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## Learning to Live and Study in Canada: Stories of Four EFL Learners from China

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*During the past five years, an increasing number of younger international students from mainland China have appeared on Canadian campuses to pursue their first university degrees. What is it like being an international student studying in a foreign language and culture at such a young age? Through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the study reported here examines the transitional experiences of four female high school students from mainland China as they moved from a Chinese high school to a Canadian high school and later to a Canadian university. The study attempts to record and understand the challenges these students must face in order to live and study in English in a vastly different educational, cultural, and social milieu. The study also offers insights into how these international students, as well as many recent immigrant ESL students, can be better supported during their adaptation process in Canada.*

*Dans les cinq dernières années, un nombre croissant de jeunes étudiants étrangers de la Chine continentale sont venus au Canada pour obtenir leur premier diplôme universitaire. Comment se passe le séjour de ces étudiants étrangers qui assimilent une langue et une culture étrangères à un âge si jeune? Reposant sur une méthode narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), cette recherche porte sur les expériences de quatre élèves arrivées de la Chine continentale, à partir de leur passage d'une école secondaire en Chine à une école secondaire au Canada jusqu'à leurs études dans une université canadienne. Le projet a consisté à noter et à tenter de comprendre les défis que ces jeunes femmes doivent affronter pour vivre et étudier en anglais dans un milieu éducatif, culturel et social très différent de celui qu'elles avaient connu en Chine. L'on y propose certaines mesures pour mieux appuyer ces apprenants étrangers, ainsi que les étudiants ALS nouvellement arrivés au pays, pendant qu'ils s'adaptent à la vie au Canada.*

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### Background

During the past five years in mainland China, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of high school students who want to pursue their postsecondary education overseas. Because of the fierce competition for limited spaces in higher education in mainland China and because of the value of a degree from a North American university, more parents in main-

land China are sending their only children away to the United States or Canada for further education.

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2003), in 2001 there were 20,160 students from mainland China, an almost tenfold increase over figures reported in 1997, which puts mainland China as the top source country with the fastest growth rate of international student numbers in Canada. In Alberta, the University of Alberta has also seen a sharp increase in the number of international students from mainland China, particularly at the undergraduate level. In the 1998-1999 academic year, there were only 14 undergraduate students from mainland China, but in 2002-2003, the number rose to 147 (International Centre, 2003). As Canadian government and educational institutions continue to promote and market Canada as a choice destination for international students, more young Chinese students will continue coming to Canada to pursue their postsecondary education.

Furnham and Tresize (1983, cited in Furnham, 1997) identified three kinds of problems international students face in the host country:

problems of living in a foreign culture (racial discrimination, language problem, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness, etc.); problems of late-adolescents/young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence; and the academic problems associated with higher educational study. (p. 14)

Because North American culture is different from Chinese culture, the process of cross-cultural adjustment is particularly difficult for most of the sojourners, especially during the early days after arrival (Adler, 1991; Lu, 1998; Sheh, 1994). Unfortunately, most of the stress of coping with a new culture falls on the students. It is usually left to the students to make the adjustments necessary for their academic success in North America (Upton, 1989; Feng, 1991). Although several studies focus on the experiences of university-level international students (Feng, 1991; Sun & Chen, 1997; Sheh, 1994; Chacon, 1999) and others record the experiences of immigrant ESL students in high schools (Watt, Roessingh, & Bosetti, 1996; Chow, 2000), no intensive study has been undertaken of one group of international students and their transitional experiences as they moved from a high school in their home countries to a Canadian high school and later from the Canadian high school to a Canadian university. This study intends to fill this gap with a narrative inquiry into the experiences of four Asian students.

## Methodology

This study has emerged out of my personal experience as a graduate student at the University of Alberta. With a TOEFL score of 630 and 10 years of tertiary English teaching experience in China, I was shocked to realize that I

could not understand what my professor and fellow graduate students were talking about in class discussions when I started my master's program in September 1998. Socializing with many of the international students from mainland China, South Korea, Japan, and Thailand in my department, I noticed that we were experiencing the same adjustment problems, though to different degrees. Most of us were struggling to make sense of this troubling period of our lives.

