

The price of learning: A study of Chinese students' psychological challenges in South Australia

Dr Chong Zhou
School of Education, the University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia
Email: Chong.Zhou@postgrads.unisa.edu.au

Dr Peter Willis
Senior Lecturer of School of Education, the University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia
Email: Peter.Willis@unisa.edu.au

Guiyun Chen
PhD Candidate, School of Education, the University of South Australia
Adelaide, Australia
Email: Guiyun.Chen@postgrads.unisa.edu.au

Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of a group of Mainland Chinese students studying at South Australian secondary schools. It explores the perceptions of these students in a more naturalistic way through conversations with them in their own language. It focuses on the cultural challenges they faced and provides an insider's knowledge about the underlying causes for these challenges and their coping strategies while they were adjusting to living and learning in Australia. This paper drawing on this study focuses particularly on the psychological challenges faced by Chinese students in South Australia. It was found that statements such as "missing home", "feeling lonely" and "living in fear" indicated students' psychological stress. The findings also uncovered the detailed basis of each of the students' challenges, providing some specific cultural information for educational practitioners to better understand secondary Chinese students in Australia.

Key words: language, culture, psychological well-being, cross-cultural adjustment.

Introduction

Education for international students involves more than a formal school or university qualification. An added value of studying abroad is the opportunity to learn about life and work in a foreign country (see White, 2003). Yet, all this does not come in an easy way. Living abroad in a new cultural setting can be very challenging. People find that much of what they have learned about interpreting the actions of people around them is suddenly irrelevant. They find the assumptions that guided understandings and reactions are no longer reliable (Schild, 1962). This sudden change usually results in feelings of disorientation, frustration and helplessness (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). So learning to live and work in a new cultural

setting is a challenging experience, which inevitably involves cultural adaptation, that is, “psychological and sociocultural adjustment” (Searle and Ward, 1990; Berry, 1997). Psychological adjustment focuses on “feelings of well-being or satisfaction” during cross-cultural transitions, and sociocultural adjustment “refers to the ability to ‘fit in’ or execute effective interactions in a new cultural milieu” (Ward, 2001, p.414). Successful adjustment is a state of ‘homeostasis’ in which a match between environment and individual is achieved. This state is marked by a psychological balance and relatively untroubled engagement in appropriate social and academic activities.

In the study, the researcher investigated from an insider’s perspective, a group of Mainland Chinese students’ cross-cultural experiences in secondary schools of South Australia. The study focused on the unique challenges faced by these students in adjusting to living and learning in the Australian cultural context. The central question addressed was: *“In what ways do Chinese students attending state secondary schools and boarding with Australian families under the homestay scheme, experience their life and learning in South Australia?”* Under the central question, three specific questions were answered: (1) *“What are the challenges that Chinese students encounter when they are studying at secondary schools in South Australia?”* (2) *“What are the factors/causes that contribute to the challenges faced by Chinese students at secondary schools in South Australia?”* (3) *“What strategies do these secondary school students from China use to respond to the challenges they face in trying to adjust to Australian culture.”*

Under a general interpretative methodology, a naturalistic method using open ended conversations was chosen because of its ability to avoid pushing informants into the selection of pre-determined categories. Rather, the study explored the perceptions of Chinese students using this naturalistic approach through informal conversations with them in their own language. Altogether 36 Chinese students were chosen from three government schools and one non-government school in South Australia. Data was collected via focus groups and individual interviews. In the first round of data collection, unstructured interviews were conducted, using focus groups as the research instrument, which served to explore potential challenges faced by Chinese students. Based on the results of the first data collection, individual interviews while still pursued informally used open-ended questions to explore the details. All interviews, lasting from thirty to sixty minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed in Chinese. These were then translated into English and checked by NAATI (The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters) accredited translators before they were used in the study. In the data analysis, the interview transcripts were organized into paragraphs, which were numbered in sequence. Each participant was given a coded name (e.g. CDCS12p9). Then, a list of domains (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was first developed from data according to recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Data was coded under the recurrence category when two to more parts of the discourse carried the same meaning although different words were used. Repetition was noted when recurring key words, phrases, or sentences appeared in at least two parts of the discourse. Forcefulness referred to such features as vocal inflection, sudden change of volume, or use of dramatic pauses for emphasis. Then blocks of data were assigned to such specific domains as: (a) challenges from learning in Australian schools, (b) challenges from experiencing Australian society, and (c) challenges from homestay living. This

paper, as part of the study, focuses particularly on the psychological challenges faced by Chinese students in South Australia.

