticing that while familiar with the norms of the Chinese context, she was still learning how to act within the Canadian context. The apprehension she felt with her own English language ability was not the only language challenge in Bei Ou's first semester. She also struggled to become accustomed to the varieties of English she heard from her classmates, and in one instance, her professor:

[My first class was] about cultural thing. I dropped that class after the first class because I can't understand the teacher. The teacher is not a native-speaker. She has a very strong accent. I can't understand her. In that class,

there were about 7 or 8 Chinese students who chose that class, but after that they all drop out.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

Bei Ou realized that although she was in Canada in large part to have new experiences in an English-speaking country, her academic life demanded a lot of attention and time. It became stressful for her, and she struggled to balance all aspects of her life:

The low point was the first term. I was overwhelmed and it's the first month I got here. A new country, a new environment, and I need to handle my studying at the same time in my life.

One unexpected social challenge that Bei Ou met in the classroom was her relationships to her non-Chinese classmates. Beyond the language challenges that she experienced at the outset of the program, she was not anticipating the experience (and age) gap that existed between the Chinese international student cohort to which she belonged and the local students:

I just graduated from university then I came here . . . I know nothing about this field. And that's the difference. In China almost all students finish all the study years together. They don't work then go to study. After university, go to graduate school or do the post-graduate. But here, almost everybody works and they know what they want and they know what they need . . . like diploma or a degree and they come here. That's a very big difference.

Bei Ou said that the two groups were distinct from the outset due to this divide. Although she was keen to meet and befriend her non-Chinese classmates, the age gap proved to be a difficult hurdle to overcome. Although a classroom community existed in the classroom setting, she did not feel like an active participant in that community, and felt as though the community she imagined being a member of, was made up of people with drastically different experiences from her own. As social relationships with colleagues can begin in the classroom, Bei Ou thought it would be useful to interact with a variety of students:

I don't want to always sit at the table with Chinese students because we have the same experience and you cannot exchange with them because you already know their background. When we sit together, we all start to speak in Chinese, and you cannot practice your English. Some topics like talk about your teaching experience . . . we all have nothing to say, so sometimes I try to find a table that's with diversified backgrounds.

Despite her efforts, social relationships with non-Chinese students were rare. In class, she socialized with Chinese students who were able to discuss shared classroom experiences in her first language. This led Bei Ou to continue socializing mostly with other Chinese international students once class had finished:

Most of the time I hung out with Chinese students, but I have some friends that are native speakers or Canadians. But when I was with them, it's like they . . . start a conversation about American movie stars or American cultures, I . . . sometimes I don't know. Maybe I know that movie star's

Chinese name of him but when they speak very fast and talk about some movies that I've never watched, I just stay silent like in the class. And sometimes I feel uneasy and I don't like that feeling. But they take care of me when I was silent. They would ask me who who who and if I don't know they would explain very patiently and recommend me to watch that movie. And when I go back home . . . and I search on the Internet, I find out "oh, its him or her" I know them. But I just don't know his or her full name in English or the movie. I watched that movie in China with the Chinese translation.

Over the course of her degree, Bei Ou become more comfortable with the classroom dynamics as well as with her own language abilities, and made some deeper social connections with her non-Chinese classmates. When asked, specifically what she found to be the biggest social challenge, she pointed out that perhaps the labels did not match her reality, and explains the complexity she felt in acculturating into a new community:

I think it's not a challenge, but sometimes you have difficulties with getting involved in the local community and with local people, but it's not a challenge it's just there. It's just an objective truth. Instead of 'challenge', I think maybe 'difficulty'. Similar to challenge, but challenge is a big word, because it sounds like you want to overcome it or you want to . . . you are actively getting involved, but if you don't want to, it's not a challenge.

For much of her time studying in her program, her goal was not to socialize with her Canadian classmates. She was content to socialize with her Chinese friends, and focus on her studies.

Academic Challenges

In Bei Ou's first class, all students were asked to introduce themselves and to provide some personal information about any relevant experience they might have had in the field of study. Despite her many years of English language study, she felt an immediate divide between herself (and her Chinese classmates) and the other students in the class. She felt embarrassed by her lack of professional experience and her lack of particular interest in the field. Although she was interested in second language education, her main goal was to live abroad. Her lack of confidence is clear in the discussion below:

D: What was your feeling hearing other students introduce themselves? What did you say?

B: Just my name and where I'm from and my background and why I came here. Listening to everyone else, I just feel a little ashamed of myself because I didn't have any working experience to share and I didn't have any purpose to choose . . . to get enrolled this program. I don't know why I choose this program, I just did. I don't have . . . everybody except the Chinese students has a clear goal why they are here . . . but for us, we just want to experience the life of studying abroad. That's the difference.

D: So, what was your main goal for choosing this program?

B: Because I don't have other choice. Because of my undergrad educational background, I can only choose this one because my undergrad is about language, so here I have to choose language.

Although Bei Ou became increasingly interested in the theories and research she was studying as she continued her studies, from the outset, she felt a separation between herself (as a Chinese international student) and her classmates. Added to the linguistic challenges and socio-cultural challenges, she had feelings of academic uncertainty. Further academic challenges were made clear through comparison to the academic culture she had been used to in China. Bei Ou makes it clear that the linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic challenges she encountered in the classroom were overlapping and inseparable. In Bei Ou's opinion, a communicative teaching style, and the expectation to critically engage with material were both challenging aspects of her studies to adapt to. She sees the challenge to quickly adapt to the new classroom culture as central to her experiences as a student in the program:

[The teaching style here is] actually quite different from my undergrad. There are some common points, but a lot of differences. Here, students always think critically. But in China, we didn't do that. So that's something I need to learn. That's something I'm struggling with all the time the critical thinking because I just got used to that teaching mode—just follow the teacher, so it's very hard to change and another . . .the big difficulty is still the language even though sometimes you have the thinking, but you cannot express as the local students. And in front of all the class, you just have that

fear and you feel shy or you don't want to express. I think that's why most Chinese students stay silent in the class.

Bei Ou continued by explaining that she felt academically unprepared to fulfill the expectations of her professors, particularly in terms of academic writing:

I was struggling with the papers a lot. I know nothing about APA style and I only write one paper before at that time. Only one final paper for my whole program in China. But when I come here I have to write, compose academic papers, and I know nothing about it [. . .] the professor was very serious and she talked me about APA style. You really need to learn about this. And this is not an academic paper. You cannot say 'that somebody said it' even everybody knows it. But in China, I think we do that a lot. Like the common sense. We just write it and nobody will point out the mistake that it's not academic. We get used to that writing style.

This lack of academic confidence, particularly in writing, was a sentiment that was echoed in Bei Ou's later interviews, and by other respondents in this study.

After Bei Ou's years of studying English in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context, she felt as though something was missing in her education and understanding of the language. Her interest in English, and all the cultural products that she accessed through the English language were being experienced as an outsider. She was interested in the cultures she was watching, but was not a

member of that culture. This was the time she started to think about pursuing further studies overseas:

I am an English major student, at least I need to see what happens in those English speaking country. And try to . . . I just want to see the world and broaden my horizon and what is the real English.

Before considering which program best suited her professional and personal interests, she placed the highest importance on the fact that she would be living in an English-speaking context. That was her primary goal, and she saw education as the vehicle to get her there:

I just want to experience. The second reason is job opportunity. And the third reason . . . before I came to Canada, I never think about immigrating here, but now I'm thinking about that. But still didn't make that decision. I'm thinking about working here. Because I can get 3-year work permit after graduation, so I can make that decision in the process if I like here or not. If I want to live here permanently or not.

What Bei Ou was referring to here was the program set up by the Canadian government to provide work visas for international students after they have graduated. Referred to as the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP), it "allows students who have graduated from a participating post-secondary institution to gain valuable Canadian work experience" (Government of Canada Immigration and Citizenship website, retrieved December 16, 2014). Upon learning about this program, Bei Ou decided to stay in Canada and try to find work.

Bei Ou has enjoyed her life in Canada, surrounded by English and immersed in Canadian culture. Although confident in her language ability and cultural understanding as a student in China, she had difficulties during her first few months in Canada. She realized that although her academic studies were useful, the immersion into an English context provided experiences that she could not have from a distance:

I think the oral English; the daily exchange is the most difficult part for me. But for the academic English, I was not worried because we did that all the time in China and what we learned was academic English. I was not worried about that. But for oral English, even you buy a coffee here, and they say 'double double,' you don't know what that means. You can never know that in China [. . .] that's Canadian culture. You don't know that.

Her first experiences into English Canadian culture provided access to everyday expressions and common phrases that she said helped her to understand Canadian culture. In her graduate classes at the University of Ottawa, this knowledge helped her to interact with her non-Chinese international student classmates, but in the classroom, she quickly realized that there would be other challenges.

Bei Ou is planning on working in Ontario for a short while she searches for jobs in Alberta. She knows that there are many petroleum companies that are hiring, and through a family connection, thinks that she has a good chance of finding work there. She is exploring the idea of immigrating to Canada permanently (by first

applying to the PGWPP, and has no immediate plans to work or to continue to study in the field of second language education. Currently, she is not planning on returning to China to pursue her career.

Summary

Bei Ou chose to keep a Chinese name, as the first step towards maintaining her Chinese identity in her new Canadian life. She recognized that although her Chinese classmates took English names, in part to acculturate themselves into Canadian culture, she felt that her language ability and experience would help her achieve the same goal.

Bei Ou had a difficult transition to her studies in Canada, as she felt a disconnect between her expectations and the reality she encountered when she arrived in her first classes. She became more silent than she had been in her English classes in China, and became reluctant to ask questions or volunteer her ideas in front of others. One of the unanticipated challenges she faced was struggling to understand all the varieties of English that surrounded her. Some of her classmates and professors spoke more quickly than she was familiar with; others spoke with accents that she struggled to understand.

Over the course of her degree, Bei Ou became more comfortable with her life and studies in Canada. She made friends, and became more familiar with the academic expectations she had to fulfill.

Bei Ou had difficulties in acculturating into the Canadian academic culture when she first arrived. Over time, she felt as though she had become more integrated into the academic culture, specifically, and the Canadian culture more generally. Her plans to stay and live in Canada show that she intends to continue working through the challenges she initially faced.

Li Yuan

Background

Li Yuan was a 24-year old woman from Jiangsu province, China. While studying at the University of Ottawa, she chose to be known by her Chinese name, but explained that others chose to use English names because:

You're more Canadian . . . it's just like you have a name people are familiar with, but I think . . . because I didn't change my name, I'm not quite sure what other people think, and sometimes students they think the name they use, the English names, they sound good, and sometimes they even change their names for a few years they change their names to be more beautiful name. I didn't change mine because I think that's my identity . . . I don't want to change my name.

Similar to Bei Ou, Li Yuan felt as though adopting an English name would bring her closer to acceptance in her new community and in Canadian culture. Although she felt that it would make her "more Canadian," she felt that she did not want to change her identity in that way. She wanted to be known by her name rather than a pseudonym that would compromise her identity.

Li Yuan was the first in her family to study overseas, and the first to speak English. Although her parents briefly studied English, they had lost the ability to speak it because it had no use in their daily lives. She began to study English in grade 1 at a private school and, unlike other respondents, had contact with some foreign language instructors in primary school (for oral English classes). She said that despite her early introduction to English, she struggled with the spoken aspect of the language:

For the oral part we need to improve it. Not just based on class. I mean for speaking, we needed to practice a lot by ourselves. Because in class, we don't have much experience speaking.