### *Participants*

Through a fellow Canadian graduate student, I first met Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose in February 1999 when they attended the University open house as prospective students. They were studying in a university preparation program with seven other students, all male, from mainland China at a local high school. I volunteered to act as their interpreter when they were being shown round the campus that day. A personal connection was sparked and I volunteered to meet with them every two weeks for English conversation practice. By September, these four young women were admitted to the university; unfortunately, their seven male classmates failed to meet the minimum English-language requirement of 530 on the TOEFL.

### *Research Questions*

Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose agreed to participate in a study to examine their transitional experiences from China to Canada during their first academic year 1999-2000. The central research questions that guided the data collection process were:

1. How did these students experience the transition from a Chinese high school to a Canadian one?
2. How do they experience the transition from a Canadian high school to a Canadian university?
3. What were/are the challenges they have faced during these transitions?

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Because of the nature of this study, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was chosen as the most appropriate approach to explore these research questions. Clandinin and Connelly define narrative inquiry as

a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply states ... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

Central to this definition is the place of stories in the inquiry, the relational quality between the researcher and the participants, the time commitment required, and the recognition that the construction and reconstruction of stories may change as both the researcher's and the participants' understandings of people and events change over time (Bell, 2002). In narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) use the term *story* to refer to the phenomenon of lived stories, the anecdotes of specific situations, like the small pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; and the term *narrative* to refer to the inquiry or method—the storytelling, a way of construction and reconstruction, interpretation, and reinterpretation of the long-term life events—the whole picture of that jigsaw puzzle.

By the time I started this research project, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, Rose and I had already built a trusting relationship with one another. We were friends and spent a lot of time together. Sometimes we went shopping. Other times we cooked and ate together. If we had time, we went to the gym to work out together. By sharing our stories of anxiety, frustration, and confusion during that particular time, we were able to process our own experiences together. We realized that we were not alone and that there was always a possibility to relive and retell our stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected primarily through ongoing conversations with the four participants. Between the months of October 1999 and February 2000, we met as a group biweekly to talk about our schooling experiences in both China and Canada. I prepared some open-ended general questions (see Appendix for the sample questions), but left it to them as to where the conversation should go because I wanted them to talk about what they felt was important in their lives (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). Each conversation lasted 60 to 120 minutes. They were conducted initially in English in the months of October and November 1999. Between December 1999 and February 2000, I decided to use Mandarin Chinese because I wanted to give them the freedom to talk about their experiences and to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings directly through their mother tongue. All the conversations were tape-recorded. I listened to the tapes immediately after and transcribed the English conversations, using more grammatically correct forms at their request. I translated the Chinese conversations into English sentence by sentence. (I worked as an interpreter and translator for two years in China.) All the transcriptions were then sent to the participants as hard copies each time for accuracy checks. I made corrections at their request to ensure that I understood and interpreted their meanings and intentions properly.

A second source of data was the e-mail messages between me and each of them during that time. They were all in English. I printed out all the messages as hard copies and put them in a separate folder.

In addition to the more formal conversations and e-mail messages, I also kept a research journal during the same time to record my feelings, thoughts, reactions, and questions after I talked with my participants or when something happened in their lives or my own life. It helped me to understand myself better as a researcher, a teacher, a student, and above all as a human being. It also helped me to gain insights into their situations, which in turn helped to strengthen our relationships.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis involved multiple readings of the conversation transcripts, the e-mail messages, and my journal entries, as well as listening to the conversation tapes again and constructing tentative narrative accounts of each participant's experiences. I sent these accounts back to my participants via e-mail for them to check for accuracy and made the necessary changes. Then I put them side by side to note the emerging and recurring themes or "narrative threads" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 132) either in an individual's stories or across participants' stories that related to the three central questions about their high school experiences in China, their high school experiences in Canada, and their first-year university experiences in Canada. The following section of this article describes their two transitional experiences in Canada by starting with their high school experiences in mainland China. Then it discusses the challenges they faced and how they coped with them in these three cultural and educational settings. It concludes with some suggestions for Canadian TESL educators as to how better to support international students and new immigrant ESL students during this critical period of transition in their lives in Canada.