Results and Discussion

In the 26 interviews, including both focus groups and individual interviews, almost all the students reported problems with psychological well-being, although some expressed feelings of anticipation and excitement at the beginning. As one student stated, “I was so excited in the first month. It felt like having fun on a holiday.” However, as time progressed, students’ moods tended to drop. The student interviews indicated three aspects of major concerns in regard to students’ psychological well-being: 1) missing home, 2) feeling lonely and 3) living in fear. The impact of psychological strain was found to be substantial for some students. A few students were so homesick they withdrew or cancelled their Australian study and returned to China. A number of students felt intense loneliness and anxiety after arriving in Australia and a few of them later developed depression.

Missing Home

Missing home was reported by Chinese secondary school students as the most prominent emotion they experienced during the initial stage of their stay in Australia. The student interviews showed that 31 out of the total 36 participants reported missing home after they arrived in Australia. Eleven students reported suffering severely from missing home and regretted their decision to come to Australia.

I must say the most difficult times are when I miss home. At the beginning I phoned home almost every day. Sometimes I sat on the grass crying while talking to my parents on the phone (GHCS04p4).

It was understandable that, without experiences of living independently, and with the loss of familiar adults and objects, missing home was a normal response among international students (Campbell, 2004). As an English proverb goes, “East, west, home is best” (The Online Encyclopedia and Dictionary)¹. But there were particular issues for secondary school students in terms of missing home. According to Fang (1999, p.131), “in traditional Chinese society, in which there was no well-functioning legal framework, no established property rights, and no formal social security and welfare systems, a strong Chinese family system became the predominant social structure for the maintenance of social stability.” In modern China, great changes have taken place, but the traditional way of life has continued in one way or the other. As Fang (1999, p.131) stated that “it was within the Chinese family and through the closest kinship networks that the Chinese people received care, protection, insurance, jobs, and most important, security.” Fukuyama (1995, p.88) regarded the Chinese family as “an essentially defensive mechanism against a hostile and capricious environment,” and Lin (1939) called it a system of “insurance”.

¹ http://www.fact-archive.com/quotes/English_proverbs

With the knowledge of such a all encompassing Chinese family culture, it is easy to understand why these students all of a sudden missed home so much. For them, the loss after arrival in Australia was not only the familiar objects, or language but also the “family insurance” (Lin, 1939) – the family care, protection and security, especially for those, who were the only children at home and the focus of family care while in their home country. One student said:

When I came here, I missed home very much. I had the feeling that I couldn't find another person to look after me like my parents. Nobody would care whether I was hungry or happy or if I had some clothes that needed to be washed. Nobody would care about me as my parents did at home (CDCS9p115).

This sudden loss of “family insurance”, meant that missing home with its strong and comforting implications, had a deep and comprehensive impact on these students' experiences in Australia. During research interviews, several students could not hold back their tears when telling the story of their early experiences in Australia. For example, one student from Qingdao said that she just could not control her feelings of missing home. Her tears would “flood” her books while she was talking on the phone to her parents in China. She stated that she had friends in China who were going to study in Germany. They had even got a German visa. After her friends heard about her “miserable” experiences living in a foreign country, they canceled their study. A few other students also said that they suffered so badly from homesickness that they regretted coming to Australia.

At the beginning, I was not used to living here. I had a very strong wish to go back to China. If it were not for my parents' strong objection, I wouldn't be here now (GHCS01p3).

The wish to return to China was strong among the students right after they arrived in Australia. However, almost all of them remained in Australia. A strong argument from the students was that they had no courage to return to China without any achievements. They stated that they just could not afford to let their families “lose face” and did not want to become the target of criticism among friends or relatives. How they appeared in the eyes of friends, family, parents and neighbours was a matter of great importance to them and their families. In other words, if the students failed to achieve their parents' (or their family's) expectations, they could feel very ashamed of themselves. So it was not unusual for Chinese secondary school students to remain in Australia without enjoying what they were studying, but because in most cases they felt morally obliged to meet their family's expectations.

Even under this moral constraint, a few students could not live with the emotional strain of missing home and returned to China not long after they arrived in Australia. One student told a story of a girl student she knew. She said that the girl, who had come to Australia with her sister, just could not live away from her parent's side. No matter how her older sister talked to her, the younger sister just could not accept the fact of “being alone”. She cried from the first day she arrived and finally returned to China with her sister about two weeks later. They didn't return to Australia.

