

Enhance the International Students' Experiences in Chinese Higher Education: From the Educational Perspective

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Abstract—Based on Hofstede's national culture, referring to the theoretical paradigm of 'capital-identity transformation', this paper explores the educational experiences of international students taking Chinese higher education from the perspective of cultural adaptation. It combines the qualitative data from 3 focus groups of 25 international students with the quantitative data from 'Closed Questions' on the Likert Scale. It reveals that students' initial inadaptation is caused by such factors as different educational culture, library resources, the Internet language system and 'dual language barrier'. Lacking opportunities to communicate exasperates the issue of isolation, which adds negatively to the experiences. It concludes that international students face the greatest challenges during the period of 'crisis' or 'initial adjustment' in 'U-Curve' and 'W-Curve'. In this light, implications are made to improve teaching and service quality to enhance students' experiences.

Keywords—international students' experience; acculturation; Chinese higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the background of globalisation and internationalisation of higher education (HE), international education in China has entered a new era. Based primarily on the qualitative data from 3 focus group studies with 25 students' from 7 countries, this paper will investigate the students' lived educational experiences in Chinese HE (CHE). It refers to Hofstede's national culture and the theoretical paradigm of 'capital-identity transformation' by Xue (2011a) to analyse the empirical data and to investigate how to facilitate students' transition and adaptation to the Chinese culture and society leading to their successful completion of CHE, thus providing implications for international education practitioners.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Culture has many definitions, one referring to 'the norms, values, standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible' [1]. Culture is the total body of tradition, borne

in a society, and transmitted from generation to generation, during which process education transmits, maintains and perpetuates cultural values, social norms and morality. Based on Hofstede's national culture, there are two main cultural orientations – 'collectivism' and 'individualism' [2] [3]. When moving from one different culture to another, one may encounter dissimilar expectations and unpleasant experiences in a foreign society, resulting in 'culture shock'. Such feelings of anxiety, risks, stress, uncertainty, worries, disorientation, confusion and physical and emotional discomforts are revealed in different stages such as the 'U-curve'[4] or 'W-curve'[5][6] while strangers in a dissimilar culture struggle to survive. 'Immigrants suffer the most severe adjustment problems at the initial stages of transition when the number of life changes is the highest and coping resources are likely to be at the lowest' [7].

In the age where international education has become an option for many people, student experience in host cultures has aroused a great interest [8] [9] [10] [11] [12]. The diversities in Chinese and UK educational systems and differences between [13] lead to differing or even conflicting expectations from UK teachers and Chinese students. To complete their UK HE successfully, Chinese students are challenged to overcome the 'culture shock' which accompanies the process of acculturation [14]. Cultural adaptation refers to personal changes in attitudes, behaviours, values and most importantly in cultural identity, resulting from regular contacts with people from different cultures, particularly from the host culture. Not adapting to the host culture, one will be like a 'duck out of water'. The research by Xue [10] demonstrates that Chinese students experienced the process of 'capital-identity transformation' while undertaking UK HE. The theoretical diagram of transformation is a process of self-development – deconstruction, creative transformation and re-construction, shown as 'two-pyramids' in an hourglass shape (ibid: 186). In the whole process, the crux is language proficiency, the transforming point. Only after they overcome the language barrier and complete such a transformation can students start to accumulate and form new capital and achieve an ultimate

success of international education, which contributes significantly to their subsequent career development [11].

Similarly, international students in Chinese HE also face the challenges of ‘culture shock’ and language barrier [15]. Furthermore, past research has shown students taking education abroad are challenged in communicating and mixing with home students and local people [16] [17]. Employing past empirical studies and findings as its theoretical underpinnings of analysis and arguments, this paper will integrate qualitative and quantitative data from focus groups and ‘Closed Questions’ to explore and enhance the experiences of international students in CHE and provide implications for bettering management, teaching and service to the students.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Subjects

This research conducted 3 focus group studies with 25 international students taking CHE in 2 institutions, 16 in a medical university (MU) and 9 in an aeronautics and astronautics university (AAU). The first group are Level-3 students in medicinal undergraduate (UG) programmes (8 students, 32%), the second are in the international foundation programme for medicine. The third interview was with 9 Level-2 students in AAU. At the time of interview, they all had stayed in China for over half a year, the first group averaging as long as 29.5 months, the second group, 7.6 months, and the third, 17.6 months. Among the subjects, 17 were male (68%) and 8 females (32%), averaging 21 years in age. The interviewees came from 7 countries, including 8 from Tanzania (32%), 6, Zambia (24%), 5, Pakistan (20%), 3, Bangladesh (12%) and 1 from Angola, Palestine and Ghana respectively. Most of them (96%) came from cities, except one from the countryside (whose family migrated to city for life later on). Approximately two thirds (16 students) were from ‘business’ family backgrounds, and ‘intellectual’ and ‘landlord’ (referring to those owning lands) backgrounds accounted for 16% respectively, and 1 from a ‘captain’ family. The interviewees exhibit the diversity in country, school, education level and major, thus revealing their rich and colourful experiences in CHE.

