Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in Chinese Universities

by

Shuai Yu

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Department of Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta

Abstract

As a high priority of internationalization, international student mobility has transformed the higher education landscape over the last few decades. Although plenty of studies focus on international students' experiences, less attention was paid to North American students' learning experiences in other countries due to the low outbound mobility, especially Canadian students. Despite the increasing collaboration and partnerships between Chinese and Canadian universities, the number of Canadian students who chose to study in China remains small. Moreover, international student mobility brings many benefits to students, higher education institutions, communities, society, and the economy (Knight, 2012). Therefore, in order to provide Canadian students with targeted support services and improve outbound mobility, it is essential to understand their learning experience in China.

Applying concepts of Kolb's (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), this study explores the learning experience of Canadian exchange students in Chinese universities, including students' perceived challenges and benefits of their learning experience, as well as their reflection on the impacts of their academic and social learning experiences. A generic qualitative research design was employed based on the constructivist-interpretive paradigm. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 Canadian exchange students who studied in Chinese universities from 2016 to 2021. The 14 students were from 10 Canadian universities and studied at seven Chinese universities.

Key findings indicate that all the participants perceived their learning experiences in China as beneficial. The main benefits include personal growth, improved language proficiency, critical thinking abilities, intercultural awareness and competencies, and enhanced academic and

career development. Perceived challenges revolved around personal and external challenges. Personal challenges were culture shock due to the language barrier and cultural differences. External challenges were caused by insufficient administration, which involved bureaucratic barriers, confusion in course registration, and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information.

This study provides a view of the context of student mobility between China and Canada. By investigating Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in Chinese universities, this study contributes to an understanding of the outbound student mobility of Canadian students, especially in developing countries. Further, this study provides theoretical and practical implications that may be of interest to educators and policy makers involved in planning and implementing international student mobility programs. Participants' learning experience may shed light for students who are potentially interested in participating in exchange programs in China.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Shuai Yu. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project name “Exploring the learning experience of Canadian exchange students in Chinese universities”, No. Pro00115112, November 15, 2021.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

For the past 25 years, the internationalization of higher education has been evolving from a minor component and a marginal activity to a broad concept and a priority of the institutional agenda, including various rationales, approaches, and strategies in different and ever-changing contexts (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight & de Wit, 2018). The most widely used definition of internationalization was proposed by Knight (2004) "at the national, sector and institutional levels, internationalization is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 11).
de Wit (2015) updated this definition by stating the purposes or goals of internationalization:

> …the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit, 2015, p. 24)

Internationalization has become a focus for many Canadian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A recent Canadian survey reported that 95% of institutions identified internationalization in their strategic plan, and 82% consider it among their top five priorities (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC, 2014). In a knowledge-driven economy, the internationalization of Canadian higher education through developing international partnerships and promoting student and faculty exchanges is essential to support Canada's science and technology innovation agendas. A review of Canada's international education strategies indicated that over the past two decades, the priorities of international activities have shifted from increasing inbound mobility to promoting outbound mobility (Government of Canada, 2012, 2014, 2020). Canada's *International Education Strategy 2019-2024* stated that short-term

work or study experience abroad allows students to develop intercultural competencies, build international networks, and gain a deeper understanding of economic relationships, which can help them adequately prepare for entering the workforce and expand their employment opportunities (Government of Canada, 2020).

The internationalization of Chinese higher education has also accelerated rapidly over the past four decades (Guo et al., 2020). Since 1978, motivated by China's open-door policy and economic reforms, the internationalization of Chinese higher education has taken four forms: scholars and students studying abroad, building transnational education programs with foreign institutional partners, integrating an international dimension in teaching and learning, and attracting international students (Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). In the past 10 years, China has been transforming from a major student-outbound country to a significant study destination for international students. Hosting international students is a mechanism for Chinese universities to acquire 'world-class' status and for the Chinese government to enhance its soft power (Hu et al., 2016; Wu, 2018).

Following the *Outline of the National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, the *Study in China Program* was implemented to improve the internationalization of Chinese education and promote the exchange and cooperation between Chinese and foreign institutions. This policy set the goal of receiving 150,000 international students to Chinese higher education institutions by 2020 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2010).

Background of the Study

As the most common internationalization activity, international student mobility has transformed the higher education landscape over the last few decades (International Association

of Universities (IAU), 2024; Knight, 2012). It has brought various benefits to students, institutions, communities, governments, and employers (Institute of International Education, 2023). Canadian universities view international exchange programs as mechanisms to enhance students' intercultural understanding and competencies, contributing to their overall employability and career choices in an increasingly global society (AUCC, 2007; Government of Canada, 2020). The AUCC survey (2014) reported that 92% of Canadian universities established bilateral reciprocal international student exchange agreements for study or research practica. Despite the consistent increase in Canadian students' participation in exchange and study abroad programs since 2000, only 11% of Canadian undergraduate students had undertaken an international learning experience by 2017 (Center for International Policy Studies, 2017).

China is among the top priorities of almost all Canadian universities in building international partnerships and other activities. Many Canadian universities have built various exchange programs with Chinese higher education institutions. Currently, the University of Alberta (UAlberta) has developed exchange programs with Chinese universities in different provinces, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, Nankai University, Fudan University, etc. (University of Alberta International, n.d.). In order to encourage more Canadian students to study in China, the U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities cooperated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and Chinese universities and established the "Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC)" in 2016 (Education Office, Embassy of The People's Republic of China in Canada, 2018). CLIC was designed to encourage Canadian students to choose China as a study-abroad destination by providing financial support, developing programming, and creating opportunities to explore the country (CLIC, n.d.).

China has attracted a large number of international students from other Asian countries, but the number of students from North America continues to be relatively small (Hu et al., 2016). Although many Canadian universities focus on forging ties with Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) by developing exchange programs and establishing partnerships, domestic students are not showing an increased interest in studying in China. Instead, preferred destinations for overseas learning experiences are focused on English-speaking countries or Western European nations (AUCC, 2014; Government of Canada, 2020). While China is Canada's largest source of international students, mobility between Canadian and Chinese post-secondary students has been mostly one-way. Approximately, only 3500 Canadian students chose to study in China in 2017, less than 0.1% of the Canadian post-secondary student population (Davidson, 2017; Education Office, 2018).

As the priority of internationalization activities, student mobility has a variety of forms (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), including full degree programs in foreign countries, short-term study programs, cross-border collaborative degree programs, research or fieldwork, and study tour, summer programs, conferences, cultural or language courses (Knight, 2012). The international student exchange program is a significant aspect of internationalization strategies used by policymakers in governments and universities (Rizvi, 2006; Daly & Barker, 2010). Daly and Barker (2010) emphasized that the implementation process of universities' strategies for international exchange programs plays a significant role in influencing student participation rates. For these reasons, governments and HEIs have prioritized international student exchange programs in terms of strategic planning on internationalization, such as preparation, evaluation, and services (Daly & Barker, 2010).

International student mobility brings many benefits to students, institutions, communities, society, and the economy (Knight, 2012). At the individual level, students who studied abroad tend to foster personal growth, improve self-awareness and self-confidence, expand their worldview, promote intercultural awareness and a second language proficiency, develop different ways of thinking, recognize their potential biases after being exposed to different cultures and ways of life. The personal benefits and networking opportunities students gained may provide them with more job opportunities and career choices (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018; Dewey et al., 2013; Harder et al., 2015; Institute of International Education, 2023).

From an institutional perspective, Canadian universities can gain academic and research partnerships through academic mobility (Knight & Madden, 2010). The returning students may also help the internationalization at home by bringing in comparative perspectives and engage with their peers in their home institutions **(**Brandenburg et al., 2019). At the provincial level, study abroad programs can benefit the provincial economy, tourism, and trade relations. Also, academic mobility programs may encourage entrepreneurship and innovation, help provinces build and strengthen diplomatic ties, and prosper in international influence (Global Affairs Canada, 2020; Government of Alberta, 2020).

At the national level, the mobility of Canadian students can promote global knowledge sharing and support Canada's science and technology strategies by bringing back new knowledge, skills, and connections (Global Affairs Canada, 2020). Additionally, study abroad programs help Canada "expand diplomatic reach in new markets" (Government of Alberta, 2020, p. 18). Finally, internationally experienced individuals contribute to an "increasingly diverse and multicultural society" and the "globalized labor market of this major trading nation," which can directly benefit Canada's economy (McRae et al., 2017, p. 9).

However, it is essential to acknowledge the drawbacks of student mobility and the challenges international students encounter during their study abroad experiences despite the benefits described above. The drawbacks can be explained from three aspects: creating inequality and elitism, brain drain, and low quality of study abroad programs. First, student mobility may create inequality and elitism because only a small number of students have the opportunities to study abroad (de Wit & Deca, 2020; de Wit & Leask, 2019). Second, student mobility has been used by governments and institutions as a way to generate revenue, enhance reputation, ranking, and soft power, which may cause a lack of quality assurance and outcomes of the programs (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; de Wit & Leask, 2019). Third, international student mobility may result in brain drain of some major sending countries (de Wit, 2019).

It is also necessary to acknowledge the challenges international students encounter in a new environment, especially acculturative stress and adjustment problems. These challenges may affect students' academic success, as well as their psychological and physical health (Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Wang, 2016). As Ding (2016) underscored, international students' satisfaction with their learning and living experience in China remains low and suggests that more attention should be paid to improving support resources and services. Furthermore, compared to students from other regions, most North American students did not find their experiences in China satisfying because the institutional support services were less available, tutors were less considerate, and staff members were less helpful (Hu et al., 2016). Most importantly, many students only engage in the international experience at a surface level and are not able to demonstrate the skills or competencies they gained from their overseas experiences without purposefully designed programs and students reflecting and applying the experiences (Dehaas, 2016; Harder et al., 2015; McRae et al., 2017; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

Statement of Research Problem

Internationalization has influenced Chinese higher education for almost four decades; student mobility has always been a priority in all international activities (Huang, 2003). It was not until the beginning of the 21st century, that China shifted its focus from promoting the outflow of students and scholars to attracting international students (Hu et al., 2016; Tian & Lu, 2020; Wu, 2018). Although attracting international students has been a priority for the Chinese government and universities, little attention has been paid to their experiences in China (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016). Researchers did not explore this trend until 2010 (Tian & Lu, 2020). Hence, most studies on international students studying in China have been conducted in the language of Chinese. over the past 19 years. The literature on international students in China in both Chinese and English language covers a wide range of topics, including the development of inbound international student education (Li, 2020; Liu & Zhang, 2019), international students' motivations to study in China (English et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Jiani, 2017), and their experiences in China (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2014; Wen et al., 2018; Yang, 2020).

International students' motivations can positively influence their learning experiences in China. English et al. (2016) outlined the main motivating factors for Western students to study in China. These factors included: greater personal growth, opportunity to travel, and future professional development, gaining cross-cultural knowledge. Jiani (2017) pointed out that availability of scholarships and funding, learning the Chinese language, promoting career development, and experiencing a different culture contributed to students' decisions to study in China. According to Hu et al.'s (2016) survey analysis, two crucial motivations for most

international students studying in China contribute to the improvement of Chinese language skills and gaining an understanding of Chinese culture.

Further, compared to Latin American and Asian peers, North American students appear to lack a strong academic motivation to study in China. Although most students surveyed in Hu et al.'s (2016) study had not decided on their plans, they expected to improve their competitiveness in the job market after acquiring the experience of learning abroad. Additionally, almost all North American students preferred to return and work in their home countries upon completing their studies in China (Hu et al., 2016).

Among studies reviewed on international students' experiences in China, most emphasized students' sociocultural and psychological adaptation experiences (English & Chi, 2020; Wen et al., 2018); several studies focused on students' academic/learning experiences (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2014; Wen et al., 2018; Yang, 2020). Based on the studies reviewed, three gaps were identified, pertaining to Canadian students' learning experiences in China.

First, there is a lack of English literature on understanding the inbound mobility of international students in China, including the historical development, characteristics at different stages, and the current context. Second, more recent studies on international students' learning experience mainly focused on their general learning satisfaction associated with academic integration, social integration, and instruction language. Third, many study abroad programs simply transfer academic credits from one traditional discipline-based educational institution to another, without considering whether students benefit from the experiences utilized the international experience for learning (Harder et al., 2015).

Of note was the scarcity of literature that focused on how reflecting on the student's learning experience, including the benefits and challenges, in China might provide some valuable insights. Without any guidance, many students only engage in the international experience at a surface level and are not able to demonstrate the skills or competencies they gained from their overseas experiences (Dehaas, 2016; Harder et al., 2015; McRae et al., 2017; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). ELT strategies allow international students to critically reflect on their learning experiences in and outside of the classrooms so they can maximally benefit from their study abroad experiences (Sakurai, 2018).

Most importantly, based on my UALibraries and Internet search (Google Scholar and CNKI), there appeared to be no research on Canadian students' experiences in Chinese universities. The participants of most studies are international students from other Asian and Belt and Road countries (e.g., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), with only two studies focused specifically on American students' experiences in China (Tian & Lowe, 2014; Yang, 2020). This study aims to address this gap in the literature.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored the learning experience of Canadian exchange students in Chinese universities, precisely their expectations and perceptions of the challenges and benefits of their learning experience. Using the concept of the learning cycle of Kolb's (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) (1991, 1997, 2000), I examined the impact of their learning experience on the exchange students. The findings of this study may provide recommendations to further develop the exchange programs, offering suggestions to potential exchange students. Findings may also contribute to an understanding of the effectiveness of applying ELT and TLT to student exchange programs.

This research was guided by the following three research questions.

1. How do Canadian exchange students perceive the benefits and challenges regarding their learning experience in Chinese Universities?
2. How do Canadian exchange students reflect on the impacts of their learning experience in Chinese universities?
3. What experiential activities foster exchange students' transformative learning?

Significance of Study

As stated in the above section, there is a lack of studies exploring North American students' experiences in China, especially Canadian students. Thus, findings of this study aim to contribute to the understanding of Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in Chinese universities. Reflecting upon what Canadian exchange students have learned from their experiences study in China should allow them to extract insights and maximize the benefits of their learning experience. Theoretically, results from this study may enrich the knowledge of ELT and TLT—specifically, their applications in studying abroad experiences.

Participants' learning experience in this study may shed light on future students potentially interested in participating in exchange programs in China. Also, by examining the challenges exchange students face, faculty members, administrators, and researchers are encouraged to reflect on exchange programs they offer as a way of optimizing the learning experiences of Canadian students. Moreover, findings of this study potentially offer relevant information for other Chinese and Canadian higher education institutions to consider, regarding the current context and dynamics of student mobility between Canada and China.

Researcher's Positionality

Positionality refers to a researcher's standpoint and positioning regarding the context (social, political, historical) of the study, such as the participants, organizations, and community. The researcher's position affects the entire research process, from constructing the research problem and questions to recruiting participants (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Therefore, in this section, I will discuss my positionality as an international student and researcher in Canada, including my background, research interests, and assumptions.

My research interests and assumptions are mainly shaped by my cross-cultural experience. English was introduced as a subject when I was in grade three. Since then, I have always been interested in Western culture and English as a language. This is why I chose English Literature as my undergraduate major. I completed my bachelor's degree at Tianjin Normal University, a public research university in Northern China. In mainland China, the normal universities are institutions that train students to be teachers. Therefore, I took courses on Educational Pedagogy and Educational Psychology throughout the four years to attain my Teacher Qualification Certificate. One course I took was Comparative Education, where I learned about educational systems in other countries. Taking this course increased my curiosity about Western culture and the higher education system. After completing the courses for my master's program, I became interested in internationalization as it has exerted significant influence on the organization and governance of higher education.

Additionally, internationalization has influenced my home university in many aspects, such as building research and academic partnerships with foreign institutions, introducing curricula, textbooks, and teaching material from Western universities, and promoting bilingual instruction in some classrooms. During my senior year, I attended a seminar on exchange

programs for master's students between my home university and universities in the UK, the US, and Canada. I then chose to pursue a master's degree in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. This is a two-year course-based master's program, with three courses (9 credits) taught in English at my home university and seven courses (21 credits) at the University of Saskatchewan.

