

Academic Adaptation: Mainland Chinese Students in Graduate Programs at a Canadian University

中国大陆学生在 在加拿大研究生项目中的学术适应



梁 晓 文禹舜 著

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◎国内首部加拿大教育学博士论文英语专著

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Abstract

Canada is one of the main destinations for international graduate students as it has a great variety of graduate programs and, at least in medicine, the natural sciences and engineering, it also provides generous funding. Perhaps the most difficult task that a foreign student has to face is adaptation to the new academic setting, an adaptation that involves both cultural and academic adjustments on the part of the student. Perhaps the less understood is the adaptations that a receiving institution has to make in order to accommodate and welcome the students coming from abroad to do graduate study.

The present thesis is concerned to study an important example of such mutual adaptation in order to understand better in what strategies a student might engage in order to be successful, as well as to better understand what strategies a host university institution might engage in so that incoming international students might be helped to be successful. The primary method for studying such adaptation was by means of interviewing both successfully graduated masters and doctoral students and students still in graduate programs at a major Canadian university, the University of Calgary, a medical-doctoral university with approximately 28 thousand full time students at the time of writing (December 2003). As well, a large number of administrators and graduate supervisors were interviewed in order to get their perspective on the adaptation processes of international students from their vantage point.

The graduate students studied were all from Mainland China and span the period from 1987 to 2003. Thirty-seven graduate students were interviewed about their own adaptation processes. Of these 24 had already completed masters and doctoral degrees at the University of Calgary and the remaining 13 were still in their programs. The literature of adaptation is historically concerned with cultural adaptation and not specifically with academic adaptation, the primary focus of this thesis. Generally adaptation is treated as a relatively

linear process in which the primary task of the student is to make adjustments on arrival, in order to be successful in the host culture.

The main discovery and conclusion of the present research is that adaptation is a very individual matter, each student adapting in a very complicated way, depending upon the degree of readiness they have at each step in their academic progress to go to the next step. This adaptation begins before the student comes to Canada and continues throughout the program. There is also a very complicated interaction between the student's cultural adjustments and adaptations and their academic ones. Thus such standard analyses of adaptation and adjustment processes, such as the well-known U-curve, are considered by the present author to be a very limited description of the adaptation processes necessary for graduate students to be successful.

As a replacement for the standard pictures of adjustment a multi-part flow chart is developed, which better reflects the adjustments that an international student must make in order to be successful. A flow chart characterization of such processes better approximates to the actual decisions that such a student must make and actions that must follow in the course of receiving a Canadian graduate degree.

A secondary conclusion of the research is the importance of the institution being as flexible as the students in adjusting to the varieties of cultural backgrounds the students bring.

Preface

In this significant book, the authors have produced a first rate study of the difficulties of accommodation that students from one culture face in trying to do advanced work in another culture. Their choice of cultures, namely China and Canada, are well chosen as these two cultures are in many ways historically very different and yet merging in the modern era. Both countries consider education to be centrally vital to the adventure of their respective nations and to their future and to that of the world at large. But both cultures consider scholarly activity to be of paramount importance, with China having a continuous history of literacy, if not universal literacy, for many thousand years and Canada tracing its origins to European literacy and culture primarily, tracing back to Greco-Roman traditions. Part of what the book has discovered in the researches is that the references and literacy of everyday life is central to the success of Chinese graduate students at a Canadian university, but this sort of preparation is not normally provided either in China or at an early stage when students arrive in Canada. This means there is always a period of adjustment in which the questions of language and culture are fundamental.

A reader of this detailed study would be much better prepared than one who has not in venturing to another continent and culture to engage in advanced study.

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In 2008 and 2012, I gained two Special Awards for Canadian Studies by Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada, to pay 5-week visits to Canada. During the stays, I collected more data by interviewing more people, searching for more resources from libraries. I am grateful for every person I meet in my life, who raises me up and lets me shine. My students in China and around the world are my very crucial motivation to be a nice enough educator, to brighten their lives.

Last but not least, I would like to call your attention to my co-author of this book, Mr. Yushun Wen, a young and bright scholar who spent countless

time and energy in making this book ready to be published. As a diligent and promising professional, Yushun will, undoubtedly, make valuable contributions to our society in the future. Yushun and his parents provided very positive and significant support to have the book published. Words can not express my appreciation to them.