In her undergraduate courses, she continued studying English, and she was also taught about North American culture. When asked if she found that information useful when she arrived in Canada, she said:

I think that's a bit superficial, or a bit universal. We won't know that until we come here. And even the textbook that teaches us the North American culture, but there's still differences with different regions. Like between the US and Canada, and different provinces in Canada.

Her early exposure to North American culture, and her early experiences studying English in China laid the foundations for her experiences in Canada. In line with Schumann's (1986) theory of acculturation, Li Yuan's comfort with English and Canadian culture came when she was in the Canadian context. Her learning and familiarity with the language and culture came as she oriented herself in her new

context, in her new language. The interest in pursuing graduate studies in Canada was largely motivated by the promise of being able to gain first-hand experience in the North American culture that she had studied from a distance.

Linguistic Challenges

Li Yuan identified herself as generally shy, but she said she had been confident in her English ability and in her willingness to speak in class since her first semester. Despite her willingness to speak, she still met with challenges in her first classes.

In those first classes, Li Yuan felt that her proficiency was not at a suitable level to speak in class, when compared with her classmates. It is interesting that in the quote below (and in other instances in our interviews), Li Yuan answered questions that were asked about her, personally, with the pronouns 'us' and 'we'. Li Yuan resorted to plural pronouns numerous times throughout the interviews, and as Li Yuan explains it, she did this because she knows that her challenges were shared with other Chinese international students. This use of plural pronouns shows that Li Yuan considered herself to be part of a community of practice. Although she did not feel as though she was a full member of the classroom community (particularly during her first semester), she felt membership into the community of Chinese international students.

[In the first semester], I didn't talk a lot, but it wasn't because I didn't want to talk, it was because it took more time for us to speak. I even need to think

what I need to say before I speak out. That was due to the language problem.

If my English was proficient at that time, I would speak more.

Her initial challenges were specifically learning the topic-specific words used in class as well as challenges listening to native speakers (both professors and classmates):

Vocabulary was difficult, and it even took more time for non-native English speakers to think about what other people had said to respond. Also, we need to organize our language before we speak. And also the vocabulary. When I was new to the program, I didn't know much of the vocabulary, but I just need to talk about myself, it was much easier . . . if we never used that word in English, then we need to think about Chinese first. And we were not sure whether we used it properly.

Where other respondents felt unwanted pressure to speak in class, Li Yuan embraced the expectation to speak in class as a part of her new academic environment:

This environment forces me to speak and even not force, I was willing to speak because everyone speaks in class and we don't have to be afraid because it was an easy environment then we don't need to think much about what we should say and what we shouldn't say. I even think if I don't speak, it was weird. I need to speak more—I need to say *something*.

Li Yuan's linguistic confidence became stronger as she adapted to the classroom culture in the Canadian university. She clearly says that her surroundings pushed her to understand new educational expectations, which encouraged her to speak in class; something that was not common in the academic culture of her earlier studies. Despite her willingness to speak in class, and the fact that she became more confident over the course of her studies, she was still apprehensive to speak in presentations or group discussions:

If I speak very slowly and I may interrupt the class or other people may be anxious about it. I may be embarrassed, so I need to prepare myself with what I need to say before I speak. I don't want to let people wait for a long time listening to me . . . just sometimes we are not very confident about ourselves whether we speak properly. Mostly we . . . sometimes we don't understand what native speakers are talking about and we don't know how to respond.

These apprehensions about speaking in class affected Li Yuan's position in group discussion and presentation situations. She would inevitably be in groups with native English speakers, and in small groups she would become increasingly insecure about her own language and academic abilities. Comparing herself to some Canadian students in her group, she said, "I don't think I can be the leader. That's because I think they know better than me." Again, she is very aware of the separation between "we" and "them" (Chinese international students and what she calls "local" or "Canadian" students). In one group work experience where Li Yuan

was the only Chinese international student in a group with four other 'local' students, she was asked to prepare the PowerPoint presentation rather than prepare any of the written content for the presentation. She was also the only member of the group to not speak to the class. She says, "[the other students] spoke for their sections. I was the person only responsible for technical." Although she was happy to avoid the anxiety of speaking in front of the class, she was aware that the other students in the group had not trusted her with either a spoken or written component of the presentation. Although from a distance it may have appeared to the professor or her other classmates that Li Yuan was working well with her group, the reality was that she did not feel as though she belonged. Li Yuan was working with her colleagues, but there was no sense of "harmony or collaboration" (Lave and Wenger p. 85). Li Yuan was physically in the presence of her classmates, and individually they were working towards a common goal, but in reality, there was little in terms of mutual understanding between members of the group, which created a major power imbalance, and a sense for Li Yuan that her abilities and ideas were not valued.

When asked what professors should know and understand about Chinese international students, Li Yuan focused on language as the major challenge that affects all aspects of academic life:

I think mostly the problem is the language, but the prof. can see the problem through our writing, through the essays. I think that's obvious. It's obvious

listening to our speaking noticing our . . . we are not very fluent in language . . . in English.

Certainly, Li Yuan's linguistic challenges were a point of anxiety for her. Throughout our interviews, she often referred back to how language was somehow at the root of all other problems she faced while completing her degree. Although she felt like she had improved both in ability and confidence since she moved to Canada, she continued to struggle with many of the same linguistic apprehensions she had when she started the program. She had yet to reach the goal she was aiming for, which was to be at a similar level of fluency to native English speakers:

When I speak English, I will not be that confident. I will need time. I will be more hesitant. Just less confident. And for here, I think I'm not the master of the language, if I speak English.

Her insight that language challenges were related to other issues she faced reinforced the framework outlined in chapter 2, which shows that although linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic challenges are each unique, there is a lot of overlap between them. For Li Yuan, the linguistic challenges she faced affected her relationships with her classmates, her confidence, and her social life.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

As many social relationships between students begin in the classroom, who one student associates with in the classroom may affect who they become social with elsewhere. The idea of students "mixing with other groups" was important for

Li Yuan and other participants in this study. She identified the Chinese international students as a group distinct from the other students in the class, and recognized that there was not a great deal of social mixing between those two groups. When asked if she felt it was the Chinese students who were intentionally not mixing with the “local students” (her label), or vice versa, she responded:

Mostly it's us. When we arrive in the first class, we saw students of the same kind, and it was easier to communicate with each other and to get some new friends because we share the same feelings, similar feelings. We were international students and we started to know some Chinese friends first before we started to know some local friends.

Clearly, language was one of the reasons for choosing seatmates in class. Li Yuan felt that if she had issues understanding something in class, she could rely on her Chinese friends to help her understand new vocabulary by discussing it in Mandarin. Beyond language issues, she identified “shared feelings” as an important factor to building substantial relationships both in class and outside of class in both academic and social settings. She describes those “shared feelings”:

We could share our feelings about arriving here and feelings about the program. It was easier to share the same feelings because we had more common topics to talk about like where we find our places to live or language problems and like our backgrounds. It was easier to communicate with them than to the local students or local . . . we are about the same age.

Li Yuan's realization that there was not much social mixing between Chinese and non-Chinese students was a reality outside of the classroom, but was not necessarily what she felt was most beneficial within the classroom. As some professors allowed students to choose their own presentation partners, Li Yuan noticed that students would often gravitate towards their friends to be presentation partners. Although she was often in groups with other Chinese international students, she thought that a more mixed group would be preferable:

I don't think all the group members are Chinese students is a very good idea. If we have mixed members within a group, then we share different thoughts probably from different cultures.

The fact that students who had social relationships beyond the classroom tended to want to work together in the class is another example of the overlap and interplay between language, culture, academics, and socializing and how that plays out in the lives of these Chinese international students. It also underscores the notion that a supportive community existed for Li Yuan, but it was with her Chinese international student classmates more than it was with the class as a whole. Whether self-imposed, as Li Yuan suggests, or if there was a lack of effort from her non-Chinese classmates, the collaborative community that Li Yuan imagined was not the one she experienced.

When asked if there she felt there was a gap between the Chinese culture that she knew so well and the culture of her new environment, she responded with

the pronoun 'we'. Li Yuan said she was not aware of any substantial cultural distance or difference partly because it was never discussed:

I think mostly we just follow-up with the local people and we manage it to get ourselves familiar with the local culture. We didn't expect . . . I couldn't remember if there was any huge gap between different cultures. Because not many local people talk about the gaps in front of me.

Academic Challenges

Like the participants in Liberman's (1996) study and Cortazzi & Jin's (1995) study in the British context, and other participants in this study, Li Yuan found that getting accustomed to the academic expectations in the program to be a challenge. Despite many years of language study, and writing essays in English while studying in China, the expectation of writing properly sourced academic papers was something she felt particularly unprepared for. She asked her classmates for advice and support before handing in her first essays to her professor:

Writing essays was also a problem for me. Even the format—I didn't know APA before I entered the program. At the very beginning, I need to learn APA format before I wrote essays. Then I asked some friends to edit my essays. I was not very confident about it at the very beginning, but later, I can do the editing by myself mostly.

Beyond the challenges associated with academic norms, Li Yuan said that her two major academic challenges throughout the program were leading presentations and finishing the required readings for each class. She noted that a reading that may

take a native English speaker one hour to complete, might have taken her twice as long, or even longer. If she could not complete the required readings before class, this led to more anxiety about being called upon with a response to a reading, in turn leading to her being silent in the class.

Although she said she was a very diligent and hard-working student, Li Yuan had some thoughts about what advice she would give herself at the beginning of the program:

[. . .] to be more confident and less emails, more talking to . . . more talking about my problems and experiences and sharing these things with students and profs. And spend more time on the readings. I didn't finish them. I only finished 70%, but I should have spent more time writing essays and on the readings.

The notion of “less emails” and “more talking about my problems” is important. Li Yuan felt (for linguistic and cultural reasons) uncomfortable expressing her problems and concerns openly. She said that this is one of the main reasons she struggled, early on in her degree, with the academic side of her new life. In China, she explained, students are meant to listen, and not openly engage with the professor. She realized only in later semesters that she could take her academic problems directly to her professors.

Initially encouraged by her language studies and her interest in travel, Li Yuan wanted to pursue studies in an English-speaking country. She had the opportunity in her undergraduate degree, where she was offered the chance to do

an exchange program with a university in Ontario. She was accepted, and spent the penultimate year of her undergraduate studies in Ontario.

Both Li Yuan's parents work in business, and had encouraged her to pursue studies in that field, but she found her interests and abilities were more suited to a field that would utilize her language studies. She struggled with the decision about what to pursue, and had disagreements with her parents on the subject:

I just told them the difficulties I encountered when I chose the program [education]. When I was overseas, they started to realize they can't influence me all the time and they can't help me make the decisions cause they don't know the situation here. So at that time I started to make my own decisions.

Li Yuan said that, ultimately, her greatest motivation to study in Canada was to practice and improve her English skills in a space where she was immersed in the culture of the target language:

I wanted to get my English to a higher level. If I stay here [in Canada], the environment is different. It pushes me to learn English much faster. I will know how people see and behave here, but in China, we won't experience that.

Li Yuan is currently staying in Ontario to work. She has been in a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend in China for the entirety of her degree, and hopes that they will be reunited in Canada. Her plans were always to be an English teacher, but since completing her degree, she has started to work for a company as an administrative assistant. If Li Yuan is able to find permanent employment in

Canada, it is her hope that her boyfriend and parents will be able to immigrate to Canada as well. She is also able to remain in Canada with the help of the PGWPP.

