

The Challenges and Academic Adaptations among Ningxia China Students Studying in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study investigated the challenges faced by Ningxia China students studying abroad in Malaysia. The paper aims to highlight the shock impacts and how the students adopted academic adaptations to continue to study in local institutions. The study employed a qualitative paradigm where a total of ten participants were interviewed. A set of semi-structured questions was used during the interviews. Interviews were transcribed. Coding and constant comparison were adopted during data analysis. The findings showed the themes of shocks were fear and uncertainty and adaptations ability. The paper presented the results on academic adaptations and concluded that the shocks the students encountered required major adaptations especially in the academic domains. And, the strengthening of skills and power had enabled them to marvel through the academic journey. The results yielded from this study contributed significantly towards the knowledge of study abroad. Thus, this implies that to be able to succeed while studying abroad, it is important to be able to adapt into the local settings and learn to live within the community.

Keywords: Adaptations, Shocks Impact, Study Abroad, Culture, Internationalization

Introduction

The Malaysian government clearly stated in *the 2020 Strategy for The Development of Advanced Countries (1991-2020)* that Malaysia's ambitious goal in education is to build it into a center of quality education in the region. The government has made great efforts to achieve this ambitious goal. Liu (2018) reported, Malaysia by taking the positive and effective measures had attracted as many foreign students as possible to Malaysia for study. At the

same time, in China, the Malaysian government has established strategic partnerships with many overseas study channels including Sohu, China education network and China education channel. Malaysian institutions of higher learning have participated in many international education fairs in China as delegations, and interpret admission policies and various questions to recruit more international students (Wang, 2016).

According to reports, Malaysia has become a gathering place for international students from all over the world, and the number continues to increase. As the tertiary-level students from China who study in Malaysia increased to around 15,000 in 2016 (Juwai, 2017), almost a four-time growth than four years before, we should notice the reasons why increasing number of the Chinese students select Malaysia as the target for their higher education. In general, the educational collaboration between China and Malaysia have been widely known among the Chinese families, which enables the Chinese parents and students to believe the higher education opportunities in Malaysia are the trustworthy choices. The main reasons are as follows: 1) diversified language environment; 2) perfect education laws and regulations; 3) convenient study abroad policy; 4) preferential study abroad fees and international degree certification.

The Study Context

Almost one third of Malaysian citizens are ethnic Chinese, many students from China study in Malaysia because the country does not only share some cultural similarities with China, but also provide the society which is highly influenced by the British culture due to the colonial history. It attracts the students from China to experience a foreign culture that exhibits the differences and similarities at the same time, and also encourages many Chinese Muslim students to live and study in Malaysia. With their religious advantage, many Chinese Muslim students expect to immigrate to the country (Zhou & Zhang, 2007). In more recent years, due to the One-belt-one-road Initiatives since 2012, China's citizens are more aware of the importance of intercultural communication and collaboration.

Under the context, many families decide to send their children to study in Malaysia as the opportunity to make their person effort in contributing to the bilateral economic and social development (Meng, 2017). The popularization of studying in Malaysia among Ningxia students could be sourced from the socio-economic status of the families in the province. In 2017, the disposable income per capita in Ningxia is ¥20,561.66 (RM12139.36 approximately), ranked at 22nd among 31 provinces of China (Hu, 2017). This fact determines that the families would prioritize the economic conditions when sending students studying abroad. In this sense, Malaysia becomes a satisfactory target due to its beautiful natural scenes, social stability, and economic costs, which do not only attract Chinese Muslim students but also the Han ethnic students who reside in the province. However, Ningxia students may encounter obstacles when studying and living in Malaysia. As Zhang (2018) concerned, one challenge rises from the difference of climate. There is the inland climate in Ningxia, dry and rain-less. Compared to that, the tropical rainforest climate in Malaysia may not be easily adapted by the Ningxia students. More than that, as the young people who barely live without family's care, they may feel highly stressed for the reasons of fear of failing, the language barrier, homesickness, and isolation from their host culture, resulting in mental issues such as depression, frustration, and students dropping out (Wang, 2016). In addition, due to the ritual

differences between the two countries, Ningxia Muslim students may feel difficult to adjust themselves in the local religious environment in Malaysia.