Although I majored in English, studying in Canada has been challenging for me as an international student. First, because I was used to the passive learning and teacher-centred Chinese classrooms, I felt unfamiliar with the active learning and student-centred classroom environment, which required me to engage in group discussions and express my opinion. I was not confident with my spoken English and was uncomfortable speaking up in class. Secondly, I struggled with completing my assignments on time, due to the different requirements and formatting styles. Thirdly, I had difficulties communicating with my Canadian professors, who preferred using emails because, in China, we spoke to professors in person, after class. Thus, I was uncertain about how to ask questions or talk about my problems through emails.

Based on my own experiences, I believe the cross-border education experience can benefit students in various ways, and students' expectations and motivations to study abroad can largely influence their experience. Before arriving in Canada, I expected to learn about the educational system and the culture through classroom observations or field trips. Unfortunately, our program did not provide such opportunities. Moreover, I hoped this learning abroad experience could equip me with intercultural competencies and research skills to benefit my future career. However, I found that taking only seven courses was not adequate. This is why I transitioned to the thesis-based program after completing all my courses.

Based on my expectations and experiences, I assumed that Canadian students studying in China may encounter similar or more severe challenges, especially when they did not speak Chinese. Additionally, their learning experience can be strongly affected by their pre-departure expectations. Exchange students' expectations of studying in China may vary because the exchange program lasts only one semester. Thus, I was eager to learn about their learning experiences in China, focusing on their expectations and perceptions of the benefits and challenges.

I believe my academic and personal experiences enabled me to effectively approach and conduct this research. I can read and assess literature, data, and sources in English and Chinese. My translation experience was invaluable when translating Chinese literature and documents into English. I understand that my positionality and assumption might also influence data collection and analysis. Hence, I acknowledged and reflected on my beliefs and values before and after conducting the interviews so that the trustworthiness of the results was not compromised.

Definition of Key Terms

In this section, I will define and clarify the three key concepts and terms essential to this study: internationalization of higher education, student mobility, and Canadian exchange students.

Internationalization of higher education: In this study, I use the definition of internationalization proposed by Knight (2012) and built on by de Wit (2015), who defined internationalization in higher education as:

> …the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance

> the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit, 2015, p. 24)

Student mobility: Student mobility refers to international students who take a full degree or a short-term program (one semester/year) abroad (Knight, 2012).

Canadian Exchange Students: Exchange students undertake a short-term education experience abroad as part of their home institution degree programs at a foreign institution or a branch campus (Knight, 2012). In this study, Canadian exchange students refer to students from Canadian universities who undertook an exchange program (one year or less) in Chinese universities from 2016 to 2019.

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. In Chapter One, I introduce the background of the study, presents the research purpose and questions, and explains the significance of the study and my positionality. This chapter also includes the statement of the research problem and definition of key terms. In Chapter Two, I present a review the relevant literature on internationalization and student mobility in China. I begin by discussing the definition, rationales, and approaches to internationalization. In particular, the literature depicts China's rationales for internationalization and the development of the internationalization of Chinese higher education. In the second section, I examine the literature on student mobility, including the development of inbound student mobility in China and outbound student mobility in Canada. I also discuss China's rationales, approaches, and challenges in attracting and recruiting international students. The third section mainly focuses on international students' motivation to study in China and their learning experiences in China.

In Chapter Three, I present the conceptual framework that guides this study. In this chapter, I introduce the main concepts of ELT and TLT, their applications to study abroad experiences, and criticisms of the two theories. I also include *Figure 1.* to demonstrate the application of ELT and TLT in this study, followed by the application of the conceptual framework. In Chapter Four, I describe the methodology of this study, my ontological and epistemological stance, research design, participant recruitment, data collection methods, data analysis steps and procedures, trustworthiness of the study, and limitations and delimitations of this study.

Chapter Five outlines the findings—data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. In Chapter Six, I analyze and interpret key findings by reporting on emergent themes and unpacking and interpreting the findings by comparing them with existing research. I also interpreted the application of the conceptual framework of this study. Chapter Seven concludes this study and includes a summary of this study, recommendations for practice, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the background, the research problem, research purpose, and significance of this study. I also explained my positionality as a researcher, provided definition of the key terms and an outline of the thesis. Establishing international partnerships and promoting student and faculty mobility is essential for Canada's science and technology development. Moreover, short-term work or study abroad experiences provide opportunities for students to build international networks, understand political and economic relationships, and gain intercultural competencies, which can benefit them for future employment and career choices. During the past ten years, the Government of Canada implemented policies and

initiatives to support domestic students studying abroad. However, the number of Canadian undergraduate students engaging in an international learning experience remains small, with only 11% participating by 2017. Although almost all Canadian universities prioritize building international partnerships with Chinese universities, most Canadian students choose American and European countries as their study destinations. Thus, in order to encourage Canadian students to study in Chinese universities, it is essential to learn about their experiences in China so the institutions can provide targeted support services.

In spite of the benefits, international students encounter challenges in a new environment, such as academic challenges, adjustment problems, culture shock, etc. As an international student and researcher in Canada, I have witnessed the influence of internationalization on both my home university in China and Canadian universities. I benefited from experiences studying abroad but also encountered many difficulties and challenges, especially during my first year in Canada. Previous studies show that North American students rate their experiences in China less satisfying than students from other regions. Also, there is a lack of integration between students' learning experiences and the educational value derived from those experiences. Therefore, this study explored the learning experience of Canadian exchange students in Chinese universities, including their perceptions of the challenges and benefits. Applying Kolb's (1984) ELT and Mezirow's (1991, 1997, 2000) TLT, this study examined how their academic and social learning experience impacted them.

Based on my UALibraries database and Internet search, there appears to be no research on Canadian students' experiences in Chinese universities. Hence, this study may increase the understanding of Canadian exchange students' learning experience in Chinese universities. Furthermore, there is a lack of literature on the application of ELT in study-abroad experiences.

ELT allows international students to reflect on what they have learned, maximizing the benefits of their learning experience. Theoretically, this study may contribute to the knowledge of ELT and TLT and their application in studying abroad research. Practically, the findings of this study may inform the faculty members and institutional administrators to reflect on their exchange programs and provide optimized support services to international students. Bearing the research purpose in mind, I will review the related literature in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

The 21st century has witnessed the growing significance and complexity of the international dimension of postsecondary education, which has contributed to the expansion of academic mobility and cross-border education (transnational education) (Knight, 2008). The term internationalization has been used frequently to discuss the international dimension of higher education over the last 30 years (de Wit, 2019). Rumbley et al. (2012) also stated that one of the most important and prominent features of internationalization is the mobility of students, faculty, staff members, and researchers from diverse regions. As one of the most critical and visible forms of internationalization, student mobility continues to be a priority among all international activities (Banks & Bhandari, 2012; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

The development of student mobility is influenced by the evolution of internationalization. For example, the internationalization of Chinese higher education has different characteristics at different stages; similarly, student mobility in China also experienced several stages. Therefore, to understand international student mobility in China, it is essential to trace back to the context of internationalization. In this chapter, I will review the related literature on the development of international student mobility in China. This chapter will include three sections. In the first section, I will introduce the definition, rationale, and approaches of internationalization and the internationalization context of Chinese higher education. In the second section, I will discuss student mobility, including the development of inbound student mobility in China, China's rationales, strategies, and challenges in recruiting international students, and the outbound student mobility of Canadian students. In the third section, I will examine the literature related to international students' learning experiences in China, their motivations to study in China, and their perceived benefits and challenges.

Internationalization of Higher Education

Clarifying the definitions, rationales, and approaches of internationalization allows us to understand international activities in a particular context. In *Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalization*, Knight (2008) illustrated the three components in great detail. Rationales refer to the driving forces, that is, why a country or an institution wants to engage in and address internationalization. Rationales guide the development of policies and programs and dictate the expected outcomes and benefits from internationalization efforts (Knight, 2008). Without a clear rationale, the process of internationalization would simply be reactive and fragmented responses to international opportunities (Knight, 2008). Approaches are different plans implemented to address the process of internationalization, which may vary among individual countries, educational systems, and institutions due to the specific challenges and opportunities they are facing and may change during different time periods due to the switch in culture, history, and politics (Knight, 2008). Hence, to better understand the internationalization context of higher education in China, I will discuss the definition, rationales, and approaches in this section.

Definition of Internationalization

Internationalization means different things to different people in different contexts. The concept of internationalization has been evolving since the late 1980s (Knight, 2015). de Wit (2002) asserted that a more focused definition is needed for this concept to be understood and given the significance it deserves. Although a true universal definition is unlikely, Knight (2015) states that the definition should be objective and comprehensive enough to describe a universal phenomenon, but it can also yield different outcomes based on the various contexts and stakeholders. In line with these requirements, Knight (2004) defined “internationalization at the

national/sector/institutional levels as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 11).

Marginson (2023) pointed out four flaws/limitations of this definition. First, this definition focuses too much on conceptual and theoretical aspects of international education (rationales, goals, and concepts) instead of the practical and operational aspects (programs and activities). In other words, this definition does not provide empirical realities, thus making it less applicable for practitioners and scholars. de Wit (2019) also stated that this definition views internationalization as a goal rather than a means to achieve a goal. Secondly, this definition tends to "lock practitioners into the neoliberal policies on global competition pursued by national governments," focusing on the individuals, institutions, and nations without considering the consequences for the other (Marginson, 2023, p. 9). Third, the definition is considered universal as it includes all cross-border activities, which may protect neoliberal agendas and make them ambiguous for practice. Most importantly, the definition reinforces global hierarchy and is restricted by Euro-American centrism, which can negate the practices of internationalization in non-Euro-American countries.

de Wit (2015) stressed that this definition conveys that internationalization is an ongoing effort rather than an outcome because it will be less generic to particular institutions, countries, or stakeholders (de Wit, 2015). de Wit (2015) completed this definition by providing a goal for the process of internationalization rather than an outcome. Alternatively, de Wit (2015) refers to internationalization as:

> … the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education in order

to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (p. 24)

Based on the definitions, Knight (2015) proposed two streams/pillars of internationalization: internationalization at home and internationalization abroad (cross-border education). Internationalization at home encompasses all the internationalization-related activities within the home universities, such as incorporating intercultural and international dimensions into teaching, learning, research, curriculum, developing extracurricular activities, building relationships with local cultural/ethnic groups, and integrating international students and foreign scholars into campus life (Knight, 2012; 2015). On the other hand, internationalization abroad refers to "the movement of people, programs, providers, policies, knowledge, ideas, projects, and services across national boundaries" (Knight, 2012, p. 22). These two streams are highly interconnected. For instance, student mobility is part of the movement of people, but it is closely linked to at-home activities, such as internationalizing the curriculum and organizing international programs and activities (Knight, 2015).

According to Marginson (2023) and de Wit (2019), a definition should be less ambitious or more ambitious and inclusive. That is, it should abandon the ambition of including all cross-border activities and be coherent, explanatory, and more empirical and reality-rooted in the global context.

Rationales to Internationalization

Since different definitions of internationalization represent various rationales and approaches (Yang, 2014), this section and the following section will examine the rationales and approaches for internationalization. Several studies proposed that internationalization is mainly driven by four major factors: academic, social/cultural, political, and economic (de Wit, 2019;

Knight, 2008; Van Vught et al., 2002; Zha, 2003). However, de Wit (2015) highlighted that the rationales for the internationalization of higher education may vary in different regions and institutions, and no model fits all. (de Wit et al., 2015).

The academic rationale assumes internationalization should be a priority in the mission statement and main objectives of an institution. In other words, the international dimension should be incorporated into teaching, research, and learning, focusing on quality assurance and following international academic standards (Knight, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1997). The social/cultural rationale views internationalization as a way to develop citizenship, improve intercultural understanding, and promote national cultural identity and language (Knight, 2004, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1997).

The political rationale represents the role that a country plays in the process of internationalization, such as implementing foreign policies, providing technical assistance, and enhancing national security and peace understanding (Knight, 2004, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1997; Zha, 2003). The economic rationale treats international education as an economic benefit that helps develop skilled human resources for economic growth and competitiveness. International students are keys to trade relations and can bring direct economic benefits to institutions or governments (Knight, 2004, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1997). Knight (2004) argued that the four rationales did not distinguish national and institutional levels. Hence, a precise categorization of rationales is needed as the institutions begin to play an increasingly critical role in internationalization. Therefore, another model was developed to divide the rationales into national and institutional levels. The rationales at the national level are human resources development, strategic alliances, commercial trade, nation-building, and social/cultural development. The rationales at the institutional level include international branding and profile,

income generation, student and staff development, strategic alliances, and knowledge production (Knight, 2012).

Zha (2003) explained that the rationales for internationalization are shifting priorities over time. He outlines four periods of change. After WWII, internationalization mainly aimed to promote understanding between people for peaceful coexistence and solidarity among countries. The World Trade Organization (WTO) initiated the liberalization of educational markets, promoting cross-border cooperation and partnership between higher education institutions (Van Vught et al., 2002). Gradually, the economic rationale became more critical as the economic potential of higher education has attracted new types of providers (e.g., online universities and corporate universities) (Van Vught et al., 2002). The insufficient infrastructure and national funding also pushed HIEs to seek an overseas market. Therefore, more attention was paid to improving international competence and competitiveness to meet the demands of the international labor markets (Zha, 2003). This promoted student and staff mobility and enhanced the knowledge of different languages and cultures. Hence, academic and cultural/social rationales have become increasingly important in improving educational quality and study programs (Zha, 2003). However, de Wit (2019) emphasized that internationalization is still motivated by the four factors, with an increasing focus on the economic rationale, driven by the international and institutional ranking system and recruiting international students as a source of revenue (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

When applying the two models of categorizing rationales, Xiao (2017) found that both models are effective in explaining and analyzing the internationalization context and the recent development of higher education in China. In contrast, the distinction between the national and

institutional levels may not be applicable to the Chinese context because of the centralized governance of Chinese higher education (Xiao, 2017).

Within the Chinese context, Yang (2014) noted that the internationalization of higher education in China has been influenced by strong economic and political factors, with a lack of cultural/social perspective. Tamene et al. (2017) suggested that the internationalization of Chinese higher education is associated with economic, cultural, social, and diplomatic rationales. Huang (2003) further explained the internationalization of higher education from 1978 to 1992 was motivated by the implementation of the open-door policy and economic reforms for realizing the Four Modernizations (the modernizations of industry, agriculture, and defense as well as science and technology). Deng Xiaoping, the former Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China, proposed "there must be a correct open policy in realizing the four modernizations. We basically depend on our own efforts, resources and foundation, but it is impossible to realize the four modernizations without any international cooperation" (Deng, 1994, p. 91). Since 1992, with economic globalization, China's transition to a market economy with Chinese characteristics led to competition with a global perspective in the academic field. Thus, the strong driving force of internationalization was to improve the quality of research and education to meet the international academic standards, which were already achieved by advanced Western countries (Huang, 2003). However, the conflict appeared in the middle of the 1990s, during which the massification of higher education in China made quality assurance difficult to achieve. Most higher education institutions were unable to meet the increasing demand. Under this situation, the Chinese government started to support transnational education by building partnerships with foreign institutions and promoting academic exchanges. As a result, the internationalization of higher education is still a matter of policy (Huang, 2003).

Approaches to Internationalization

Individual countries and educational systems face different opportunities and challenges concerning the internationalization of higher education. Thus, the approaches to addressing internationalization can vary due to different priorities, cultures, history, politics, and resources (Knight, 2021). The approaches help us understand and assess how internationalization is conceptualized and implemented under a particular context (Knight, 2004). Knight (1997) proposed four approaches to describe the concept of internationalization: competency (quality assurance of teaching and learning), activity (specific international activities, e.g., curriculum, student and faculty exchange, financial support), ethos (the culture that supports international and intercultural perspectives), and process (organization and administration of international activities) (Knight, 1997; Zha, 2003). In order to be more elaborate, Knight (2004) categorized approaches from two levels: national/sector level and institutional level approaches. At the national or sector level, she identified five approaches to internationalization: programs, rationales, ad hoc, policies, and strategic. Knight (2004) contended that the approaches can help policymakers in a country, a province, and an institution reflect and develop policies and strategies regarding particular issues on the international dimension of higher education. She also pointed out that the approaches overlap to some extent, and there is no best way to internationalization (Knight, 2004).

de Wit (2019) provided a critical review by pointing out the tensions between a "short-term neoliberal approach" and "a long-term comprehensive quality approach" (de Wit, 2019, p. 15). The current approaches to internationalization focus primarily on establishing international standing and profile, which is reflected by competing for the number of international students, scholars, and publications rather than improving the international standard and quality of

programs and building capacities through international cooperation (de Wit, 2019; Knight, 2015).

