

## **Chinese International Students' Experiences in a Canadian University: Ethnographic Inquiry with Gender Comparison**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study employs ethnographic inquiry to present the lived experiences of Chinese international students while attending the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada. The findings display the transformative experiences of this group, including language acquisition, academic and social challenges, and the strategies by which the cultural group attempts to overcome the challenges with gender comparison. This study highlights specific challenges affecting Chinese female students as they labor to overcome sexism and patriarchy on two continents. Cultural stereotyping and negative labeling are also evaluated in detail. Arguably, the findings might impact educational and social policies and university protocols for accommodating vulnerable groups. Recommendations are made to alleviate difficulties for Chinese international students by facilitating a more supportive learning process within the university environment.*

**Keywords:** Chinese international students, ethnographic inquiry, lived experiences

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## INTRODUCTION

With the striking development of Chinese reform and “opening-up” policy and the trend of educational globalization, the younger generation in China has been exposed to the impact of Western cultural values and practices in ways that the previous generations have not. Moreover, internationalization of higher education has been suggested and implemented as an approach to cope with the trend of educational globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2008). Therefore, the number of Chinese students pursuing their higher education abroad has been steadily increasing (Chao, 2016; Li, Dipetta, & Woloshyn, 2012). Meanwhile, their entrenched cultural beliefs and practices are steeped in centuries of cultural observations (e.g., Confucianism and Taoism) and are influencing the youths’ traditional ideas and values. For example, Confucianism has occupied a dominant position in Chinese culture and education history for over 2,000 years. This school of thought holds distinct ideological beliefs and practices. Some of these beliefs and practices contradict the motivational features of modern Western individualism. These traditional values are inclined to discourage self-promotion, challenging elders, and collectivism. Furthermore, Confucius attempted to stand against so-called pragmatism (Eno, 2015). These traditions create cultural conflicts in areas such as relationships with instructors and classmates, concerns about face-saving and one’s reputation, and anxiety from unexpected conversations. It is a serious challenge for Chinese international students to blend into mainstream Western society; in many cases, this means shunning traditional imperatives that are an integral part of their heritage and identity. Furthermore, there is a strong gender divide between the cultural treatment of males and females. Chinese female students often have to overcome traditional patriarchal views and values because males are valued more than females and females are expected to reproduce and nurture a stable family environment (He, 2001).

In Canada, Chinese students represent the largest percentage (34.1%) of international students attending universities (Statistics Canada, 2016). From 2015 to 2017, Chinese international students attending Canadian universities increased by 5,211 (+8.9%; Statistics Canada, 2019). For instance, at the University of Regina, 15,276 students (full-time and part-time) were studying in Fall 2017 (University of Regina, 2017). About 14.2% of these students were international students from 90 countries around the globe (University of Regina, 2017). China was the top source of international students, as expected (Kate Zhang, personal communication, September 5, 2017). Of this group, 50% attempt to stay in Canada after their graduation (Humphries, Knight-Grofe, & Klabunde, 2009). Hence, for Chinese international students in Canada,

university life can be a critical stage, affecting one's long-term decisions and adjustments to Canadian life.

However, for Chinese nationals, the transition into university studies is a significant challenge, even for the brightest. It is imperative that Chinese students adjust to Western ways, wrestling with Western culture and facing the challenges of an additional language and potential discrimination (Jiao, 2006; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Liang, 2003; Sam, 2001; Zhang & Zhou, 2010), as well as their own bewilderment of some things foreign that differ from Chinese traditional beliefs. Even when meeting the linguistic requirements, Chinese students tend to run up against Western educational protocols and practices (e.g., individuality and critical thinking; Yang, 2010; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Moreover, the approach to advanced education can be quite different from the Chinese educational system. In addition, Chinese students are under considerable pressure from both the state and family to succeed. It will mean "losing face" and shaming their families if they fail to make the required adjustments.

These situations suggest a need for further research into the authentic experiences (as well as the subjective understandings) of Chinese international students in Canadian universities. In this study, based on a holistic inquiry of Chinese international student experiences, the researchers aim to identify the main challenges faced by Chinese international students at the University of Regina; how the university accommodates this group; how the faculty relates to these students; and how the university at large accommodates diversity (e.g., culture and gender). Findings might impact educational and social policies and practices, as well as university protocols for avoiding the impingement of vulnerable groups.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Growing Trend of International Students in North America**

In North America numerous efforts have been made in recording and analyzing the lived experiences of international students. With the quick rise in popularity of North American university programs, worldwide international students have migrated in record numbers. As of 2017, 244,842 international students were studying full-time at Canadian universities (Statistics Canada, 2019). In Canada, Chinese students represent about 34% of these students. Moreover, the percentage of international female students was 56.2% in 2016/2017 and continued to outnumber men in most fields of study (Statistics Canada, 2019). In 2016/2017, female students occupied 77.0% of enrollments in education and 74.1%, in health and related fields. Comparatively, male students accounted for 79.5% of enrollments in

architecture, engineering, and related technologies and 73% in mathematics and computer and information sciences (Statistics Canada, 2019). The professed advantages of studying in North American countries (international students) are many. In the workplace, this could lead to improved employment opportunities, particularly as participants gain international experience while improving English proficiency (Li et al., 2012). Compared with the United States, Canadian education is perceived as a nice compromise, providing a high quality of education within a safe environment. In addition, less expensive tuition influences decisions to come to Canada (Chao, 2016; Kutting, 2012; Li et al., 2012; Ogbonaya, 2010).