Summary

Li Yuan was another respondent who opted to keep her Chinese name rather than use an English name in class. Like Bei Ou, she felt that adopting an English name may have brought her closer to Canadian culture, but she did not want to compromise her Chinese identity in the process.

Although Li Yuan did not feel as though she was an equal member of the community of practice in the classroom, the community of Chinese international students provided a space of comfort and familiarity. In this community, there was information sharing and a sense of belonging.

Li Yuan identified her language ability to be central to any other challenges she faced in her studies. Because she felt as though her English was not as strong as her native-English speaking colleagues, she lacked confidence to speak in class or make friends with those outside of her group of Chinese friends.

Beyond spoken English, Li Yuan struggled with acculturating into the Canadian academic culture. Academically, she struggled with writing to the expectations of her professors. She received some low marks, which lowered her self-confidence. She links these experiences to her lack of willingness to speak much in class, and also her reluctance to approach her professors with problems.

Hillary

Background

Hillary was a 25-year old woman from Harbin, China. She had lived in different regions in China, and attributed her experiences living in those different cities, as well as classes she took in her undergraduate education (in which she studied 'Western' culture) to not feeling the same culture shock that is often experienced, and perhaps expected, by other Chinese international students.

Hillary said that before she came to Canada to study, she was confident in her language ability, and although not fluent, had a very solid understanding of grammar and was a strong speaker compared with other Chinese international students. When she arrived, her linguistic confidence changed:

I feel like it's [confidence in using English] always fluctuating. The time I got here, I felt . . . it's so nice, I can practice a lot. When I speak with native speakers, I felt . . . I will never speak like them because it's not my first language. My mood dropped to low. And then there were days I thought I could speak well, then it dropped again. When I speak sometimes my lips were fighting. There were times like that. But now I think much better.

While her educational experiences in her home country gave her the confidence to pursue her studies overseas, the reality when she arrived (juxtaposed to her experiences in China) created new experiences affected by fluctuating levels of confidence and doubt in her own linguistic abilities. Hillary said that a big part of

her expectation when studying at the University of Ottawa was the interaction she would have with her Canadian classmates:

Honestly, we [Chinese international students] were expecting that we could, during class discussion, we could have more interaction with the . . . I hate the word . . . native speakers, but the reality is, we are kind of sitting together and having our own discussions. I mean the international students, the Chinese students. We really didn't interact with the people whose first language is English. This is something different from my expectations . . . before I thought we will have this interaction a lot, but it's not really the case . . . except a few people who really want to interact with international students. I would say at least 60% of students don't want to socialize with international students. At least they don't want to speak with you unless you first speak with them. I think Chinese students are not confident enough in their language proficiency.

Hillary noted here that there was a clear connection between the socio-cultural challenges of interacting with those classmates with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and linguistic ability. She began her studies with the idea that a collaborative and inclusive community would exist in the classroom, and that she would be a member of that community. Her words highlighted the disparity, again, between her expected experience and the reality in the classroom. Her perceived exclusion from the community of practice in the classroom was linked to her language ability, which affected her confidence in interacting with her non-Chinese

classmates. It seemed as though, at least in her first few classes, she did not actively try and address this concern through her actions:

I sat with other Chinese students. I looked for the other Chinese students to sit with. They would save seats for me so I sat with them.

She admitted to being shy around her non-Chinese classmates, but she gained confidence as her time at the university went on. Similar to other participants in this study, Hillary's experiences illustrate Schumann's (1986) theory of acculturation in practice. As she spent more time in the Canadian classroom culture, her confidence improved. This led to more and deeper interactions with her Canadian classmates.

Linguistic Challenges

Like Li Yuan, who related many of her challenges back to language, Hillary said that language confidence affected her experiences in the classroom as well as her ability to socialize and work with Canadian classmates. When asked what she wanted her Canadian classmates to understand about Chinese international students, she said, "they are shy. They don't want to socialize a lot. I think that's it. I think because of the language. They are not confident speaking their second language."

She described, more specifically, her own challenging experiences at the beginning of her degree when trying to use English. Although she had studied and even worked in English while in China, she struggled with speed and fluency issues (both when speaking and listening). She described her feelings below:

I don't even have to think of the word in Chinese, but in English, I really have to think hard about that word to speak appropriately. It was definitely a challenge to speak fluently, especially at the beginning. When I was nervous, my mind would just go blank . . . and broken sentences. I think it happened to everybody, not just me. Other international students, too.

Hillary said that this only added to her reservations about answering questions or speaking out in class, and that her behavior perpetuated the stereotype of the "silent Chinese student." It was also important to note here, that Hillary said that the challenges she encountered were shared experiences among other members of the cohort of Chinese international students. These shared experiences helped to strengthen the bond between members of that community, while in some ways, distancing themselves from their non-Chinese classmates. As other participants noted, it was "easier" to socialize and work with other Chinese students due to their similar cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as their shared experiences in their new, foreign context.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

Hillary said that socializing with her classmates was not easy. After a few semesters, she eventually started to make some Canadian friends, and to socialize outside of school. She said the reason for this shift was, "just time and immersing in this environment. Just time." This is exactly in line with Schumann's (1986) notion that the longer a person spends immersed in a new culture, the more acculturated that person will become, not only with cultural norms, but also with language.

While dealing with the stress of school and life in Canada, she did not socialize very much with any of her classmates (Canadian or Chinese). In fact, she said that she was “not social at all”:

I think it’s because my personality. I’m not a very sociable person. Some Chinese students complained that I didn’t socialize enough with them, but I did . . . I didn’t isolate myself on purpose. I still socialized. But compared with others, not a lot.

Hillary also found that there was a cultural divide between her interests and the interests of the Canadians she met. She found that the idea of what constituted a social evening differed greatly, and she was not interested in the kind of socializing that her Canadian classmates suggested. She also found that when she did socialize, she felt most at ease with other Chinese international students:

I think for a lot of Canadians, they love parties, and for a lot of Chinese, they don’t do that. I guess that the problem with all the Chinese students here is that they like to socialize with people from their circle. It’s like in Toronto, Chinese people live together, and Brazilian people live together. You have these little societies and little groupings everywhere. It’s like that. I felt that here a little bit. I would say most of the CIS socialize most of the time with the Chinese circle. But a few of them can go out and socialize with Canadians.

When asked if Chinese students would like to interact and mix more with Canadians, Hillary said, “I doubt it. If they wanted to, they would have already done it, right?” She said that fundamentally, the social issues she encountered were based

in her language challenges. She felt as though, with some more time in Canada, both her language, social, and cultural problems would have been greatly reduced:

Language comes with culture I was thinking if I just . . . I didn't have to grow up here, probably just attend high school here, I would feel so so so much better, I would feel like more of an insider and less of an outsider. I'm not saying I feel like an outsider in this program, but I would probably feel like an insider from the beginning of the program since the beginning. Just high school throughout university. That would make a huge difference.

Hillary's words speak precisely to the idea of initially feeling like a peripheral member of an inclusive classroom community, and how, as she spent more time in the culture and surrounded by the language, she became more engaged and felt more included. Since Hillary graduated from the program, she began to socialize with Canadians who were not her classmates. She found this easier; as she spent more time immersed in Canadian culture using English every day.

Academic Challenges

Beyond the language challenges that Hillary faced at the outset of her studies, she found the academic expectations that were on her to be difficult to meet:

For the first session, I didn't have a foundation for those big concepts and it took time to build on that, but at last, I kind of . . . you learned it from one class and took it to another class and it reinforced what you learned before, it felt good . . . oh! I learned it before. I like that.

Hillary recalled that her first class gave her a surprising taste of the new classroom culture she was now a part of. She found the format of the lessons and the relaxed style of the professor to be a refreshing change from the formal classrooms she had been used to in her undergraduate studies in China. Reflecting on her very first class in a Canadian classroom, she said:

I remember the prof. did an icebreaker. That was a new thing for me and a fun way to know each other. I got the first sense of North American teaching style. I would expect the prof. to dress in a formal suit and stand at the podium and click, click, click and we had the multi-media . . . use the Smartboard, but I didn't expect as much of the interactive . . . I think it was very good. It was nice.

Despite some initial positive experiences, Hillary found adjusting to some aspects of the Canadian style of teaching, as well as to the expectations of her Canadian professors, to be difficult in her first few semesters at the university:

It [getting used to the Canadian style of teaching and learning] was a little daunting, but then I got used to it. It was the 3rd and 4th session where I started to voice my opinions in the class. It's in the second year, but in the first year, no. I never spoke in class. I was shy. Even in China, I would never raise my hand and answer. I think it's my personality.

Hillary, like Li Yuan, claimed that one of the main factors holding her back from speaking in class was that she was generally a shy person. In both cases, I feel as though neither of them was particularly shy, but that in fact, the difference in

classroom cultures, coming from an educational system where students are not expected to speak very much in class, to a system where students are expected to offer their opinions and critically engage with subject matter through discussion made them feel shy, even though they were simply used to not speaking in class. Sitting in their new classrooms, they felt quiet and reserved, particularly when comparing themselves to other students who were more familiar with the norms of the Canadian classroom culture. Regarding her silence in class, Hillary said, that she would refrain from speaking in class “because I care what other people think about me. Maybe they think what I say is a funny idea . . . is it worth voicing my opinion? What other people will think about what I think? When I think about that, I will be a little reserved.”

Written assignments also proved to be challenging in her first semesters, but Hillary found a way to address her issues. She consulted other Chinese international students who had been studying in the program longer than she had. These students, who were more familiar with Canadian academic expectations, helped her navigate her first assignments and learn how to properly source using the accepted and expected APA style:

I had someone who knew APA style and I asked them before I handed in the first few assignments. I would discuss my assignments with other Chinese international students. Like . . .how would you write it? Where did you find the resources? It was a challenge. To learn APA, I also learned from the websites.

When asked why she did take any of her questions to professors, she said that in Chinese schools and universities, there is a wide divide between professors and students, and students are not encouraged to take their issues directly to the teacher:

I think I went to the professor once after class. Once or twice—not very often.

I think I was a little scared. Since I started my school, I'm scared of teachers. I picture them as the authority, and I guess I have a complex . . .it's continued until now.

A further challenge came in the form of presentations. In Hillary's educational and professional background, she had never been asked to do a presentation, let alone in English. While she could stay silent in class and avoid the potential embarrassment of making a public mistake, and she could spend time with Chinese classmates to work on her written work, her first presentations were daunting. Each class required students to do a pair or group presentation for the class. She was not confident that she could complete and do her first presentation, but like other aspects of her academic journey, doing presentations became easier over time:

I think I didn't do a presentation before. My first one was in this program. For the first one, I was really nervous because I'm afraid I might lost my train of thought if I am too nervous. I might say something wrong. I might use the wrong word. I might forget something during the presentation. But then the second time I was a little less nervous, and after that, it was not a big deal.

Despite Hillary's extensive language study and academic achievements in English, she considers herself to be starting from a different standard when it comes to marks, compared with native English speakers:

A burning question that I'm always wondering about: is the writing standard the same for international students and native-speakers? I think no. I think no. But I'm not sure. I never asked the prof. that question. Because if it's your native language, you are expected to write better than people whose first language is not English. It's unfair that way probably why the profs. Should lower their standards. They should be the same. It's unfair if it's like that, but if not, I doubt whether everybody could get to the standard of an A, but probably 99% of the students, if you finish an assignment and show that you are a hard-working student, you will get an A or an A- at least. There's no reason to get a B. that's the goal of this program. In this way, I'm guessing they might compromise the standard because I doubt that every student that got an A was up to that standard . . . I'm not sure whether the marks speak volumes here, but in China they do. Especially for employers. They will look at your transcript when they hire you. It won't be the only deciding factor, but they will take it into consideration.