Jones et al. (2021) also noted that approaches to the internationalization of higher education should contribute to the common good locally and globally. For example, the approaches should focus on quality assurance by evaluating the international programs and activities at home and abroad, including ensuring the mutual benefits and involvement for all parties and stakeholders and the deep collaboration and communication of local and international partnerships. The approaches should also support social justice and development and treat everyone involved as equally valuable (Jones et al., 2021).

By clarifying the definition, rationale, and approaches to internationalization, we gain a deeper understanding of the priorities of international activities in different countries and institutions. Moreover, it underscores the pivotal role of student mobility in these international activities, thereby highlighting the practical implications of our research.

Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education in China started in 1978 is marked by the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Chen & Huang, 2013; Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (1978-1989), proposed that China should work towards realizing Four Modernizations (the modernizations of industry, agriculture, and defense as well as science and technology) by learning from the successful experience of other countries (Deng, 1978). In 1983, Deng's statement, "education should be geared to the needs of modernization, globalization, and future construction," advanced the development of internationalization.

The internationalization of Chinese higher education went through three stages from 1978 to the present. The first stage (1978-1992) is characterized by the Chinese government dispatching students, scholars, and academic staff members abroad for advanced studies and research, inviting foreign experts and scholars to China, integrating international dimensions into teaching and learning (e.g., introducing foreign textbooks and teaching content), developing bilingual programs, starting transnational education (e.g., building partnerships and cooperating with foreign institutions) (Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party & State Council, 1993; Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). With the promulgation of the *Notice concerning Increasing and Selecting Overseas Students* in 1978 and the *Provisions on Self-supported Study Abroad* in 1981, the number of Chinese students studying abroad increased drastically. Also, as Chinese governments started to explore various Sino-foreign cooperatives in running schools in 1978, transnational education appeared as a new form of international cooperation and exchanges (Chen & Huang, 2013).

During the second phase (1993- early 2000), the policies and strategies focused on three aspects: encouraging overseas Chinese scholars and students to return, attracting international students to study in China, further promoting transnational education, and internationalizing the university curricula (Chen & Huang, 2013; Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). The three foci are demonstrated in the policies. For instance, *Chunhui Plan* was implemented in 1997 to fully support the return of overseas students to serve the country (MoE, 1997). *Interim Provisions for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* in 1995 stated the cooperation and joint operation between Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) with foreign institutional partners should be essential to China's education policies and educational programs (MoE, 1995). Over 70 Chinese HEIs were granted the qualification to undertake different forms of

transnational education with foreign institutions (Huang, 2003). Transnational education promoted the internationalization of curricula, including importing original textbooks from foreign universities, teaching in English, or giving bilingual instruction (Huang, 2003). Meanwhile, China started to put more effort into attracting foreign students to study in China (Huang, 2003), which will be explained in detail in the next section.

During the third phase (early 2000 to the present), the focus of internationalization started to shift from importing Western knowledge to China to exporting Chinese knowledge to the world. China began to improve its soft power and expand its global influence by promoting international exchange and collaboration (Yang, 2014). This trend was featured by hosting international students, holding international academic conferences, organizing Confucius Institute programs, developing international science and technology collaboration (Chen & Huang, 2013; Huang, 2003; Yang, 2014). The number of international students has witnessed rapid growth since 2000. According to the China Education Yearbook (2002), the total number of international students in China in 2000 was 44,711, with nearly half of them studying for degrees rather than taking short training courses or learning Chinese language and medicine in the 1990s (Huang, 2003). By 2018, the number had grown to 492,185, with 10.49% growth from 2000 (MoE, 2018).

In this section, I illustrated the definition, rationale, and approaches to internationalization and introduces the three stages of internationalization of Chinese higher education. Learning about the development of internationalization can allow us to understand the context and dynamics of international student mobility in China and international students' motivations to study in China.

International Student Mobility in China

Student mobility is usually referred to as "international students who are taking a full degree abroad or students who are participating in a short-term, semester or year-abroad program" (Knight, 2012, p. 24). Over the past 25-30 years, due to the growing demand for higher education and globalization, student mobility has witnessed a consistent expansion and become a major focus of higher education policies (Rivza & Teichler, 2007; Scott, 1998; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). According to the OECD statistics (2020), 5.6 million tertiary students engaged in cross-border study in 2018, over twice the number in 2005. As a priority and important indicator of internationalization, student mobility has developed multiple forms (Kehm, 2005; Knight, 2012).

Knight (2012) listed six forms of student mobility experiences. The first type is students taking full degree programs in foreign countries (degree awarded by host institutions); the second form is students taking short-term mobility experience (one semester/one year) in a foreign institution (degree awarded by home institutions with credit from coursework at the foreign HEIs); the third is students registering in cross-border collaborative degree programs involving two or more institutions or providers (degree can be awarded by foreign institutions or by all partner institutions); the fourth and fifth categories are students participating in research or fieldwork and internships or practical experiences required by the degree program at home institution; the last type is usually not credit-based, such as taking study tour, workshops, summer programs, conferences, cultural or language courses (Knight, 2012). For the purpose of this study, it fits in the second form that students from Canadian universities undertake exchange programs in China for one semester to one year.

China has always been considered a student-sending country, with 703,500 Chinese students studying abroad by 2019 (MoE, 2020). Although the number of international students has continuously increased since 1978 with China's reform and opening-up policy, the number remained relatively small (Cai, 2013; Chen & Huang, 2012). After China became a member country of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, attracting international students has become a strategic and political focus in China at the national, provincial, and institutional levels (Gao & de Wit, 2017). As Zhao (2011) argued, in the global market for international students, China has quickly "grown from an insignificant player to a major destination." In 2002, the Minister of Education (1998-2003), Ms. Chen (2002) stressed it was crucial for China's education to open more widely and access the international educational market by attracting international students and promoting Chinese traditional culture. China began to shift its role to a destination country for international students, with 492,185 students studying at 1004 Chinese universities by 2018 (MoE, 2019). Zhang and Liu (2017) also addressed that the increasing number of international students studying in Chinese universities is one of the five major achievements regarding the internationalization of Chinese higher education. This section depicts the historical development of inbound student mobility in China, China's rationales and strategies in attracting international students, and the challenges in recruiting international students.

Development of Inbound Student Mobility in China

China began to accept international students 1400 years ago, dating back to the Sui Dynasty (581–618 AD) (Li, 2000; Wen, 2018). The planned and normative introduction of international students started from the foundation of the PRC in 1949. Since then, the development of inbound student mobility in China has undergone four stages. The first stage

spanned from 1950 to 1977, during which international education was dominated by politics and diplomacy. In 1950, following the end of the Chinese Communist Revolution, China enrolled 33 students from socialist East European countries (Hvistendahl, 2008; Pan, 2013). Over the next two decades, China developed close relations with Asian, African, Latin American independent states, the former Soviet Union, and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe (Jiani, 2017; Peng, 2009; Wen, 2018; Zhu, 2011a). Therefore, a significant number of student exchange programs were established between China and these countries. Most of the international students were from North Korea, Vietnam, and Mongolia. During this stage, the main purpose of attracting international students is to serve the needs of diplomacy and internal affairs, so the admission standards and requirements are low (Jiani, 2017; Peng, 2009; Wen, 2018; Zhu, 2011a). However, the education of international students was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution and experienced a period of stagnation from 1966 to 1971. China began to gradually accept international students in 1973, with a total of 383 students enrolled that year (Li, 2020). Also, international education was highly administrated by the government, and institutions had limited authority over international students' administration (Wen, 2018). This period is also characterized by the Chinese government providing financial assistance to international students, which covered all their expenses in China (Zhu, 2011a). Nevertheless, the number of international students remained low due to China's low tertiary education level (Jiani, 2017). From 1973 to 1977, China only recruited 2063 international students (Li, 2020).

The second stage (1978-1989) was marked by China's reform and opening-up policies, which facilitated international education and increased the number of international students studying in China (Chen & Huang, 2012; Jiani, 2017; Wen, 2018). The working conference on international students held by the MoE in 1979 laid out the guiding principle of "creating a good

environment to attract overseas students and gradually increasing the number of enrolments." The government started to shift power and enlarge the independence of higher education institutions (HEIs). The institutions have authority over recruiting international students (Wen, 2018; Zhu, 2011a). During this phase, Chinese institutions began to accept self-funded international students (Hvistendahl, 2008; Zhu, 2011a). Moreover, three significant system constructions contributed to the introduction of international students. First is the implementation of the academic system. As China started to use international conventions on academic qualifications, international students could be granted degrees in Chinese universities. The second is the improvement of the visa system. The third is establishing and regularizing the Chinese Language Test for Foreigners (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)). With the regulation of administration systems, the number of international students reached 80,000 in 1991 (Hvistendahl, 2008; Jiani, 2017; Pan, 2013; Wen, 2018).

The third stage (the mid-1990s- early 2000s) witnessed the increasing internationalization of Chinese higher education and the building of world-class universities. The rapid development of foreign trade boosted the needs of talents, which to some extent, motivated more international students to study in China (Wen, 2018). Additionally, the management systems have been improved, especially after establishing the China Scholarship Council and the promulgation of *Administrative Rules on the Acceptance of Foreign Students by Colleges and Universities*. This policy had specific provisions on the classification of international students, admission and recruitment, scholarships and funding, administration systems of teaching and support services, and visa application (Jiani, 2017; Zhu, 2011).

The last stage (early 2000s-present) saw the rapid development of international education, with China becoming a WTO member. Following the GATS (General Agreement on

Trade in Services) requirements, China started to expand its international influence and establish bilateral agreements with other countries, which lifted the restrictions of student exchange (Jiani, 2017; Pan, 2013). The MoE's (2001) working report stated that recruiting and educating international students should be an essential part of China's diplomacy. The Minister of Education from 2003 to 2009, Mr. Zhou (2006), also proposed that educating international students is a way to internationalize China's education, increase the international recognition of China's education services, and expand international influence. Therefore, the government decided to enlarge the scale of scholarships for international students in 2008. The number of international students has seen an average increase of 3000 during the three-year period (2008-2010) (Chen & Huang, 2012).

At the National Work Conference on Studying Abroad in 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed the importance of recruiting international students and provided important instructions for international education exchange programs (MoE, 2014). Meanwhile, the sending countries of international students became more diversified, with South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan being the top three in 2018 (MoE, 2019). Furthermore, the issue of two crucial policies, the *Overall Plan for Coordinating and Advancing the Construction of First-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines* (State Council, 2015) and t*he Study in China Program* (MoE, 2010), further stated China aims to be a major host country for international students by creating a solid international teaching and research environment. Wen (2018) noted this phase has three main features. The first is that the Chinese government started to focus on the quality assurance and assessment of international education; the second feature is China's initiatives to promote and legitimize its soft power; the third refers to the mutual recognition of qualifications and credits between China and other Asia Pacific countries.

Under these policies and initiatives, the number of international students has been significantly increasing, particularly the percentage of degree students. Also, a great number of HEIs began to accept international students, from 23 institutions in 1979 to 811 institutions in 2015 (Jiani, 2017; MoE, 2016). Nonetheless, the majority of international students are from other Asian countries (59.95%), with 16.57% from Africa, 14.96% from Europe, and just around 7% from America in 2018 (MoE, 2019). In addition, most research on international students in China focuses on quantitative data with a lack of research on exploring international students' experiences in Chinese universities, particularly the studies on American and Canadian students' experiences in developing countries are limited (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Ma & Wen, 2018; Wen et al., 2017).

China's Rationales in Attracting International Students

Similar to the rationales for the internationalization of Chinese higher education, the rationales for attracting international students are also embedded in the social, economic, political, and academic environment (Gao & de Wit, 2017; Wen, 2018). Neo-liberalism is considered the most common rationale for recruiting international students because international students contribute to the economy of the host country (Gao & de Wit, 2017; Pan, 2013; Zha et al., 2019). The market mechanism has played an increasingly important role in regulating the supply and demand of cross-border education (Marginson, 2006). Chinese higher education has been driven by international and market forces under globalization and the gradual decentralization of governance (Cai, 2013; Hayhoe & Zha, 2007). Due to the marketization, decentralization of higher education and the decreased government funding for higher education, HEIs worldwide started to become entrepreneurial and adopt commercial approaches to recruit international students (Pan, 2013; Wen, 2018). International students can be an important source

of income for host countries because they typically pay higher tuition and registration fees (Hvistendahl, 2008). In the short term, their living expense may benefit the local economy. In the long term, they are likely to contribute to the knowledge economy and innovation by integrating into the domestic labour markets (OECD, 2020).

Additionally, from the early 1990s, the Chinese government began to decentralize the authority of educating international students to HEIs. As a result, individual institutions started to compete for the authorization to develop programs and enroll international students because the university receives more funding from the government by recruiting international students (Wen et al., 2018; Zha et al., 2019). Thus, the rise of China as a study destination is perceived as the result of neoliberalism (Wen, 2018). However, recruiting international students in China is not primarily motivated by economic benefits (Pan, 2013). International students do not pay high tuition fees; instead, about one-fourth receive full scholarships and funding from the Chinese government (Zha et al., 2019). Therefore, neo-liberalism is inadequate to explain this phenomenon. As Pan (2013) stated, "recruiting international students constitutes an important part of China's diplomatic strategy as well as with its political and economic agendas" (p. 253).

In addition to neo-liberalism, Wen (2018) proposed three other rationales to explain the inbound international student mobility in China: the developmental-state thesis, the soft power approach, and the cultural approach. The developmental-state model emphasizes hosting international students as a diplomatic issue for improving China's international relations and the international recognition of the Chinese higher education system (Pan, 2013; Wen, 2013). Rather than profiting from international students, this model argues it is the state's role to invest in the education of international students. This is demonstrated by the government's initiatives to offer scholarships to students from socialist and ally countries since the 1950s (Wen, 2012). For

example, receiving students from developing countries can increase bilateral and multilateral collaboration between Chinese and foreign HEIs and consolidate the relations between China and developing countries (Gao & de Wit, 2017). Moreover, the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) established a large number of scholarships for international students in 1997 (Wen, 2018).

Except for the growing economic and political influences, the Chinese government promotes a non-threatening image by cultivating its soft power (Hvistendahl, 2008). China uses international exchange and cooperation to legitimize and exercise its soft power (Hu et al., 2016; Wu, 2018). According to Wen (2018), soft power is "a state's attributes that produce appeal or attraction" and "is derived from intangible resources like national cohesion, culture, ideology, and international influence" (p. 176). In other words, soft power is foreign countries' positive understanding or perception of China's interests and identities (Wen, 2018). Individual countries and institutions consider the number of international students as an indicator of their attractiveness and reputation (Kehm, 2005). The *Study in China Program* had set the objective of receiving 500,000 international students to study in China by 2020 to "develop China's soft power and promote the concept of a harmonious world" (MoE, 2010).

The cultural approach advocated that internationalization should be interpreted from historical, holistic, and cultural perspectives (Wen, 2018). At the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China in 2016, Xi Jinping proposed *Four Matters of Confidence* by adding Confidence in its Culture to the three matters of confidence (the socialist path, guiding theory, and political system). Through international exchange and cooperation, international students, especially those with Chinese language proficiency, can better understand China, promote and enrich cultural diversity, and enhance mutual and international

understanding (Wen, 2018). Based on the rationales, China has applied several approaches or strategies to recruit international students.

China's Approaches to Attracting International Students

In the increasingly competitive market, many countries and HEIs are developing target strategies to attract international students (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Some countries implement reforms to lower the barriers to immigration and employment. Most governments provide funding programs and reduce or eliminate tuition fees and living expenses (OECD, 2020).