## **The Two Transitions**

### *High School Experience in China*

When I asked Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose to reflect on their lives in mainland China, they said they were "always busy studying for school subjects." Three major themes emerged from the data related to this period.

#### *Better education for better future*

Throughout Chinese history, education has always been the means for social mobility. From Confucius' time until the 1800s, students (always men) devoted their whole lives to study until they were well over 20 years old and often in their 30s in order to pass all the civil service exams necessary to be appointed as one of the educated and ruling elites in China. Nowadays, in order to secure a better future, students in China from a young age are told to "study, study, and study" so that they can go to the best kindergarten, the best elementary school, the best middle school, the best high school, and the

best university. Mei recounted her high school experience, which was typical for a student in China:

I had a very tough time in high school. I had to study Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 12 midnight, during which I stayed in school with my classmates from 7:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Even Saturday and Sunday mornings, we still had to go to school!

*Traditional approach to learning*

In order to get high marks on exams, a more traditional approach to learning has been adopted in the Chinese education system. This transmission model (spoken of in China as *Tian Ya Shi Jiao Xue*: spoon-feeding teaching) requires that students be passive learners. All they need to do is to memorize tremendous amounts of material from their textbooks and/or teacher's lectures. Therefore, students in China always find themselves busy with schoolwork.

Rose: In China, the teacher just gave you this formula, focus on this kind of question and do your homework, practice for hours, memorize this formula and then you could get high marks. The questions/problems about our school subjects were too difficult to figure them out. We had to work on so many questions/problems. We had a lot of homework to do. We had to spend more time solving the problems and answering the questions in order to get a higher mark to go to a university.

Magnolia: I had no time to do what I wanted, to take a walk, to go to the ocean, to write something, to talk with my parents or have some communication ... I had no time. I spent so much time in school ... but there were things that I really wanted to do. I had no time for that.

*Intense competition for few seats in higher education*

Except for Rose, who has an elder sister, the other three young women are each the only children in their respective families. Their parents all expected them to finish at least one university degree so that they would have a better future. In order to go to a university in mainland China, each student has to write the annual National College Entrance Exam in July. Those who want to go to the best universities must get the highest possible marks.

Mei: In order to go to top universities, we needed high marks on the entrance exam. We were under great pressures from our parents, our teachers, and even ourselves to excel in our academic studies. We had to always focus our attention and time on the school subjects. We did not have any free time to develop our personal interests, such as drawing, dancing, and other non-academic activities.

Jasmine: My parents found a boarding high school in the outskirts of the city for me. The living conditions there were awful, but that school had a high percentage of its graduates going to university. I stayed in that school for three years and was able to improve my marks in all school subjects.

However, because of the limited space in Chinese universities and the fierce competition for these few seats, it has become more and more difficult to get into first-rate universities in mainland China. Not satisfied to settle for the second- or third-rate ones, parents turn their attention to foreign universities. All four participants took the annual college entrance exam in mainland China in July 1998, but decided to come to Canada to do their first university degree.

#### *Transition 1: From High School in China to High School in Canada*

When I asked Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose about their university preparation program at the local Canadian high school between September 1998 and June 1999, they were not happy about their first year in Canada. Three major themes emerged from the data related to this period.

##### *Initial homesickness*

Except Jasmine, who went to a boarding school for three years and was eager to leave her mother because "she always controlled my life," it was the first time the participants (Magnolia, Mei, and Rose) had left their parents to live on their own. They were very homesick during the first two months.

Rose: I lived with my mother for 20 years. This is the first time I left her so far away. It's really hard for me. For the first two months in Edmonton, I wrote so many letters to her, but half a year later I got her first letter to me! I decided to call her instead.