Hillary mentioned that she struggled to understand the content in her first semester in her program. She highlighted this as the major academic challenge she faced in the program:

I guess in my first class, a lot of things that were mentioned, I had never heard them before. Even though the prof. explained them, I had never heard of them before. I didn't know what they meant. That left me a deep impression and another prof. mentioned something in my first session—there were a lot of things in that first session that I didn't understand.

Similar to other respondents, Hillary noticed a significant difference in her ability and confidence when comparing herself at the beginning and the end of the program. Despite her challenges early on, she felt that by the end of the program, as though she had overcome some personal, as well as academic, challenges. She said, this was reflected in her own feelings about herself and in her marks:

My highest point was the last session. I felt like I am now in a good state. If I was in that state before when I started, I would have done so much better throughout the whole program.

Hillary first began considering studying overseas mid-way through her high school career. She realized that with her language training, there could be possibilities to work for the government, or for international companies where bilingualism is required and valued. She claimed that once she was in her undergraduate studies, the idea of travelling to study overseas was a goal shared by the majority of her classmates. She said that although it may be a dream for most Chinese students, the amount of money needed to move to Canada was excessive. She said that the thought of being away from friends and family was not appealing for many of her classmates, particularly her girlfriends, who wanted to graduate, get

married, and start a family immediately after the completion of their undergraduate degree. She calls that “the more stable life,” but says that in China, “I think everybody wants to [study overseas] if they get the chance.”

A large part of Hillary’s motivation to study in Canada was the idea that a foreign graduate degree can open greater opportunities for employment in China. Once she had lived in Canada for a few months, she began to reconsider the value of the degree she was pursuing:

I know there are more and more people coming from overseas with their degrees. It’s valuable for sure. How valuable? We’re still competing with people who graduated from China, like Peking University. Who will excel? It’s hard to tell. I guess other factors will come into play like previous experience and overall performance.

After a year of teaching in China, Hillary felt she had enough experience to consider studying education at the graduate level. She was drawn to Canada over the United States because of the violence that she saw on American news. She applied to three universities in Canada, and was accepted at one—where she pursued her studies. Hillary was not in total agreement with her parents on a few issues (moving so far away, not pursuing teaching in China, the option of studying science), but eventually, they agreed that Hillary should study Education in Canada, and would have their full support. She explains her decision making as follows:

What I was thinking and what my parents were thinking was a little different.

I wanted to just continue my education and since I already got a little

experience in education, and I became a certified teacher before I came here. I took the test and had the interview, so I think I got a little bit of experience in education field and I found that it's a fascinating world. I thought why not? But I was not thinking the whole life I would do teaching, I never thought that way. I was thinking life could change. I always wanted to learn more. I wanted to learn science, but my mom would say you're just thinking too much, it's not realistic. If you learn teaching, you can find a teaching job. My parents are thinking a little different from my thinking. But they supported my idea to come here.

Hillary used her three-year work permit in Canada to work while she considered her next step. Although her primary goal to move to Canada was the quality of the education system, she started the process of applying to immigrate. She is currently working as a cashier and is still considering working in the education field in the future, although she is also considering working in a corporate office in the meantime.

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Summary

Hillary, more than the other female respondents, was very confident in her English language ability as she prepared to study in Canada. Her expectations in coming to study in Canada included working and socializing with her Canadian colleagues at the university. This was not the case, and she notes that although cultural differences and language ability were factors, there was also a lack of interest in the “native speakers” to interact with her and her Chinese colleagues.

Hillary also says, more directly than other participants, that the issues she faced from the outset of her program were largely linked to her English ability. She also explains that these linguistic challenges, and the challenges she faced when interacting with non-Chinese classmates and friends, became less pronounced the longer she spent in Canada.

Hillary is also the one participant who recounted a distinctly positive experience in her first class. Where others struggled with the shock of the new academic culture, Hillary was pleasantly surprised by the new classroom dynamics and tone of the classroom culture in her first course.

When dealing with academic issues, Hillary turned to other Chinese students who had been in Canada longer than she had. This is another example of one of the participants in this study finding comfort in the community of practice of other Chinese international students. Where there was reluctance in approaching her professors or other classmates for help, Hillary went to students who spoke her language and had experienced similar challenges in their own studies.

Michael

Michael was by far the most talkative respondent in this study. Despite being fairly quiet in class, in the one-on-one interview setting, he would speak for extended periods (unlike other respondents, who needed prompting at times). I have included longer narrative chunks from the interviews with Michael because it more accurately captures the nature of the interviews I conducted with him.

Background

Michael was the only male respondent in this study. He is a very confident speaker, and is generally outgoing, which he identified as a trait that is not the norm among his peers from China. He chose to use an English name in the classroom so that he can “better communicate with [his] peers.” His Chinese name was quite easy for English speakers to pronounce, and his English name was similar enough to his Chinese name that he does not mind using either. He offered more insight into the complex decision to use a Chinese name while studying in Canada:

One professor remembered no Chinese name at all, so she interacted with all local students while Chinese students were ignored. This is just my impression. But actually that prof. was really great, really nice, but that created a false impression to some degree. I mean kind of gives me the feeling that you do not belong to this field or, you're nothing to do with your opinions, or you have little connection to the class . . . some have English names—for those who better want to communicate with local peers, they

will use English names, but for others, they do not care if the teachers focus on them, so they insist on using Chinese names.

This feeling of “having little connection to the class” explores the idea of a classroom community, in the sense that although students may occupy the same physical space, that interaction and collaboration does not necessarily follow. Michael’s choice to use an English name was one of the methods he used to try and become an active and accepted member of the classroom community.

From a young age (primary school), Michael’s parents paid for him to have an English tutor come to their home for private lessons. This tutor worked with Michael for over four years, and stayed with him when he attended a private high school known for its high-level English instruction. During this time he also travelled with the school to England for further English studies. Michael claimed that his background in intensive English language training was imperative to his success in English studies. His semester in the UK was not the integrated experience that he had hoped for. In fact, he said, “we have so many Chinese students, so we stayed in our own circle rather than talk to foreign students.” This was similar to the experience that he would face years later in his graduate program. As Dewey (1938) suggests, past experiences, whether educational or “miseducation[al]” (p. 8), affect later experiences. Michael had already travelled to an English-speaking country with the hopes of collaborating with native-speakers. He was disappointed then, that the Chinese students had stayed together, in a community of familiarity, and there had been minimal mixing with non-Chinese peers. He approached his studies in Canada

with a similar expectation, and was met with a similar result: despite his intentions, the inter-cultural mixing that he had expected was not the reality he encountered upon arrival.

Linguistic Challenges

Michael found his first classes and subsequent encounters with his English-speaking classmates to be unexpectedly challenging. Although initially confident in his language ability, he found that the language used in the classroom was at a level and speed that he was not used to:

I have a lot to say. I had full confidence in myself before I came here. It was a really nice opportunity for me to practice because I lacked that in the Chinese context, so I dared to say anything that I can express. I was really confident. When I studied in my first semester, I found that many Canadian students spoke at a much higher rate than I had expected. Much faster, especially some girls. I was crazy. I thought they were crazy! How come? There is the affect of imitation when learning a foreign language, so I guess I tried, but I failed to do so. And I think their high speed really caused a listening comprehension problem for me. Especially when it was with content I was not familiar with. That affected my level of confidence. I found that no matter how hard I tried, for my entire life, I cannot catch up with them. So I gave up the plan to catch up with their speed. Then I found that the speed is not the whole story. You can have language proficiency and you also should pay

more attention to the content that you use and speak rather than the expressions and other language stuff.

Like other participants in this study, Michael saw his initial confidence wane in his first semester. Michael continued by framing his own issues as part of similar challenges faced by his friends and classmates:

Language confidence was a major problem, especially for the male Chinese students. I'm not sure why. All of them mentioned identity in our personal conversations, some quite often. One friend said he dare not use English in certain settings because no matter what, you still have the accent which is identifiable and which is indicative of your foreign identity. Which means you do not belong to this cultural group and to a greater degree, this is not your home, you should go back. Now, he went back to China, and I'm not sure if he will come back again. This is an important problem.

Michael also realized that most Chinese international students are generally quiet in class. He self-identified as one who breaks that trend. He pointed out that one of the reasons Chinese students are so quiet in class is that their primary goal is not their studies:

I also think for many of them, the first purpose for them to study here is to immigrate to Canada. So study is only part of their initiative, but for me, study is the major part of my life. I'm not sure if I'm right, but I think I have more passion than they do for my studies.

He attributed his willingness to speak in class to his interest in the subject matter and his goal of continuing studies in the same field.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

When asked about his initial experiences with his classmates, Michael applied the identity theories he had studied in class to explain the relationships he experienced:

I tried to mix. The underlying reasons of who I chose to sit with was because I learned more about identity. I think identity is not something you can get rid of; it's something you should be proud of. It's something distinctive and something that is really . . . it is something always with you. So I should keep my real identity. So sitting with Chinese students still share my identity with the other students while I don't want my identity to be suppressed by the supremacy assumed by the white students.

Michael revisited the notion that, although he had the ability to use English well enough to converse and socialize with native English speakers, he did not find enough in common with his non-Chinese classmates to have meaningful social relationships outside of the classroom:

Often times people tend to stay in their comfort zone. Language should be the determining factor about whether you feel comfortable or not. So yeah, I think except for language, we have different life. If we talk about our lives during the breaks, we should find a common interest, but it seldom occurs

when we sit with the white students, that we have the same stories or life. They do not like to listen to our stories, and we do not care about them.

Here, Michael was revisiting the idea that he did not feel as though he was fully a member of the community of practice that existed within the classroom. The relationships that were formed between students in the classroom often led to social relationships beyond the classroom. Like other participants, Michael claimed that while cultural differences, and differing life experiences existed, language was still a primary barrier to feeling comfortable enough to build cross-cultural relationships.

Academic Challenges

Michael found that even the basic structure of classes at the university was different from what he was familiar with and different from his expectations:

I had little knowledge of Canada. When I arrived here, I found the lifestyle was different, but in terms of academic studies, I found that . . . in China we have the name of classes, like class 1. You will stay with the students for quite a few classes. You will move to different classes with the same students. Here we move around to different classes, but we are separate from other classes. It's like shopping. You get little connection with the students. But if you really want to find some friends, you should talk to them. That's how I got some links with some students here in the first place. I do find that communication is harder than I expected in terms about what to talk about rather than how

to talk about it. We have different values and different interest points: the Chinese students and the Canadian students.

Similar to other respondents in this study, Michael found that he could connect with his fellow classmates linguistically, but could not find much in common to talk about. This became evident as he tried to make the move from talking strictly about the academic topics that he and his classmates shared to other, less formal topics purely for the sake of socializing rather than for any school-related purpose.

He made a crucial point that was reiterated by his peers. The challenge was not always language ability or comprehension. Indeed, he felt very confident in his English language ability. The issue was using the language to make the connections between and across the cultural divide, rather than strictly the linguistic divide.

Michael traced his challenges with writing academically in English to his undergraduate work in China. He quickly realized that his Chinese education had not provided all the academic tools he needed to write an acceptable academic paper in a Canadian classroom. He recalled some of the details of his what he learned in China, below:

[In one] class the teacher adopted the most traditional method of writing. I did not learn the specifics of writing (coherence and cohesion and other delicacies in writing). I found that's where I lack when I attend university in Canada.