Homesickness was a serious problem for many of the younger Chinese students. However, there were a small number of Chinese students who expressed different feelings about home. They said that they did not miss home too much because they kept talking to their parents on

the phone whenever they wanted to and they could frequently travel back to China. Several students reported that they returned to China three or four times a year so that they later felt the trip back to China was something like “domestic” travel as far as the time away was concerned.

I missed home but not that much. I returned home four times last year (smiling). It all happened during the school term break. In fact, the last time I went back occurred under my parents’ persuasion. They insisted on my going back home during the holiday, though I wanted to stay here (GHCS15p102).

Improved telecommunication systems and more convenient airline services between Australia and China have helped to ease the intensity of students’ feelings of missing home. The intensity of missing home was also reduced due to their frequent travels and frequent telephone conversations, as one of the students said. But not all the students had this fortune of traveling back and forth four times a year. In other words, students’ intensity of missing home varied in accordance with individual situations, including individual financial situations and the individual’s ability to cope independently with daily life.

Two students expressed an alternative. They stated that they did not miss home so much because their lifestyle in Australia was similar to that in China. They usually came back from school and then spent the rest of the day in front of the computer. They were used to being alone at home because their parents in China were very busy.

The influence of the Internet in China was also regarded as another positive reason for students not missing home. They stated that the Internet in China provided them with more access to the outside world. They could “travel around the world” through the Internet, which changed the old connotation of going abroad. Foreign countries would no longer be remote and unknown lands.

Feeling Lonely

Apart from the sufferings of “missing home” after arrival in Australia, loneliness was reported as another psychological challenge accompanying the other psychological suffering among Chinese students. Nearly half of the students revealed that after a few days’ curiosity about the “new” country, they started to suffer from loneliness. They felt very lonely after school and could not find anything to do except for their school work.

Lonely, yes, when I came back home from school I was alone in my Australian homestay. It was very boring. I tried to find something to do but in vain because there was nothing to do there except for doing homework which I was not interested in (GHCS02p25).

So, at the beginning of their Australian experience, students liked going to school more than anything else because that was the only place that they could find someone to talk to. Some students reported that such a situation lasted for about half a year. Others still felt lonely after staying in Australia for a year or more. They complained that their life in Australia was very boring and Chinese international students seemed to be living in an isolated world. Homestay and school was all there was to their life in Australia.

My life in Australia is very boring. Our homestay won't let us go out by ourselves. After school I have to stay at home. I'm always reading, searching the internet or listening to music. It seems as though I'm working hard. Actually I have no one to talk to. I'm very lonely and can't find anything else to do (CDCS7p68).

According to the SA Government School Homestay Guidelines (SAGSHG, 2002, p.9), international students are expected to ask permission from their homestay to go out. For their safety, they should inform the homestay who they are going out with, where they intend to go and the expected time of return. The students said that this policy played a positive role in protecting international students' safety, but at the same time, it restricted their life to home and school. The students agreed that the policy was not a direct cause of students' loneliness, but it added to their isolated situation and was thus considered by most as one of the factors that contributed to their loneliness. A few students even complained that they seemed to be "locked" in homestay and lost their "freedom" in the "free" country of Australia.

As those students' time out of school was mostly spent in homestays, TV naturally became their good "friend" when they were alone at home. But unfortunately, the students concluded that this "friend" was another factor contributing to their loneliness. The students complained about Adelaide TV having few channels to choose from and being very boring. Instead of watching their favourite sports they had to make do with local games such as "footy" and "cricket" which were never played in China and they didn't like very much. In their eyes, the TV in Adelaide seemed to be nothing but an immobile companion of loneliness. TV sometimes made them feel even more lonely and frustrated when they could not find a proper program or couldn't enjoy due to their poor English. A common saying from the students was that they were very lonely because there was nothing to watch on TV (when they couldn't find a program they liked).

In China we have many sports channels and live shows of world sports events while in Australia they just have the local sports programs. This is so boring for me, because I like NBA and I can't watch the game in Australia. It is not available on any Australian channels. People here all like footy or AFL, which I don't understand at all and have no interest in (CDCS6p108).

The short shopping hours in Adelaide were also reported as a factor of students' loneliness. Because there were limited activities that they could engage in, some students wanted to go window shopping. This was considered as a good way of familiarising themselves with their local environment. But the students later complained that they often found themselves in an awkward situation. Several students stated that when they went to the shops or banks after school, most of them were closing up. When they visited the city centre on Sundays, they didn't see many people and most shops were closed.