China applies four main approaches to recruiting international students: using international conventions, providing financial support, promoting the Chinese language and culture, and developing curricula and programs. First, China started to follow international conventions on academic qualifications in the late 1970s so that the academic qualifications and degrees awarded by Chinese universities could gain international recognition. China established Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) with 15 developing countries from 1988 to 2000 (MoE, 2006). Second, China provides financial support to increase international students' ability to enroll (Pan, 2013; Wen, 2018). According to the statistics, the Chinese government offered about 10,151 scholarships to international students in 2007 (MoE, 2008). The China Scholarship Council awarded international students 10,000 full scholarships (approximately $ 52 million) in 2007 (Hvistendahl, 2008). The government also added 6,000 scholarships between 2008 and 2010 to attract international students for advanced programs in China (Hayhoe & Liu, 2011). Moreover, another scholarship program is targeted at sponsoring students from the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia to study medicine, engineering, and agriculture in China (Hvistendahl, 2008).

The third strategy is promoting the importance of the Chinese language and sinology, which is reflected by setting up the Chinese Proficiency Test and establishing Confucius Institutes (Hvistendahl, 2008; Pan, 2013). The statistics showed that most international students (62.5%) who come to China study Chinese language and sinology (MoE, 2011). Furthermore, international students funded by the Chinese government to take degree programs in China must attend a one-year language program (China Scholarship Council, 2011b). Since 2004, China has established hundreds of Confucius Institutes in 154 countries to promote the Chinese language and culture (Hvistendahl, 2008; Pan, 2013). Liu Yandong, the Confucius Institute's headquarters chairperson, stated that the goal of the Confucius Institute is to promote China's policies on international student recruitment, international exchanges, and cooperation (Liu, 2010, p. 4).

Lastly, Chinese universities started to increase the diversity of programs and curricular options. Also, China has added English instruction programs to some fields, including medicine, business, and Chinese culture (Hvistendahl, 2008; Pan, 2013; Zha et al., 2019). In addition to studies and programs related to the Chinese language, China offers degree and non-degree programs in various disciplines, such as Chinese medicine, sinology, business, sciences and technology, arts and sports (Pan, 2013). Many Chinese universities have developed English-medium instructed degree programs for international students since the mid-2000s (Kuroda, 2014). Meanwhile, China developed joint programs with foreign institutions, and the foreign institutions established branch campuses in China (Pan, 2013). The rationales and measures to attract international students indicate that China is playing an increasingly important role in the global knowledge community, and the number of international students studying in China has been growing gradually (Li & Zhang, 2011). Nonetheless, China is facing many challenges in terms of international student recruitment.

China's efforts to attract international students also include integrating international elements into curricula and pedagogy, liberating visa policies, providing internship and work opportunities, and improving the overall quality of Chinese institutions, especially in STEM-related subjects (Bhandari, 2019; Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Yang, 2014).

China's Challenges in Recruiting International Students

Despite the steady growth of international students in China, the Chinese government and higher education institutions face the challenges of quality assurance, insufficient services, inefficient curriculum and program development, imbalance of resource allocation among institutions, and limited employment opportunities. Although the Chinese government started to decentralize its power to the HEIs in enrolling, teaching, and managing international students in the early 1990s, the government paid inadequate attention to quality assurance, which is demonstrated in its low admission requirements, low teaching quality, and a lack of funding and relevant policies at the state level and the institutional level (Li & Zhang, 2011; Wen et al., 2018; Wu, 2018). Wen et al. (2018) argued that quality only appears in policies as a concept instead of a strategy. Most Chinese universities prioritize improving research in order to reach world-class standards, with little effort to improve teaching, especially for international students (Wen et al., 2018; Zha et al., 2019). Also, professors' and supervisors' abilities in teaching international content and instructing in the English language need to be enhanced to improve the educational quality and meet students' needs (Wu, 2018).

Furthermore, the service systems and resources for international students, such as websites in foreign languages, club activities, and library services, are insufficient. Since the national government still has the exclusive authority to regulate tuition fees and provide funds to individual universities, some universities cannot invest sufficient resources even though they

want to improve the services and educational quality (Gao & de Wit, 2017). Moreover, the resources allocated to individual universities are imbalanced. For instance, only a limited list of universities can provide scholarships to international students under China's Ministry of Education (Yang & de Wit, 2019).

The current curriculum is limited in context and language (Gao & de Wit, 2017). The contextual features of the curriculum are not diversified or targeted enough to meet the needs of international students with different backgrounds (Wu, 2018). In addition, although Chinese universities have provided English-medium courses, the efficiency remains low because many faculty members are not proficient enough to teach in English (Yang & de Wit, 2019). Employment and immigrant opportunities are limited for international students, mainly those from developing countries (Gao & de Wit, 2019; Yang & de Wit, 2019). However, although the Chinese government extended the restrictions for international students to work after graduation, visa, immigration, and employment policies are still underdeveloped. Only three cities (Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong) launched initiatives to apply for work permits (Gao & de Wit, 2019; Yang & de Wit, 2019).

In terms of policy formulation, China's policy on the recruitment and the administration of international students are still underdeveloped at the national, local, and institutional level (Gao & de Wit, 2017; Wu, 2018). Last but foremost, there is a lack of focus and systematic research on international students' reflections and specific needs (Wen et al., 2018; Wu, 2018). In conclusion, China shows positive attitudes in attracting international students, but it also faces many challenges. In order to attract international students, the government and institutions need to enhance the quality assurance and service systems. The policies also need to be improved and implemented. Most importantly, learning about international students' experiences is critical for

policymakers, program developers, educators, faculty members, and administrators to better achieve the goals.

The Outbound Mobility of Canadian Students

The Canadian federal government has cut funding to provinces to support higher education since the mid-1990s (Jones, 2014). Due to a lack of funding, most Canadian HEIs started to seek opportunities through international student recruitment and establish partnerships with foreign institutions. Therefore, many policies and strategies were developed during the 1980s-1990s to attract international students to study in Canada (Friesen, 2009). The number of international post-secondary students has increased substantially, from 101,304 in 2008/2009 to 318,153 in 2018/2019 (Statistics Canada, 2020). In spite of the abundant education abroad opportunities, the number of outbound students remains low, with only 11% of Canadian undergraduate students undertaking an international program by 2017 (Center for International Policy Studies, 2017; McRae et al., 2017).

Knight and Madden (2010) described the benefits of international academic mobility from the individual, institutional, and national levels. At the individual level, academic mobility can enrich Canadian students' experiences by developing intercultural awareness and a deep understanding of global issues, which may increase their competitiveness in the labour market (Teichler, 2004; Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Moreover, "internationally engaged students can contribute a Canadian perspective to the production, sharing, and transfer of knowledge around the world" (Knight & Madden, 2010, p. 19). Trower and Lehmann (2017) also indicated that study exchanges give less-privileged Canadian students opportunities to seek out international experiences, and studying abroad has proved to have greater positive effects on students from low socio-economic backgrounds. At the institutional level, Canadian universities can gain

academic and research partnerships through academic mobility and benefit from international comparative perspectives from returning students. At the national level, the mobility of Canadian graduate students can promote global knowledge sharing and support Canada's science and technology strategies (Knight & Madden, 2010). Despite the above benefits, Canadian students are facing critical challenges and barriers to pursuing international learning experiences.

McRae et al. (2017) explained the challenges of education abroad from four perspectives: students, institutions, employers, and the economy. Knight and Madden (2010) also outlined four factors that impede international academic mobility: funding, academic, personal responsibilities and time, and culture and language. According to the AUCC survey (2014) and Canadian Bureau for International Education survey (CBIE, 2016), the four main challenges Canadian students face are financial barriers (lack of funding or financial support), academic challenges (inflexible curricula, lack of institutional services and credit recognition), language/culture barrier (lack of necessary language skills, unfamiliar with the culture) and time (delayed graduation) (AUCC, 2007; AUCC, 2014; CBIE, 2016; Knight & Madden, 2010; Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011).

The institutions are facing accreditation, resources, and credit challenges (McRae et al., 2017). Students from specific programs (e.g., engineering programs) with accreditation requirements cannot receive course credits from foreign institutions, limiting the curricular activities they can undertake outside of Canada. Additionally, the resources, such as regulations or policies to track and deliver quality international programs, are inadequate at the institutional level. Therefore, when building international linkages, academic values and quality should be considered to ensure students can benefit from their abroad experiences (AUCC, 2014; McRae et al., 2017). Also, the credit recognition system is deficient, which means there is a lack of

alignment between the course offerings and the credit recognition in their home institutions (McRae et al., 2017).

Although many employers have expressed that they value students with international experiences and intercultural skills, they may lack the awareness or the ability to identify and utilize the competencies they can bring to the organization. Moreover, there is a lack of an effective screening process to identify students' intercultural skills because students are not given the tools or opportunities to reflect on their international learning experience or demonstrate their skills during job searching (Dehaas, 2016; McRae et al., 2017). This resonates with this study, that is, how students reflect on their learning experiences and utilize the gained skills for future development. Economically, students prefer the US and Western European countries as their study destinations instead of the strategic priority countries for Canada, such as China, Brazil, and India (AUCC, 2014; Universities Canada, 2015).

As student mobility trends may differ from region to region, Knight and Madden (2010) addressed that it is essential and revealing to understand students' rationales for studying abroad because it will inform administrators and educators in higher education of the students' needs (McCarthy et al., 2012). In general, international students study abroad for various reasons, including seeking better education at institutions with a more prestigious or specialized field of study, enhancing their cultural competencies or language skills, and improving employability chances (McCarthy et al., 2012; OECD, 2020). Altbach (2004) emphasized that most students from developed countries choose to study abroad to gain a global perspective and experience. Trower and Lehmann (2017) interviewed 17 Canadian students about to undertake exchange programs (UK, US, Australia, and Europe) from a Southwestern Ontario university. They concluded that students decided to study abroad for personal growth and escape temporarily

from the frustrations and pressure of being an undergraduate student. More importantly, credit recognition is essential when choosing their study destination (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). McCarthy et al. (2012) surveyed 87 Canadian students at a small private college in New York and found the unavailability of desired programs in Canada and the qualification recognition are critical factors that affect students' decisions to study in the US. Knight and Madden (2010) proposed that Canadian doctoral students' primary rationales and motivations to engage in short-term abroad experiences are enhancing career opportunities, gaining life experiences, and attending conferences and workshops for their research work.

Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011) examined Canadian students' perceptions of and attitudes toward international education and their awareness of education abroad opportunities at York University in Toronto. By surveying and interviewing 77 undergraduate students, they suggest that students' intent to study abroad is associated with their "perceived social and institutional support and academic hassles at the host and home institution" (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011, p. 495). The majority of students (97%) who are optimistic about studying abroad perceive strong institutional support and fewer academic challenges. By comparison, students not intending to study overseas identify more academic and social difficulties (e.g., language barrier, culture shock, and loneliness) and few social or institutional supports. Their findings also reveal that students prefer long-term programs (year/semester-long) to short terms because they may not obtain the full benefits or achieve their goals through short-term programs (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011).

Since the number of Canadian students studying abroad is relatively small, only a few studies are available on their rationales and motivations to study abroad. Furthermore, the existing studies are about Canadian students in other developed countries, such as the US, UK,

Australia, and European countries. According to the most recent MoE statistics, about 3,585 Canadian students were studying in China by 2015 out of roughly 400,000 international students (Dehaas, 2016). The Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC), launched in 2016, offers courses across different disciplines in English and French at top Chinese universities (CLIC, n.d.). Also, China's Ministry of Education covers almost all costs, including application fees, tuition, insurance, and a monthly stipend. Nonetheless, due to the lack of promotion, only six Canadian universities participate in this program, and most students are unaware of these study opportunities in China (Dehaas, 2016). Due to the small number of Canadian students choosing to study in China, there is no study focusing on Canadian students' motivations/rationales and their experiences in China. However, several studies aim to explore US and European students' experiences in Chinese universities, such as their motivation to study in China, their social and learning adaptation, and their satisfaction with the programs and experiences. The following section will illustrate the benefits of international education, students' motivation to study abroad, and international students' learning experiences in China.

International Students in China

Study abroad is identified as one of the key strategies for internationalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007). With more and more students going abroad for tertiary studies, international student mobility is changing the landscape of higher education (OECD, 2020). International student mobility benefits not only the students but also the host and sending countries and institutions (Tamene et al., 2017). For international students, studying abroad is an opportunity to access high-quality education that may not be available in their home countries (OECD, 2020). Studying abroad experiences helps students develop global perspectives and improve their cultural and social competencies and linguistic skills. Furthermore, the qualifications and skills

students acquire may enhance the potential for employment and career prospects (Kehm, 2005; Li & Zhang, 2011; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; OECD, 2020). Through student exchange and international student recruitment, institutions can build partnerships with foreign partners, promote their reputation and branding, develop connections within the international network and knowledge community, and achieve sustainable institutional growth (Tamene et al., 2017).

Despite the mentioned benefits, many factors at the individual, institutional, and national levels also drive student mobility patterns (Bhandari et al., 2018). Individually, students choose to study overseas mainly due to a lack of facilities and quality at domestic institutions, the commercial value of a foreign degree (better employment prospects) and gaining international experiences, such as learning about other cultures and languages (Bhandari et al., 2018; Cummins, 1993; OECD, 2020). In terms of universities, factors that attract international students include the rankings and capacity of the institutions, the support and service systems, and affordability (lower tuition fees and higher subsidies) (OECD, 2020). At the national level, factors may include better economic performance and exchange rates, sound government policies for student mobility, political stability, and religious similarity (OECD, 2020). However, Altbach (2004) addressed that the main reason students from developed countries study abroad is to gain a global perspective and experience. It is necessary to understand students' motivations for studying abroad and their experiences studying abroad for the following reasons (Knight & Madden, 2010). First, students' motivation to study abroad can be viewed as their expectations, which will influence their experiences in the host universities or countries. Secondly, administrators, researchers, and program developers can better understand international students and better respond to their needs. Thirdly, the HEIs can improve their international recruitment,

strategic international student marketing, student support services (Hu et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2012; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

Based on the UALibraries database and Internet search, there appears to be no research on Canadian students' motivation to study in China specifically. Also, there is a lack of research on Canadian students' experiences in foreign countries. Hence, in the following section, I will discuss international students' motivations to study in China and their learning experiences in China. Analyzing the motivation and experiences of international students from other countries, especially the US and Europe, can help in understanding the patterns of Canadian students. Moreover, the studies concerning students' experiences in China involve their socio-cultural and learning experience. Since my research aims to explore Canadian students' learning experiences, I only examined the literature related to their learning experiences.

Motivations for International Students Studying in China

Motivation factors in the decision to study overseas include the employment opportunities and the satisfaction of student experiences, including the education quality, accommodation and residency environment, social activities, and the cost (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). International students' motivations can influence their learning experiences and how they handle their experiences in China (Bian, 2013). The significant factors that attract international students to China can be categorized as political and economic factors, culture and language, and individual factors. Political and economic factors include China's potential and improving economic development, the establishment of bilateral trade relations and bilateral mutual recognition agreement, and the construction of international education policies (Bian, 2013; Ding, 2016; Fang, 2015; Jiani, 2017; Song & Liu, 2014). In addition, some students are fascinated with learning the unique Chinese culture and Chinese language (Bian, 2013; Ding,

2016; Hu et al., 2016; Jiani, 2017). The primary individual factors include greater personal growth, gaining international and travel experience, improving cross-cultural awareness and competence, contributing to future professional development, and increasing job opportunities (Bian, 2013; English et al., 2016). The availability of scholarships and funding is also an essential factor international students consider before choosing to study abroad (Jiani, 2017).

However, compared with countries with competitive higher education systems, Chinese universities' academic quality and research environments are the primary reasons international students are against studying in China (Jiani, 2017). For instance, Ding (2016) pointed out that the quality of higher education in Shanghai is not sufficiently attractive to international students. Additionally, compared to Latin American and Asian peers, North American students did not acquire a strong academic motivation to China. Instead, they viewed Chinese universities' lower admissions standards as a factor influencing their attendance. Although most students surveyed had not decided on their future plans, they expected to improve their competitiveness in the job market after acquiring the learning abroad experience. Among the international students surveyed, almost all North American Students preferred to work in their home countries (Hu et al., 2016).