Apart from a brief time studying in England as a high school student, Michael's education had been entirely in China. Although he expected that classes would be different in Canada, he had not anticipated that the roles of teacher and student would be as drastically different from what he was familiar with. This was evident as he recalled his first impressions of the Canadian graduate classroom:

I expected that the teacher would lecture the whole class, but I think it's more student-based classroom arrangement. The prof. assigns you some readings to do before class, then you share your understandings with peers for the week and then the professor would come up with some comments or some research in that field. This kind of teaching style was very different from in China. You know you would expect the prof. would tell you all you need to know without you doing anything prior to class. So I think this is the experience shared with many Chinese students.

Michael also found it difficult to adjust to a teaching style that was so different from the lecture-based style of learning he was used to. He found it odd that all the classes were in the evening, and got the impression that he was basically attending "night school for people who were busy with other jobs during the daytime." Although, over time, he became more comfortable with the new teaching style, he found the classes were too focused on encouraging the opinions of his classmates rather than listening to lectures from his professors. He said, "I would prefer to hear more from the experts, from the teachers' perspectives."

Unlike the other respondents in this study, Michael booked meetings with his professors to discuss his assignments, application letters, and future job and educational opportunities. He says these meetings helped him become more comfortable with the program and “adapt to the academic studies”.

When it came to group work, Michael realized, again, that he did not have similar experiences to his Chinese classmates. He highlighted the fact that there was usually a clear divide between Chinese international students and Canadian students when working collaboratively:

I know there is a power relation with the Chinese students . . . maybe the Canadian students will say they have a higher proficiency level so they tend to do the major work, while the Chinese student only do some unimportant things, but I think it depends if you just want to say I want to do the work, you can do it. I can say that I benefitted a lot from the editing from Canadian peers. I could see what they wanted to use to modify here, so I think it's a better way for me to improve my writing skills.

When given the opportunity to choose his own group members, he was always deliberate in his choices, although those choices changed over time:

Initially, I tend to join those groups with white students because I think it will be a great chance for me to hear their voice to mix their opinions, to be more multilingual, multicultural, but then I realized that the white students dominate the group discussion and they usually . . . it's them who voice the group's opinion. So I realized I had no chance if I joined them.

Michael's insights here are crucial to understanding the complex structures of the community within the classroom. Even when working directly with his classmates, Michael felt that he was not a valued member of the group. Michael said that in the courses specifically related to his major (second language education), there was not always a large divide between Chinese students and others, but he highlighted another course in which he felt that distinct separation throughout the class:

I think the power relation stems from the language and the supremacy they assume for themselves, to a certain degree. Not to be aggressive. But to a certain degree I think so. I have the impression that for medical students, for those majoring in psychology education . . . counseling . . . you can see all of the counseling students are white. I think the impression is most salient when I took the course about testing and evaluation in which many professionals were in the class. They were white and they dominated the discourse. The only thing the Chinese students can do is talk about language testing, which the native speakers have no knowledge at all. They talk about some psychology tests . . . or some professional tests that the prof. can resonate with that we cannot relate to. So it's just native speaker talking, Chinese students stay silent. Chinese student talking, native students do not say anything at all. So it's just really weird in that class actually. You can do nothing to that.

Regarding marking, Michael had strong opinions when asked if Chinese international students get marked the same as all other students:

I don't think so, I don't think so. But I remember one Chinese student told me the prof. told him, because you are an international student, so I will not pay much attention to your grammar.

Michael was unique in his motivations to study at the university he chose, at least at first. When considering which English-speaking country he should choose to pursue his studies, the presence of French was one of the deciding factors:

Comparatively speaking, [Canada is] less expensive where you can attend a university and have an enjoyable life. With UK, I knew it somehow, the most important reason to choose Canada, is my parents still want me to further my French studies because Canada is bilingual. But when I got here, I found out that French is much more underused than English. I did not sense that the different status these languages enjoyed. I realize that English is the still the power language. I went to Montreal with 5-6 students voluntarily, and I spoke French there. It works. On several occasions when English was not understood, I spoke French and they understood it, and they facilitated an enjoyable journey. [. . .] After I came here, I realized most of the international students are in this program because they want to immigrate to Canada, which was different from my original expectation. They kind of persuade me to do so like they did. That is actually my idea now, especially now, my parents, my mom and my relatives want to come here. For example,

one student who got accepted into this program, he got an offer in UK, but finally, he decided to come to Canada, with many offers, the deciding factor is the immigration policy for foreigners. For me, it's a different scenario because we had French. And that was a priority for me.

Michael's primary goal motivation for studying in Canada was to study, but he revealed that that was not the case with many of his Chinese international student classmates:

Some of them do not pay close attention to their studies, as they revealed to me. Some do not even get the course pack, and it's still possible to get a decent mark in the end. So you can see, . . . actually that student returned to China. There is no general pattern that you can assign to every individual, but for most, the immigration policy is the major attraction.

Unique among the respondents in this study, Michael actively prepared for the academic aspects of studying in Canada, beyond his undergraduate work and independent of his university:

When I received the offer from [the university], I thought that I should do something more about it to study in depth . . . before I came here, I realized I should do something to improve my writing. So I looked at books like persuasive writing, in which I found helpful models . . . like claim and evidence, evidence to support a claim, and also sub-evidence and sub-claim.

Michael was the only respondent who was pursuing further studies in the field of second language education. His interest in the field (as well as applied linguistics), his love of academia, and with encouragement and support from his parents. His goal was to complete a PhD in Canada and to find work as a professor in the second language or linguistics field.

Summary

Michael differed from the other participants in this study for a variety of reasons. He was the only male respondent, and through his interviews, was able to comment on the experiences that he shared with other male Chinese international students. He was also the respondent with the greatest interest in the field of second language education. He did not choose the program arbitrarily, as other participants had. He came to the program with the desire to gain a deep understanding of the subject matter, and to use his degree to pursue further studies in the field which could lead him to a career in academia. Although limited to one semester, Michael was also the only participant who had any studied overseas prior to coming to Canada. For these reasons, Michael's interviews were unique in both content and perspective.

Regarding the silence of Chinese students in class, Michael provided an interesting theory. While other participants claimed that they were simply shy, or lacked the confidence to speak in class, Michael thought that another issue was that many of his Chinese classmates were simply uninterested in the topics being discussed. While other students chose to study second language education on advice

from their parents, or because their undergraduate studies in English left them few other options, Michael had an active interest in the field, which meant that as he became more familiar with classroom norms, his own confidence improved, and he was more willing to offer his voice in class discussions.

Michael was a very conscientious student in China, and was a keen student as he began his studies. Initially, he had difficulties adjusting to the Canadian classroom style, which he found more interactive than his classroom experiences in China. He had to learn how to be a student in this new context, which took some time. Although he adjusted to the style, he still felt that one of the merits of the Chinese classroom is that the students get more information from the experts, rather than hearing the opinions of his classmates.

More than other participants, Michael had a lot to say about the power imbalance he felt between himself, along with his Chinese classmates, and the non-Chinese students in his classes. Although, perhaps more than other participants, Michael was actively pursuing the goal of being an accepted member into an academic community of practice at the university, he was met with the impression that his opinions had less value, and that his experiences differed from his non-Chinese classmates to the extent that there was not a lot of common ground, both academically and socially.

Discussion

This study's purpose is to allow this cohort of Chinese international students at the University of Ottawa to relate their experiences during their graduate studies.

Its guiding question is: How do Chinese international students enrolled in a second language education graduate program construct narratives of their socio-cultural, linguistic, and academic experiences associated with studying at a Canadian university?

In the literature review, I began by examining a variety of studies related to the field and research focus of this study. Studies such as Liberman (1994) and Desjardins & King's (2011) research helped me to get a deeper understanding of qualitative research that had been focused on the experiences of graduate students, and Asian graduate students more specifically. Basen's (2013) documentary provided context to the particular research site and the experiences of past Chinese students who had come to study in Ottawa. The studies done by Liu & Winn (2009) and Holmes (2005), as well as data from the CBIE (2015) provided information regarding the trend of internationalization in Canadian universities, and the implications of that trend. The research done by Gan (2009), Li, Chen, & Duanmu, (2010), and Gu & Maley (2005) all helped to explain the adjustments and culture shock experiences of international students. This research led me to the realization that there was a gap in the literature regarding the academic acculturation experiences of the students in my research context. A further search revealed two similar studies that had been completed in the Canadian context. They were Zhang's (2002) work which focused on cultural communication issues of Chinese MBA students, and Shi's (2010) study which focused on the experiences of immigrant Ph. D. students. These studies, particularly, helped me to realize that academic acculturation was an under-researched area in the context I was studying. Although

these two research projects were completed in similar research sites to my own work, the methodologies differed from the methodology used in this study. My research on acculturation led me to Gardner's (1985) work on integrative motivation, and then to Schumann's (1986) theory of acculturation, which ultimately became the central element for the conceptual framework pertaining to this research.

I began my analysis with a start list of codes drawn from this conceptual framework and the demographic information gleaned from the participants. From there, themes relating to linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic experiences and acculturation were identified and explored. Though the interviews with my participants, I was able to gain an understanding of how these students positioned themselves within the classroom community, the Chinese international student community, and where there was overlap or separation between those groups. Essential to my analysis was how Schumann's (1986) theory of acculturation applied as the participants explained their experiences. The themes of acculturation were particularly relevant when looking at language confidence in the classroom, and the changes that occurred, both in confidence and proficiency, as the participants spent more time in Canada.

As I focused on the central themes of linguistic, socio-cultural, and academic challenges, I also remained open as new and unexpected themes emerged. I noticed in the research that there was a good deal of discussion on student silence in the classroom, and collaborative work, but not enough on linguistic confidence, support

systems, interactions with non-Chinese classmates, student expectation discrepancies, or academic acculturation. These themes emerged through conversations about the challenges that were described as the participants reflected upon their personal experiences.

Linguistic Challenges

It became evident that the linguistic challenges faced by the respondents in this study were foundational when discussing any of the other experiences they had had in their university programs. Although each respondent entered their program with varying degrees of confidence in their writing, speaking, academic and presentation skills, all four found that they became less confident as they began their studies, attended classes, and interacted with their classmates and professors. For some, the challenges were more connected to proficiency, for others, lack of confidence was the principal challenge. Other challenges included pronunciation (difficulty understanding and being understood by colleagues and professors), as well as a lack of familiarity with the subject-specific language that appeared in lectures, texts, and classroom discussions. All respondents in this study explicitly mentioned at least two of the above challenges as part of their classroom experience. The respondents in this study also noted that they found a that there was a disconnect between the English language proficiency and fluency they had acquired in their studies in China, and the reality of what they were expected to produce in the Canadian classroom. Michael, specifically, says that he believed his academic English ability, pronunciation, and vocabulary to be strong to the point of

“above average”. In his first class, he quickly realized that despite his academic language knowledge, he lacked much of the subject-specific language needed for class discussions and presentations. He also found it difficult to understand his non-Chinese international student classmates. While he started with more linguistic confidence than other respondents, we still resorted to sitting and working with Chinese students in the classroom, simply because of the linguistic comfort he felt with that group.

For each of the respondents, their comfort in their new academic culture was closely linked to their ability to use English with greater proficiency and confidence. They became more established in classroom communities, and realized that their success in all aspects of their academic and social lives was highly dependent on their language ability.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

As the respondents in this study noted, the link between linguistic challenges and socio-cultural challenges was significant for them. When the Chinese students in this study were unable to communicate easily with their non-Chinese classmates, they were unable to build relationships that extended beyond the classroom. Two respondents had similar experiences where they found themselves among Canadian peers. When the conversation changed from academic topics to more informal conversation about cultural events and entertainment news, the Chinese students were lost. They lacked the common cultural knowledge needed to contribute to and understand what was being discussed, and they stayed silent. In one case, Li Yuan

went home and did some research so she would be more prepared for similar discussions that would arise in the future.