### **Identity Intersectionality of International Students**

Other contributing studies relate to identity intersectionality. Gender, religion, and nationality complicate the impact of adaptation and adjustment for international students. Dutta (2012), researching female students in an engineering program, noted that issues of gender significantly impacted student identity and success (Le, LaCost, & Wismer, 2016). Phillips (2013) emphasized that as usual, male students were more likely to be more assertive and less passive than female students. Others argue that identity categories (gender, age, and ethnicity) affected adaptability and success (e.g., Popadink, 2008). It has been noted in various studies that students and international students needed to foster active, friendly, and mature relationships (Aidoo, 2012; Longerbeam, DeStefano, & Yu, 2013; Philips, 2013). Adaptive strategies, as employed by international students, have evolved in acknowledgment of this. Nasrin (2001) argued that there was a need to address issues such as social relations between local and international students, faculty members' understanding of the students' challenges, and personal voice.

### **Researches Concerning Chinese International Students**

Due to the one-child policy formulated during the past decades, as far as Chinese parents concerned, offering sufficient financial support for their children to obtain higher education in international universities has become less difficult. Moreover, Chinese higher education has focused on mastering basic knowledge instead of practical abilities, which renders many Chinese parents eager to send their children to developed countries such as the US and Canada for higher education (Chao, 2016; Yan, 2015).

However, language acquisition is an obvious barrier for international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). To compensate, many Chinese students focus on programs seen as less language based, such as science, engineering,

and business, circumventing the arts or humanities (Statistics Canada, 2016). For example, many Chinese students (regardless of gender) consider science and engineering as better choices in consideration of future employment (Ortiz, Chang, & Fang, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016). For these students, the arts and humanities might be perceived as having less status. Traditional educational history also plays into adaptation and success in Chinese international students. Chinese traditional education is teacher-based, focusing upon lecture and rote memorization (Gu, 2006). Chinese students often find it difficult to speak out and present in the Western classrooms (Yang, 2010; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). What is more, they have to face life pressures including social life, housing, and cultural shock in the new environment (Jiao, 2006; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Liang, 2003; Sam, 2001; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). For instance, most of Chinese international students merely communicate with and seek help from Chinese friends rather than those students from other countries or the locality (Jiao, 2006).

All of the above studies attempt to identify and explain the many barriers and challenges for Chinese international students in a North American landscape. Student perceptions, identity features, and background accrue to both contour and restrain student success. But in making sense of this, it seems necessary to consider the many contributing factors independently.

For many studies, Chinese international students are considered a homogeneous group, without suitable allowances for a difference in detail. Gender serves as an example here. Gender differences are often not a major consideration in data collection and analysis in the research of this group (Chao, 2016; Li et al., 2012; Zhang & Zhou, 2010), albeit female students have been examined as a vulnerable group by a few researchers (e.g., Phillips, 2013). Arguably, historically, males were more likely to go abroad for study; this is viewed as more culturally appropriate as many nations reward women and men differentially, allowing males greater access to advanced education, especially studying abroad (Ogbonaya, 2010). Males are lent greater access to the resources required (Wall, 2008). Unfortunately, despite the impact of these conditions, few studies focusing on Chinese international students examine identity (e.g., gender) as a conditioning factor in student treatment and eventual success. Arguably, things like racialization, gender coding, and social class weigh heavily into student reception and success.

The innovative aspect of this ethnographic study is that student difference is considered when identifying the challenges facing Chinese international students (inclusive of ways in which they strive to overcome these challenges). Principally, gender is further reviewed and examined as a distinguishing category. The study places a specific emphasis on the struggles faced by Chinese female students, with consideration of marital status and academic background. Additionally, experiences of institutional and cultural biases are

assessed as they wear upon the students in their day-to-day existence.

## THE STUDY

The city of Regina is a prairie city located in the province of Saskatchewan Western Canada. Saskatchewan borders the U.S. state of North Dakota to the south, the Canadian province of Manitoba to the east, the province of Alberta to the west, and the North-West Territory to the north. Compared with other universities, the University of Regina has traditionally had a low percentage of enrolled international students. However, that has begun to change. The University of Regina now gets more than 50% of its graduate students abroad (Statistics Canada, 2016), the highest in the country. Undergraduate international enrollment rate now also accounts for around 14% of students (Statistics Canada, 2016). The University of Regina, however, is a relatively new institution, becoming an autonomous university in 1974. Located in the Canadian prairies provinces, Regina is some distance from major Canadian centers. Arguably, the University of Regina appears relatively remote to the Chinese eye. However, this disparity plays out in the researchers' favor.