Overall, international students' motivation for studying in China can be regarded as financial, economic, political, and individual factors. Financial factors refer to scholarships and funding opportunities. Economic and political factors are China's optimistic economic development prospects and improved policies and administration systems related to international education. Individual factors include learning the Chinese language and culture, enhancing cross-cultural abilities, and career development. International student expectations can motivate them to achieve their goals, but their experiences in China can differ from their expectations. The

following section will illustrate international Students' learning experiences in China, including their perceptions of the benefits and challenges.

International Students' Learning Experiences in China: Benefits and Challenges

International student mobility brings plentiful and diverse benefits to students. The impacts of studying abroad can be explained by personal and professional benefits. Personal benefits include increased self-confidence and maturity and expanded worldview (DeGraaf et al., 2013; Dwyer & Peters, 2004). Moreover, studying abroad improves intercultural competencies, cultural awareness, and cultural intelligence, such as understanding their cultural values, being more sensitive to cultural diversity, becoming aware of the similarities and differences, functioning effectively between different cultural groups, and challenging their preconceived judgments and stereotypes about other cultures and political and economic systems (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Engle et al., 2014; Haas, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2019). Further, Erbes et al. (2022) found that immersing in a local community in Shanghai allowed international students to change their previous perceptions and biases about China. Cubillos and Ilvento (2012) found that study-abroad experiences significantly impact students' self-efficacy perceptions of their foreign language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Professionally, students can highly benefit from their learning abroad experiences during employment, such as equipping them with employability skills (interpersonal, communication, teamwork), strengthening their resume, providing more job opportunities and career choices, and increasing their clarity and motivation about their career directions (DeGraaf et al., 2013; Knight, 2012; Potts, 2015).

However, to benefit from this experience, students must make substantial efforts, such as engaging in diverse learning environments, extracurricular learning, and collaborative activities and actively interacting with and getting feedback from peers and faculty (National Survey of

Student Engagement, 2016). Wen et al. (2018) addressed that instruction language, pedagogy, peer interactions, and student-faculty academic interactions are recognized as critical factors that affect international students' learning experience. Students' individual traits and context-dependent factors also play a crucial role in their learning experiences. Individual traits include students' characteristics (prior knowledge and previous experiences), their motivations and expectations, and their perceptions of the teaching and learning environment. Context-dependent factors include classroom arrangements, campus services, teachers' characteristics, and teaching approaches (Ma & Wen, 2018; Tian & Lowe, 2014). Ma and Wen (2018) described the two types of class arrangements for international students in Chinese universities: separation mode and merging mode. Separation mode means that international students are placed in separate classes with unique curriculum plans, and the classes are mostly taught in English. In contrast, the merging mode is where international students are placed in mixed classes with local students, and a higher level of Chinese language proficiency is needed to attend classes. Learning about these factors allows us to better understand students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of their learning experiences (Ma & Wen, 2018).

Yang (2020) conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen American undergraduate students who studied in China. The students reported this experience was beneficial because it allowed them to engage in experiential learning, develop valuable life skills, bond with people from other backgrounds, and expand worldviews and global mindedness. An example of experiential learning is that the students were able to apply what they learned in class to real life. They learned about the burgeoning business and technology of China in class, and they had opportunities to visit those corporate partners. Moreover, studying in China allows American students to improve their language proficiency and pursue their cultural and historical interests

(English et al., 2016). Tian and Lowe (2014) interviewed eight American students who participated in a five-month student exchange program in China and concluded that individuals' determination and the teachers' practices are two determinants of their learning experience. Students agreed that they started to appreciate the different teaching approaches and the Chinese courses with time. By undertaking informal activities and conversations with Chinese professors, the students were more informed about the Chinese learning culture and beyond the academic setting. They also mentioned that those professors who were encouraging and showed an understanding of their difficulties helped them build a sense of belonging in the host environment.

In spite of the positive impacts and benefits reported by international students, students also encountered various challenges and were sometimes not satisfied with their academic experience in China. Understanding the challenges to international student mobility is critical to minimize and prevent their obstacles in regard to policy formulation, program and curriculum design, and financial and social support (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011). Based on 2552 questionnaires and 40 in-depth interviews of international students, Ding (2016) stressed that international students' degree of satisfaction in China is significantly below international benchmarks concerning the quality of education and other support services. More importantly, compared to international students from other regions, North Americans report the lowest satisfaction levels for their learning experiences in China (Hu et al., 2016). Language barriers, unfamiliar teaching approaches and content, inadequate student-faculty interaction, and support services were identified as the major challenges for international students studying in China (Wen et al., 2018; Yang, 2020).

Regarding the language barrier, many students mentioned the professors' poor English instructions in English-medium classes, limited opportunities to communicate with Chinese students and local people, and a lack of resources to learn Chinese (Ding, 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2014; Wen et al., 2018). Furthermore, most students found the teacher-centred teaching approach less effective and the course content boring and superficial. The inadequate interaction or communication with faculty and staff also negatively affects their adaption to the new environment and their learning experiences (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016). For example, in Hu et al.'s study (2016), the students complained about faculty being less available, tutors being less considerate, and staff being less helpful. Also, the cultural differences in teaching identified by international students sometimes resulted in a feeling of being excluded (Tian & Lowe, 2014). Tian and Lowe (2014) emphasized that Chinese professors should not merely serve as instructors but also as mediators between classrooms and Chinese cultures. The professors and staff should be provided training opportunities to understand how to engage international students in learning and offer proper support services to their on-campus and off-campus activities. Finally, many students were less satisfied with the institutional support services, such as orientation and other services related to their academic and social adaptation (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2014). Ding's (2016) findings indicated that newly arrived students were disappointed with the orientation programs and the support services of their arrival (picking-up service at the airport), learning (advisors and faculty), and living (residence and eating) are less helpful.

Significantly, among all the international student groups, North American students (mainly students from the United States and Canada) had the lowest satisfaction with their experiences of learning, living, and support services. The possible reasons they are least satisfied

with their learning experience may be the high academic standards and the professional support systems of the North American higher education system (Hu et al., 2016).

To conclude, while international students could benefit from their learning experiences in China, they encountered many challenges. Their studying abroad experiences can contribute to personal and professional development, such as raising intercultural awareness, enhancing intercultural competence, and improving language proficiency, providing more employment opportunities and career directions. The challenges related to the learning experience include language barriers, inadequate faculty interaction, limited opportunities to communicate with local peers, poor support services, and unfamiliar teaching approaches and teaching content.

Summary

This chapter reviews previous research related to the internationalization, internationalization of Chinese higher education, inbound and outbound student mobility in China and Canada, and international students' motivation to study in China and learning experiences in China. As a primary internationalization strategy, student mobility has been prioritized by many countries and higher education institutions. The analysis of the internationalization context of Chinese higher education shows that the current focus of internationalization is to export Chinese knowledge to the world, which is featured by promoting student exchange, establishing partnerships and collaboration with foreign institutions, holding international academic conferences, and organizing Confucius Institute programs. Driven by neo-liberalism, the developmental-state thesis, the soft power approach, and the cultural approach, China applies four approaches to attract international students: following international conventions, providing financial support, promoting the Chinese language and culture, and developing curriculum and programs. Notwithstanding that the number of international students

has been increasing steadily, the Chinese government and universities face many challenges regarding student recruitment, including inadequate quality assurance system, insufficient resources, inefficient curriculum and program development, and imbalanced resource allocation.

Despite the benefits and opportunities for overseas education, the number of Canadian students studying abroad is relatively small. Therefore, the Canadian government encourages domestic students to study overseas. Yet, many Canadian students do not consider going abroad to China for four main reasons: lack of funding or financial support, academic challenges (inflexible curricula, lack of institutional services and credit recognition), lack of necessary language skills and unfamiliar with the culture, and delayed graduation. Also, students prefer the US and Western European countries as their study destinations. For these reasons, there is little interest by researchers in exploring Canadian students' experiences in China. International students' motivations can highly influence their learning experiences and how they handle their experiences; this study aims to explore Canadian students' motivation to study in China.

In the third section, I reviewed the related literature on international students' motivation to study in China and their learning experiences in China, including the benefits and challenges. Several financial, economic, political, and individual factors influence students' decisions to study in China, such as available scholarships and funding opportunities, optimistic economic development, and the improvement of policies and administration systems related to international education. Other motivations include learning the unique Chinese language and culture, promoting their cross-cultural competencies, and contributing to their future career prospect and paths.

According to previous studies, international students who studied in China state that studying in China contributed to their personal growth, raised their intercultural awareness,

enhanced their intercultural competence, and improved their Chinese language proficiency. Nonetheless, the challenges and barriers must not be ignored as they can inform institutions and program administrators to customize their support services to better assist and meet the needs of international students. The challenges include language barriers, inadequate faculty interaction, limited opportunities to communicate with local peers, poor support services, and unfamiliar teaching approaches and teaching content.

A few studies have focused on the U.S. students' experiences in China. It is likely that students from the U.S. would have a similar experience to Canadian students. In this regard, Hu et al. (2016) suggested that North American students chose to study in China mostly because of the lower admission standards instead of educational quality. Although they perceived the learning experience as a way to improve their competitiveness in the job market, almost all students preferred to work in their home countries (Hu et al., 2016). In Yang's (2020) study, the thirteen American undergraduate students reported the experience allowed them to engage in experiential learning, develop valuable life skills, bond with people from other backgrounds, and expand their worldviews and global mindedness. Additionally, American students were able to improve their language proficiency pursue their cultural and historical interests (English et al., 2016). Nevertheless, among students from diverse regions, North American students (mainly students from the United States and Canada) reported the lowest satisfaction with their experiences of learning, living, and support services (Hu et al., 2016). The reason could be the high academic standards and professional support systems of the North American higher education system.

More importantly, among the studies illustrating the benefits of studying in China, only Yang (2020) mentioned students engaged in experiential learning; that is, they were able to apply

what they learned in class to real life. For instance, they learned about the business and technology of China in class and had opportunities to visit those corporate partners. It is critical for international students to reflect on their experience as many employers expressed the concern that international students lack the ability to identify and utilize the intercultural aspects. They are not provided with the tools or opportunities to reflect on their international learning experience or demonstrate their skills during job searching (Dehaas, 2016; McRae et al., 2017).

This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating Canadian students' experiential and transformative learning experiences in China. The next chapter will discuss the conceptual framework and its application in this study.

Chapter 3- Conceptual Framework

In the previous chapter, I discussed international student mobility in China, international students' motivation to study in China, and their learning experience in Chinese universities. This chapter explains the conceptual framework that guides this study. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework as "a visual or written product, which lays out and explains presumed relationships among the key factors, concepts, or variables of the phenomenon" (p. 18). Imenda (2014) noted that mapping a conceptual framework is an inductive process in which two or several concepts are combined to form a possible relationship or a model. A conceptual framework is suitable when one theory or the concepts of one theory cannot fully explain the research problem (Liehr & Smith, 1999). A conceptual framework is an integrated way to perceive a problem and is ordinarily applicable to a particular study (Imenda, 2014; Liehr & Smith, 1999). Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984, 2015) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000) were employed as a conceptual framework to analyze Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in China. Before describing ELT and TLT, I would like to clarify the definition and purpose of a conceptual framework. Liehr and Smith (1999) refered to a research framework as "a structure that guides the researcher as study questions are finetuned, methods for measuring variables are selected, and analyses are planned" (p. 13). In other words, a research framework serves as the basis of the research process by guiding the research questions, hypothesis, and objectives, which can lead to a better review of literature, selection of appropriate data collection and analysis methods, and interpretation of findings (Imenda, 2014; Maxwell, 1996; Owen, 2014).

This chapter will start by introducing ELT, specifically the experiential learning cycle and its application to international students' learning experiences abroad. Then I will illustrate

TLT, focusing on the main concepts and their application to short-term study abroad experiences. Finally, the application of the conceptual framework in this study will be discussed.

Experiential Learning Theory

ELT was initially developed by Kolb in 1971. ELT draws on fundamental theories of human learning and development by prominent 20th-century scholars, notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire, Carl Jung, and others (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). The term experiential is used to emphasize the central role that experience plays in learning and distinguish ELT from other cognitive and behavioral learning theories (Kolb et al., 2014). Kolb (2015) explained that for experiential learning, knowledge is not an "independent entity to be acquired or transmitted"; instead, it is "being continuously created and recreated" by new experience (p. 49). This theory suggests that learning is a holistic and integrative process that "combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (Kolb, 2015, p. 31). ELT is premised on the assumption that learning occurs through experiences, which are then reflected upon, resulting in holistic outcomes (Tarrant, 2010; Ritz, 2011). Kolb (2015) asserted that students learn from their experiences through critical reflection, such as "questioning the preconceptions of direct experiences, tempering the vividness and emotion of experience, and extracting the correct lessons from the consequences of action" (p. 49).

Experiential learning, as a type of learning contextualized from actual experiences, is typically found in study abroad programs (Austin & Rust, 2015; Perry III, 2011). International education should provide some of the richest and most powerful forms of experiential learning opportunities for students (Montrose, 2002; Roberts et al., 2013; Savicki, 2008). Kiely (2004) and Tarrant (2010) also agreed that experiential learning associated with study abroad, even

short-term ones, can improve students' understanding of globally complex issues, enhancing their intercultural competence and sensitivity (Wagenknecht, 2011). However, experiential learning does not occur automatically (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). On the one hand, international students need to be responsible for their learning and constructing meanings from their experiences (Roberts et al., 2013). On the other hand, Montrose (2002) explained that study abroad program providers and administrators lack an understanding of the constitution and application of experiential learning in improving program practices. Therefore, without properly designed activities or tools for self-reflection, many students only engage in the experience abroad at a surface level (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Although students report being satisfied with their overseas experience, they may return home without any change (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). They are not capable of demonstrating the skills or competencies they gained from their overseas experience, which means that the educational value of an international experience remains low (Dehaas, 2016; McRae et al., 2017; Montrose, 2002).

Skelly (2009) argued that study abroad programs should benefit future generations intellectually rather than serving as a matter of commodification. By developing the agenda and critically reflecting on their experience, international students can learn alternative worldviews and gain new perspectives on the social, political or ethical implications of the new knowledge acquired (Montrose, 2002; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Tarrant (2010) agreed by stating that even short-term programs have the potential if they are experientially structured. Hence, in order to maximize the benefit of students' learning experiences, it is essential to encourage students to reflect on what they learned in and outside of the classrooms (Sakurai, 2018). Further, the design of programs also plays a significant role in facilitating students' experiential learning. McKeown (2009) explained that many programs lack structure, such as student engagement, group

discourse, and reflective exercises. Strong and Gibson (2017) also pointed out that the most influential activities in study abroad programs are field trips, self-reflection, and community interaction. Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) further stated that reflection, critical analysis and synthesis are essential elements if programs are to reach their potential.

Experiential Learning Cycle

ELT offers "a dynamic view of learning based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/ abstraction" (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). These two dimensions lead to the four key concepts of ELT: the learning cycle, learning style, learning space, deep learning and development (Kolb, 2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2009). The learning cycle consists of grasping experience (Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization) and transforming experience (Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation) (Kolb, 2015; Kolb et al., 2014). The concept of learning cycle suggests that experiential learning can be achieved through four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb (2015) suggested these four stages allow individuals to learn more effectively by engaging in experiences and critically reflecting on those experiences to build new knowledge, skills and understanding. However, due to different learning styles, some people do not experience all four stages. A learner may not go through all the four stages or follow the sequence and they may start from any of the four phases, and sometimes may skip a phase or primarily focus on just one stage (Kolb, 1999). For example, some people rely on senses and prefer to grasp new information through participating in the concrete and tangible activities. Others tend to perceive new information through abstract conceptualization, such as thinking, analyzing, systematically planning. In terms of experience transformation, some people are inclined to watch others who

participate in the experience and reflect on them (reflective observation) (Kolb et al., 2014). Similarly, in transforming or processing experience, some tend to carefully watch others involved in the experience and reflect on what happens, while others choose to jump right in and start doing things (active experimentation) (Kolb et al., 2014).