Studies and reports had shown, studying in Malaysia could trigger both the benefits and costs for the Ningxia students. If they successfully overcome the difficulties faced when staying in the foreign country, their maturity of personality can be highly strengthened, with the cross-cultural experiences that can diversify their worldview (Huang, 2015). Nevertheless, if they fail to adapt themselves in the Malaysian environment, the overseas experiences could be a mental burden and gain much less for academic and social competencies. Hence, the aims of the study were to investigate the Ningxia students' most obvious challenges and how they overcome these problems and adapt the rightful strategies to adapt to the environment and surrounding. This paper highlights the most significant challenges and their academic adaptations while studying in Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework is established to facilitate in the data collection. The framework is made up of three major components: 1) Acculturation Model; 2) Cultural Shock 3) Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic adaptations. The acculturation model focuses on the adaptation in international students in higher education, and because it integrates both the psychological and the sociocultural aspects of adaption rather than only highlighting the importance of psychological drivers of inter-cultural adaptation (Yan, 2008). The model is inspired by Searle & Ward (1990) and Ward & Kennedy (1992) which view intercultural adaptation is a stress and coping process, as well as a cultural learning process. And, the cultural shock Model supported the four stages of reactions of international when studying abroad (Lyu, 2000). Finally, assuming that problems and challenges can be overcome, the adaptation theories provided the basis for the investigation.

Methods and Sample

The study employed a qualitative method in soliciting data. A total of ten participants took part in the interviews. The participants comprised of six female students and four male students from the province of Ningxia China. They are currently in their first to final year of academic study. They participants are undergoing Degree programs from various fields. The profile of the participants is shown in Table1.

Table 1: Biographical Profile of Participants

Name	Age	Academic Year	Type of Programs
Sophia	22	Year 1	Psychology
Peter	24	Year 2	Accounting
Zoe	26	Year 2	Education
Mark	22	Year 2	Business Administration
Xiao Qi	23	Year 3	Sports science
Max	25	Year 3	HRD
Sue Fei	28	Year 4	Entrepreneurship
Momo	23	Year 1	HRD
Anita	21	Year 1	Education
Karen	27	Year 4	Early Child hood

In total, ten participants were interviewed, six female students and four male students. Among the ten participants, three are from Education program in Psychology, and early childhood. Five are from the Business and Entrepreneurships program. It attempted to understand the challenges, the shocks and adaptations experienced by the Ningxia students in local higher institutions. Several sessions of in-depth interviews using the semi-structured questions were asked upon participants during interviews. A review into some episodes of the experience were recalled and recorded. Thus, the strategy of critical incident technique and discourse analysis had also been adopted as methods to obtain relevant and quality data.

For purpose of confidentiality, and adhering to the ethics on research, the actual names of the institutions and participants were not used in this paper. The data obtained from all the twenty interviews were collectively analysed to uncover common themes and sub-themes on the shocks impact which lead to their adaptations to succeed in studying abroad.

Findings and Discussion

Many of the students undeniably stated they faced numerous challenges and problems upon arrival for their studies at local universities. At that point of their situations, the biggest challenges most of them uttered was the very disturbed feeling such as lonely, loss and uncertain. Zoe said, "I wish I had never come to study". All the participants expressed their learning experience was difficult and tough but it had been a very demanding and confusions were around their mind as many things were not clear to them. Especially, things were more challenging at the beginning of their journey at local institutions here. The main theme of fear and uncertainty are elaborated as below:

Fear and Uncertainty

In general, one of the challenges that the findings revealed was the feeling of fear and uncertainty. The fear was whether they can fit in to the society as many facets of life such as language, cultural and attitudes of the local did not seem to be similar to them. At that time,

the students lived with uncertainties; it actually affected their life. The uncertainties were much on the studies as they had tremendous worry was they going to be able to complete? They find their life had changed in unexpected ways. They felt uncertain about the changes brought, they worried what their life was going to be, they were very unsure of how our life going to be. Living with uncertainty can affect them in many ways. Living with uncertainty causes them to feel upset and overwhelmed. Peter said as it was more than a shock to him but he finds himself living with 'do not know what to do' as he said:

It was a night mare for me. At the early stage everything is not clear to us? We asked but nobody told us about the course, the hostel and the medical and insurance things. All are not sure. The worse was when were told in China and here are not the same. have to act. Our body checks....Some may say it is up to the doctor to do it, we worry but cannot do anything...we wait and waited.....