In this study, ethnographic data was drawn upon to illustrate the challenges as faced by specific individuals; herein, the project followed a working assumption that all of the students participating were striving to adjust to their new environments and to improve on both their studies and life experiences. In assessing student experience two qualitative research methods were employed: unstructured observations and semi-structured interviews with participants. Method findings were organized and analyzed along the following thematic areas: language acquisition, academic development, daily living, and socializing and fraternization. Adaptive strategies were also observed. Here students seemed to employ three related strategies in overcoming day-to-day challenges: self-socializing, self-adjustment, and passivity and acceptance. Chinese female participants were deemed to face the greatest burdens, laboring to overcome patriarchy on two continents. Female subjects carried additional family commitments and obligations. They also experienced prejudicial treatment from their male colleagues. Cultural biases were another concern. Chinese students indicated that prejudices predicated upon primary identity signifiers (skin color, language use, cultural practices) continued to be a problem. Negative labels, based on cultural and racial factors, were impediments to student adaptation and success.

For the researchers, findings proved both surprising and useful. Observing and conflating both observation and interview was helpful in the attempt to improve the learning environment for Chinese international students at the university level. Purportedly, data could assist university administrators and faculty members in creating a fairer and healthier

university environment for all.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A hermeneutics paradigm was utilized to help locate the study and guide the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researchers. Hermeneutics focuses on the interpretations of texts including both verbal and non-verbal communication (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Heidegger (1927) argued that meaning should be mediated and interpreted further as a symbolic interaction (as cited in Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). He also suggested “the historicity of human understanding” and saw “ideas as nested in historical, linguistic and cultural horizons of meaning” (as cited in Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 26). In the present study, hermeneutics allows the researchers to not only interpret and understand Chinese international students’ lived experiences but also to delve into situated meanings of the experiences such as gender differences and cultural stereotypes. The context of their discourses and cultural origin can specifically be considered as well.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

Ethnographic research is often employed in exploring the specific dynamics of a cultural group (e.g., values, behaviors, social interactions, attitudes, and language). The critical point of such ethnography is its holistic, deep, and systematic observation of a setting. Researchers then immerse themselves into the real lives of those cultural groups under study to gain a more complete view of that culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the present study, the current experiences and backgrounds of Chinese international students (specifically those at the University of Regina) were examined, employing a diverse and nuanced group of participants (e.g., English language teachers, and undergraduate and graduate students). Some of these students have a previous degree in English; others are cross-disciplinary students and exchange students. All of them face struggles and troubles in a manner that distinguishes them from local students. The methodological paradigm described above was selected and employed to deeply probe into the lives and experiences of these participants. It explored the institutional and social rules, as well as policies, that guided and governed the educational institution (University of Regina) and its participants. The study further examined the group’s responses to these social and institutional pressures.

The fieldwork for this study took place over a 2-year period (2015-2017). The practice itself included two qualitative strategies in collecting and analyzing the data: semi-structural interviews incorporating gender

comparisons; in-depth unstructured observations, including classroom observation; and social event observation.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

For this study, *homogenous sampling* was used, as Chinese international students (specifically those at the University of Regina) possess generalizable traits (i.e., language, educational background, all studying at the university). *Maximal variation* was another sampling strategy utilized for this study. It was established early on, in obtaining a diverse perspective, that the researchers would interview different Chinese international students, as categorized by age and academic backgrounds. Sample respondents were drawn from four disciplines: education, engineering, and applied science, psychology, and business administration. Letters explaining the purpose of the study, as well as participant consent forms, were sent to the target population. Ultimately, six men and six women (12 total), in the age range of 20–39 years, were interviewed. These interviews were conducted using semi-structured conversations. The interviews were divided into two parts: common experiences and distinct personal feelings. The interviews were open-ended, encouraging participants to talk about their impressions, feelings, and experiences. The goal of the interview was to provide an authentic and detailed description of a student's daily life. Interview questions focused on personal stories and related topics:

1. Why did you choose Canadian universities instead of Chinese universities for your higher education? What will be your plan after graduation? Will you return to China or remain here?
2. Can you describe times (examples) when you were happy; times you were disappointed? Describe moments when you experienced depression (study, life, and socializing)? How did you deal with these challenges?
3. What are some of your perceptions of the campus climate (university)? Have you experienced discrimination, negative labeling, or perceived unfairness based upon your point of origin? Give examples.
4. What non-academic things have you learned (values, worldviews) while studying at the University of Regina?
5. Do you have any advice for administrators and faculty members?



The majority of interviews (11 interviews) were carried out face-to-face in a location chosen by participants. One interview was conducted via video chat. Interview duration was 30 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded (with permission). Three participants were interviewed twice (only if required). All interviews took place in the respondent's first language (i.e., Chinese). The goal was not to impede participants in expressing their feelings and experiences. Recordings were later translated for the purpose of this research and verified by participant checking.

## **Observations**

The disciplines of education and engineering and applied science were selected for weekly classroom observations. The effort was to generate a broad representative sample, with respondents utilizing a variety of differing experiences. As mentioned, the classroom observations lasted six academic terms and targeted Chinese international students, including their directed responses, performances, and classroom behaviors. The behaviors and activities in daily social events were also observed. This involved celebrations, informal gatherings, picnics, and religious activities. The intention was to observe participants in non-academic as well as academic settings. This provided greater insight into the day-to-day experiences of these students.

## **FINDINGS**

As identified above, the data sources included semi-structured interviews transcripts, field notes of unstructured observations and conversations, corresponding archival research, as well as the memos with reflective remarks. These data were analyzed and coded, revealing a number of relevant themes. Through constant comparison a complete data set was confirmed. This procedure guaranteed the organization of the data in a consistent and credible manner.