The cycle begins with concrete experiences, where individuals take in information from substantial activities. Second, reflective observation allows individuals to reflect on and interpret their concrete experience in order to draw meanings from it, such as what happened, what is different from or similar to their past experiences, and what they thought about it (Kolb, 2015). Then the reflective observation may lead to abstract conceptualization, in which the implications for action are deduced. During this stage, the individuals form abstract ideas and knowledge by combining what they learned from the new experiences with their prior experiences, knowledge, and external information. The last step, "active experimentation," is that individuals refer to their understanding of the abstract conceptualization and apply them in new situations, such as their future learning, plans, and decisions (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's learning cycle considers learning as a continuing spiral, where "the learning achieved from new knowledge gained is formulated into a prediction for the next concrete experience" (Montrose, 2002, p. 6).

Criticism of the Experiential Learning Cycle

ELT has been used efficiently in management education and business training programs since 1984, and it has remained the most commonly cited source and widely influential model in reflective practices for the past 35 years (Dennison, 2010; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Seaman et al., 2017). However, it has been criticized by many scholars from a philosophical, methodological, epistemological, sociocultural perspective, and neurobiological perspectives (Coffield et al., 2004; Fenwick, 2000, 2001; Jarvis, 2012; Miettinen, 2000; Seaman, 2008). Therefore, it is

necessary to review and acknowledge these criticisms and explain why they will not affect this study.

First, the learning cycle describes individual learning without considering the historical, cultural, and social context of learning (Fenwick, 2001; Hallows et al., 2011; Jarvis, 2012; Michelson, 1999; Miettinen, 2000; Seaman, 2008; Smith, 2001). For example, Fenwick (2001) argued that the reflection separates the individual learner and the context. The context includes the social, political, and cultural dimensions and relations that the individual learner is in, and these relations are critical to understanding "how learning unfolds in experience" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 20). Additionally, the concept of reflection assumes that knowledge is concrete and is "extracted and abstracted from experience by the processing mind" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 21). This is contrasted with the idea that all knowledge is constructed within "power-laden social processes" and experience cannot "be known outside socially available meanings" (p. 22). Kolb (2015) responded to this criticism by clarifying that although "Experiential Learning is not a discourse on social and political factors that influence what people learn and believe in the tradition of critical theory," it is "not incompatible with these approaches" as "both views together enhance our full understanding of experiential learning" (Kolb, 2015, p. 54).

The second criticism is from the methodological and epistemological aspects, which revolve around the conflict between the learner's autonomic learning and the institutionally organized, assessed, and certified learning (Miettinen, 2000; Seaman, 2008). Miettinen (2000) stated that Kolb's ELT is inadequate as it uses an eclectic method of constructing and substantiating to serve his own presentation with the work of Kurt Lewin and John Dewey. Seaman (2008) also argued that the learning cycle describes learning as a step-by-step process oversimplifies and narrows learning and experiences. Therefore, the "experience-reflect-learn"

pattern should be considered as "an ideology of experiential learning rather than a philosophy or a theory of experiential learning" (Seaman, 2008, p. 15).

Thirdly, the learning cycle is constructivist and cognitivist (Fenwick, 2001; Michelson, 1999). Fenwick (2001) defined constructivism as a process "where the learner reflects on lived experience and then interprets and generalizes this experience to form mental structures. These structures are knowledge, stored in memory as concepts that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations" (p. 248). Reflection is viewed as a cognitive activity, and the process of reflection is too simple (Boud et al., 1983; Fenwick, 2001). The constructivist and cognitivist view learners as fundamentally autonomous from their contexts and acknowledge that the learner can control their reflection rationally. However, these perspectives ignore the learner's unconscious mind and oversee the learner's intention or desire to learn (Kolb, 2015). This is also reflected in Schenck and Cruikshank's (2015) study. They challenged ELT from a neurobiological perspective by saying that the cognitive foundations of ELT oversimplify the brain's learning as it neglects other cognitive foundations, such as salience and priming. The cognitive foundations of ELT ignore the fact that our brains can only focus on one aspect at a time, and the brain will not identify all the salient points of our activities (Baddeley, 2003; Schenck & Cruikshank, 2015). Kolb (2015) argued that the critics from this perspective missed the point that "experiential learning is the posited transactional relationship of the individual and the social environment" (p. 55), which implied the interpenetrating relationships between the learner (subjective experience) and the context (objective conditions) (Kolb, 2015).

The fourth criticism is related to the constitution of concrete learning (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2014; Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Fenwick, 2001; Morris, 2020). Kolb's ELT (1984, 2015) views experiences as something you can reflect upon. Bergsteiner et al. (2010) critiqued Kolb's

false assumption of the learning experience as concrete, active, and abstract and argue that experiences can be concrete and abstract. He gave an example that concrete experience could be losing money, whereas abstract experience is reading about someone losing money. Accordingly, Bergsteiner and Avery (2014) proposed a new model of a concrete/active/primary learning cycle and an abstract/passive/secondary cycle. Morris (2020) argued that there is a lack of clarity in the four stages, such as the constitution of a concrete experience, the need for critical reflection, the context-based conceptualization. Instead, Morris (2000) proposed a revised version of Kolb's learning cycle, including contextually rich concrete experience, critical reflective observation, contextual-specific abstract conceptualization, and pragmatic active experimentation. Nevertheless, Harvey et al. (2016) highlighted that reflective practice is diverse as learners can engage in reflective practice from a shallow to a deeper and critical level. Finally, some studies indicated that the four stages of the learning cycle are not sequential or cyclical and do not connect cohesively (Jarvis, 2012; Kirschner et al., 2006; Miettinen, 2000).

In this study, the concept of the learning cycle serves as a tool for developing interview questions for students to reflect on their learning experiences, such as the differences and similarities between their learning experiences in China and their past experiences in Canada and the impact of the learning experiences. It is possible that the students cannot remember or recall all the meaningful or important learning experiences and is acknowledged as a limitation of this study.

Experiential Learning in International Education

The principles and practices of ELT have been applied to different fields of education since its emergence in 1971, such as curricula and course development in K-12 (McCarthy, 1987), professional development (Boyatzis et al., 1995), adult learning (Sheckley et al., 1993),

and education innovations in higher education (Mentkowski, 2000), including the development of programs, pedagogy, curriculum, teaching methods, and learning styles (Kolb et al., 2014). For the past two decades, ELT has been applied widely in education abroad studies. Montrose (2002) emphasized that understanding and practicing ELT is critical to support international students' academic integration with the "rigor and credibility afforded to traditional discipline-based learning" (p. 3).

Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) employed ELT to design study abroad pedagogies and summarized ten principles guiding the experiential pedagogy, including process and personal integration/development, problem-based content and curriculum, critical analysis and reflection, collaboration and dialogue, community, diversity and intercultural communication, action and social transformation, mutuality and reciprocity, trained faculty and staff facilitation, evaluation and assessment. According to Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002), studying abroad usually includes active learning. It has potential for experiential learning, but that does not always lead to experiential learning as most programs do not provide opportunities for students to critically analyze or reflect on their experiences. They highlight that reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis are essential to reach the potential of experiential learning (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002).

Montrose (2002) applied ELT as a framework to enhance the educational value of an international experience and concluded that ELT serves as a useful tool for understanding how students studying abroad integrate experience with analyzing and reflecting on their experience. She outlined the seven principles to maximize international students' experiential learning experience: intention (motivation), authenticity (real situation), planning, clarity, ongoing monitoring and assessment, reflection, evaluation. Using ELT, Sakurai (2018) examined how

international students perceive the impacts of their short-term study experience as part of undergraduate multidisciplinary education in Japanese universities and concluded that short-term international courses positively impacted their personal development, generic skills, global perspective, and subject-specific matter.

Based on ELT, Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2005) examined the influence of designed experiential learning techniques on students in international business programs. Their findings indicate that students perceived a positive effect of experiential exercises, such as business case usage, class projects, guest speakers, and videos. However, these experiential techniques should supplement the pedagogy instead of a substitute for course content, which requires educators to customize them to fit their course content. Roberts et al. (2013) indicated that ELT can help educators develop and facilitate learning activities that have positive cognitive and affective impacts on international students before (pre-reflection activities), during, and after their education abroad. Passarelli and Kolb (2012) noted that the ELT provides a model for educational interventions in education abroad because of its holistic approach to human adaptation by transforming experience into knowledge. Additionally, staff, faculty, and students involved in the study abroad experience should understand the learning process to skillfully maximize learning (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). They pointed out the roles that educators/teachers and students need to play to achieve experiential learning. Teachers should examine their teaching philosophy and practices and play flexible roles, such as facilitator, expert, evaluator, and coach, during this process. Students should be familiar with the experiential learning cycle and their preferred learning style. Also, students should build diverse learning relationships with professors, peers, staff members, internship supervisors, advisors, roommates, local citizens (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

Finally, Strong and Gibson (2017) suggested that experiential learning can provide guidance in designing activities of study abroad programs. They surveyed students enrolled in faculty-led study abroad and exchange programs through a large US university. The respondents of this study reported that they were given opportunities for active learning and to reflect on their experiences through essays and student-centered class discussions. They also indicated that they benefit mostly from "the field trips, self-reflection, community interaction, and writing aspects" (Strong & Gibson, 2017, p. 97). Similarly, Quesada-Pineda and Haviarova (2014) introduced a case study that applied the learning cycle of ELT to design a study abroad course. The results show that ELT is an effective mechanism or strategy for planning and implementing study abroad courses. Also, it allows students to develop strong ownership and autonomy of their learning process (Quesada-Pineda & Haviarova, 2014).

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (1978) first proposed the concept of transformative learning in *Perspective Transformation*, in which he referred to a "meaning perspective" as "cultural assumptions" that were shaped by one's past experiences (p. 101). Mezirow (1978) explained the transformation of a meaning perspective as something that happens when facing dilemmas in life. They became critically aware of their assumptions instead of simply trying to solve problems and acquire more information.

A meaning perspective is also called a "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 2000), "the structure of assumptions and expectations" that serve as "a belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience" (p. 42) and understanding the world (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000). Mezirow (2000) argued that frames of reference are "the results of ways of interpreting experiences" (p. 12). Moreover, frames of reference often represent cultural

paradigms and are formed under the influences of cultural assimilation and primary caregivers (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). According to Mezirow (1997, 2000, 2003), transformative learning is the process that transforms problematic and taken-for-granted frames of reference to more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective ones, which increases the likelihood of generating justified and true beliefs and opinions to guide action.

A frame of reference consists of two dimensions: a habit of mind and resulting points of view (Mezirow, 2000). A habit of mind is a set of generalized or orienting ways of thinking, feeling, or acting based on assumptions that individuals use to interpret the meaning of their experiences (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). Habits of mind become expressed in a point of view, which represents meaning schemes (specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgements) that "direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, justify objects, and attribute causality" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18).

Mezirow (2000) introduced six habits of mind: epistemic, sociolinguistic, psychological, philosophical, aesthetic, and moral-ethical. Epistemic habits of mind pertain to how we acquire, assess, and apply knowledge, which is reflected in one's learning and educating styles and preferences (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1991). Sociolinguistic habits of mind comprise the social norms and customs, cultural symbols, and constitutive influence of language (Mezirow, 1991). Psychological habits of mind are based on people's self-concept, needs, inner fears, and personality traits and being attentive to the psychodynamics of social situations (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Philosophical habits of mind represent personal philosophy, a transcendental worldview, or religious doctrine (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) identified aesthetic habits of mind as our "values, tastes, attitudes, standards, and judgements about beauty and the insight and authenticity of aesthetic expressions" (p. 17). Finally, the moral-ethical habits of mind are related to

conscience and morality, such as good or evil and justice (Mezirow). Mezirow (1991, 2000) did not view the six habits of mind as independent but as overlapping and influencing each other because each perspective consists of beliefs, values and assumptions that shape how we see the world and guide our actions. When summarizing the key concepts of TLT, Cranton (2016) explained the interrelationship of the six habits of mind:

> The way we see the world is a product of our knowledge about the world (epistemic), our cultural background and language (sociolinguistic), our psychological nature (psychological), our moral and ethical views (moral-ethical), our religious doctrine or worldview (philosophical), and the way we see beauty (aesthetic) (p. 22).

Mezirow (1991) further advanced his ideas and introduced perspective transformation, "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world" and acting on these new understandings (p. 167). Mezirow (1997) presented four types of learning: elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming habits of mind, and transforming points of view (Mezirow, 1997). Taylor (1998) suggested that, when studying abroad, international students can achieve transformative learning through perspective transformation. According to Mezirow (1991), perspective transformation can be achieved through ten stages:

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma.
2. Examining oneself with feelings of guilt or shame.
3. Critically assessing one's assumptions.
4. Recognizing that the process of transformation also occurs in others.
5. Exploring options for new perspectives and roles.

6. Planning new actions.
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the new plans.
8. Provisionally trying new roles.
9. Building competencies and developing self-confidence in new roles.
10. Integrating new perspectives into one's life.

Stages 1-4 focus on changing one's frames of reference, which requires critical reflection of assumptions, the transformation of habits of mind or points of view, taking action on the new insights, and critical assessment (Mezirow, 1997, 2000). Mezirow (1997, 2000, 2003) stressed that disorienting dilemmas and critical reflection are essential to changing frames of reference. The disorienting dilemma is an experience that conflicts with one's present frames of reference and causes discomfort and disequilibrium (Mezirow, 2000). In other words, any major experiences or events that challenge an established perspective can lead to transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Critical reflection means becoming critically aware of their own and others' assumptions and expectations and assessing their relevance and validity for making interpretations (Mezirow, 2000). Stages 5-10 are about preparing for and acting based on new insights and perspectives (Cranton, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). It is worth noting that the ten phases may not occur sequentially or entirely for individuals to achieve transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Kitchenham, 2008). However, the more phases they are involved in, the more likely they are to experience transformative learning (Stone & Duffy, 2015).

Mezirow (1991) noted that one can develop an understanding of oneself and the world by being in an uncomfortable situation, going through critical reflection, and acting on the new insight (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Further, Mezirow (2000) emphasized that "the possibility for

transformative learning must be understood in the context of cultural orientations embodied in our frames of reference," which "shapes our preferences and limits our focus" (p. 24). Hence, for international students to achieve transformative learning, it is crucial to seek out and consider viewpoints that challenge or contradict the prevailing norms of the dominant culture (Mezirow). Taylor (2009) also argued that developing a deep understanding of personal and sociocultural factors and contexts is essential to fostering transformative learning, including the contexts of the learning events, the learners' prior experiences, and their cultural background.

In the context of studying abroad, even for short-term programs, students are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and be exposed to an unfamiliar environment and cultural contexts (disorienting dilemmas), which can initiate the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 2000). Regardless of the length of the exchange program, studying abroad can be a transformative experience as students may be challenged by their previous beliefs, values, and perceptions of the world when exposed to a foreign environment (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Gould, 2018). One of the research purposes of this study is to explore the impacts of short-term studying abroad experiences on exchange students. The concepts of the transformation of habits of mind, points of view, and stages 7-10 of perspective transformation were applied to answer this question. During the past decades, Mezirow's TLT (1991, 2000) was used by many researchers in short-term education abroad studies, which will be outlined and explained in the next section. Further, despite being one of the most common and comprehensive theories of adult learning (Cranton & Taylor, 2011), TLT has been evolving in the past three decades and has been critiqued by many researchers regarding its empirical application, theoretical foundation, and concepts. Thus, in the following section, I will also outline and summarize the main criticisms of TLT and explain why it did not affect this study.

Criticism of Transformative Learning Theory

Although TLT remains one of the most practical and comprehensive theories of adult learning, it has been critiqued by many researchers since it was first proposed by Mezirow in the 1970s. Mezirow's TLT was primarily critiqued for over-emphasizing the individual but not taking account of power or context, including the hegemonic assumptions, the influence of gender, class, race, sociocultural, historical, and political contexts (Brookfield, 2000; Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Inglis, 1997; Newman, 1993, 1994; Tennant, 1993; Tylor, 2007). In addition, Taylor (1997) notes that TLT ignores the role of relationships, which is essential for managing the transformative experience and engaging in in-depth reflection.