B. Research method

This study principally employs the qualitative method of focus group study. Each group study includes 3 parts: a) brief self-introduction (about 6-8 minutes); b) the highlight of group interview, comprising 20 questions and taking over 1 hour on an average; c) Closed Questions, including 11 questions, designed on the Likert Scale. Such group interviews were conducted mainly to learn about how the students applied to CHE institutions (CHEI) for education, how they went through visa application, their expectations and experiences, emotions and feelings, their social lives and friends-making in China, their identity changes and their cognition and understating of CHE. Each group study took 1.5 to 2 hours, therefore every subject had enough time to talk freely about their personal experience in CHE. The group study revealed characteristics of dynamics, interactions and spontaneity while the students

answered questions by talking to each other, mutually questioning, confirming and arguing.

This paper is principally based on the empirical qualitative data, with students’ real *voices* heard all through, revealing the quality of ‘undeniability’ [18] with ‘richness and holism’ and an emphasis on the ‘lived experience’ (ibid: 10). The relevant quantitative data elicited from ‘Closed Questions’ provides complements and supplements, thus improving the reliability and validity of the research [19].

IV. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION

This part will investigate the students’ lived educational experiences in CHE through scrutinising the rich empirical data from focus group studies and ‘Closed Questions’.

A. Educational Culture and Teaching Management

Education is the mechanism and process of transmitting cultural values and social norms, maintaining culture and passing on morality and cultural values, with social and political system determining the education system. Resulting from the cultural differences, international students face great challenges while receiving education abroad. According to Xue [10], Chinese students, characterised by collectivism, teacher-centeredness, step-by-step teaching and rote learning, view teachers as authority figures and taking challenging and being critical as offensive and invading others’ dignity. Consequently the UK educational system typical of individualism composes the greatest challenge for Chinese students, which advocates autonomous learning, critical and creative thinking. Likewise, this study shows that international students pursuing CHE believe the host educational culture greatly impacts on their experiences. When interviewed, they expressed great expectations yet articulated their unpleasant experiences. Such a feeling was most acute upon their initial arrival when they knew little about the Chinese education system.

This study involves students from 7 different countries and for them there exist vast differences between their home and host cultures, as illustrated by Hofstede (see Table I). Hofstede’s ‘Uncertainty Avoidance’ (UA), for example, reveals great diversity when scrutinised, the index ‘30’ for China being lower than any other countries in question (being ≥ 50). Pakistanis, for instance, maintain a rigid code of law, explicit beliefs and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas (UAI 70). They feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid uncertainties. People from countries exhibiting high UAI like Pakistan have an emotional need for rules and they have an inner urge for precision, punctuality being their norm. In contrast, adherence to laws and rules for Chinese people is somewhat flexible to suit the actual situations and pragmatism is a fact of life. Chinese are comfortable with ambiguity, and its language full of ambiguous meanings presents huge difficulties for Westerners to follow. Such ambiguities normally put people with different cultural values at a loss for understanding.

TABLE I CONTRASTING HOME AND HOST CULTURES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Variables Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Pragmatism	Indulgence
China	80	20	66	30	87	24
Tanzania	70	25	40	50	34	38
Zambia	60	35	40	50	30	42
Pakistan	55	14	50	70	50	0
Bangladesh	80	20	55	60	47	20
Angola	83	18	20	60	15	83
Ghana	80	15	40	65	4	72

Source: <http://geert-hofstede.com>

Synthesized and tabled by the author

At a group interview, Alexander from Pakistan depicted how they felt confused, perplexed and disheartened when CHEIs started certain modules late with a very short notice. He expressed frustration and despair at the abrupt change of teaching hours. He believed the implicit policies and regulations constituted one of the greatest challenges, as illustrated by his following comments:

‘For me, the challenge is the change of different policies ... that affects the degree because that gives us pressure on different points. Changing the rules without noticing, doing anything like this kind of thing, makes us students into the depression.

