In Pursuit of International Higher Education: Sociocultural and Communication Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students

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Abstract: The development of the global education mission has been strengthened by the widening perspective of transnationalism for higher education. The mobility of international higher education (IHR) has become a global hot trend especially over the past few decades. China continues to be the single largest and fastest-growing nation in terms of sending student bodies for overseas tertiary education today. With the booming of international higher education (IHE) seeking, Chinese international students (CIS) are however troubled by a series of sociocultural and communication challenges, damaging their education outcomes, aspirations, labor market preparations, as well as global education efficiency. This paper explores the major reasons that intrigue CIS to seek IHE, common obstacles they encounter during their foreign education journey, and existent coping strategies. The paper ends with an outlook into a new strategy which requires more researching and data gathering; it serves as a preliminary step to a future proposal of a multidimensional model.

Keywords: Chinese international student (CIS), international higher education (IHE), higher education challenges, coping strategies, Berry's framework

1. Background

By the numbers, over 4.3 million students sought overseas tertiary education in 2013, more than doubling the amount compared to 2000 (Heng, 2017). Since 2009, Chinese international students (CIS) constitute for over 1/3 of the total international student population worldwide (Yan, 2017). While the promotion of global education and individualized demands are keeping students' pursuit of international tertiary education at an all-time high, international student have inevitably come across various sociocultural and communication challenges which hinder their overseas experiences. This paper chose to examine such challenges from the perspective of CIS due to a few reasons.

CIS, in numbers, make up the largest contribution to global higher education.

The mobility of CIS has grown faster than ever over the past decade and this trend will likely remain the same throughout the next decade

CIS's size, diversity, and complexity - geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally.

CIS pose consistent and worrisome sociocultural and communication challenges that remain unfixed.

2. Reasons why CIS pursue IHE

The driving forces behind a CIS's aspirations for seeking overseas tertiary education varies. The total number of CIS seeking IHE can be broken down into two general categories.

Category 1 - CIS who want to veer away from domestic tertiary education competition.

Category 2 - CIS who wish to seek self-development and experience cross-cultural offerings to increase competitiveness on the global labor market.

CIS in category 1 look for compensatory methods away from the fierce competition of gaokao, the postsecondary examination that determines one's fate of what kind of domestic tertiary institution they can attend. Another type of category 1 CIS is those who performed poorly during gaokao and are looking for an alternative (Liu & Helwig, 2020). Category 1 CIS usually (but not always) have an advantage in this escape of domestic tertiary education as they come from socioeconomically wealthy backgrounds, which enable them to look at an IHE pathway with more options (Wang & Miao, 2016). CIS in category 2 often value negotiation, reproduction, and expansion of their social, cultural, and professional identities (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). Category 2 CIS look to shape personal merit and strive to become competitive global market elites through their productive experiences when studying abroad. Noted that as the increasingly competitive global job market often offer high regards for graduates from prestigious institutions, CIS from both categories understand the marketable international commodity behind it and look to pursue their IHE at reputed institutions (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2017). Cebolla-Boado (2017) provided quantitative evidence that foreign institutions that have high numbers of CIS enrollment are usually

globally high-ranked institutions. Aside from personal merits, the Chinese government, from a national level, regards IHE as a great investment strategy that allows CIS to find self-realization, cutting-edge knowledge building, and foster a living cross-culture experience which contribute to their future growth and national demand contributions upon return (Wei, 2013).

3. Sociocultural and communication challenges faced by CIS

While the increasing internationalization of higher education has brought a flush of CIS overseas, these students grapple with various sociocultural and communication challenges which entangle their journey in the respective foreign institutions where they are pursuing an education. CIS face tensions academically, socially, and culturally, which counter-benefits their original purpose of seeking an IHE journey. Below sections will go in depth and examine factors that complicate CIS's foreign education journey, including a lack of cognitive understanding of foreign tertiary education, insufficient cross-cultural awareness and local resources during their time studying abroad, and communication misunderstandings from traditional parental expectations.