### **Findings from Informal Interviews**

Ten main themes emerged from the collected data. These themes were presented in Table 1 (female participants) and Table 2 (male participants). Thematic categories included: background, marital status, current programs, classroom cultures, gender issue, positive cultural experiences, challenges, cultural biases, successful strategies, and advice for administrators and faculty members. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. As an additional subset of female and male responses were

examined (independently). Here four potential issues were revealed and presented below.

### **Language Acquisition, Academic Development, Life, and Socializing**

The researchers confirmed that the identified challenges related to language acquisition were consistent with existing literature. Almost all of the participants identified language barriers, academic gap, differences in life (culture), and socializing as significant. Language acquisition and linguistic barriers were given the top priority for both male and female students. Moreover, it was worth noting that the language barriers included both verbal communication (listening and speaking) and non-verbal aspects (writing and reading). As Rosalyn (female) noted,

The first discouragement is the language. English is not my first language but I had to involve myself into a total English class as much as I could. Because of my poor listening, I was unable to follow some ideas from my classmates.

Wu (male) also stated that,

Sometimes, your research work may not be accepted or considered to be valuable enough, only because the corresponding English writing is not good and cannot satisfy the requirement of an academic paper for publication.

Respondents also identified various strategies for overcoming these challenges. Coping strategies can be categorized using the following three types: (1) self-adjustment, i.e., personal change and adaptation such as reading, watching movies, and social contact; (2) self-socializing, i.e., forging friendships and acquaintances such as attending social engagements, cultural familiarization; and (3) passive acceptance, i.e., doing nothing.

The first strategy, self-adjustment, arguably worked to repair interpreted deficits. As Yan (female) said,

I often ease my tension by reading, watching movies and contacting with my family members and old friends.

With self-socialization, a subject worked towards increasing social engagement as an adaptive strategy. Long (male) commented,

I joined the new student group to make new friends. I also tried to talk with every classmate and made friends with them.

With passive acceptance, students accepted their fates. One participant, Li (female), commented,

I miss Chinese foods and feel lonely and bored. At the beginning of my studying in the faculty, assignments, pressure and the lack of socializing made me exhausted and extremely lonely. But I did not know how to change the situation.

Male informants were more likely to use self-socializing as a strategy to deal with the challenges of discrimination and isolation than female participants. During the semi-structured interviews, female participants frequently acknowledged and exercised vulnerability as a social tool, more so than the male participants. This was true in the categories of social adaptation, psychological adaptation, cultural adaptation and general adaptation level. Five female participants expressed negative emotional experiences such as loneliness and isolation. Only one male participant expressed passive attitudes (Figure 1). This suggests that the female students expressed more emotional stress than the males. Generally, the male participants were more concerned with their academic development (Table 2). As Wu said,

Frankly, there is no seriously bad time during my study experience in the University of Regina. All of the frustrations mainly resulted from the academic work, such as the failed experiment and rejected manuscripts.

### **Chinese Female Participants' Challenges**

As predicted, female participants signified that they often suffered from some traditional patriarchal viewpoints that males were valued more than females and that females were expected to reproduce and nurture a stable family environment. Jiang was an only daughter, so her parents did not support her to study abroad and thought she should stay in China with a stable life and marriage instead of studying abroad.

Married female students commented on having to balance their studies and the needs of their children and husbands. For some, this left them little time to socialize. Li (female) was a mother with two children. She had few friends because she had to attend to her courses in the evening and then care for her children. This included checking their homework while completing housework for next day. Sometimes, she had to spend extra money to find a babysitter for her children when the demands of studying took precedent. Li encouraged and motivated herself to be successful in her academic program. Academic success was her dream and represented a new start in life. Li patiently accepted that language learning was a gradual and developmental process. Conversely, male married students did not experience the same (additional) pressure from their families. Wu was a father with a 2-year-old son. As he commented,

Evidently, the best experience is that your efforts on your research topic eventually recognized by the peers.

Yong (male married student) also enjoyed the workout/sports time at the university such as the badminton and did not report feeling his family responsibilities were a burden or hindrance.

In addition, the female participants felt that gender discrimination was an issue (Table 1). It even came across in general school discourses. Some of them remarked that the textbooks, course content/readings, and journal articles recommended were written based on a male perspective. That is, instructors were imperceptibly encouraging sexism as discursive.

### **Cultural Stereotyping (Expectations and Actions of Host Group)**

Cultural stereotyping was viewed as a significant factor in adjusting to their new world. These tensions were expressed in common ways. For example, the opportunities for asking and answering questions in classrooms were insufficient. These participants commented that some instructors were more likely to invite questions from local students instead of international students. One respondent commented that when he experienced this discrimination, he felt frustrated, even emailing his instructor expressing his concerns (he did not receive an explanation). A second concern noted was that there were fewer opportunities for internships, research assistantships, and part-time jobs. Compared with the local students, most of the participants felt that Chinese students were not equally competitive with local students (internship and research opportunities). Jiang (female) stated that

the competitiveness of Chinese students in getting part-job is lower than local students. The feeling was that many part time jobs only targeted local students as employers and did not want international students.

Yong (male) claimed,

...that was so bad... they should practice more and more openness to everyone.