Mezirow (1991, 1994, 1998, 2000) responded to these criticisms. Adult learning, such as critical reflection on assumptions, is influenced by contexts such as power, race, class, and gender differences; thus, transformative learning is through discourses embedded in culture and power relationships (Mezirow, 1991, 1996). Yet, Mezirow (1991) admitted that the relationship between transformative learning and the influence of the context is hard to establish, and he did not adequately address the influence of power and societal transformation but focused on individual transformation. However, emphasizing individual transformation did not mean he advocated for individualism over collectivism (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1994) asserted that it is valid to focus on individual change, but that does not mean a perspective transformation is simply an approach to personal growth. Further, individual and social action are not exclusive of each other. Individuals addressing and solving sociocultural issues may lead to social action (Mezirow, 1991, 1997). Depending on the context, individual transformation may turn into societal transformation (Mezirow, 1994). For example, individual transformation may turn to societal transformation if individual learners discover options for social action, analyze their

problems through participatory research, and collaborate with others to take social action (Mezirow, 1994). However, Mezirow (1991) recognized it is difficult to categorize both individual transformation and social action because they can demonstrate several forms. Alhadeff-Jones (2012) also contended that understanding the complex relationships between individual and collective transformation is challenging as it requires one to "establish strong connections between psychological, social, anthropological, economical, and political theories" and "systematically bind knowledge of parts to knowledge of the whole" (p. 184).

The second common criticism is related to perspective transformation. Tennant (1993) criticized Mezirow for viewing "the normative psychological development as instances of perspective transformation" (p. 34). Mezirow (1994) replied that "perspective transformation is the engine of adult development" (p. 228); thus, it is unnecessary to differentiate adult development from transformative learning. Further, Alhadeff-Jones (2012) argued that Mezirow simplified transformative learning and reduced the diversity of real-life variables by portraying the ten phases of perspective transformation as a linear process. In other words, transformative learning has been "caught into a double bind" (p. 183) in terms of generalizing how it is interpreted and promoted and acknowledging its contingency; instead, transformative learning is a complex process both as predictable (ten phases of perspective transformation) and unpredictable (contingent events) (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012). Additionally, each phase is affected by multiple factors and can involve various outcomes; for example, emotions, beliefs, and behaviors may affect other phases of the transformative process. Hence, the ten stages of perspective transformation should be considered through linear and circular dynamics (Alhadeff-Jones, 2012). Moreover, Taylor (2000) raised doubts about the first stage of perspective transformation: disorienting dilemmas, by saying that it is not clear why some disorienting dilemmas lead to

transformation, but others do not. Taylor also asked why negative events (disorienting dilemmas) can lead to transformation, but positive experiences do not. Alhadeff-Jones (2012) suggested that both positive and negative reinforcements "regulate the emotions, beliefs, and behaviors at each stage of the process and in between" (p. 183).

Thirdly, as a key concept of TLT, critical reflection has been critiqued for being too abstract and rational (Clarke & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989). As a theoretical basis of critical reflection, rationality is essential to transformative learning (Arends, 2014). Nevertheless, "rationality falsely assumes the existence of universal truths"; thus, the purpose of critical reflection is undermined by the reinforced "dominant paradigms and ways of thinking" (Arends, 2014, p. 356). Collard and Law (1989) further stated that ideal critical reflection is impossible due to contingencies. Mezirow (2000) agreed that critical reflection is never ideal due to contingent variables, but it can still contribute to transformative learning. Taylor (1997) criticized Mezirow for over-emphasizing rationality in critical reflection, overly relying on autonomous and cognitive learning through rational discourse. Mezirow (2000) changed rational discourse to reflective discourse, which can be seen as a response to the critiques of transformative learning being too cognitive and rational. Furthermore, Mezirow (2000, 2006) recognized the role of emotions, intuition, and imagination in transformative learning. In addition, Merriam (2004) purported that a certain level of cognitive development or function is essential to engage in rational discourse and critical reflection, thus, inducing transformative learning. However, testing cognitive development is a challenging task. Therefore, Merriam recommended Mezirow expand the theory to add "more connected, affective, and intuitive dimensions" on the "cognitive and rational components" (p. 56).

Lastly, from the epistemic perspective, it remains unclear how TLT differs from other constructivist theories, such as deep learning, active learning, or making meaning from experience, because they share many similar characteristics (Cranton &Taylor, 2011). For example, Brookfield (2000) commented that the word transformative is, to some extent, meaningless. Newman (2012) supported this idea by proposing that transformative learning is just good learning, which should be understood as a conceptual metaphor instead of a theory.

In this study, phases 7-10 of perspective transformation and frames of reference (habits of mind and points of view) were applied to explore the impacts of the short-term exchange program. The outcomes of studying abroad are impacted by the social contexts. Also, as the learning takes place in a new and unfamiliar environment that extends beyond students' comfort and predictability, I acknowledged that both positive and negative experiences could foster transformative learning. As such, the criticisms and limitations of TLT are acknowledged but do not directly impact its suitability as a theoretical framework to guide this study. The next section outlines how other studies related to studying abroad have effectively used TLT as the theoretical framework in their research design.

Transformative Learning in Education Abroad

In the past ten years, TLT has been applied to many short-term studying abroad studies, especially global tourism and business education programs. These studies include assessing the transformative impacts of their education abroad experiences, fostering transformative learning through curriculum and activity design, identifying the factors that promote transformative learning, and the barriers to achieving transformative learning. Regardless of the length, studying abroad can foster transformative learning by exposing students to new places, cultures, and learning environments, challenging and testing their preconceived beliefs (Bell et al., 2016;

Blake-Campbell, 2014; Gould, 2018; Perry et al., 2012). Even short-term study abroad experiences can initiate long-term and lasting impacts on students (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011; Stone, 2014). For example, Gould (2018) conducted surveys on students who participated in a one-semester study abroad program and concluded that students experienced transformative learning and increased their cultural awareness, as well as enhanced the subject's cultural awareness. Further, encountering others with different frames of reference during their study abroad can foster different ways of thinking among the students (Daloz, 2000). However, being in another country is not enough for transformative learning; certain interventions and supports are needed to foster transformative learning in students, including purposefully designed curriculum, field activities, cultural-enriched experiences, and activities that facilitate critical reflection (Bell et al., 2016; Nerlich, 2020; Perry et al., 2012; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011; Stone et al., 2017). Stone and Duffy (2015) noted that study abroad experiences aligned well with the 10 phases of perspective transformation and recommended TLT as a framework for developing strategies for international curriculum.

Several studies discussed how transformative learning could occur during short-term study abroad when combined with adequate pedagogical and activity design that challenges students' prior perceptions and promotes critical reflection. Perry et al. (2012) built on TLT and ELT to investigate how a short-term study abroad program cultivated global citizenship and cultural awareness. The findings indicate that transformative learning can be facilitated through experiential activities and thought-provoking opportunities. Using TLT as a theoretical foundation, Cavender et al. (2020) proposed a YEP framework that facilitated transformative learning during a 10-day study abroad program. Y (yourself) required the students to step out of their comfort zones and self-reflect before, during and after the experiences. E includes

challenging experiences and participants documenting and reflecting on their experiences. P (asked the participants to focus on their surroundings: people and places, such as interacting with locals, and to observe the cultural and historical environment. Moreover, Biber (2021) proposed a model of transformative learning for a short-term study abroad program, including high-impact practices, cultural integration, and experiential reflection. The findings demonstrated activities that foster transformative learning, such as community-related projects, service learning, guided tours to historical sites, interaction and having meals with local families.

Chwialkowska (2020) drew from TLT to identify the strategies of a two-semester exchange study abroad program that promotes student cross-cultural learning (CCL), including accommodating individuals with different cultural backgrounds, incorporating academic context based on cultural and cross-cultural content and coursework, engaging in the local community and interacting with locals, facilitating self-reflection. This study also recommends using course content that facilitates thought-provoking discussion and applying experiential activities to potentially trigger disorienting dilemmas and promote critical self-reflection (Chwialkowska, 2020; Taylor, 2000). Similarly, Nerlich (2020) also linked ELT and TLT to emphasize the importance of pedagogical intervention that encourages critical self-reflection in fostering transformative learning. Hallows et al. (2011) designed pedagogical approaches to a short-term global business education abroad experience that promote transformative learning by increasing students' self-confidence and expertise. Other researchers also recommended incorporating culminating and meaningful activities that challenge preconceived viewpoints and promote critical self-reflection in the programs, such as journaling, blogs, group projects, concept mapping, social activities, and case studies (Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011).

TLT was also employed to explore the outcomes or impacts of short-term study-abroad experiences. Bell et al. (2016) applied the perspective transformation of TLT to examine the experiences of 150 US university students who participated in short-term experiential module-based study abroad programs on sustainability. When asked to reflect on their experiences by the end of the program, students self-reported gaining new sociocultural and economic understanding, feeling more connected to the natural world, and making changes. However, they also pointed out that phase 10 of perspective transformation, fully integrating the new habits and assumptions into one's life, is the hardest to achieve. Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) used TLT to examine how students made meaning of their experiences during, immediately after, and one year after a week-long study abroad experience and how they integrated their study abroad experience into their lives. They concluded that although all participants integrated the study abroad experience into their lives to some extent, students who valued their international experience the most tended to engage in further international learning opportunities and continued to find the meaning of their study abroad experience. The degree to which the integration occurred resonates with Mezirow's phases of perspective transformation (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). Additionally, gaining awareness of and learning about the transformative learning process equip learners with the tools to derive more meaningful transformative learning outcomes from their study abroad experiences (Dirkx et al., 2010; Lange, 2004). Blake-Campbell (2014) also emphasized that the transformative learning outcome depends more on how and when students reflect on their experiences than on the duration of the programs.

Lastly, a few studies investigated the factors that can impede or induce transformative learning. For example, Walters et al. (2017) purported the factors that are likely to induce

transformative learning, including students' characteristics, prior experiences, destination, and novelty of experiences. Specifically, they highlighted the effectiveness of journaling and service-learning activities to facilitate critical reflection and transformative learning. Stone (2014) also argued that students' prior travel experience and motivation to study abroad also affect transformative learning. Stone et al. (2017) conducted questionnaires to explore the factors contributing to transformative learning and identify the transformative outcomes in the context of short-term tourism education abroad. Results show that transformative learning occurs in study-abroad settings when coupled with specific learning activities. Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) noted that the extent to which students achieve transformative learning depends on what these students do after they return home. Furthermore, Foronda and Belknap (2012) described the barriers to perspective transformation, including emotional disconnect, being overwhelmed, and a vacation mindset. Stone's (2014) study demonstrated that a sense of alienation can induce transformative learning, but the intimate nature of study-abroad groups may prevent individual students from experiencing alienation.

Application of the Conceptual Framework

TLT and ELT were combined as the conceptual framework for this study. The experiential learning cycle of ELT serves two purposes: guiding the interview questions and examining the experiences or activities likely to bring about a transformative learning experience. Three concepts of TLT were used to explore the outcomes and impacts of short-term studying abroad programs: perspective transformation, habits of mind, and points of view. I mapped the conceptual framework in *Figure 1* and illustrated the figure below.

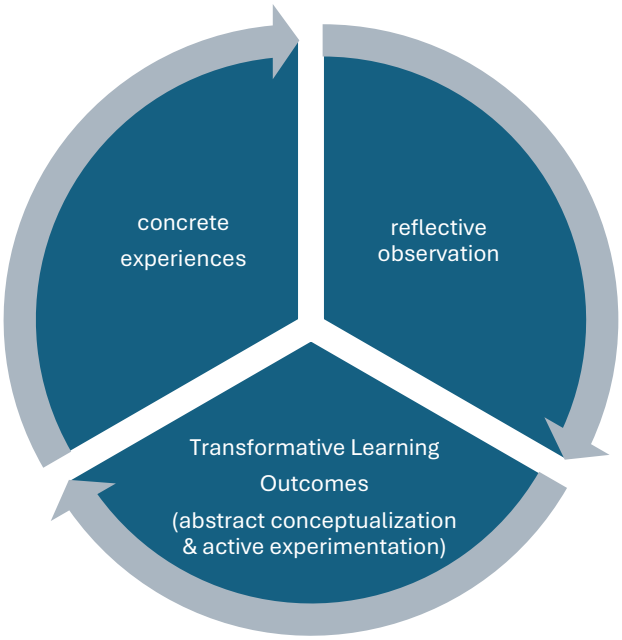

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. Adapted from Kolb (2015) and Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000).

According to Kolb (2015), from a theoretical perspective, the learning cycle can be applied to the individual learning process in all situations. The experiential learning cycle, specifically the first two stages, was used to design interview questions. The cycle begins with concrete experiences, where individuals take information from substantial activities. During the interview, I asked the participants what they did during their exchange programs, including curricula (subject matter, curriculum), in-class learning, extracurricular activities, field site visits, group tasks, student-centered research, and other projects. These experiences often require students' substantial effort and involvement in diverse learning environments (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). I also explored students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning, capacities of the institution (facilities, financial support), administration and support services, and the climate or culture of the universities in terms of valuing and supporting international students and activities.

Second, reflective observation allows individuals to reflect on and interpret their concrete experience to draw meanings from it, such as what happened, what is different from or similar to their past experiences, and what they thought about it (Kolb, 2015). I asked the students to step back and compare their learning experiences in China to their previous experiences in Canada to notice the similarities and differences. This stage usually involves students questioning what happened and what they thought about it. Self-reflection requires students to continuously explore their feelings and emotions and critically analyze their actions, primarily why they acted or responded under certain circumstances (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Then reflective observation may lead to abstract conceptualization, in which the individuals form abstract ideas and knowledge by combining what they learned from the new experiences with their prior experiences and knowledge. This stage is when students critically analyze the meaning of the new experience in order to form new knowledge that can be utilized the next time a similar situation is encountered. The last step, active experimentation, refers to individuals' understanding of the abstract conceptualization and now they apply them in new situations, such as their future learning, plans, and decisions (Kolb, 2015). In other words, students refer to their understanding of abstract conceptualization and apply them to new situations. This process requires planning and the transfer of new knowledge into concrete actions. The last two stages are similar to stages 7-10 of perspective transformation, such as acquiring new knowledge and skills and fully integrating new perspectives into their lives. These two stages can also be used to explore the impacts of their study-abroad experiences. However, TLT provides a more holistic and detailed perspective of transformative impacts. The application of TLT, including perspective transformation, habits of mind, and points of view, will be illustrated in the findings chapter.

In this chapter, I introduced the conceptual framework that combines the concepts from two theories: Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT). I first explained ELT, including the main concepts, experiential learning cycle, criticisms, and its application in international education. Then, I illustrated TLT, focusing on the main concepts, its criticisms, and its application to study abroad experiences. Finally, I discussed the application of the conceptual framework. I used the experiential learning cycle to guide the interview questions and examine the experiences and activities that likely lead to a transformative impact. Three concepts of TLT were used to explore the outcomes and effects of short-term studying abroad programs: perspective transformation, habits of mind, and points of view.

A conceptual framework is the foundation of the research process, guiding a better selection of appropriate data collection and analysis methods. In the next chapter, I'll discuss my choice of methodology, including research design, data collection, and analysis methods.

CHAPTER FOUR: Methodology

Informed by the research questions and the conceptual framework, this chapter describes the research design, data collection, and data analysis techniques and procedures. A research design is a set of guidelines that connects paradigms to inquiries and data collection methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). A paradigm is a basic set of beliefs, that is, the researcher's ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Therefore, before illustrating and justifying the research method, it is essential to question the paradigm as it guides our beliefs and feelings, informs our strategies of inquiries, and guides our actions, which will lead to our choices of research methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this chapter, I will first discuss my ontological and epistemological stance as a researcher, followed by the research design and the data collection methods, participant recruitment and information, and steps that guided data collection and analysis.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology and epistemology refer to the claims or assumptions that "a particular approach to social inquiry makes about the nature of social reality" (e.g., what exists, what are the forms and nature of reality) and "about the ways in which it is possible to gain knowledge of this reality, whatever it is understood to be" (e.g., the nature of knowledge, what can be known, what is the relationship between the knower and the known) (Blaikie, 1993, p. 6; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) stated that "all research is interpretive" (p. 31). Further, they listed four major interpretive paradigms that guide qualitative research: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivist-interpretive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

As a researcher, I philosophically position myself as constructivist-interpretive. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) implied that the two terms constructivism and interpretivism are synonymous.