Magnolia: The second or third month I came to Edmonton I got very homesick. I cried on the phone while talking to my mother. The next day my father phoned me. He was very angry because he told me that my mother was so sad when she heard me crying on the phone. After that, I never cried over the phone.

Mei: I would miss my parents when I was unhappy or had difficulty with my studies. This is the first time I leave them. At home they always did everything for me. My parents thought that I could not handle it. Before my mother came to Edmonton to visit me in February 1999, she could not sleep well or eat well. She misses me very much. After she saw that I could handle, she did not worry that much any more.

Soon Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose realized that they could no longer tell their parents whatever was on their mind and ask for comfort and understanding, advice and guidance as they used to do in mainland China. Now, with the Pacific Ocean in between, their parents could do nothing but worry more about them if they told them all their troubles. They learned to "keep all the bad things to ourselves and only let them know the good things." They realized that they needed to be strong in order to support their parents during this difficult time in their lives.

#### *Disappointment*

Having paid RMB \$150,000 (Can. \$25,000, enough for a student to finish a four-year university degree in mainland China) for their housing, meals, and tuition for the first year and the application and handling fee, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose were disappointed that they had to live in a crowded apartment. Four students shared a two-bedroom unit. Back in mainland China, each of them had a private bedroom. They had to learn to get along and live with one another in peace. The variety and quality of their meals were also "unsatisfactory" and "disappointing" because they could no longer "order" what they wanted for their daily meals when asked by their mothers. They had to accept whatever was put on the table.

Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei and Rose did not have an ESL teacher when the school term began in September 1998. They did not know what they should study. They did not know until January 1999 that they needed to pass TOEFL in order to go to university in Canada. The school did find an experienced ESL teacher for the second term starting January 1999, but Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose thought that this came too late as they would sit for the TOEFL test in May. They regretted that they had wasted four months because they "did not study as hard as they should have." In order to make up for their lost time, all four participants enrolled in evening TOEFL preparation courses in a local college. But they were disappointed when they realized that "Canadian teachers do poorly to prepare international students on TOEFL. They don't know how to teach for exams." This mismatch between what and how they needed to learn in order to pass TOEFL and what and how their Canadian teachers were able to teach them was unfortunate.

#### *Academic adjustment*

Because Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose had obtained their high school diplomas in mainland China before they came to Canada, they did not need to worry about the marks for math, physics, and other subjects. Therefore, the main goal of their first year was to improve their English as quickly as possible. They had their own separate ESL class with one Canadian teacher and seven male students, all from mainland China. They also took some math and chemistry courses with the mainstream Canadian students. However, the feeling of isolation as a separate group was strong throughout that



year. The school had no mechanisms in place to support their integration into the rest of the school population to ease some of the pain of adjusting to a different academic setting in a different country.

When Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose started their university preparation program in that high school, they were given a test in English. Most of the test items were on listening comprehension, and they did poorly. Magnolia was so upset about her "weak" English that she did not even feel like going to school any more. She had lost confidence that she was "good enough to enter university." And Jasmine said,

Because my English was poor I even hated to go to the classes except English and math classes. I felt really awkward in those other classes, especially when I was the only Chinese student who spoke broken English!

To make matters worse, they did not have a qualified ESL teacher in their first term. Because of their poor pre-test scores, their first teacher, a volunteer, thought that they knew little English. She taught them basic English, which was "very boring and not helpful" to them because they had studied English as a school subject in mainland China for seven years. They knew more English than she thought, but they lacked listening, speaking, and writing skills. Because their English proficiency level was so low, Mei worried whether she could reach the minimum TOEFL requirement score of 580 within such a short time. Rose was not certain whether her dream of going to university would ever come true in Canada.

In addition to language difficulty, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose also had to adjust to the different high school life here in Canada. They were exposed to a different way of teaching, which requires students to be active participants in the learning process. They were asked to do research, group work, class discussions, and oral presentations, a totally different way of being a student from what they were accustomed to in mainland China. They were also surprised to find that school days in Canada are shorter, only from 8:30 a.m. till 3:30 p.m. They had much less homework and it was much easier for them, especially math and chemistry. With so much time at their disposal, they did not know how to manage it themselves, how to fill the vast amount of time that they had yearned for back in China. Jasmine's feeling of unhappiness was typical.