A third concern identified was the curricula itself. Respondents felt that selected knowledge was written for Saskatchewan natives. Here the textbooks chosen and used by faculty members were apt to focus on local issues and less so on international ones. Glory (female master student) stated:

The curriculums taught are inclined to localization. But as a comprehensive university, it should concern more about some universal and macro-spherical contents in master courses or

above. Our research still only focuses on Chinese things and cannot elevate to the universal and international level. Additionally, racial segregation still exists in some aspects.

### **Stereotyping and Negative Labeling (Cultural and Institutional)**

Labeling became a problem when harmful stereotypes were imposed upon social and historical groupings. Many Chinese students felt that they endured the stigma of a harmful label. For example, perceptions were that Chinese students did not have sufficient English language skills to compete with local students. Respondents identified grades as significant, with many labeling Chinese students as failing. Female participants seemed to be more sensitive to labeling than their male counterparts. Yan (female) said that

...some people always asked me where you learned English. Chinese people were not too good at speaking English.

Rosalyn (female) commented that

...the class in Canada is quite different from China. During my master period in Regina, students always worked in groups and had discussions with each other. At the end of each term, students need to prepare presentations by themselves or in groups. These characteristics are not suitable for a Chinese international learner as I lack this study environment since I was young.

### **Findings from Observations**

Field notes and memos from observations (classrooms and social events) were analyzed and coded for emergent themes. This brought the researcher closer to understanding the experiences of Chinese international students. With the classroom observations, three major themes emerged (as listed in Table 3): main challenges, focus reflections, and negative influences. There were five sub-themes identified: language barriers, psychological status, the conflicts between previous educational models and new educational models, cultural shock in classrooms, and racist inclination. Meanwhile, in the social events observations, four possible themes were identified: personal backgrounds before the enrollment, main languages used, main friend circles, and topics during conversations (Table 4). The results of these observations corroborated, contextualized, and expanded findings from the semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1: The Themes in Informal Interviews (Female Participants)**

Participants	Background	Marital status	Current program	Classroom cultures	Gender issue	Positive cultural experiences	Challenges	Cultural biases	Successful strategies	Advice
Rosalyn	English students	Single	Masters	Teachers and students just like friends. Professors and classmates were all very helpful and friendly.	No gender inequality	Some special experiences of the outdoor and physical education course and the multicultural environment	Language barrier Teaching model Critical thinking Loneliness	Not obvious	Joined some parties and festivals. I obtained cultures, customs of diversity ethnic groups. Grasped chances to practice English and took a step to cultivate critical thinking	Providing more opportunities for Chinese students to practice in some public schools
Yan	English teacher Visiting scholar	Single	Ph.D.	Based on small-scale course model, classmates also can interact closely with each other.	Gender inequality still exists, are written by male authors	The relationship between students and advisors is more close and harmonious	Socializing Loneliness, and transportation	Employment and negative cultural labeling	Ease tension by reading, and contacting with family members and domestic friends	Faculty staff should enhance the inclusiveness of language and culture

<b>Han</b>	Exchange student	Married	Bachelor	Instructors in classroom usually teach some local cultures.	No evident gender inequality	Enjoy the equipments of the university very much such as swimming pool, gym and library etc	Grades, exams, assignments and discussions. Housing and dining	No	Students should adapt actively the new environment instead of forcing the instructors to match students' requirements	No
<b>Glory</b>	Transdiscipline student	Single	Master	The curriculums taught are inclined to localization.	Segregation still exists in some aspects	Learned a lot about independent learning, rethinking, and social equality	Language barrier. Assignments' pressure and the lack of socialization. Loneliness. Researches still only focus on Chinese things	Employment and Classroom	Make self-adjustment	Relevant authorities can respect more multi-culture and make curriculums more universal. And professors can transmit more international theories

<b>Jiang</b>	Exchange student	Single	Bachelor	Totally different teaching methods	Not yet	I do not have particularly impressed thing.	I try my best but get nothing in return	Other students from other countries	Making self-adjustment and paying more attention to next classes	Providing more practical opportunities
<b>Li</b>	Company employee	Married with children	Master	I appreciate the free learning environment.	Not yet	The friendship and goodness of local people. Fresh air	Language barrier. I have no enough time to socialize because I should look after my children	Employment	Passively accept the current situation.	I hope the university can offer internship opportunity



**Table 2: The Themes in Informal Interviews (Male Participants)**

Participants	Background	marital status	Current program	Classroom cultures	Positive cultural experiences	Challenges	Cultural biases	Successful strategies	Advice
<b>Wu</b>	Company employee	Married with Child	Ph.D.	Openness and profession	The rigorous scholarship, international research experience	Language barrier and research work	Insufficient opportunities for question-answers in a classroom	Keep going	More teaching opportunities
<b>Yong</b>	Company employee	Married	Master	Not too good	I enjoy the workout/sports time in the university, especially the Badminton club organized by some students	Language barrier and the conflict between Chinese traditional education and Canadian education	Not found	Communicating with Chinese professors	Compared with other University of Canada, the tuition fee does not match reputation.
<b>Jun</b>	Exchange student	Single	Master	Freedom and flexible	Share, harmonious Openness	Academic development and language barrier	Few employment opportunities	Organizing student club	Internship opportunity