Others found the social differences between themselves and their Canadian classmates (and in some cases, roommates) too wide to bridge. The Chinese students were surprised at how the Canadian-born students socialized. The Chinese students were generally uninterested in attending parties, drinking, or dancing. The cultural norms that the participants in this study were familiar with were different from the new situations they found themselves in in Canada. Richer experiences came to those participants who (usually over time, and with increased linguistic confidence) became more open and familiar with the new situations they found themselves in. The participants' experiences with their Canadian classmates were largely affected by the past experiences that both groups were bringing to their present situation.

Another common experience was related to the fact that because my participants needed to spend more time working through the academic readings and assignments required for class, they did not have time for much socializing that was not school related.

Academic Challenges

Many of the academic challenges faced by the students in this study were related to the challenges outlined above. In a variety of ways, it was clear that none of these challenges existed in isolation. Rather, one challenging experience led to another. For example, Li Yuan noted that because she was not confident enough in

her language proficiency to speak out in class, she did not feel confident to speak to her Canadian classmates outside of class. She felt that the classmates who were friends with one another outside of the classroom worked well together in group discussions and presentations, a factor that helped them succeed academically. Without the foundational linguistic or social connections, she felt as though her academic success was also affected. Another common academic challenge that was referred to by all respondents was the lack of familiarity with APA style, and how this challenge resulted in low grades for their first assignments and essays. As the Chinese international students had very limited exposure to the accepted formatting of academic papers in the Canadian classroom, my respondents felt that this was another quite burdensome skill that had to be learnt and practiced. Hillary and Li Yuan specifically said that their first essays were given poor marks, and that their professors emphasized the importance of familiarizing themselves with APA style before they handed in another assignment. These students turned to online resources and their Chinese classmates for help on this subject.

Another major academic challenge for the students in this study were the course requirements for in-class group presentations. None of the female participants had given academic group presentations in English prior to their first classes in Canada. They felt that they struggled to master the content they were presenting and lacked confidence in terms of presentation style, pronunciation, and word choice. All respondents said that their first presentations were very challenging and anxious experiences, but over the course of their studies, presentation assignments became easier to complete as their confidence grew and expectations became clearer.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter is organized into three sections. This first section focuses on the need for future research and suggests directions for further academic studies that would be valuable additions to this field. I point to several theoretical and methodological options that might prove to be promising in future research. The second makes recommendations based on this study in terms of programming and concrete teaching practice. It includes suggestions for program administrators with regards to addressing the challenges faced by Chinese international graduate students and outlines concrete suggestions for teachers who are working in internationalized graduate level classrooms. The third and final section of this chapter concludes this thesis by making some general comments on what was learned from this study and what conclusions the reader can draw from it.

Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of a cohort of students who is becoming more prominent, but whose voices are often overlooked. To reiterate: the research question that I used to guide this research was:

How do Chinese international students enrolled in a second language education graduate program construct narratives of their socio-cultural, linguistic, and academic experiences associated with studying at a Canadian university?

Although various studies have been conducted to explore the experiences of Chinese international students, certain salient aspects of the challenges these students face need to be explored in greater depth. This is largely due to the fact that with a student population that is rapidly becoming more internationalized, the face of classrooms, and the demographics on Canadian campuses are changing and need to adapt as well.

Future research needs to be conducted in a few areas, specifically. First, I believe that qualitative studies that explore the voices and perspectives of the non-Chinese classmates of Chinese international graduate students would be invaluable. In my own studies, and in my own personal conversations with non-Chinese classmates, I have heard many strong opinions about the interactions between these two groups, both positive and negative. These opinions are often voiced in relation to the interactions that occur when Chinese and non-Chinese students work together on in-class presentation assignments. In a sense, exploring the experiences of non-Chinese classmates would be a way of taking into account the other half of the equation in terms of these assignments. This research could be conceptually based on Lave and Wenger's (1998) theory of *communities of practice* and could benefit from a focus that highlighted the role of mentors within the classroom. The role of mentorship to create a community of practice is interesting when applied to the interactions between Chinese international graduate students and their non-Chinese classmates and colleagues.

Second, it would be interesting to conduct a follow-up longitudinal study with my respondents in five or ten years to see how their experiences studying at a Canadian graduate program have affected their lives personally, professionally, and academically. Conceptually, Dewey's (1938) theory of experience could be useful in framing the relevance of past experiences studying at university, and the effects that experience had on their future careers, studies, and pursuits.

Another aspect of the varied experiences of Chinese international students that was revealed through this research was the idea of shifting identity, as a response to the newly adopted linguistic, academic, and socio-cultural contexts. Some respondents claimed that they had classmates from China who had drastically changed their personalities when they moved to North America, while others self-identified as being a different person in the English context compared to their "Chinese self". I believe that great value could be gained in investigating this phenomenon, why it happens, and why some students embrace it, while others resist it. Norton's (2000) work on identity and language learning investment could be used to frame studies that examined this aspect of these experiences.

As internationalized classrooms become ubiquitous in the North American context, providing concrete qualitative information about the experiences of international students should be central for future research. It is important to provide space for the personal voices of students to be heard. Qualitative research, such as the one I have conducted here, can provide the depth that is often lacking in quantitative approaches to research. Ideally, as Creswell (2015) argues there is

great value in pairing the two approaches to that examines a wide range of students while allowing the space to provide context and concrete detail. With so many Chinese international students studying in Canada, such a research agenda would be extremely valuable to understanding this ever-growing and ongoing phenomenon.

I have revised the original conceptual framework in order to create a clear vision as to how future studies could usefully serve this area of research. Building on the notion, as highlighted by the participants in this study, that academic challenges were central to their experiences, that section of the revised diagram has been enlarged to emphasize the importance of investigating that particular facet of this research more thoroughly. After narrowing the research focus to the academic challenges of Chinese international graduate students, it would be useful to apply three particular theories to unpack these experiences further. As mentioned above, Lave and Wenger (1991) explore the notion of negotiating meaning in practice in their work on communities of practice, and insist “that shared practice does not itself imply harmony or collaboration” (p. 85). Lave and Wenger (1991) say that, learning is basically “socially situated practice” (p. 88). As Wang and Beckett (2014) point out, “Chinese students who pursue their graduate studies in an American institution can be defined as novices in this new academic community of practice” (p. 84). It would be valuable to approach new research in this area with these notions in mind.

Another important theme to consider in future research is the notion of identity. As mentioned above, Norton’s (2000) work on *imagined communities*

explores how students' motivations and learning trajectories can be affected by the extent to which they feel as though they are members (actual or desired) of a learning community. This idea of membership and feeling like a peripheral member of the classroom community was a rich theme that emerged through the analysis of interviews in this research. Further research could explore how personal identities shifted over time through an attempt to define the imagined community and through reflection over a greater time period.

A final direction for future research could investigate the power relations within the classroom context. I believe there would be great value in investigating the experiences of a similar cohort through the lens of Jackson's (1968) idea of *hidden curriculum*. Jackson (1968) argues that schools are not simply places of acquiring subject matter, but are places where concepts of power structures, academic expectations, representation of ownership of knowledge, rules outlining who is allowed to speak and when, and what forms of knowledge are valued are taught and learned. Applying this lens to further research could only help researchers to understand the complexity of the power dynamics within a context similar to the one studied here.

On the following page is the revised conceptual framework, highlighting suggested directions for future research.

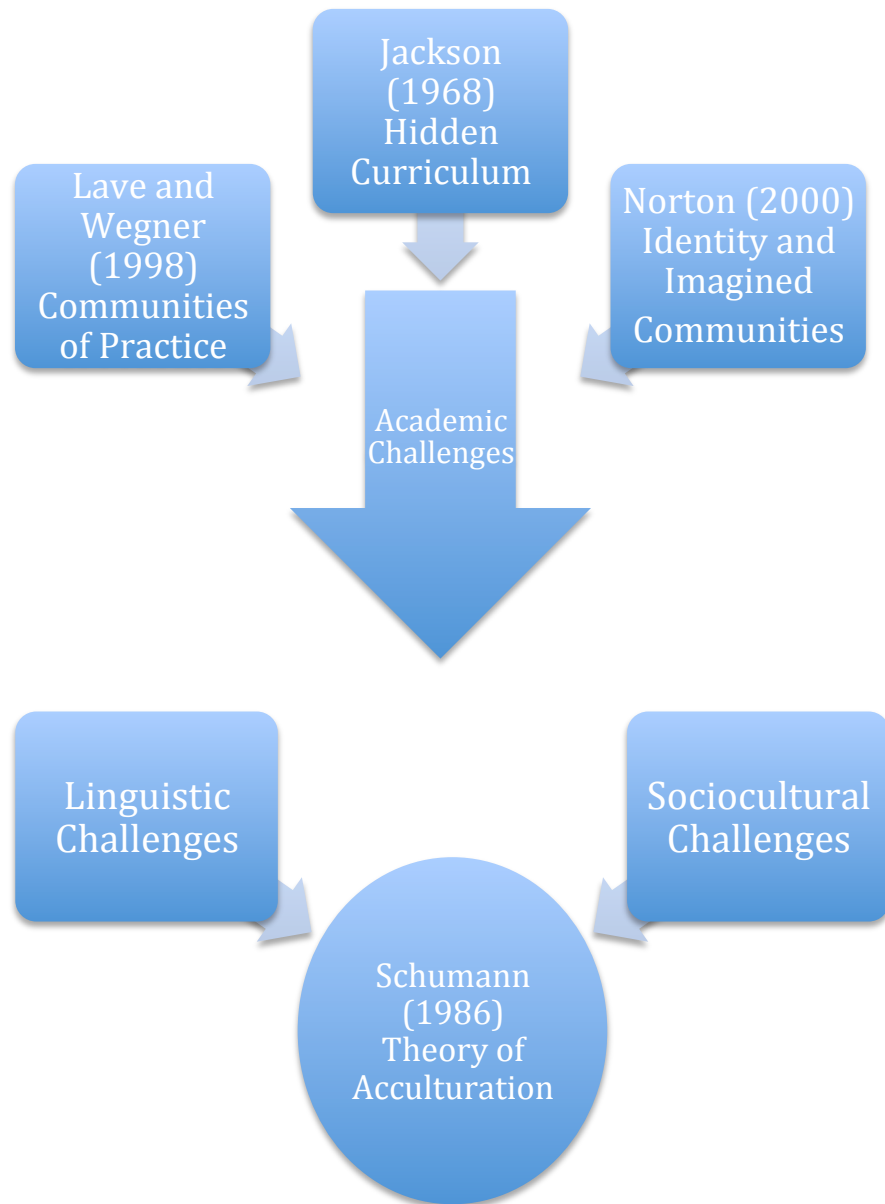


Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework

Recommendations for Programming and Teaching

In this section, I outline concrete recommendations for universities with regards to programming and teaching Chinese international students. I have

specifically made suggestions for teaching practice with regards to language and acculturation concerns, as well as practical recommendations for helping Chinese international students adjust to life while studying in Canada.