The shops here close very, very early and they aren't open on weekends. That is what I hate most about this place. When I first arrived and went out on weekends I hardly saw anyone anywhere in the street. It was like a deserted city (CDCS10p43). All you can do is stay at home listening to the birds singing

Lack of English language was considered by students to be a major factor contributing to their lonely life in Adelaide. Most students insisted that their loneliness was largely the consequence

of their lack of English language skills. They all expressed the opinion that everything would be all right if they had no language problems. They insisted that their lack of English language skills not only limited their interaction with other people (which was a main reason for their isolation and no local friends) but also made it impossible to keep or develop further relationships after they met with locals. They said that they had no idea how to talk to the locals in English. On occasion, when they had a chance to talk to someone, they found it hard to have a normal conversation because of their poor understanding. Their poor English sometimes made them feel as if they could not breathe in this environment.

I have no idea about how to talk to the locals in English. I feel like I can't breathe in this environment because of my poor English. On occasion, when I have a chance to talk to someone, I find it hard to have a normal conversation because of my poor understanding. My life in Australia is boring (CDCS7p60).

Because of the different personal situations between Chinese students, the intensity of loneliness appeared to be different. Some students reported that loneliness struck them heavily in the initial months and the intensity of feeling lonely gradually decreased as they became more familiar with the environment and got to know more and more people. But at the time of the interviews, many students said they had not integrated into Australian society. Instead, they admitted that they had integrated themselves into the local Chinese community. Those who failed to make contact with others and still had no friends at the time of the interview were found to remain in a state of loneliness. Some of them said that they seemed to show symptoms of depression due to a long period of loneliness and no way of releasing this tension. For example, one student said in the interview, that he had never felt happy since he arrived in Australia. He had no way of talking freely to anyone (including people of the same nationality) but he had to pretend that he was all right. The intensity of loneliness was enormous and deep in his heart.

Living in Fear

Most Chinese students reported feelings of anxiety and "living in fear". Some said they felt anxious every day or spent their whole Australian experience living in fear. After arriving in Australia, some students were unable to accept the fact that they were in a "foreign" country. Some regarded the Australian people around them as "foreigners" rather than coming to terms with being a sojourner themselves. Some students commented on how it felt strange to be surrounded by "foreigners". They had a feeling of being panic-stricken.

There are so many 'foreigners' and so few Chinese! Wherever you go you see signs in English (not signs in Chinese). In China, we saw Chinese people wherever we went. But here wherever we go we see 'foreigners' I was not used to it at the beginning (CDCS12p113).

The feeling of being panic-stricken was accepted by many as a normal feeling for someone who had recently arrived in a foreign country. They stated that they were, after all, the only child in their family and had no such experience of being away from home alone. Most students took it for granted that they would get over their fear and anxiety as time went on. However, after their initial panic at arriving in Australia, many of these students were plunged into a new kind of fear, which was still with them on the day when the interviews were done. Many students said that they just could not feel the same as they had in their home country.

Even if some locals were kind and friendly, they still had a continuous feeling of living in fear. This forced them to take an attitude of “no argument” as a means of self-defense when they interacted with other people in the new environment.

While I am in Australia, I am unable to put my mind at rest. However good it is, it is not my home. I am full of fear when I interact with the locals, always afraid of offending someone. In China, wherever I went, I felt at ease, even if people were not so kind to me (CDCS3p41).

One significant reason that these students were unable to put their mind at rest was their limited English. Some students admitted that they lacked confidence speaking English, lacked confidence in their social skills and had little knowledge of local ways of doing things. This made them feel hopeless at engaging with local people. Some said that whenever there was a difference of opinion, they were always the losers. They lacked the language and social skills to defend themselves during arguments, even if they thought they were right. In their eyes, some of the locals took the advantage of their unfamiliarity with the environment or their language deficiency, to bully international students some of whom then felt panic at interacting with them. It was very hard in this situation to have any confidence and the loss of confidence over an extended period of time left them feeling anxious day after day. One student told about one of his experiences. He said that when he requested a receipt after paying for an English test, he was told “this is Australia”. When his request was refused without what he considered to be a reasonable “excuse”, the student became angry and raised his voice to defend his right as a customer. The student was then accused of disturbing the order in a public place and the security guard was called. The student said that he wanted to argue his case before the security guard but his English was limited and he was not sure about the matter. He feared the incident could have a negative impact on his student status and possibly lead to him getting a criminal record if they refused to listen to him. In the end, the student gave in because he was afraid of losing the opportunity to study here. He took a compliant attitude because he was full of fear.