This study reveals students perceived slow teaching speed and low teaching level as problems in CHE. They claimed not to be acclimatising to the Chinese teaching style. Quite a good number considered themselves unadaptable to the ‘book-centred’ teaching, as Martha remarked below:

‘When you ask them a question, they just give you an example exactly in the book. It’s not like being taught back at home. In China they want you to know exactly what’s in the book. If you write what you understand, it’s a wrong answer. That’s why I find it difficult.’

In the students’ view, there existed problems covering poor teaching arrangements and teaching without depth in both CHEIs. Resulting from a shortage of staff, some lacking professional and special knowledge took over teaching.

Concerning the fact that some switch to teaching subjects without training or professional knowledge, particularly regarding the phenomenon that one lecturer teaches several subjects, students showed great concern. They feared that insufficient learning, inadequate and shallow knowledge and lacking teaching resources would pose great problems if they took postgraduate study in future. The Tanzanian students (Group 2) on the foundation programme seemed more satisfied with their experiences (see Table II). This group came to China shortly after their secondary education, some without a senior middle-school qualification. They felt Chinese lecturers were fine and they themselves had obtained knowledge and made progress in CHE. The only thing they perceived unsatisfactory was the teachers’ English language proficiency (to be covered later). Even so, some pointed out that Chinese universities should focus more on the programme’s quality. They remarked that the programme intended to prepare students to take UG programme in medicine was inappropriate for those wishing to study engineering or other subjects. Jessica commented on the two factors of levels and subjects of the programme below:

‘I finished my A-level courses. Some people finished their O-level classes and they came straight from that. So I might have that knowledge of 4, 5 and 6, but someone might not have that knowledge ... we are different people in the same class, we are different, we have our own careers, maybe I want to be a doctor, he wants to be an engineer, but from what I see in class, the physics maybe they teach, mostly based on medicine, compared to people who study engineering. It’s a very big disadvantage to them.’

TABLE II MEAN RATINGS OF CLOSED QUESTIONS

Questions	Group 1 (8)	Group 2 (8)	Group 3 (9)	3 Groups (25)
Education quality in China	3	4.25	3.3889	3.54
Education quality at home	4.25	2.5	3	3.24
Quality of personal education in China	1.9375	3.875	2.8889	2.9

Quality of personal education at home	4.35	2.9375	3.6667	3.652
Life quality as a student in China	3.25	3.625	3.5556	3.48
Life quality at home	4.4375	4.25	4.4444	4.38
Chinese language proficiency to success in China studies	2.5	4.25	4.1111	3.64
Chinese education to subsequent career	3.25	4.75	3.8889	3.96
Chinese education to future financial condition	3.125	4.5	3.7222	3.78
Chinese education to world knowledge	3.3125	4.5	4.1111	3.98
Chinese education to changes in values and beliefs	1.25	3.25	4.2222	2.96

B. 'Dual Language Barrier' in Chinese Higher Education

Past research has shown that students face great challenges in completing their education abroad. Factors such as deficient language proficiency, inadequate professional knowledge and being unadaptable to the host educational culture greatly affect their experiences. English language problems were the most frequently mentioned difficulty in research by Ballard & Clanchy [20]. An IELTS score 'is of little value in itself when coping with an academic higher education course' [21], with 30.3 per cent of international students regarding English as a major problem during their overseas stay. Xue [10] revealed English language proficiency as most challenging for Chinese students while taking UK HE and yet such a proficiency is the transforming point in the 'capital-identity transformation' paradigm.

Consistent with the past findings, this research reveals that international students at CHE encounter a gigantic language barrier. To be more exact, they face the severe problem of 'dual language barrier' while completing their CHE, a hotly-discussed issue reported independently by the 3 focus groups. On one hand, lacking Chinese language proficiency presents an enormous difficulty for the students interviewed for the study. Because neither of the institutions set language requirements for students to enter CHE, all but one had 'zero foundation' (1 student learned Chinese mandarin for about 3 months beforehand). In striking contrast, UK, USA, Australia and Canada, where international education has reached a well-developed stage, have very strict language requirements, with students' obtained proficiency as the prerequisite for enrolment. Although CHEI arranged mandarin classes which the students considered very useful, to improve their linguistic and communicative competence is not an overnight thing! Chinese mandarin, distinctive as a different linguistic family, proved particularly difficult to learn, and the students helplessly sensed their slow progress. Even the Palestinian student with a 3-month learning history remarked his little knowledge of mandarin did not really count and he found it highly demanding to pick it up once he took the course. The 'four-tones' of Chinese mandarin exacerbated the language issue, which disheartened the interviewees, believing mandarin to be an unsurmountable barrier.