One support network that often helps Chinese international students with their off-campus living needs is the group of websites (all in Chinese) that arranges housing, roommates, advice for life in Canada, and travel planning. The students in this study made extensive use of these websites. These sites seem to have been valuable resources and the sites and publications currently employed by the university do fulfill important functions. However, I believe that the university itself should be more assertive in becoming the primary entity that covers the needs that these independent sites serve. By allowing these needs to be met by independent sources that are unrelated to the university, a risk exists that international students are being provided inaccurate information. In addition, by allowing these sites to become a primary source for information for these students, a valuable opportunity to being lost in terms of fostering a sense of belonging to the university community.

One exemplary program that exists at the university under study is a mentorship program for international students run by international students at the International Student Success Centre. The goal here is to pair recently arrived international students with international students who have lived and studied in Canada for a year or more. Unfortunately, although this is undoubtedly a worthwhile program, the participants in this study were unaware of its existence. As international students often lack the confidence to join new activities, (based on

linguistic insecurity, or cultural apprehensions, among other reasons) I recommend that an enhanced promotion of this program would be of benefit. An enhancement and expansion of programs that partner incoming students with students who are more acculturated would be invaluable.

For all graduate students, the first semesters of a new program can be overwhelming. There are new expectations, and adapting to the new academic environment can be challenging, particularly for international students who are also familiarizing themselves with life in a new country, living away from home, and many other potential challenges. Bei Ou highlights one of the academic challenges that she (and her colleagues faced) when writing her first assignments. She remembered how she and her Chinese international student classmates were either unfamiliar or unaware of the academic expectations needed to write acceptable academic papers. She claimed that she did not become comfortable with the expected format until into her third semester.

Although the university does offer programs preparing international students before and after arrival, none of my respondents were aware of them. I would recommend that these programs be strengthened, better promoted and coordinated. Furthermore, on-campus programs that offer language-training could more explicitly move to an embrace of higher levels of academic skills.

A type of mentorship program would be valuable to create connections between new students and more experienced students, as well as international

students and non-international students. I do not believe this type of program would have to be exclusively given to international students.

This research is one step in understanding the experiences of Chinese international students as they pursue graduate studies in Canada. As Bei Ou says, “It’s like a journey. The beginning is usually very hard, but when you go through that, everything is very bright.”

An unexpected theme that emerged through the interviews was the idea that although, for example, Chinese and non-Chinese students may not have been mixing in class or socializing outside of class, that for the Chinese students, this was not something they considered to be ‘a challenge’. Bei Ou says it so well, that it is worth repeating here. While discussing the fact that she did not mix socially with non-Chinese students, she said:

Challenge is a big word, because it sounds like you want to overcome it or you want to . . . you are actively getting involved, but if you don’t want to, it’s not a challenge.

This struck me, and I believe it is worth repeating. As I was attempting to make sense of the challenges faced by this cohort of students, I had not considered that something an outside observer may consider a problem, may not be a concern for those living the experiences. There was a similar moment with Michael when he said that the lack of socializing between the Canadian and Chinese students was in large part due to the fact that neither group was interested in the other. While many of the issues that were described by the respondents of this study were challenging

for them, it is important to recognize that what one group (or researcher) may consider to be a challenge worth addressing, may, in fact, be a non-issue for the parties involved.

It became clear to me, through this research, that there was a divide between the needs of the Chinese international students who participated in this study and the university they were attending. Although support is in place (in the form of the international student office, the Chinese embassy, homestay networks, and professors' office hours), there is more that could be done by the university to facilitate the transition and the ongoing challenges of this cohort that is so valued and sought after by the institution.

My first recommendation is to enhance the existing programs that connect prospective students and those involved with faculty admissions in person before the start of their programs. This could include visits to China to work on applications and interview applicants to get an accurate picture of who is being accepted into the program. Along with this could be some in-person workshops with Chinese students to address the questions they may have about life in Canada, academic expectations in the classroom, the logistics of campus life, cultural questions, and any other issues that former students would consider valuable. Even basic workshops or lectures that include discussions of introductory readings and academic writing help would be invaluable to this group of students. This initiative would be served if there increased coordination between the admissions office, the language testing centres, and with faculties.

Canadian universities must also be more cognizant of the linguistic starting point of the Chinese international students they are admitting into their graduate programs. Although language proficiency tests, essays, and academic transcripts are all required in the application process, the universities must realize that those items alone may not provide an accurate profile of these students. With inevitable differences in regulations (in test-taking, for example), as well as the presence of the Chinese companies that assist, edit, and change students' work before the application is sent to the Canadian university, another assessment by the host university would be valuable. Giving an assessment when students have already been accepted and arrived at the host university does not seem to be the most practical or useful method. Therefore, I suggest there could be value in written assessments, interviews, or presentation assessments given by the Canadian university to potential applicants in China. As Canadian universities intend to increase the intake of international graduate students from China, this will be a way of having a more accurate understanding of the proficiency and ability of those students. I argue that the challenges faced by the students in this study would have been even more problematic for students with a lower level of English. Interviews and assessments done in the host country (as part of the application process, not replacing the existing process) would benefit the university, and would ensure that the incoming Chinese international students were those who were adequately prepared to succeed once they arrived to study in Canada.

The implications of this study's findings for teaching in the ever-increasingly internationalized Canadian graduate classroom are many. First, it is my hope that

international students' classroom experiences can be better facilitated through the sharing and understanding of the challenges they face, which are not always known to (or shared with) their professors. Particularly for professors with little or no international experience themselves, it can be difficult to understand the issues that most directly affect the international students in their own classrooms. Hopefully accommodations (such as adapted methods of grouping students or a comprehensive introduction to the academic fundamentals expected in their course) can be made to serve all students, particularly as the ratio of local and international students changes in the coming years. One of the greatest positive effects that could result in this would be that Chinese international students feel more comfortable (academically, linguistically, and socially) from the outset of their program. All respondents in this study reported that they struggled in their first semester (for a variety of reasons). In a program that usually takes two academic years to complete, it would be a great service if one semester (sometimes more) were not spent becoming accustomed to the new norms of life in the Canadian classroom.

A very basic suggestion for teachers is to learn and use all students' names in class, and to treat all students as fairly as possible, while still being available to support students (international and non-international) with any concerns, especially during the first classes of the program.

I must also emphasize here the importance (for teachers and TAs at the graduate level) of attempting to understand the inter-student relationships within

the classroom. Being aware of the distance (regardless if it is self-imposed) that exists between international students and local students is the first step in finding ways of creating increasingly inclusive classrooms. The respondents in this study recounted (in a variety of ways) being seen as 'other' by both some of their professors and some of their classmates. How instructors deal with this divide is really dependent on the particular group of students, the subject, and the goals of the teacher and class, but recognizing the potential distance, and finding a way to create a comfortable and collaborative classroom for all students should be a goal.

It became evident to me through the act and interpretation of interviewing the respondents that although some of their comments confirmed my anticipated experiences, while others were more nuanced than expected, and still others were unexpected entirely.

One theme that became clear after the first interviews was that all four respondents in this study faced some challenges in their transition into the Canadian academic context: no one had a seamless or entirely easy transition into their new academic lives. This was anticipated, as the difficulties of international students have been explored in other studies, and have been conveyed to me by my own classmates and students. Language appears to be central to all other challenges faced by this cohort. Whether students were hesitant to speak in class, or if they found it difficult to relate to their classmates, the central challenge for all of the respondents came back to language. Any cultural and social challenges that the respondents faced were, at their root, ultimately language issues.

Connected closely to this phenomenon was the feeling of a lack of confidence in their new linguistic surroundings. All respondents experienced this adjustment in their own way. While some respondents reported that their confidence in their academic language remained strong, they struggled with the conversational English needed for less formal discussions and in interactions beyond the classroom. Others felt that although they had been very successful English students in China, they struggled with the amount of academic material they were expected to understand and produce. Two respondents noted the relatively short time it took a native speaker to complete the weekly class readings compared to the time they needed to complete the same readings. As I had expected, one issue was closely linked to others. For example: one respondent made the connection that because she needed more time to complete readings (and subsequently, to discuss the readings with her Chinese classmates in Chinese), she felt as though she had less time to socialize. She often could not complete the readings in time for the next class, and so she was not confident in volunteering comments on material she had not completed. The next week, she would be further behind, quieter in class, and have even less time for anything else outside of class. The other respondents made similar connections. One respondent said that she was not confident in her language ability to speak out in class in front of so many native speakers. This led others to think that she was shy and introverted. She said that because she did not have the opportunity and confidence to speak in class, it made her very nervous for her first presentations. This made group work difficult. These are two examples of how one challenging experience led to others for all of the respondents interviewed for this study. It was

unsurprising to learn that the different aspects of their academic and personal lives were interconnected, but to hear the connections in their own words made the effects of seemingly smaller challenges all the more evident.

One of the very surprising findings from this study was the ways in which these Chinese students prepared to come to Canada to study, and the support systems they relied on when they arrived.

All four respondents used the services of an agency in China to prepare their applications. Basically, the students (parents) pay the agency a large sum of money (ranging with these respondents from a few hundred to a few thousand Canadian dollars) to help with their applications to foreign universities. The agencies worked with the students to make sure they have met all requirements, included all materials and forms, and have the application package together by the appropriate dates. The surprising part of this process is that beyond the technical and logistical assistance, these agencies also help to edit application cover letters, resumes, and any writing samples that may be required by the foreign institution. According to two of the respondents in this study, the edits were quite substantial—to the point of major edits for the purpose of giving the foreign university exactly what they were looking for. The respondents in this study felt that although their writing samples may have been improved; they gave an inaccurate portrayal of the kind of writing the student could produce on his or her own. It is very important to realize, as Canadian universities are changing their acceptance policies for international students, that many of the new students have used these services to alter and

improve their applications. It may be the case, that the students who are eventually accepted do not have the written skills or academic understanding that is conveyed in their applications.

All respondents noted that one of the main reasons preventing Chinese students and others (some referred to “native speakers,” others, “Canadians”) from interacting was due to personality more so than culture or language. All female respondents claimed to be shy or quiet at the beginning of the program, and all respondents felt, particularly at the outset of the program, a lack of confidence in their language ability, yet they claimed that it was personality that was a major factor that prevented Chinese international students from interacting with their non-Chinese classmates. Bei Ou, specifically mentions that she felt that what prevents Chinese international students from interacting with other cultural groups in the classroom is personality, although she admitted that Chinese international students felt more comfortable when they were together. This was a feeling echoed by all other respondents numerous times in their own interviews. Two respondents claimed that, although their initial intentions of mixing with native-English speaking, Canadian students, that over time they resorted to the comfortable space of interacting with other Chinese international students.

An unexpected theme that emerged from the interviews was the way that the three female respondents practiced English socially beyond the classroom. All three of the female respondents were at some point in their degrees either casually or very seriously involved with religious groups. Initially, they became involved

because they were seeking people with whom they could practice speaking English. They were invited by friendly Canadians to join church groups, Bible reading meetings and attend services. All three women attended. Although none of them claim to be religious (and even if they had religious beliefs, they were not Christian), they all became regular attendees with their respective groups. Perhaps this highlights the need these students had to practice English outside of the classroom. Without too many social interactions with their English-speaking classmates, these religious groups became the only place they could regularly use the language they were studying. Eventually, one of the respondents had to leave the church, as she could not longer feign her beliefs in order to practice English. The two other women still occasionally attend meetings and events with their groups in order to continue to have discussions and conversations in English.