Many of the students were also unable to put their mind at rest because they were constantly reminded in school, either verbally or in written letters, that their student visa would be cancelled in this or that circumstance. Students said that they lived in fear of being driven out of the host country because they did something wrong and their visa was cancelled. They felt they were being treated as potential offenders and were constantly warned not to “break the law” or break any kind of rules. Students said they could not work out the real purpose of this reminding - whether the school just wanted to help them understand the policy or whether there was some other motive. The result was that they lived in fear. Visa cancellation meant the end of their study. This was something they feared greatly as it would be a sign not only of the student’s own failure but also their family’s loss of face. Students felt they had to be careful in everything they did at school, all day every day. They feared making mistakes or unintentionally causing offense. After all, English was their second language - they were actually unable completely to understand other people.

A few students also revealed their fear of walking in the “empty” suburban streets. They all said that cars were the major form of transportation for Australians. The consequence of everybody driving a car was that the streets in most suburbs were left with fewer pedestrians. To Chinese students, there seemed to be just cars passing by in the streets. The quiet, empty, suburban streets, combined with frequent news reports about local crimes, left some of the

students fearful of their safety when walking in the streets. A few students even expressed their fear of walking in the suburbs during the daytime.

Implications

This research indicated that secondary school Chinese students in Australia are confronted with three broad categories of challenges in regard to their psychological well-being: missing home, feeling lonely and living in fear. It should be noted that the results are responses of young people facing the difficulties of cultural dislocation. Some criticisms become connected to the particularity of a single student in a particular situation. Nevertheless, student interviews provide valuable insight into the situation of Chinese secondary school students in Australia and the challenges they face. Through analysing student accounts of their psychological experiences, a number of most salient cultural issues faced by Chinese students in Australia are highlighted and discussed. Although some of the findings, such as missing home and feeling lonely, were also found in Campbell's (2004) study of Chinese tertiary students in New Zealand, this research has presented a more detailed insiders' view of these psychological difficulties.

Although the reason for homesickness varied from individual to individual, the Chinese family values or "the family insurance" was found to play a dominant role in the intensity of secondary school students missing home. Those who were more independent (or had experiences of being independent) from their families, while in their home country seemed less likely to suffer from homesickness, whereas those who were the only child in the family and accustomed to their family's daily care and companionship were more likely to suffer from severe homesickness when they arrived in their host country.

It was also found in the study that such factors as advances in telecommunication and airline services, improved economic conditions and greater connections between China and the outside world, played a positive role in international students' psychological well-being in their host country. The improvement in telecommunication made it very easy for students to contact their family and friends in China and often helped to reduce the intensity of missing home. China's opening up to the outside world has changed the old connotation of 'going abroad' and Australia at least for some was no longer a remote, unknown land. Growing familiarity and connection with foreign countries helped many students to cope with their life in the host country.

The loneliness of secondary school students was found to be different from the findings on loneliness experienced by university students in previous studies. University students did not usually live in homestay and thus had more freedom about their movements. Most university students had experience of living independently before coming to Australia while secondary school students tended not to have such experiences. Their loneliness was closely related to being isolated from the open Australian society, which left them feeling empty, with nowhere to go and no one to talk to. The loneliness of students in this study was found to be mainly caused by three factors: 1) language trouble resulting in deficient social capability, 2) different lifestyle customs which made it difficult for students to participate in social activities, and 3) misunderstanding of the rules / guidelines for international students. In most cases, the students

in the study reported returning to a relatively “normal situation” after about six months when they began to get more involved in broader social activities.

The findings also indicated that many secondary school students could not easily put their mind at ease when first arriving in Australia. Some felt panic stricken at the beginning, feeling strange walking alone in the “empty” suburban streets and interacting with other people. All this was found to be the result of their uncertainty in the new cultural setting, their limited English and occasional incidences of bullying that happened to them. This finding implied that the more knowledge of the host culture students had, and the more local acceptance, the less fearful they tended to be in their interactions with people outside school and their homestay family. Conversely local people’s attitude to students was considered to have a significant impact upon their psychological well-being.

All in all, for secondary school students who leave home to reside in another country with different culture for educational reasons and who successfully find a way to adjust and settle into their new life, this change is influential and contributes to a kind of cultural flexibility and maturity. The distancing from the support normally given by family and friends, loss of the familiar 'routine' pattern of life and exposure to an implosion of new environmental and psychosocial factors (Fisher et al., 1985) can contribute to a kind of worldly maturity. All this has a great impact on students’ psychological well-being, especially for those Chinese students who so much relied on “the family insurance” and had no experiences of being independent. Therefore, more specific social support for this group of students should be given enough attention to help students’ successful transition.

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