On the other hand, interestingly, the students viewed the English language proficiency of Chinese teachers as the greatest challenge while completing their personal CHE. The subjects recalled having been told that teaching in CHE would be delivered in English before coming, but they perceived the Chinese teachers' nonstandard pronunciation and unidiomatic expressions, revealing the so-called 'Chinglish' in class, as extremely demanding. In the students' opinion, the limited English language proficiency rendered teachers unable to express themselves freely or well, resulting in not giving full play to their yearly-accumulated expertise and knowledge, which seriously impacted on the teaching quality. The statistics revealed the students rated the quality of the Chinese education they personally received 2.9 on the Likert 5-points scale (see Table II). The subjects came to the consensus that Chinese teachers had limited English proficiency and lacked expressive abilities, convinced such a barrier made it tremendously arduous for them to raise questions or make academic exchanges with teachers or classmates in English. They perceived the little interaction in class severely affected their learning outcomes, believing it immensely tough to complete their CHE. In the same vein, the 'dual language barrier' made it powerless and hopeless for the students to make academic exchanges in Chinese mandarin. Three groups shared the same view on this point. In comparison, those on the foundation programme rated their experiences higher. Even so, they reacted intensely to the teachers' English proficiency. Their typical comments are as below:

Susan: We can have a teacher who speaks English but the English we don't really understand.

Jessica: You may find the teacher has points to express but he does not have enough to express, so he just ends hanging by giving the information.

Nancy added: Just as they said, the English language, the accent that comes from a Chinese teacher doesn't cover that English at all because you try to understand, you want to understand, you just don't understand what the teacher is saying. At the end of the day, it's not exactly what you are expecting.

When asked what constituted the greatest challenge in completing their CHE, Martha from Zambia replied, 'Their (Chinese teachers') English and our Chinese', believing the

'dual language barrier' most challenging. Several students in 3 groups commented in the same humorous way 'The language barrier is even greater than the Great Wall'. Their great worry was that such learning efficiency and communication would affect their subsequent application for postgraduate studies and looking for jobs unfavourably, therefore hoping the intuitions would soon make changes and improve the situation.

C. The Chinese-Language Computer System

As discussed before, the international students in this study are immensely challenged by little teacher-student interaction, difficulties in getting academic advice due to the 'dual language barrier', diverse teaching styles and learning methods. In normal situations, students can make up for their insufficient comprehension and knowledge deficiency by going to libraries or utilising web resources and self-study. However, the interviewees in this study perceived the libraries in both CHEIs only had Chinese magazines and journals, lacking resources in English. To make things more complicated, both universities adopted the Chinese-language computer system. Resulting from 'zero foundation' for Chinese mandarin, students were at a loss how to use computers, not to mention the library resources. Even if they wanted to ask questions, because of their very limited Chinese language proficiency and because of library staff's incapability of speaking English, 'dual language barrier' again resulted in communication failure, leaving the students at their wits' end. When it came to using internet resources, the subjects proved exacerbated, disheartened and hopeless. As a consequence, although the library is universally believed the best place for study, only some went a few times, individual students had never been there. They regarded their dormitories as a more comfortable place for study, repeating their daily simple study and life cycle – classroom, cafeteria and dormitory. They reached a consensus that there was no library for foreign students in CHEIs, and they could only learn textbooks and handouts by themselves. This way of learning impacted upon students' acquiring knowledge, shadowing their educational experience, as illustrated by the following conversation among interviewees in one focus group:

James: the library maybe is for the Chinese students only, not for us. You cannot find any English books, E-books ... if you get to the computer, the operating system is in Chinese.

Ray: in the library the staff just said the operating system is in Chinese. We don't know the process, how can we get into the computer?

June (me): Can you connect your pc with the library web?

Ray: I also took my pc to the library. I tried to connect to the library wifi but I cannot connect. I don't know the process, I don't know the password ... I couldn't get any help from the authority... There's no librarian for foreigners.

Richard: if we take our personal computer to the library, it's just not usable.

Thomas: I've been to the library before but found it's more complicated to study there. I think it's more comfortable to study in my room.

It is worth noting that computer, internet and teaching facility problems loom larger in MU with two campuses. In their view, the new campus had comparatively better facilities but was far away from downtown whereas the old one, situated in the centre, was convenient for living and transport but the scale was small and resources were limited. The fact that different campuses adopted different communication systems aggravated the problem even more. Occasionally students went to the new campus to use the gym and wanted to take advantage of the library resources and teaching facilities, only to find themselves helpless for being unable to use the Internet, wasting time and ending in doing nothing. At interview, both groups in MU were staying and studying on the old campus and they very explicitly expressed their negative opinions on the computer system, teaching facilities and infrastructures (specifically no library).