Another theme that emerged was that all respondents thought that the students' university's plan to double the number of international students into its programs in the next 5 years will have a negative effect, despite the fact that these students are all international students at the very same university who have benefitted from the same policies. Part of the appeal of studying overseas seemed to unanimously be the experience of being the minority—a Chinese speaker in a Canadian classroom; a minority in an English-dominant context. By increasing the number of international students, the respondents think that the experience of studying in a foreign context will be diminished. Two respondents mentioned that with more international students, they believe that the quality of classroom work will falter. Three respondents did not like the idea that more Chinese students

would have graduate degrees from Canadian universities. By simply awarding more degrees, they felt that their own degrees would decrease in value. Although the respondents in this study did not mix very much with non-Chinese international students, they seemed to embrace their position in the classroom, as a distinct group. None of the respondents thought that being in a Canadian classroom where Chinese international students were the majority would be desirable.

It was never the goal of this study to reach generalizable conclusions concerning Chinese international students as a whole, but more to allow four members of that cohort to tell their stories and experiences with a degree of detail.

Conclusions

My approach to this thesis began with a literature review that was essential in informing me about what had already been researched in this area. An analysis of these studies showed me that there was a gap in the literature regarding academic acculturation as it applies to Chinese international graduate students in a Canadian university. This literature review was used to determine that the theoretical model of acculturation was most appropriate for this study. I explored the theory of acculturation (Schumann, 1986) and how it had been applied to groups similar to the participants in my study. Examples from the literature review encouraged me to follow the interview-based, qualitative data collection methodology I used for this project. This initial reading and research led to the design of the data instruments used, and the analysis that followed. The discussion chapter of this thesis is

informed by this the reading of this work and how it applied to my context and my participants.

This research project was very enlightening for me. As a classmate and teacher of Chinese international students, this research has a very personal connection to my studies as well as my daily classroom interactions. As I prepare students to pursue their university studies, I believe that the findings from this research project will guide me towards more informed practice which will hopefully help to alleviate, for future students, some of the challenges faced by the participants in this study. It has become clear to me, through my analysis of the findings, that the importance of recognizing the challenges associated with academic acculturation cannot be overstated. Schumann's (1986) initial model of acculturation provided a foundation for this research that allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges of these students.

As a researcher, I have learned many things about the process of conducting and reporting research, but most poignantly for me, was my deeper understanding of the role and position of the researcher that I gained by doing this project. I believe that the knowledge I brought with me as a former classmate of my participants, but not as a Chinese international student myself, enabled me to ask informed questions, while still being able to genuinely ask for clarification on the complexity of the lived experiences that differed greatly from what I assumed or expected. I believe I had an almost ideal balance as a researcher between familiarity and separation, which allowed my participants to speak candidly and insightfully.

Through this research, I have come to some conclusions about my participants and their experiences in the context that was being explored.

First, it is clear that there is a gap between Chinese international student expectations and their lived experiences. While students come to study in their programs for a variety of reasons, most come with the confidence that their English proficiency, cultural understanding, and academic abilities will be sufficient for a successful and meaningful academic experience as an international student in Canada. Although the participants in this study ultimately felt as though they had achieved that goal in the end, the first few classes and semesters were vastly different from what they had expected. This gap affected many aspects of their academic and social lives. The experiences told to me by the participants in this study reinforced the idea that the process of academic acculturation is a significant factor in the studies of Chinese international graduate students.

Second, there is a clear gap between Chinese international students and their classmates. In graduate level classes, there is a great divide between these two groups of students, particularly with regards to age, language ability, and work experience. Although this variety could work positively to create a varied and diverse classroom where students share knowledge and collaborate, the opposite appears to be true. Diversity exists, but the aforementioned differences appear to create separate social groups, and distinct power structures within collaborative work. I find this area of the research to be extremely interesting and important

work. I believe further specific research is needed to explore the power imbalance between international students and their non-international student classmates.

Third, it is reassuring to know that this research is timely and can help to start discussions about a growing trend. Chinese students are continuing to come in great numbers to Canadian graduate classrooms, including in the particular context of this study, where there are even more Chinese international students in second language graduate classes than when the interviews for this project were conducted. This fact only reinforces the relevance of studies in this area. As more Chinese international students come to study in Canadian classrooms, it is important to learn from the successes and challenges that were faced by the students who have come before.

Fourth, the experiences of the participants in this study clearly illustrate what Schumann's (1986) theory of acculturation looks like through lived experiences. All four participants struggled in their first classes and semesters in Canada. Over time (to varying degrees), each participant became more confident, more linguistically proficient, and more comfortable with Canadian academic culture. Their confidence in using English was greatly affected by the amount of time they spent immersed in the Canadian context and the Canadian university classroom.

Finally, a major conclusion for me is the realization that the classroom communities did not exist in the way I, or the participants, expected. Although the participants in this study found that it was difficult to establish relationships with

their non-Chinese classmates, there were strong connections established within the Chinese international student group. This group of students developed naturally and helped each other with the challenges that the others faced. I believe that is important to re-evaluate how meaningful classroom connections can be created between graduate students across cultures, and to explore the experiences of the Canadian students in the classroom. This will be possible with a close re-examination of what cross-cultural and cross-linguistic classroom communities would really look like. We have to revisit assumptions of what constitutes an effective classroom community, and understand that that varies across cultures. It should not be assumed that the preferred norm is the Canadian norm. Even though Chinese norms are being subdued for the Canadian norms in this context, a medium which respects and values both expectations and needs would be ideal in these increasingly internationalized contexts.

It is important to remember that although this study allowed four Chinese international students to retell and reflect on their experiences over the course of their graduate degrees in a Canadian university, that these are only four voices out of the many thousands of Chinese international graduate students currently studying in Canada, and the many thousands more studying in similar contexts around the English-speaking world. I hope that this research provides a valuable snapshot of a rapidly changing cohort. As university policies, classroom expectations, and student demographics continue to evolve in Canada's increasingly internationalized classrooms, this research should serve as a valuable addition to the continuing research that is being done with similar groups of students in similar

studies across the country. I hope that this research can encourage deeper conversations regarding the myriad challenges faced by international students in Canadian classrooms, and that it may influence positive change through increased engagement of future administrators, professors, classmates, and future Chinese international students who study in Canada.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email for Participants

Socio-Cultural, Linguistic, and Academic Experiences of Chinese International Students

Recruitment Email

Purpose

A major focus of the University of Ottawa's *Destination 20/20* plan is the increased internationalization of its student body. Specifically, one of the plan's main aims is to double the number of international graduate students at the university by 2020. With this in mind, it is essential that the university understands the experiences and expectations of the international graduate students it is currently hosting and intends to host in the future. My research will focus on one of the largest and fastest-growing cohorts in this group: Chinese international graduate students.

This research project will help me gain insights into how Chinese international students negotiate the sociocultural, linguistic, and academic experiences that come with studying Second Language Education at the graduate level at the University of Ottawa. My focus of this research is to investigate these experiences, and the role they play in the classroom for Chinese international students.

My choice of this research topic has been guided by my own educational and professional experiences as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and a graduate student at the University of Ottawa. I have lived and taught in Taiwan and China, as well as at the University of Waterloo (UW) and the University of Ottawa (UO), as an ESL teacher.

What you will be asked to do

If you agree, I will ask you to participate in three 1-on-1 interviews (each lasting a maximum of 1.5 hours) about your experiences as a Chinese international graduate student at the University of Ottawa. You can decide when and where this interview will take place. I will also supply you with a copy of the transcript of your interview so that, if you wish, you can make comments or corrections. I will send you this transcript via a password-enabled e-mail.

Anonymity

Your identity and personal information will remain private and anonymous using pseudonyms. I will be the only person who will know your actual identity. All data

will be kept in locked cabinets in my locked office or in password protected files on my computers.

Informed Consent

Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any negative consequences.

Please reply to this email acknowledging that you have read and understood the above and agree to participate.

I will contact you soon in order to find a convenient time and place for our interview. If there are any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me or one of the other contacts listed below.

Thank you!

David Pratt

Principal Researcher/ MA (Ed.) Student (University of Ottawa)

Douglas Fleming

Associate professor/ thesis research supervisor

613-562- 5800 ex. 4151

dfleming@uottawa.ca

Germain Zongo

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research

613-562-5800 ext. 5387

gzongo@uOttawa.ca

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form:**Informed Consent**

I _____ have read the letter describing the research. I understand the purpose of the study and what is required of me, and I agree to participate. I have been assured that my participation is voluntary and that my identity will remain confidential. I agree to participate, and I am aware that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence.

I am aware that there are two copies of this consent form, one of which I my keep.

I am aware that any concerns about the ethical conduct of this project may be addressed to the Protocol Officer of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board at the University of Ottawa, (613) 562-5800, ext. 5841.

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Supervisor's signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Chinese International Students' Cultural, Linguistic, and Academic Challenges

Type of interview:

- In-person interview

Date: _____ Place: _____ Time: _____

Interviewer: _____ Respondent: _____

Example Guiding Questions:

1. Why did you choose to study at the University of Ottawa?
2. What education background do you have? How did it influence your experience at the University of Ottawa?
3. What were your expectations before studying here? Did your expectations change or remain the same once you were here? In what ways?
4. What did you find challenging when you first began your studies in Canada?
5. What were the major differences between studying in China and studying in Canada? Which differences were the most challenging?
6. Describe your experience doing group work/ group presentations.
7. Describe your experience studying with other Chinese international students.
8. Describe your experience studying with your non-Chinese classmates.
9. Do you generally prefer working with other Chinese international students, with

- non-Chinese students, or with a mixed group? Why?
10. Did you experience any cultural challenges in the classroom? What strategies did you use to overcome these challenges?
 11. Do you feel like you were mentored by any other students? Were you the mentor?
 12. Did you experience any academic challenges during your studies at the University of Ottawa?
 13. Did you ever feel like there was an 'insider'/ 'outsider' divide between students during your studies at the University of Ottawa? Can you explain what made you feel that way?
 14. Do you think stereotypes affected your experience at the University of Ottawa? Why or why not? How?
 15. What advice would you give to other Chinese international students starting a graduate program in Second Language Education at the University of Ottawa?
 16. Is there anything that you would like to add that I have not asked?

Potential Questions for Interview 2 and 3 (questions in these interviews will be strongly guided by the data collected in the first interview, and are therefore subject to change)

1. How do you feel about your experience in your graduate program so far?
2. What have you learned since you started your graduate program?
3. How have you changed since you started your program?
4. Have you changed the way you interact in class since you started your program?
5. How would you describe your academic life now?
6. What are some things that have become easier for you, academically, since you started

your program?

*Further questions will be guided by the data collected in the first interviews.

Additional Comments:

Appendix D: Participants

Name of Respondent	Gender	Age	Languages Spoken at Home	Hometown/ Home Province	Undergraduate Degree
Michael	Male	23	Mandarin Chinese, local Chinese dialect	Beijing, China	English Language and Literature (translation concentration)
Li Yuan	Female	24	Mandarin Chinese, local Chinese dialect	Changjou, China	English Language (Business English concentration)
Hillary	Female	25	Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese	Harbin, China	Interpretation
Bei Ou	Female	24	Mandarin Chinese, local Chinese dialect	Jiangxi, China	English (translation concentration)

Appendix E: Ethics Approval Notice

File Number: 02-14-01



Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 03/24/2014

Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
 Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice
Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Douglas	Fleming	Education / Education	Supervisor
David	Pratt	Education / Education	Student Researcher

File Number: 02-14-01

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: Socio-Cultural, Linguistic, and Academic Experiences of Chinese International Students

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
03/24/2014	03/23/2015	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:

N/A

File Number: 02-14-01



Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 03/24/2014

Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Signature:

Kim Thompson
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

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