<b>Bo</b>	High school student	Single	Bachelor	Sharing and studying from all different culture makes people more fulfilling	I also enjoy the outdoor activities, for example, ski and hiking. Furthermore, people here do not really put eyes on other and find mistake.	Academic development, loneliness, and the pressure from family's expectation	Not obvious	The successful cooperation in one project makes people fresh.	The tuition fee is bit higher than other good rank universities
	<b>Hong</b>	High school student	Single	Bachelor	No special things	Language barrier, exam, and assignments	Not found	Playing digital games, chatting, and eating delicious foods	Nothing
<b>Long</b>	High school students	Married	Bachelor	Team-work capabilities	I like the enthusiasm of local people and multi-culture	Language barrier, loneliness	Not found	I joined the new student group to make new friends. I also tried to talk with every classmates and made friends with them.	Nothing

Generally, the results of the observations supported the findings from the interviews. First, language obstacles were the top challenge for Chinese international students. This obstacle was embodied in four aspects: the dialogue between students and instructors, the dialogue between students and students, students and textbooks, and the grades of assignments. It was worth mentioning that female participants were more willing to talk with instructors (for career planning) in classrooms than male participants. Moreover, female participants appeared to have greater need for corrective measures, self-improvement, note-taking, and development of speaking abilities than males (Figure 2) in the sampling classes. Second, Chinese international students were isolated and felt excluded from their educational and cultural environment. Last, Chinese students struggled from the contradictions between their traditional educational modes and the new Western approach. These contradictions included teaching methods, teaching contents, and academic requirements (Table 3).

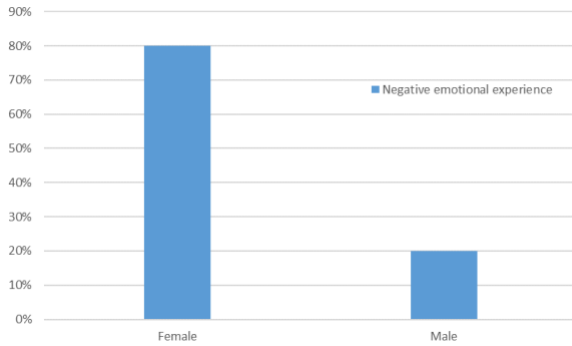
As Rosalyn (female) mentioned,

...students were encouraged to think critically. However, to criticize an article written by a celebrated author is rare in China. Critical thinking was really a challenge to me.

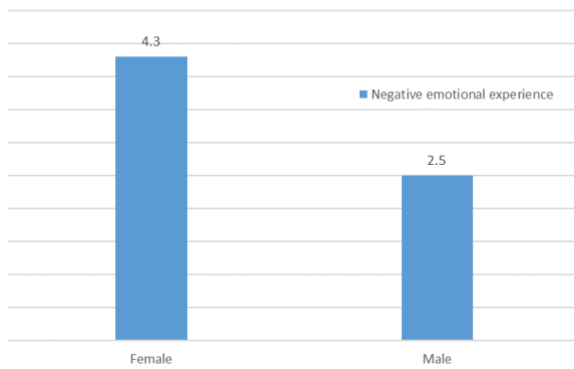
In addition, they felt uncomfortable with the behaviors of local classmates, such as eating, talking loudly, texting, and placing their feet on chairs during class. Many felt that, compared with local students, there was insufficient opportunity for asking and answering questions in the classrooms.

Turning towards the observations of social events, reported barriers were definitely in place (Table 4). Participants mainly spoke Chinese in church activities, informal gatherings, and other celebrations. Friendship circles usually involved like-minded participants (i.e., Chinese nationals). Topics during these conversations focused on Chinese and personal issues and not academic topics relating to their programs. Those students who were planning to make Canada their home were more eager to learn and adapt into Canadian culture.

**Figure 1: Gender Comparison (Negative Emotional Experience)**



**Figure 2: Gender Comparison (Positive Classroom Performance)**



**Table 3: Emerging Themes in Classroom Observations**

Main challenges	Focus reflections	Negative influences
Language barrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The dialogue between students and instructors</li> <li>● The dialogue between students</li> <li>● The dialogue between textbooks</li> <li>● The grade of assignments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Chinese students, particularly, male students, had few communications with their instructors although they feel confused about some contents taught.</li> <li>● No matter in class or after class, Chinese students, and particularly female students, had few communications with local students.</li> <li>● They often spend more time reading textbooks or other materials with some unavoidable misunderstandings.</li> <li>● The grades often are lower than other local classmates.</li> </ul>
Psychological status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Isolation</li> <li>● Nervousness</li> <li>● Exhaustion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● They embodied the exclusion from the new educational and cultural environment.</li> </ul>
The conflicts between previous educational model and new educational model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teaching methods</li> <li>● Teaching contents</li> <li>● Academic requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● They were used to study based on teacher-centered learning environment.</li> <li>● They weren't familiar with presentation, independently making questions, class discussion and writing inquiry papers.</li> </ul>
Cultural shock in classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Native classmates' behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● They feel unacceptable for the behaviors of domestic classmates such as eating, talking loudly, texting and putting randomly legs onto other chairs.</li> </ul>
Racist inclination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Compared with local students, they have insufficient opportunities for question-answers in a classroom.</li> <li>● Negative cultural labeling from other classmates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● They often feel depressed or discouraged and even also think the negative cultural labeling is intrinsic for Chinese students.</li> </ul>