All the students live with some uncertainty; it affected them emotionally and mentally Living with uncertainty caused them fear, each of the students adapt always to manage all the uncertainties in life. Momo recounted her feelings:

Any time, things changed, the feelings of frightened, the feelings of worries, the feelings of not sure what going to happen! We just do one when they ask us to do.....It is no good feeling...always doesn't know what happen..... Something is wrong. We also don't know? We get no help.....

Many questions arise at this time among them. What kind of life will be? Why did I make this choice? Why Malaysia? These unknown create fear in them. The fear of the unknown is conquered with an inquisitive mind as Sue Fei recalled:

Actually I am very lost. I was very lost and very scared....depressed. I don't know where to turn to and whom to talk to! I always not sure. When my father and mother called I also tell them not sure, not sure....was completely lost and I couldn't understand why like this?

While the initial shock was there, of finding out they may feel alone and hard to accept the situations, this fear can lead them to withdraw, at this time, they felt like social outcasts and indeed others, in their own fear, may isolate themselves as Karen said:

We stay with friends from China...Not sure. Not many they told us. The International office nobody speak Chinese. We can't talk to many things. We go back to hostel and ask people there.... I couldn't understand why like this?

In the situation of study abroad, it is inevitable to feel fear and uncertain as the students did not know what lies ahead for them? The adaptation ability is utmost important as it serves as a way of coping and moving forward in difficult situations. However, each individual's adaptation ability might vary as some are stronger and some might be weaker. Despite of all, the students depended on their adaptation ability to overcome many situations while facing the challenges during their study in Malaysia. Eventually, many of the Ningxia students were able to complete their studies from institutions in Malaysia.

Adaptation Ability

The challenges forced them to make adjustment that they had to make to survive in the new environment was inevitable. The learning experiences and situations can be unbounded. The students come to perceive their own adaptation ability were both in and beyond the immediate situation. They developed a capacity to address and appreciate the uniqueness of each situation, while developing a sense of personal competence and readiness for new ambiguous situation. With this experience, they realized that they were stronger than they thought they were. It was the individual strength to be more self-reliance. To achieve this end, they needed to learn as much as they could and also adapt as quickly as possible. The sub-theme emerged is: The students are stronger.

The Students are Stronger

To some of the students, live strong means they had to take everything into consideration, their attitudes, what's around them? They had to have the positive attitude to try and do what was plausible to help the them to live. In the situations like such, they always were stronger that they thought according to Peter, "The strength is just in you". Besides that, Xiao Qi added that she never thought she had the strength to overcome the situations until she came to terms about it. Many of the participants felt they were actually stronger than they thought they were when helping others the co-national friends their adaptations:

We have to go through it. We have no choice. We look forward. Be positive. We don't know we can, but we can stay...we can see things different, so we cannot change, we learn to accept...we adapt and live the life.....we are strong, can faced many things....The mental must be very strong. We must trust what we believe. We are stronger than you think we can be.

In some students, everyone become overly considerate of everyone else's needs for time to adjust, they have to be opening doors to communication especially between house mates and roommates. It is always helpful and is easier facing the situations together. As Xiao Qi recalled how she got her support and gained her inner strength to cope with her situations:

I told myself I have to be really strong, no matter what. I was fortunate that my co-national fiends are here. I was stronger than I think I could be.....ya ya. Actually I don't know I had to go through all this. Looking back, I couldn't even think I could survive this. Because at those time, there were times I really wanted to give up on myself also.

The students had to remain strong to provide each other with an opportunity to see the problems they were confronting the new environment themselves. This can give new perspectives on the situation, reduce the inappropriate stressed help themselves to adapt. At the same time, realizing that they themselves among the students have the strengths enhance their sense worth and purpose in life.

In brief, notable here, the participants felt unsecure while studying abroad. However, they did have their own ways to adapt and survive. For example, they eventually found themselves to be stronger when they had to live on their own, far away from their family. Besides that, they also sought the support friends their friends or people whom they felt comfortable

talking and sharing their feelings. These are the first few issues they had to overcome in order to move forward for the studies.

Ningxia Students' Academic Adaptations

In lieu with their overseas experience, a series of learning took place within the participants and it was found that the participants learnt through various ways during their experiences and adapted significantly towards the environment or the learning situations. As majority of them uttered, "All we did was trying to find ways to see the connections and hopefully there would be solutions to the problems".