3.1 Lack of cognitive understanding of foreign tertiary education

Academically, CIS are often regarded by their foreign university professors as individuals who are unwilling to participate, unwilling to become more independent, and uncritical thinkers (Wu, 2015; Heng, 2018). Further, CIS in many cases are reluctant to speak up or give opinions during classes due to their traditional Chinese heritage (Wu, 2015). However, CIS are academically and socially unwilling to interact not because they are substandard students but rather because they lack cognition of local cultures and foreign academia expectations. CIS are unaware of knowledge such as classic authors/ texts, popular ideas, or key historical events which may be natural instincts for domestic students (Heng, 2018). Other examples include knowledge regarding sports, the media, popular figures, or politics. CIS lack such knowledge which may be common sense to domestic students. Therefore, CIS struggle to catch up with normal in-class information when a "common sense" knowledge arises, and they are unable to participate in such conversations. Other academic cognitive differences found between a CIS and a domestic foreign student include writing style, analytical requirements, and citation convention requirements, since traditional Chinese schooling teaches differently. CIS are reluctant to reach out to professors and faculty support due to the above cultural differences and on many occasions due to limited command in English. In general, traditional Chinese teaching styles are mostly guided and objective-oriented, while Western teaching styles are more self-directed, which CIS find difficult to adapt to and cope with (Heng, 2018).

3.2 Insufficient cross-cultural awareness and local resources

The divergence created by the lack of preliminary cognitive understanding also imposed other microcosms, one such being insufficient cross-cultural awareness for CIS. Upon initial arrival at foreign education host nations, CIS transition in culture from a majority racial and ethnic group status (China) to a racial or ethnic minority status (Liu & Wei, 2020). Identity shifts have led to two types of acculturative stress which CIS have found troubling to adapt to and cope with, which are psychological and physical stress.

3.2.1 Psychological stress

Psychologically, such transitions have posed great difficulties for CIS to encompass to, under two reasons. First, CIS face the dilemma of learning new foreign cultures in the short timeframes they spend overseas for tertiary education. For most CIS, such timeframes only last 1.5/2 (graduate level students) to 4 years (undergraduate level students), generating great difficulties for CIS not only for adaptation but also forcing them into a dilemma of whether they should adapt to the local culture, amid the short timeframe. Second, CIS possess profound difficulty in adapting to new foreign cultures due to strong ties to their native heritage. Even under the influence of the alienate foreign cultures and environments, CIS tend to hold on to their Chinese roots in terms of behaviors, lifestyle, and culture (Hsu & Chen, 2021). Such disconnects often lead to a phenomenon where CIS pose a foreign exterior while maintaining a Chinese interior (Yan & Berliner, 2010).

3.2.2 Physical stress

Aside from psychologically challenging culture adaptation, CIS are also mostly unaware of physically apparent problems they may face. Two typical physical challenges CIS face amid their foreign education journey include physical dangers and difficulties of living in culturally divergent environments. Coming from vastly differentiated society standards and regulations, CIS have no ways of becoming aware of what kind of physical harm they may face while studying abroad. In addition, many CIS not only face identity shifts but also social shifts where they now live independently in an alienate environment. Such culture shock cause mental and physical unsettling for many CIS.

3.2.3 Inadequate local resources

Local resources have also found to provide inadequate support for fellow CIS when they arrive at foreign institutions.

The best example used to explain this section would be the Chinese Student Scholars Association (CSSA). CSSAs' are the official CIS groups that exist in most foreign universities worldwide dedicated to supporting CIS in their life, education, work, and other issues outside of China. CSSAs' have formally served as the bridge between CIS and Chinese consulates and embassies in their respective areas. However, CSSAs' have provided poor support for arriving CIS in terms of raising cross-cultural awareness and cultural adaptation strategies. While CSSAs' try to bring CIS together and forge better Chinese culture locally in foreign territories, there is a lack of systemic means to promote cross-cultural awareness for CIS. These acculturative stresses and local resource inabilities combined add on to the combination of reasons for CIS's struggles while studying abroad.