**Table 4: The Themes in the Observations of Social Events**

<b>Personal backgrounds before the enrollment</b>	<b>Main languages used</b>	<b>The main friend circles</b>	<b>The topics during conversations</b>
Trans-discipline students	Chinese	Chinese people	Missing Chinese foods, culture and other Chinese things.
English teachers	Chinese and English	Chinese people, native speakers and the students from other countries	The acceptance of new culture and new experience in English learning
The students whose major are English	Chinese	Chinese people, native speakers and the students from other countries	Outdoor activities and travel
Visiting scholars	Chinese	Chinese people	Study pressure and family lives
The students who are changing their identities into immigrants	Chinese	Chinese people	How to immerse themselves into local life. Academic development, future work, and plan.
Exchange students	Chinese	Chinese people	How to obtain academic success in a short time.
High school students	Chinese and English	Chinese people, local people and other students from other countries	The transition into university studies and the interesting things in a new culture.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on results from both interviews and observations, it is clear that these students, particularly female students, have been experiencing the transitive barriers with a significant lack of support for these students in meeting their successful transition in the present setting. Meanwhile, it is obvious that negative effects of school climate across culture, race, and gender and declines in self-esteem have been embodied in the group.

### **The Transitive Barriers**

As far as Chinese international students are concerned, first, the language barrier is a major impediment for Chinese students (Tables 1 through 3). This includes verbal elements as well as also non-verbal ones. Intercultural communication seems far more complicated than linguistic proficiency (Ogden, 2006). Yan and Rosalyn (both female) were English teachers in China with a relatively proficient speaking ability (English); however, they still suffer cultural barriers as expressed through language (e.g., Chinese reading and writing style). As Yan said,

I do not feel much of a language barrier and feel easy to make diverse friends. But sometimes, although I have lots of good ideas, it usually results in some misunderstandings... based on Chinese ideology.

Also, based on what some participants commented, although the university offered supports in verbal communication in English, they still needed more help in non-verbal aspects to overcome language cultural resistance. As Jiang (female) articulated:

Not enough. I also need to learn some extra words to support my daily life using. For example, we usually participate in the celebration of some Western festivals like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween or even Easter Day. To be frank, we do not even know what is behind them and why we should celebrate, we just take it as an opportunity to get together with friends. Maybe we should know more about the culture thing which is behind these festivals.

Secondly, Chinese students experienced difficulty in communicating with their instructors in class or after class, which created an academic barrier to a large extent. Such a situation can openly manifest acts of racism, which are married with learned cultural biases. For example, Chinese educational experiences focus upon traditional instructional styles of pedagogy and

assessment: standardized testing, teacher-led teaching and passive learning, memory-based training and skills repetition, and externally introduced discipline (students comply within the authoritarian rituals of the classroom). Chinese learners learn passively, as discovery methods relying upon experience and community are rare. Chinese international students find it difficult to participate in the Western academic environment (e.g., cooperative groupings). However, textbooks and faculty members lack an understanding of Chinese culture, which arguably contributes to a misunderstanding of students' learning. With behaviour anchored in Chinese tradition, Chinese students do not speak in a direct manner. During classes, teachers often fill in the silence, preventing Chinese students from speaking. Such situations can present these same students as unmotivated or slow learners (Liu & Lin, 2016). Conversely, native speakers have strong writing styles and can present a clear progression of concepts and idea (e.g., one topic per paragraph; strong oral abilities). In class difficulties play out in grades, which can poorly reflect on the Chinese students (see Table 3).

Third, traditional education strategies in Chinese families contribute to the dilemma faced by Chinese students in life and socializing. Chinese parents usually monopolize everything for their children, which results in the lack of the group's independent and adaptive competencies. Therefore, a contradiction is shown that the Chinese international students actually expect to learn the Canadian ways but find the Chinese ways more familiar and effective to solve problems. Learning of the Canadian ways also requires their independent cognitive and behavioral reconstruction that they lack (Brody, 2015). Therefore, according to the findings of observation, the participants appear frozen in their own (Chinese) groups, isolated from the mainstream. They do not actively expand their social circles to include others from outside (Tables 3 and 4). Not communicating with local students, Chinese students experience difficulty in understanding the behaviours of local classmates, such as eating, talking loudly, texting, and placing their feet on chairs, etc. They consider many of these mannerisms rude and disrespectful. Observing behaviour at social events, participants primarily communicate with their compatriots in Chinese. This, unfortunately, contributes to the ethnic divide and does little to break down the cultural gap.