Academic Adaptations

One of the indispensable ingredients involved in the students' adaption was the process of learning. Learning took place through the adaptations in the four aspects specifically. Some of the participants revealed that the first turmoil was the miscommunications of certain recruitment agencies representing Malaysia Higher Education were not well informed or competent. For example, even the admission requirements for China students were not made clear. Hence, upon arriving at the institutions only they had to re-submit documents to enable them to apply students' permit or other documents to allow them to join the academic programs. Mark recalled he was shocked as his academic qualifications of his Foundation results were not accepted by the institution; he had to solve all this matter before he can join or register for his studies at the institution. Therefore, Mark advised all other students to gather sufficient information before they deal with an agent. He said:

I will definitely tell people to be careful with agents. My results can't accept to do Degree. I had to get extra documents from previous school in China to support me. Many of the admission was not clear . we are not well informed.

Another academic issue was the transfer of credits scheme at local institutions. Anita remembered she was promised a thirty points of credit transfer when she joined the Degree program at her new institution. But that never took place and she had to complete the entire credits for the Degree. So how did she adapt to these situations? She appealed through her academic advisor for about one year before she was granted the credit transfer. She recalled:

No no no No credit transfer. The University did not agree. We met the Vc and also many academic staff at the office. We discussed and asked for credit transfer. Again, we need to prove our studies in China...to give curriculum and many othe things. We are so sad and disappointed. We are shock and don't know how to go? Whom to get help. We wait and see..... in the end we decided to go through the English course first...

Some students cannot adjust their feelings and cannot adapt to the situations. During the interviews, I was told a few of their friends quit when the credit transfer did not work out. It was a difficult time to find out their previous academic study was not recognized. Zoe explained:

Our results from China cannot be accepted. We have to start all over here....Some of us had studied the same things in Chinese ...The faculty head is so strict said cannot and cannot. We no choice...We called our agent. Our agent also came and talked...until six months nothing.....

It seemed that they all recognized the importance of academic preparations such as the procedures of admission, the status of credit transfer and the requirement for specific programs at local institutions. It is crucial for the students to be provided common guidelines and improve on the admission procedures at all levels. Sophia never hesitated to make the statement:

For us to come, it is not easy... we hope the credit of transfer and what can be accept and what can't be accept must tell us. So we can prepare. The passport and the medical checks also problems...all not sure and never tell us... we wait and see,,,, we follow what the academic staff said to do....

The most common academic adaptation the Ningxia students had to make was the usage of English Language in the learning process. This may be the major problems of them attending lectures. The level of English Proficiency hindered them in the process of learning and affected their performance. Despite they had done six months of Proficiency course provided by the institution. They still cannot command in English. It means language is true barrier at this stage and language is the skills that one can pick up not overnight. So they need to work and many of the students struggled to complete their projects or assignments. As Max elaborated:

OOOoh English we are no good. We can't understand also. We can write a little. We we use the hand phone to check as dictionary. We asked friends...The English Course got levels, we need to pass.....we passed and go to next level... we still cannot speak...very difficult the English course. Some of us had to repeat like level before to go to Level 3. Need more money and longer time to do into Degree the time

The students found it was impossible to comprehend when most of the notices and formal documents or announcements were in Bahasa Malaysia. Most of the they time had to learn the information from their friends. And, Momo was really lost when she was provided document not in English Language at many occasions. She reminded:

No Chinese. Many of the letters and what we saw arum the campus is all in Bahasa Malaysia. We can't read at all. We don't understand. Our portal, also not in English...We also don't know what happen. We need to find out from friends...sometimes the people very angry because we don't know many thingshaha

Another observation shared by the students was the student-centered teaching and learning in the local classroom. Many a times, the students were encouraged to participate in the classroom activities and they sometimes had to use English Language to convey a message. This was a challenge to them. Perhaps they were very used to the teacher-centered way of teaching in China schools. Obviously, this evidence was found in the students' reflection

where they were not required to participate in the learning and teaching process during schools in their own country. Sue Fei stated that:

Our school, the teacher teach in front, we just listen and listen and do the homework. Here very different, many talk, many group work, many project...we have to speak in the class...we had to answer questions by the teachers... so scare to go class... some lectures not so friendly to us also....