The study shows that both institutions barely provided international students with any academic support. As a result of 'dual language barrier', the interviewees thought they had made almost no academic communications with teachers. In fact, academic supervision plays a very critical role in students' academic advancement [22]. Thanks to their senior compatriots' kind and voluntary help, the students timely solved their problems in study and life. On the whole, the international students in this study regard their CHE as being different from their expectations. They made unanimous comments like 'Chinese education is good for Chinese but not for foreigners'. Students' quantitative data from 'Closed Questions' corresponded with the qualitative data that was verbalised when students rated the quality of CHE they personally received. Group 1 at Level 3 gave a rating of '1.9375', much lower than '4.35', a rating to the education quality at home (see Table II).

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the empirical data in this study, 3 key points emerge as follows:

(1) Acclimatising the host educational culture is critical for one to complete the international education abroad. Countries like UK, USA, Australia and Canada are very experienced in providing education to international students in that they run programmes like 'Induction' week. During this week, International Office, administration staff and lecturers from faculties inform the new arrivals of enrolment, academic registration, registration at the police station and local clinic, and a brief overview of the modules to be offered. This study reveals that the international students are in a great panic and stress at the initial stage of CHE, which fundamentally affects their subsequent educational experiences. In this light, it is advisable that CHEIs run programmes like a '1-week Induction' to advise students on registration and settling-in, to highlight key issues in Chinese educational culture, to showcase the typical Chinese teaching style and to brief on the modules to be provided. Equally important, CHEIs should establish 'a buddy system' by using students' compatriots who arrived earlier to help out upon new international students' arrival. This practice will undoubtedly facilitate students' initial adaptation to the Chinese culture and their successful transition to CHE.

(2) Past research has shown that language deficiency is one of the greatest challenges students face while taking international education. This empirical study demonstrates that the students taking CHE are even more severely challenged by the so-called ‘dual language barrier’, the Chinese teachers’ deficient English language proficiency and their own Chinese mandarin deficiency. As illustrated in Xue’s research [10], language proficiency is the transforming point in the ‘capital-identity transformation’ model. Only after having acquired a certain level of proficiency can international students start to accumulate cultural capital until ultimately a successful completion of their education abroad. In this sense, CHEIs should learn from universities in countries like UK, USA and Australia to set minimal language requirements for students overseas to embark on CHE. With the international education developing at such a fantastic pace, language requirements is not only essential but also possible for a better student experience.

(3) The ‘Chinese-English language’ computer system proves strenuous for international students in this study. As indicated in the research, students’ lacking Chinese language proficiency constitutes one greatest challenge imaginable, resulting in minimal interactions in class and little academic communication with Chinese lecturers or classmates. In other cases, library is the best place for students to catch up with their studies by employing the library resources, online journals and internet stuff. However, the issue of accessing the Internet looms large in the current study. It is therefore essential for CHEIs to create a friendly environment for international students to acclimatise to the Chinese education system gradually. It is suggested that more supervision be provided when students are initially coping with the challenges in learning. It is desirable that an English language system be provided for international students to use computers and consolidate what they have learned, enrich knowledge and ultimately complete their CHE successfully.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper explores the educational experiences of 25 international students taking CHE from the perspective of cultural adaptation, with Hofstede’s national culture, the ‘capital-identity transformation’ paradigm and other empirical studies in international education as the theoretical underpinnings of analysis and arguments. It combines the empirical qualitative data from focus groups with the quantitative data from ‘Closed Questions’ on the Likert Scale. It reveals that students’ initial inadaptation is caused by such factors as different educational culture, library resources, the Internet language system and ‘dual language barrier’. Lacking opportunities to communicate or to make academic exchanges exasperates the issue of isolation, which negatively impacts on the students’ experiences. This study grasps the nuance and subtleties of human behaviour by revealing students’ true *voices*, hence characteristic of good understanding and profound insight. It concludes international students face the greatest challenges during the period of ‘crisis’ or ‘initial adjustment’ in ‘U-Curve’ and ‘W-Curve’. This paper therefore makes suggestions including ‘Induction Week’, ‘the buddy-

system’, ‘English-language computer system’ and ‘minimal language requirements’ to enhance the international students’ experiences at CHE. This study provides implications for improving teaching and service quality in international education.

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