Xiao Liang
August 2012
Changsha, Hunan, China

List of Abbreviations

- B. A. —Bachelor of Arts
BeiDa—Peking University
B. Sc. —Bachelor of Science
CBE—Calgary Board of Education
CCCSA—Calgary Chinese Community Service Association
CCSSA—Chinese Students and Scholars' Association
CND—Canadian Dollar
CPC—Communist Party of China
CS—Career Services
CSDC—Counseling and Student Development Center
E. g. —for example
ELF—English Language Foundations
ESL—English as a Second Language
EVDS—Environmental Design
EWC—Effective Writing Center
FGS,GS—Faculty of Graduate Studies
GMAT—Graduate Management Admission Test
GRE—Graduate Record Examination
GRS—Graduate Research Scholarship
GSA—Graduate Students' Association
I. e. —that is
ISC—International Students' Centre
IT—Information Technology
M. A. —Master of Arts
M. Sc. —Master of Science
PC—Personal Computer
Ph. D. —Doctor of Philosophy

Qinghua—Qinghua University

R. A. , RA—Research Assistant

RMB—Renminbi (Chinese Yuan)

SAS—Student and Academic Services

SU—Students' Union

T. A. , TA—Teaching Assistant

TOEFL—Test of English as a Foreign Language

UA—University of Alberta

UBC—University of British Columbia

UNB—University of New Brunswick

UNESCO—United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UofC, UC—University of Calgary

USD—United States Dollar

Contents

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY	1
1.1 Background	1
1.1.1 Some background related to this study	1
1.1.2 An overview of internationalization at University of Calgary	2
1.1.3 A description of “Mainland Chinese students in graduate programs at a Canadian university”	4
1.1.4 Chinese students in overseas education	5
1.2 Importance, Objective and Significance	6
1.2.1 Importance	6
1.2.2 Objective	7
1.2.3 Significance	7
1.3 Research Questions	8
1.3.1 Main research question	8
1.3.2 Supporting questions	8
1.4 Anticipated Forms of Results	8
CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW	9
2.1 Related Literature for This Research	9
2.1.1 Major areas of research	9
2.1.2 Limitations of the previous research	18
2.2 A Comparison between Higher Education in China and in the West	19
2.2.1 Higher education in China	20
2.2.2 Higher education in the West	30
2.2.3 Experiencing higher education in China and in Canada	38

CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	47
3.1 Introduction to the Qualitative Case Study	47
3.2 The Variety of Research Methods in This Qualitative Case Study and Data Analysis	49
3.2.1 Qualitative interviews	50
3.2.2 Classroom observation	52
3.2.3 Document analysis	53
3.2.4 Data analysis	53
3.3 Research Ethics	54
3.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Qualitative Case Study	54
3.5 Qualitative Interviewing: Sources of Reactivity Problems and Some Discussions	55
3.5.1 Introduction to the concern	55
3.5.2 Different sources of reactivity problems and possible solutions	56
3.5.3 Discussion on the reactivity problem of qualitative interviewing	65
3.5.4 Recommendations for qualitative interviewing	67
CHAPTER FOUR PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH	68
4.1 Findings from Students' Perspectives	69
4.1.1 Introduction to the interviewees	69
4.1.2 Commonalities and varieties	76
4.1.3 Adaptation issues for Mainland Chinese students in Canadian graduate programs	85
4.1.4 Adaptation strategies	116
4.1.5 Students' reflections on adaptation processes	121
4.1.6 Suggestions for Chinese students for a better academic adaptation process	129
4.1.7 Suggestions for the university, faculty, staff and to immigration policy	135
4.2 Findings from Faculty and Administrators' Perspectives	142
4.2.1 Background	142
4.2.2 Issues particular to international students	147

4.2.3	Recruitment, expectations, policies, programs and strategies to support international students	154
4.2.4	Suggestions to international students and to universities	158
4.2.5	Faculty and administrators' reflections on the international student issue	164
4.3	Findings from Class Observations	165
4.3.1	Introduction	165
4.3.2	Findings	166
4.3.3	Considerations of class observations	169
4.4	Findings from Document Analysis	169
4.4.1	Introduction	169
4.4.2	Findings from document analysis	170
4.4.3	Considerations of document analysis	172

CHAPTER FIVE	DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS IN RELATION TO THE THEORETICAL LITERATURE	174
5.1	General Discussions Related to the Literature	174
5.1.1	Some questions about factors that influence the adaptation process	174
5.1.2	Differences between Chinese higher education and Canadian higher education	178
5.1.3	Adaptation theory	182
5.1.4	Adaptation process	184
5.2	Findings from the Research New to the Literature	185
5.2.1	Adaptation issues	186
5.2.2	Adaptation strategies	191
5.2.3	Differences among findings generated from three research methods	193
5.3	Adaptation Diagrams for International Students	196
5.3.1	Adaptation Process Diagram	197
5.3.2	Adaptation Support Diagram	203

CHAPTER SIX SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

.....	209
6.1 Summary	209
6.2 Recommendations for Further Research	211
6.2.1 Limitations of the present research	212
6.2.2 Recommendations for further research	213
6.3 Recommendations to international students' adaptation	214
6.3.1 Recommendations to international students	215
6.3.2 Recommendations to university administrators, faculty and staff	218
6.3.3 Recommendations to community and cultural organizations	221
6.3.4 Recommendations to Canadian higher education authorities and government	223
6.4 Conclusion	226
References	227
Appendix I Cover Letter (Recruiting graduate student interviewees)	233
Appendix II Approval of Ethical Review	235
Appendix III Participant Consent Forms	236
Appendix IV A Letter Requesting Site Access	242
Appendix V Potential Interview Questions	244
Appendix VI Interview Quotation Notes	248
Appendix VII Records of Interview Tapes	249
Appendix VIII Permission for Observation of Class	254
Appendix IX Samples of Publicity of the Research and Researcher	255