Jasmine: I was not happy. I didn't have lots of things to do and I felt empty.

Mei: I don't think I learned a lot in that high school because I was lazy. I didn't work hard enough. The teacher there didn't give too much homework as the Chinese teachers did.

Rose: I think I wasted my money and time. I regret that I just wasted one year and did nothing.

Magnolia: Three of us always talked till midnight. We came home, ate and slept. What a terrible life!

They all wrote their TOEFL test in May 1999, and none scored 580. However, they all scored above 530 and were admitted into their undergraduate programs on the condition that they would take an intensive ESL course in their first term at the University of Alberta.

### *Transition 2: From Canadian High School to Canadian University*

After a whole year of uncertainty, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose were excited that their dreams of going to university finally came true. However, they were unprepared for the major challenges they had to face in order to pursue an advanced degree in a language not their own. Three major themes emerged from the data related to this period of their young lives.

#### *Lack of academic language skills*

University life today in Canada is much more driven by inquiry, problem-solving and project-based learning, group work, oral presentations, and class discussions, all of which require an entirely different kind of English language proficiency. Soon after they started their university lives, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose realized that passing the TOEFL test did not help them much in their daily academic activities and that the academic studies at the university were far more demanding than those in high school. Because they lacked the academic language skills to carry out many of the academic tasks at the university level, they were frustrated when they could not understand lectures or classroom interactions. They spent a lot of time looking up new words in dictionaries when they did not know the vocabulary in their readings of various subject areas. They could not and did not take part in class discussions. They had to spend much time writing assignments, only to be rewarded with low marks.

Magnolia: It's impossible for me to listen to the lectures effectively because I can't understand the professors at all. I have to come back home and read the textbooks myself, but I can't catch up with the professor. He is already lecturing on chapter 14 while I am still laboring at chapter 6. So now I must read, read and read and try to understand. If only I could understand his lectures, I wouldn't have to spend so much time at home! But his lectures are all Greek to me. I learn almost zero from the lectures.

Mei: Do you think we can handle these subjects, like computer and chemistry? We never studied them in China. We don't know a lot of the terms in Chinese or English. I have to use the diction-

ary all the time. It's really difficult. In fact, if we read the textbook and if we can figure them out, the text is not very hard for us, but ...

Rose: Once I went to my math professor and tried to ask him some questions, but he had difficulty understanding what was my question! I had to write my questions on the blackboard in order to help him understand! I didn't know the math terms in English to make myself understood!

In their ESL course, they were reluctant to take part in class discussions. For one thing, they were not used to the discussion format and did not see any value in it; for another, their English ability prevented them from feeling as if they were making any meaningful contributions to the class discussion. Besides speaking, writing essays in English also posed a big problem in their academic life.

Jasmine: Vocabulary and writing pose a big headache for us. We don't know how to use English ... how to express our ideas clearly. My teacher's comments on my essays filled the whole page and I was discouraged and wondered whether I would ever improve my English writing.

Magnolia: My essays on subject areas ... the mark is much lower again and again. When I finish it I ask my friend to help me correct it. There are still a lot of grammar mistakes. I can figure out what is my weakness, but I can't work it out. I cannot solve it.

Mei and Rose also asked for my advice about what they should pay more attention to in essay writing. In fact, they all decided to major in sciences in the first term so that they would not have to take English 101, a difficult course for them because they would be required to read and write extensively in English.

#### *Heavy course load*

In addition to the intensive ESL course that took place Monday through Saturday, three hours a day, between September and December 1999, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose also registered in three other courses to start their undergraduate programs. They chose math, chemistry, and computer courses because of the lower language demands. However, by the end of October 1999, they realized that a full course load was heavy for them. In December 1999, Rose dropped out of her computer course for fear that she could not pass the final exam and that this would affect her GPA. Magnolia planned to drop her biology course in February 2000 when she felt that she did poorly on her mid-term exam.