### **Negative Effects of School Climate Across Culture, Race, and Gender**

Initially, in the school climate, people tend to treat Chinese international students as a homogenous group and rarely adjust for distinct identity positions. This is a significant concern particularly for Chinese female students and their additional family responsibilities. It is indicated above that female participants are more passive (e.g., in finding opportunities to



socialize) and vulnerable psychologically than male students. Female married participants with children feel additional pressures from their families. In Chinese traditional culture, the husband holds controlling authority over the family. The primary commitment of a wife is “looking after” her husband and children. In addition the “double day” has a serious impact on this same group. In contemporary (Chinese and Western) societies females may not only have the burden of the family but must also compete with males in the workplace and academic environments (Sun, 2005). The American Psychological Association (2011) found that women showed higher levels of stress than men. According to the source, men report being less concerned about managing stress and are more likely to say they are doing enough in this area. Women, in turn, place emphasis on the need to manage stress but feel they are not doing well enough. With this study, at least, one in four women acknowledge they are not doing enough when it comes to managing stress; only 17% of men feel this way (American Psychological Association[APA], 2011). However, they seem to lack specific social, cultural, and psychological supports provided. Additionally, gender differences were embedded in general university discourses such as the textbooks used in the present site. Such situation renders what instructors do around appear to be supporting issues of gender.

Second, cultural stereotyping can be defined as how someone views another person based on who he/she is, where he/she is from, or the language he/she speaks without getting to know the individual (Gates, 2017). As revealed in the findings of interviews, Chinese international students’ opportunities for asking and answering questions in classrooms were insufficient relative to local students. Meanwhile, they were labeled as slow learners in English study. Psychologists have mentioned that the longstanding cultural stereotyping would harm the performance of talented students and make students weak and vulnerable (Gates, 2017). In the present setting, cultural stereotyping unavoidably spread to the group’s on-campus employment, which resulted in the group obtaining few employment opportunities. They are more likely to avoid applying for a part-time job if they believe that stereotypes determine how if they are hired.

Third, the textbooks chosen and used by faculty members are inclined to focus on local issues instead of international issues, which contributes to a larger cultural gap. For example, it is impossible for Chinese international students to completely immerse themselves into the discussion focusing on First Nation issues in Saskatchewan, Canada.

It is worth mentioning that a greater and more diverse sample might allow the researchers to expand the findings of the study. Regardless, it would be interesting to learn if the in-school (university) experiences of Chinese international students are similar in Vancouver or Toronto, locations where a

large Chinese population has existed for over a century. However, the motive remains the same—to engender better communication and understanding between learners. An additional limitation to the study may be the first author’s background as a current Chinese international student, although the study attempted to avoid the biases produced in this ethnographic inquiry.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study reveal the in-depth and lived experiences of Chinese international students and the difficulties experienced in managing two cultures. The study identifies four barriers to happiness and success: language barriers, academic barriers, life barriers, and socializing barriers (impacting gender differentially). Female students incur additional stressors given family pressures and cultural expectations. Additionally, the Chinese student’s faces culture stereotyping and culture-based labels as a product of daily life. Additional contributing factors include a lack of emotional and academic supports (cultural transition), the lack of multicultural experiences and education for faculty members, and insufficient psychological supports, particularly for women.

This paper offers four recommendations to university administrators and faculty members actively working with international students (particularly Chinese nationals). It is the hope that the recommendations can possibly ameliorate the challenges faced by international students and in the process, create a more ideal and fair learning environment.

The first recommendation is to create a less parochial and more responsive curriculum. We recommend that curricula include greater international and macro-spherical knowledge, even if focusing upon Canadian issues. In the case of Chinese international students, they are more able to explore a more diversified research base with a more internationalized curriculum. This moves them away from the parochial content as offered up in some classrooms; however, it also serves as a deterrent to the common Chinese practice of retreating behind the traditional culture and language of the home front. The goal is a curriculum that builds upon existing cultural knowledge regimes, as well as academic ones.

The second recommendation is to encourage faculty members to seek out cultural training in developing a more culturally sensitive response to international students. Faculty members need to hone their teaching skills in a multicultural environment. With the case of Chinese international students, they should understand the role that Chinese culture and language play in the learning process (Mirza & Meetoo, 2012). A training workshop would enable faculty members to obtain greater cultural understandings, improving and building upon the mutual understanding between instructor and student

(Chinese international students). Faculty members should offer a more open dialogue at a personal and professional level to support students in their learning process (Mirza & Meeto, 2012).

The third recommendation introduces the need for greater integration within the university community. University staff should discover new ways for students to attend and participate in social events (both Chinese and local). In addition, international student supports can include counseling sessions as well as tutorials on a number of relevant subjects found valuable (e.g., rights and protections offered through Canadian law). This will prove particularly helpful to women dealing with the anathema of both racism and patriarchy.

The fourth recommendation is to develop a greater globally cultural recognition and consciousness. For example, at the University of Regina when it comes to the conflict between Chinese culture and Western culture, Chinese students usually suffer. The dilemma is trying to negotiate a truce between the two cultural frontiers. The cultural collision prevents both cultures from developing a closer relationship. We need to listen more. For example, although Confucianism is over two thousand years old, it can offer wisdom and insight for the modern western world. Confucianism is not a dogmatic religion, but a philosophy of living. Confucianism bridges individualization and inspiration with the integration of learning, thinking, and practice (Eno, 2015). Confucianism offers us a more student-centered teaching philosophy. Turning to the west, the philosopher, John Dewey (1916), in his *Democracy and Education*, stated that education was an accumulation of experiences that stimulate both growth and the capacity for further growth. Dewey here advocated creating learning situations that work students into collaborative social engagement. For Dewey, growth is a combination of plasticity and dependence, as the student is irrevocably changed with each learning event. Here two cultures, so commonly partitioned, essentially have a close connection with each other; growth not difference should be fostered and encouraged.

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