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Some background related to this study

When the researcher first entered her graduate program at a Canadian university after her nearly twenty years of education in Mainland China, including graduate studies, she was thrilled and, at the same time, shocked. This is called “education shock”, which is similar to “culture shock”—“the disequilibrium caused by encounters with other cultures” (Mestenhauser, 1988, p. 135). “Education shock” is also an important issue that is confronted by people moving from one country to another country. Mestenhauser’s (1988) definition of “education shock” is “the disequilibrium based on an encounter with a different educational system and method of instruction (p. 135)”. The researcher’s experience of being involved in a Canadian graduate program includes a state of shock in reaction to the Canadian ways of education.

“Education shock” generally has its foundation in the differences between one’s previous educational system and the present one. The researcher’s experience of education shock reminds her that besides certain commonalities, the two educational systems in China and in Canada present many differences. In this study the researcher shall examine what the disparities between the former and latter educational system are that require those students from other countries to accomplish, in their process of pursuing further studies within the Canadian educational system.

According to Berry (1997), “adaptation” refers to changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands. These adapta-

tions can occur immediately, or they can be extended over a longer term. With either a “fast” or a “slow” “adaptation” process, the majority of international students manage to successfully accomplish the requirements of Canadian graduate programs. When they strive for the degree, they meet with various challenges: confrontation with the new language of instruction and learning, unfamiliar classroom dynamics, evaluation systems, professor-student relationships, and many more.

The present research is designed to focus on the Mainland Chinese international students in Canadian graduate programs. After many considerations and consultations, the topic came to be “Academic adaptation: Mainland Chinese students in graduate programs at a Canadian university”. The “Canadian university” will be the University of Calgary (U of C, UC), where “internationalization” is set as an important goal.

1. 1. 2 An overview of internationalization at University of Calgary

The University of Calgary is located in the City of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It gained full autonomy as a degree-granting institution in 1966. It has sixteen faculties with more than sixty academic departments and major program areas. The U of C employs about 1900 academic and 2400 support staff and serves 28000 full-time equivalent students registered in degree programs and another 20000 in continuing education programs. International services and information have been available for students for almost as long as the university has existed. International services and information for students were established and in operation by 1974. An international student advisor was designated in the late 1970's. The Study Abroad Information Center was established in 1977 (Brinkerhoff & Miller, 2001, p. 6). The two prominent organizations for internationalization in this university are International Center and International Student Center, which have served the University and its larger community for several decades.

By 1985, there were more than 16000 students, about 700 of whom were international students, with a rapidly growing, large and diverse group of faculty members. Such rapid growth led to an international context in which the faculty could work and students could study.

In response to the University's mandate for internationalization, faculty

members engaged in applied educational and development activities in foreign countries. These activities create fresh energy for the University. A variety of international projects have been and is being carried out between this University and other parts of the world: Bangladesh, Central America, China, Guyana, Kosovo, Nepal, Russia, etc. (University of Calgary, 2001a). Past projects included the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) supported Bhutan Education and Management project, and Canada-Asia Partnership Project.

Meanwhile, the recruitment and retention of international students serves as another contribution to the internationalization of the University. The growth and improvement of international students' support services positively contributes to its international reputation. The Office of Institutional Analysis at University of Calgary (OIA) reported, as in Table 1-1 (2000—2001) that the year 2000 to 2001 witnessed a total of 876 international students, four percent of the total number of 21700 full-time students in this university. By Fall 2002, the number of international students was raised to 1165, which accounted for five percent of the total fulltime equivalent student number of 23380 (OIA, 2003—2004, p. 4).

**Table 1-1 University of Calgary Comparison of Full-time Enrolment
with Full-time Visa Enrolment (OIA, 2003—2004)**

	Fall Session									
	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Undergraduate										
-Visa	522	418	372	405	432	483	505	546	657	680
-Total Undergraduate	16 012	15 904	17 901	17 438	17 364	17 585	18 520	18 999	19 356	20 139
-% Undergraduate Visa	3.3%	2.6%	2.2%	2.3%	2.5%	2.7%	2.7%	2.9%	3.4%	3.4%
Graduate										
-Visa	378	339	282	322	320	273	356	330	374	485
-Total Graduate	1 988	2 070	2 196	2 276	2 468	2 433	2 586	2 701	2 917	3 241
-% Graduate Visa	19.0%	16.4%	12.8%	14.1%	13.0%	11.2%	13.8%	12.2%	12.8%	15.0%
Total										
-Visa	900	757	654	727	752	756	861	876	1 031	1 165
-Enrolment	18 000	17 974	19 287	19 714	19 832	20 018	21 106	21 700	22 273	23 380
-% Visa	5.0%	4.2%	3.4%	3.7%	3.8%	3.8%	4.1%	4.0%	4.6%	5.0%