Apart from these counterproductive mechanisms, they also found their own ways to cope with their lack of academic language skills and the course demand of a university student.

Jasmine: If I don't understand, I will read the textbook first. If that doesn't work, I will go and ask my professors, who are very patient and explain things clearly. TA's are also nice.

Magnolia: Previewing the lessons help me a lot, especially the lab. At first, I just followed whatever other students were doing because I had no idea what I should do. Although I am still not 100% clear about the experiments even after my preview, sometimes my results were different from the expected, now at least I know all the steps.

Mei: I can't understand what the professor is talking about. I have so many problems that if I ask him all in class he will teach me the whole class. I must come back home and read the textbook again and again, but I still can't understand it. After I do the homework, I understand a little bit.

Rose: I am going to ask my professor if I can tape record his lessons. It might help me because I want to pass my computer course.

#### *Time management*

By the end of their first term, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose had realized that they needed to change their old study methods in order to manage their time more effectively. During the term, all of them found that although they worked hard and spent most of their waking hours on their course work, they never felt caught up on their studies. They always rushed to finish this reading, that lab report, this research paper, and that presentation. On many occasions, they had to stay up until two or three o'clock in the morning to finish their assignments. When exams came, they felt overwhelmed. In fact, I had to reschedule our conversation once because they were "too exhausted to stay awake and talk" after they handed in their research papers for their ESL course.

Magnolia: I have problems with time-management. I planned to preview my lessons, but I didn't do it. If I had managed my time reasonably, I would have enough time to preview before the lectures and review afterwards. But I did neither.

Rose: I didn't change my study habit, so I got a very bad score. I learned my lesson from my first mid-term. For every part, I just read my textbook one week before the mid-term. My English is very poor, and I couldn't figure it out. I felt so stressful.

Jasmine: We still had our old study methods. We just reviewed what we had learned before the exams. As for me, even though I finished all the sample questions, some of them I didn't really understand. As a result, I made the same mistake on the exams. I should have studied and reviewed what I had learned more regularly instead of rushing it all just before exams. Our time-management skills were also very poor. Before the exams I studied until mid-night everyday and I was really active in my studies. I think I should study all the time instead of just doing it before the exams. So my mid-term grades were not so good.

Clearly Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose transferred their old learning strategy, that is, cramming and memorizing much information before exams, to their new learning situation in Canada. This strategy did not work because all the materials were in English, which made it more difficult for them to memorize because they did not understand the text. Toward the end of their first term, they realized that they should aim to understand their coursework, but had no idea how to do this. There was no study group or peer support group to help them along.

However, learning to change study methods and to manage their time better in effect forced them to discipline themselves and set up their own study schedule, as the Canadian teachers would not "push" them to study.

Mei: We have to change study habits. From high school to university it's a big jump. I heard many Canadian students also fail in their first year because they don't change their study habits when they come to university. In high school teachers may push you a little bit, but in university professors don't even know who you are! There are 200 or 300 students in one class! So it's up to you to decide when, where and how to study yourself.

Toward the end of their first year, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose all agreed that they had become more independent and mature learners in Canada than they were in China.

#### *Four ongoing themes during these two transitions*

Throughout these two transitions across the three educational settings, pressure for good grades, parental sacrifice, and financial concerns were always on the participants' minds. However, these concerns changed over time.

While in mainland China, their main goal in high school was to get high grades in all school subjects so that they could go to the best university; in the Canadian high school, their aim was to get a high TOEFL score to enter the Canadian university. Once in the university, they just wanted to pass all the courses and maintain a sufficient GPA so that they could finish their first

university degrees. Except for the first four months in Canada when they did not know what they should study, they spent most of their time studying, studying, and studying to help them reach their goals.

In mainland China, many parents save money for years in order to have sufficient to pay for their children's education so that they will have a better future.

Jasmine: My family is not rich, but my mother is good at saving money. She has spent a lot of money on me without hesitancy: buy me a piano, find a tutor to teach me piano, and also send me to Canada.

Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose knew about the level of family frugality required for them to receive a good education before they came to Canada; however, they did not realize the real meaning of it until they started to live on their own and paid for everything themselves in their second year in Canada. They were astonished to find that everything in Canada was far too expensive for them: tuition, clothing, food, accommodation, and transportation. In order to cope with this difficult situation, this time they chose to live in a two-bedroom apartment to cut some expenses. Each also started part-time jobs for the first time in their lives in the summer of 2000—so that “I can earn my own living expenses and reduce the financial burden of my family” (Rose). They knew that if they had stayed in mainland China, employment would not have been required of them until after university graduation.

Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose felt pressured to study harder and harder because they realized the huge emotional and financial sacrifices their parents had made to send their only children far away to study in a foreign country. They also became aware of how wonderful their parents were and have learned to appreciate them more. They wanted to do well in university so that they would not let their parents down.

Unfortunately, because of language difficulties, the fourth and most challenging concern for them was trying to meet their parents' expectations during their first two years in Canada. While in mainland China, Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose did not have to worry too much about their English, but they knew that they had to improve their English proficiency if they wanted to survive in Canada. However, they had no idea how to do this without their familiar structures—homework or exams—during their first year in the Canadian high school. The lack of proper ESL support in turn made it even more difficult for them. After one year of struggling with English and studying hard for the TOEFL, they met the minimum language requirement of the university and were admitted into their undergraduate programs. Soon they realized that they did not have the academic English language skills necessary for them to do well in university courses. Desperate to cope, they tried everything they could with some successes and

many failures. Figure 1 summarizes the challenges all four participants faced and how they coped with them in these three cultural and educational settings between 1998 and 2000. In the adjustment process, they also learned a lot about themselves as learners. The fact that they all passed their ESL course in the first term and managed to get through most of the other coursework boosted their self-confidence as English language-learners so much that toward the end of their first year, all four participants decided to take English 101 in order to go to their chosen field of studies: engineering (Jasmine), business (Magnolia and Mei), and science (Rose).

## Discussion

Consistent with the research literature (Furnham, 1997; Feng, 1991; Sheh, 1994; Sun & Chen, 1997; Upton, 1989; Watt et al., 1996), my study confirms that the process of adaptation into a different educational and cultural milieu is complex and fraught with challenges for any newcomers. Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose's stories about the negative experiences during their transition from a Chinese high school to a Canadian high school are a clear indication that the school was not ready to admit international students (but maybe felt obliged to do so because of the double tuition these students paid). No infrastructure was in place to integrate them into the mainstream student population so that they could feel welcomed and that they belonged. The school could have set up some peer tutor groups so that Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose could help some Canadian students with math and chemistry and in return could be helped with their English. Or they could have asked some Chinese-English bilingual students to be their buddies to help them in their first two or three months in Canada. The school should have hired a qualified ESL teacher from the beginning. It was not a good decision to give the young women the pre-test because the result was devastating and left them with no confidence as capable English-language learners. The school could have chosen other alternatives to determine the level of their English proficiency, for example, individual interviews. It took them a long time to recover and to regain their confidence and courage to continue with their studies. The school could have offered them a workshop on how to succeed in schools and universities in Canada, teaching them explicitly the skills and knowledge necessary for such an endeavor. They could have offered another workshop on the process of cultural and educational adjustment and the coping strategies available to them so that they would become better informed about their own situations and could remain hopeful about their future during this difficult period of their young lives.

Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose's stories about their stressful experiences during their second transition from the Canadian high school to a Canadian university also point to several directions that universities and colleges in Canada need to go. In order to help ESL/EFL learners to succeed

<i>Educational Settings</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Coping Strategies</i>	<i>Ongoing Challenges</i>	<i>Coping Strategies</i>
High School in China	1. Better education for better future 2. Traditional approach to learning 3. Intense competition for few seats in higher education	Study, study, study Massive amounts of exercises and memorization Study harder to get higher marks on university entrance exams; come overseas	Pressure for good grades	Study harder
Transition 1: from high school in China to high school in Canada	1. Initial homesickness 2. Disappointment: poor ESL support; crowded living conditions 3. Academic adjustment: language difficulty Different student role Time management	Write letters home; make weekly phone calls Accept what is offered; try to get along with one another Study; enroll in evening TOEFL classes Learn by doing; waste a lot of time	Parental sacrifice Financial concerns	Study harder; appreciate more and more Cut expenses; find part-time jobs
Transition 2: from Canadian high school to Canadian university	1. Lack academic language skills: lectures, discussions, active student participation; discipline specific terminology, idiom 2. Heavy course load 3. Time management	Choose science courses; avoid difficult language course; not participate in discussions; preview; review with classmates; do homework; ask professor; tape-record lectures; ask friends for help Study hard; drop courses Stay up very late before exams; change study habits	Language difficulty	Study; learn to survive each school day

*Figure 1. Challenges and coping strategies of the two transitions (1998-2000).*

in their academic studies in Canadian universities today, all university instructors should have some ESL training so that they become aware of the language needs of their ESL students and find ways to help *all* students learn.



It is also essential to provide ongoing ESL support for international students because their English-language needs change over time, and it usually takes five to seven years for them to acquire academic language skills (Cummins, 2001). University academic advisors should be cautious when they advise course work for international students, especially during their first term. They may "bite off more than they can chew" and have to drop a course or two in the end. The international students' office should take a more active role in reaching out to help them. The fact that Jasmine, Magnolia, Mei, and Rose did not know that 15 university facilities and services were available to international students was unfortunate because some of them would have been helpful: host program, emergency loan or bursary, student counseling services, peer program, exchange program, and courses in ESL. Perhaps the international students' office should hire international students from various countries as part-time liaisons to help those whose limited English-language proficiency may prevent them from accessing those services and information that are useful to their academic success and personal well-being as international students.

## Conclusion

Iyer (2000) calls the 20th century "the century of migration," and the 21st century continues this trend. Among the new migrants, international students are a group of people who voluntarily uproot and displace themselves in order to pursue their educational goals in foreign countries because they often cannot find such opportunities at home. In this article, I focus on one particular group of international students, students from mainland China, and the challenges they faced and how they coped with them during their two transitions in Canada. The fact that only four students out of a group of 11 made it to the university indicates that the cultural and educational adjustment is not a smooth or easy process (Watt et al., 1996) and that there is still much to be done in Canadian schools, colleges, and universities to ensure that all international students get the quality education they deserve and have paid for.

The transitional period of living in a foreign country is fraught with uncertainty, anxiety, frustration, and depression for international students. They remain vulnerable and require support from the host institutions. If the Canadian government and educational institutions continue to promote Canada as a choice destination for higher education and to recruit international students from all over the world, they need to take the ethical responsibility of supporting these young people during this period of transition so that they can succeed and fulfill their dreams of higher education.

## The Author

Yi Li, born and raised in Shanghai, China, was a university English teacher for 10 years before immigrating to Canada in 1998, when she started her graduate studies at the University of Alberta. She is currently a doctoral candidate exploring the meaning of home and homelessness among international students. Her research interests include teaching English as a foreign/second language, second-language teacher education, intercultural education, and narrative inquiry.

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## **Appendix: Topics for Conversations**

1. Who was your favourite teacher in your high school in China? in the Canadian high school? Who is your favourite teacher in the Canadian university now? Why?
2. What differences have you noticed about the teacher-student relationship between China and Canada?
3. How did you learn English in your high school in China? in the Canadian high school? How do you study English in the Canadian university now? How long do you think it takes to reach near native-like English proficiency? What do you think you can do to improve your English?
4. What was the most difficult for you when you were a high school student in China? in Canada? What is the most difficult for you now?
5. What are some of the differences have you noticed between a Chinese high school and a Canadian high school? a Canadian high school and a Canadian university? How did/do you cope with those differences?
6. How did you study in China? How did you study last year? How do you study now?
7. What changes have you noticed in yourself or in your thinking since you came to Canada?