3.3 Communication misunderstandings from traditional parental expectations

Prior to analyzing the communication miscues, the difference between Chinese societal expectations and Chinese parental expectations must be distinguished. Since the Chinese economic reform in 1978, IHE has been highly sought by CIS and viewed as a primary option to gain status, societal respect, and intellectual positions. Prior to and during the two decades post the 1978 reform (1978-2000), China was economically and academically poor, and the aspirations for seeking IHE were more on the context of national demand and national urgency. The drive for students, scholars, and researchers to pursue quality IHE and return to rebuild China upon completion of their education did not only come from societal expectations but also inner morale. Such societal expectations and motivations for people to pursue IHE have changed focus over the past two decades (2000-2020), though.

While the path of IHE has continued to grow more popular, CIS sought an overseas education due to vastly different reasons compared to the period between 1978-2000. Reasons such as but not limited to these mentality shifts have been mentioned in section 2 (II). One key factor to be aware of and one that has brought tremendous communication misunderstandings for CIS, is the role of parental expectations and demands and how parents have become a push-factor in their children's decision-making process when pursuing an IHE. Many Chinese parents hold traditional Confucius society beliefs and have vastly differentiating ideologies compared to their children. While in the Western perspective, one may assume that students hold the sole responsibilities for the education path they strive to pursue, the fact is that parental confrontation makes up a great portion of CIS's decision process. Parental expectations led to the broad reasoning of over-popularity in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as medicine and business, and under-popularity in liberal arts and social sciences (there are other contributing factors but for the purpose of this paper only parental influence is examined) (Huang & Gove, 2015). The communication gap was created due to Chinese nationals' (CIS in this case) traditional sense of social morality, or the core value of Confucianism in benevolence, which holds them responsible to respect and follow the words of their elders (parents). Such communication flaws damage CIS's inner desire for an ideal pursuit of IHR and can lead to the deterioration of personal beliefs, aspirations, and goals.

4. Existing coping strategies and a novel idea

The lack of cognitive understanding, cross-cultural awareness, and communication misunderstandings from traditional parental expectations have led to a spectrum of academic and social stressors for CIS (Cao et al., 2018). To find combatting means to the above challenges, Berry (1997) previously introduced the conceptual framework of stress-coping for acculturation which many scholars have expanded upon in modern times. Berry's (1997) framework focused on identifying significant stressors influenced by individuals and the society and led to two general methods of coping: problem-focused (which attempts to change or solve the problem) and emotion-focused (which attempts to regulate the emotions associated with the problem). Yan (2017) proposed other strategies such as social support, host national support, and professional support from counseling.

One keynote to coping strategies, however, is that they typically retain the idea of solving or reducing problems after they occur (such as problems that are witnessed among CIS only after their arrival in foreign nations), but do not entail strategies which support CIS in terms of becoming aware of IHE challenges in the preliminary stage, or prior to their arrival in foreign nations. Multidimensional strategies that build CIS cognition and cross-cultural awareness prior to their pursuit of IHR should be the next stage that researchers and scholars ought to explore. Among which, the forging of effective communication between students and their parents will also be key to ensuring future success. This paper serves as a preemptive step to the introduction of a novel multidimensional model that aims to form CIS's cognitive understanding and cross-cultural awareness during their high school years leading up to their IHE paths.

5. Concluding statements

The pursuit of international tertiary education will continue to be a global hot trend and China will continue to serve as

the leading nation in sending students overseas. CIS will continue to be motivated to seek an IHR due to various push factors including but not limited to personal, economic, social, and political reasons. As the leading contributor nation to IHR and as a nation upholding sophisticated and Western-divergent heritages, CIS's sociocultural and communication challenges analyzed in the above sections must be taken into serious accounts. While existing coping strategies are much needed for CIS who have continued to struggle overseas, a new mean of building preparatory cognitive understanding and cross-cultural awareness for CIS must be sought before they arrive in foreign host nations and become immediately entangled with stresses.

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