We did not have to speak in classroom in China. Er just sit and listen to the teacher finish 1 hour and go and we do the work...everyday like that. No need to get involved in the process...

The Ningxia students faced numerous barriers in the academic field. As shared by the participants above. They had to deal with issues of admission, credit transfer, language problems and also the method used in local institutions in the classrooms. In the long run, the Ningxia students prepared themselves mentally to make the adaptations to make academic progress. However, they still had to deal with very different life situation while studying abroad in Malaysia. The next section presents the discussions of findings.

Discussion of The Findings

Studying in Malaysia has indeed become a good choice for Chinese students from China. Malaysia and Ningxia share commonalities in which a large proportion of residents are Muslims, it is reasonable to assume some Ningxia students could prepare and integrate themselves into the socio-cultural context in Malaysia (Zhou and Zhang, 2007). However, some non-Muslim students from Ningxia need to adapt themselves into the Malaysian culture that is more diversified than their home culture and with a Muslim majority in the society. Nonetheless, the Muslim students from Ningxia still faced challenges due to the ritual and the everyday life difference between the two countries (Zhang, 2018).

In general, the findings from this study showed evidence majority of students who are studying abroad face fear and uncertainty under the unknown circumstances. It supported the study of Teng (2020) that one who lived with uncertainty affected their emotions and mental state. The results also show the adaptation is the key to survive when the students are in local setting and local institutions for their studies. The adaptation ability provided the students with strength to overcome difficulties. Wang (2016) reported young students feel highly stressed for the reasons of failing, the language barriers, homesickness and isolation for the local culture proved relevant and similar to this study. It was found from the analysis, the students adapted equally significant once they are supported and are clear of a mission to accomplish.

In brief, the educationists ought to be aware of the circumstance and use of strategies to suit the students (Tay and Salmiza, 2020) as the restudy compared studying in other country to Malaysia. This implies that students pace and adaptations levels might vary and to enhance their learning in a different setting. It is important to understand the social and psychological among the international students.

Implications for Practical for Internationalization

Higher education in Malaysia aims at accelerating the inflow of international students to 200,000 by 2020 in the Report of Internationalization policy of Higher Education (Higher Education 2011). Therefore, it is important to learn from this research as the results yielded very significant pointers. Firstly, as revealed in the findings, many students were not made clear of the information for international students, it is timely to ensure recruitment agencies representing Malaysia higher education are competent, well informed, reputable and will cat at all times in the best interest of students and the Malaysian higher education (KPM, 2013).

Secondly, it is urgent to improve admission procedures into respective institutions at all levels supported by Ngeow and Ma (2016) In addition, procedures involving visa application, immigration policies as well as procedures into the country should be reviewed and new guidelines should surface. Thirdly, it is suggested to ensure the use of English as medium of instruction in the management and academic aspects of higher education involving international students. For instance, allow international academic to transfer of any academic related activities also supported by the study of Sheikh, Siti and Hon (2017).

Last but not least, it is vital by now higher education should promote research and development capacity through initiatives with international counterparts (Shahar, 2017). So that, some kind of satisfaction index among international students can be recorded. Nevertheless, a sound framework for international students' management should be adopted by all institutions to enhance the increase of international students into Malaysia

Conclusion

This investigation on the challenges faced by Ningxia students while studying abroad in Malaysia revealed that the students experience shocks initially and lead them to adapt to its environment to survive. It is also noted the shocks they encounter stirred them to fear and uncertainty. However, strengthened up their adaptation ability to feel stronger of themselves and provide support to each other among them to marvel through the academic journey. The major problems arose from the academic are the admission procedure, the credit transfer, the teaching and learning in the classroom and also the language barrier.

Despite of all the hurdles, the Ningxia students were able to juggle as they adapt to the learning environment using their own previous experience and the new learning acquired along the way. They are also expected to have equipped themselves with multiple skills and knowledge in living within the community. Nonetheless, it can be said shocks while studying abroad have great influence on their adaptation strategies to succeed in their studies.

The combination of these results on challenges and shocks faced among the Ningxia students in local institutions, the adaptations revealed demonstrates cognitive and affective changes as well as intellectual. The information yielded form the study can be integrated in curriculum planning for international students, students' mobility programs and engagement with community especially in policy making for internationalization. It is recommended that every effort to be made by the internationalisations educational policy to promote the best practice for international students.

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