Thus, the two terms can be used interchangeably. Underpinning the interpretive paradigm is a relativist ontology and a subjective and transactional epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; 2008). A relativist ontology assumes multiple realities "constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially" (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 271) and "there is no single, observable reality" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). In other words, social reality is the product of how social actors interpret and negotiate the meanings of actions and situations (Blaikie, 1993). The purpose of this study is to understand how Canadian students perceive their learning experiences in China. In this case, I approach this research with an assumption that international students develop multiple senses and perceptions of their learning experiences in China based on their backgrounds and motivations to study in China.

The transactional and subjective epistemology demonstrates a two-way relationship between the investigator and the investigated, who are interactively linked to each other. The interpretive epistemology emphasizes that "individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among the investigator and respondents" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.111). An interpretive inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of experience and emphasizes the role of subjectivity (Sears & Cairns, 2015). All knowledge is being constructed during the interaction between humans and their world within a social context (Crotty, 1998). That is to say, the researchers should position themselves in the study rather than being outsiders or observers. The researcher plays a vital role in understanding and interpreting the meanings that participants hold about reality. Regarding this study, I aim to understand and interpret the meanings that Canadian students have about their learning experiences, including their perceptions of the challenges and benefits of their learning experience in China and their reflection on the impacts of their academic and social learning experiences. Qualitative research

methods fit into this constructivist-interpretive paradigm because qualitative research relies on the researchers to understand the issue from the participants' standpoint. Moreover, qualitative researchers are actively involved and intend to understand and explain the phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

Research Design

Qualitative Research

This study uses qualitative research design to understand Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in China. Qualitative research is defined as "an approach to inquiry that begins with assumptions, worldviews, possibly a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems exploring the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Qualitative research allows us to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). Qualitative research is suitable for this study due to the following characteristics. First, qualitative research is well suited for studies that intend to understand the issues in depth, better capture the participants' meanings and subjective perspectives, and produce rich and detailed data of small groups and cases (Patton, 2002). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) articulated that "human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs" (p. 5). Second, qualitative research allows us to better understand the context of the data (Patton, 1999). Third, qualitative research relies on the researchers to understand the issue from the standpoint of the participants. As "the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15), qualitative researchers are actively involved and intend to understand and explain the phenomena or how people construct and interpret the meaning of the world and their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincon, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Fourth, instead of being deductive and test hypotheses,

the process of qualitative research is inductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); that is, qualitative research is the most appropriate to "address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore" (Creswell, 2012a, p. 16). Qualitative researchers begin with gathering and analyzing data to gain an understanding of the phenomena (Lichtman, 2013). Finally, Patton (2002) points out that qualitative research is best suited when the research questions are open-ended.

In light of this study, qualitative research allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon (the internationalization of Chinese and Canadian higher education), the context of inbound student mobility in China and outbound student mobility in Canada, including China's rationales, strategies, and challenges in attracting international students and Canada's efforts in encouraging domestic students studying abroad. Furthermore, international student mobility is a phenomenon related to and influenced by a country's cultural, historical, and political context. In other words, Canadian students' decisions to study in China and their experiences may be influenced by various factors, such as social, cultural, and economic factors. Qualitative research helped me probe Canadian exchange students' interpretation and perception of their motivation and learning experiences in a more profound way. As the number of Canadian students who studied in China is small, the sample size for this study was small. As importanly, the three research questions are all open-ended, "How do Canadian exchange students perceive the benefits and challenges regarding their learning experience in Chinese universities? How do Canadian exchange students reflect on the impacts of their learning experience in China? What experiential activities foster exchange students' transformative learning?" Thus, based on the characteristics mentioned above, qualitative research fits this study.

Generic Qualitative Research

This study applied a generic qualitative approach. Several factors suggest that a generic qualitative approach is the most appropriate for this research. First, as the most common type of qualitative research, generic qualitative inquiry, also known as basic qualitative research (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), is employed to meet the research objectives rather than a single, established research method (Kahlke, 2014). According to Caelli et al. (2003), generic qualitative studies demonstrate some or all of the characteristics of qualitative research rather than fitting within a specific methodology, such as ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology (Kahlke, 2014). In other words, a generic inquiry allows researchers to "play with the boundaries of one research method" and develop research designs that fit their particular epistemological stance and research questions" (Kahlke, 2017, p. 38). Second, Merriam (2009) suggested that generic qualitative studies are epistemologically constructivist and interpretive, and seeks to "discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11); specifically, generic qualitative studies focus on how people interpret their experiences and construct their world (Merriam, 2009). Third, regarding the data collection and analysis, the generic inductive approach requires purposeful sampling, and data analysis is highly inductive, such as developing codes, categories and themes (Lim, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2006).

The generic qualitative approach is suitable for this study because the research design does not fit within a specific methodology, including ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, narrative inquiry, or case study. Furthermore, the generic qualitative approach allowed me to gain a deep understanding of Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in China and how they reflect on and interpret their experiences.

It is essential to address some pitfalls of the generic qualitative approach as it is not as commonly applied as the other qualitative research approaches. The generic qualitative approach has been mainly critiqued from the following four aspects. The first critique is that the generic qualitative approach lacks congruence between the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological standpoints because of the mixing of elements of established methodologies. Secondly, it lacks a robust foundation of literature that can provide detailed guidance to the researchers (Kahlke, 2014). The third critique is a lack of trustworthiness and rigor, especially credibility (Caelli et al., 2003; Percy et al., 2015). Lastly, the researcher's assumptions and presuppositions are not clearly articulated (Caelli et al., 2003; Kahlke, 2014). To address these concerns and pitfalls, I identified and articulated my assumptions, biases, and beliefs in the researcher's positionality section by stating what led to the question and my assumptions about the topic of interest. Additionally, as the theoretical and epistemological positioning guide the research design, I explained my ontological and epistemological perspectives in the first section of the methodology chapter. I also justified my research method choices step by step. Bellamy et al. (2016) suggested that rigour can be addressed by using triangulation reflexivity and respondent feedback. I used member checks, peer examination, and reflexivity to achieve creditability. I also conducted a comprehensive audit trail by describing the research process in detail.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Sampling in qualitative research is selecting a small number of individuals as key informants who can contribute to the researcher's understanding of a phenomenon (Gay et al., 2012). Creswell (2012b) stated that a few factors need to be considered when selecting participants, including the research purpose and research design, accessibility of the potential

participants, and their willingness to provide information. Applying a generic qualitative research design, I aimed to explore Canadian students' learning experiences in Chinese universities from 2016 to 2021. Therefore, I used purposeful and snowball sampling methods for participant recruitment.

Sampling Approaches

As noted above, I used purposeful and snowball sampling approaches to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling involves identifying individuals or groups of individuals knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that purposeful sampling is the most common strategy of nonprobability sampling, which is the most appropriate and used sampling method for qualitative research. Ritchie et al. (2003) argued that the samples in nonprobability sampling are "not intended to be statistically representative, the chances of selection for each element are unknown, but instead, the characteristics of the population are used as the basis of selection" (p. 78).

Purposeful sampling assumes that the researcher "wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Patton (2015) also argued that purposeful sampling allows for an in-depth understanding of "information-rich cases," from which "one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 53). Furthermore, LeCompte and Schensul (2010) proposed criterion-based selection, which suggests researchers decide the crucial attributes of the sample and find individuals or sites that meet those criteria. The essential attributes should reflect the research purpose and help identify information-rich cases. Considering the research purpose and the research design, the participants were Canadian

students from Canadian universities who have engaged in and completed exchange programs in Chinese universities from 2016 to 2021. I recruited 11 participants through the purposeful sampling method.

A snowball sampling strategy was also employed to recruit additional participants. Snowball sampling is also known as network sampling; that is, the researcher locates several participants who meet the criteria first and then asks if they could recommend more individuals who meet those criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Applying a snowball sampling strategy allowed me to obtain additional information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). I asked the participants if they could recommend their friends who also met the criteria. I recruited three participants through this strategy.

When collecting samples, I needed to decide the sample size, including how many people or sites should be included. However, several studies suggest that there is not an exact or correct answer regarding how many participants are enough (Emmel, 2013; Gay et al., 2012; Guetterman, 2015; Staller, 2021). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that redundancy, or theme saturation, is the primary criterion when deciding the sample size. Gay et al. (2012) proposed that the number of participants can depend on "the extent to which the selected participants represent the range of potential participants in the setting" (p. 143). Additionally, Patton (2015) indicated that the sample size depends on "expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study" (p. 314).

Polkinghorne (1989) proposed that five to 25 participants are appropriate for semi-structured interviews. Based on the information received from the coordinators of UAlberta and U of R, 26 (UAlberta) and 38 (U of R) Canadian students participated and completed their exchange studies in Chinese universities from 2016 to 2022. Most importantly, as all the

exchange programs were canceled or postponed during COVID-19, all the exchange students completed their programs before 2020. Thus, all the participants completed their undergraduate degree upon the time of the data collection. As a result, they may not check their university emails. Therefore, I aimed to recruit 12-16 participants. After sending out the invitation letters for two rounds, I recruited nine participants. Then I reached out to another coordinator at UAlberta who is in charge of the Canadian Learning Initiative in China (CLIC). By contacting the potential participants on LinkedIn, I recruited another five participants.

Participants

Based on the definition in Chapter 1, Canadian exchange students refer to students from Canadian universities who undertake an exchange program (one year or less) in Chinese universities. Fourteen exchange students participated in the interviews. They were from nine Canadian universities who completed their exchange programs in seven Chinese universities from 2016 to 2022. Following the purposeful and snowball sampling strategies, eight participants were recruited through the international offices of three Canadian universities: UBC (3), U of R (3), and McGill (2). Six participants were recruited through the CLIC anniversary book. They are from six Canadian universities: the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, Queen's University, the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, and the University of Montreal. The 14 participants consist of 12 undergraduate students and two graduate students (participants 8 and 14). The participant information is demonstrated in *Table 1*.

Table 1.

Participant Information

Participants	Home Institution	Host Institution	Exchange Duration	Major
Participant 1	University of British Columbia (UBC)	Fudan University	Feb-June 2019 4 months	International Economics

Participant 2	UBC	Tsinghua University	2018-2019 10 months	Political Science and International Relations
Participant 3	UBC	Tsinghua University	2018-2019 1 year	International Economics
Participant 4	University of Regina (U of R)	Jilin University	May-June 2017 1 month	Politics, philosophy, economics
Participant 5	U of R	Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance	May-June 2017 5 weeks	Accounting
Participant 6	U of R	Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance	May-June 2016 5 weeks	Accounting
Participant 7	McGill University	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	2018 4 months	Commerce
Participant 8	McGill University	Tsinghua University	2017 4 months	Law
Participant 9	University of Alberta	Tsinghua University	2018-2019 10 months	Business and Economics
Participant 10	University of Calgary	Tsinghua University	2018-2019 4 months	International Relations
Participant 11	Queen's University	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	2018-2019 4 months	Commerce
Participant 12	University of Ottawa	Nanjing University	2018-2019 4 months	Environmental Science
Participant 13	Carleton University	Nanjing University	2018-2019 10 months	International Business
Participant 14	University of Montreal	Shanghai University of Finance and Economics	2016 4 months	Industrial Relations

As illustrated in Table 1, participant 1 majored in International Economics at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and participated in an exchange program at Fudan University for one semester (Feb-June 2019). Coming from a West Coast city in Canada with many Chinese people, participant 1 chose to study in China for two reasons. The first is to

understand China's future economic development prospects and different political environments; the second is for personal development and cultural understanding, which may provide them more employment and career opportunities in the future job market. They chose Shanghai and Fudan University because of the reputation of the city as China's business center and Fudan's prestigious ranking. During the exchange, participant 1 took courses on Chinese Society and Diplomacy and Shanghai Urban Perspectives.

Participant 2 majored in Political Science and International Relations at UBC and exchanged at Tsinghua University for ten months from 2018 to 2019. Participant 2 had been on a one-year exchange in Europe during high school. Further, they had been to China for three weeks to evaluate a summer program when they started to become interested in Chinese culture and language. Furthermore, the exchange program was relevant to their major and interests. They chose Beijing because of their familiarity with Beijing and Shanghai compared to other cities. They chose Tsinghua University because of its high rank. During the exchange, participant 2 took courses related to political science and international relations from a Chinese perspective with primarily international students.

Participant 3 majored in International Economics and engaged in an exchange program between UBC and Tsinghua University for ten months from 2018 to 2019. Born in an Asian country and grew up in Canada, participant 3 could already speak Chinese but was not fluent. Therefore, participant 3 expected to improve their Chinese proficiency and learn more about the culture. Moreover, participant 3 is also intrigued by China's economic growth, which could benefit their career and employment in the future. Academically, they took major-related courses with international and local students. Participant 4 majored in Politics, Philosophy, and

Economics at the University of Regina and went to Jilin University for a one-month exchange (May- June 2017).

Participant 4 had never travelled outside of Canada before the exchange and chose to study in China because of its unique culture, which is very different from Canada. They took courses on public diplomacy, contemporary Chinese policy, and basic Chinese language with other exchange students. Participant 5 majored in Accounting at the U of R and exchanged at Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance for six weeks in 2017. The exchange program was highly promoted by the department.

Born in a city in Western Canada, participant 5 commented they were more conservative and not a risk taker growing up. Therefore, they expected to step out of their comfort zone studying in China. Also, participant 5's decision to study in China was influenced by their family and China's unique culture and economic development prospects, which may benefit their career. They took classes on international trade and finance, international accounting, and Chinese culture with other international students.

Participant 6 majored in Accounting at the U of R and exchanged at Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance for five weeks in May 2016. Growing up in a small town in West Canada, participant 6 wanted to experience a different culture from the Western culture. Moreover, the experience of traveling to China once before left them with positive impressions of China. Thus, they started to take Chinese language classes through the Confucius Institute. During the exchange, participant 6 took accounting and finance courses and Chinese language and culture courses with international students.

Participant 7 majored in Commerce at McGill University and participated in an exchange program in Shanghai Jiao Tong University for four months in 2018. Originally from Africa,

participant 7 was intrigued by the Belt and Road initiative and all the diplomatic ties between China and African countries, so they were interested in learning the politics and the economy of China and the Chinese language, which may benefit their career in the future. Furthermore, participant 7 had participated in a Summer Business Program for two weeks in China seven months before the exchange program, so they were more familiar with Shanghai than other cities. Participant 7 took marketing and programming courses with local and international students.

Participant 8 majored in Law at McGill University and engaged in an exchange program at Tsinghua University for one semester in 2017. Prior to studying in China, participant 8 had exchange and other study abroad experiences in several East Asian countries, during which they learned a lot of Chinese. Therefore, participant 8 expected to practice Chinese, specifically in their field of study, because Tsinghua has an excellent reputation for international law and Chinese language programs. Participant 8 took classes on international law and Chinese language, culture, and history with international students. They also took two courses in Chinese from the Faculty of Law with local students.

Participant 9 majored in Business and Economics at the University of Alberta and exchanged at Tsinghua University for two semesters from 2018 to 2019. Participant 9 chose to study in China because of China's future economic development prospects and interest in Chinese culture and language, which may benefit their career. Similar to participant 6, participant 9 also had a good impression and developed an interest in China since they went to China for two weeks in high school for a summer program. Moreover, Tsinghua is one of the high-ranked universities in China, and the offered program fits their major. They took courses in business and economics with international and local students.

Participant 10 majored in International Relations at the University of Calgary and exchanged at Tsinghua University for one semester from 2018 to 2019. Before the exchange in China, participant 10 studied Chinese for three years. Therefore, they wanted language and cultural immersion. Other reasons to study in China include the program that fits their major and the funding from the Chinese government.

Participant 11 majored in Commerce at Queen's University and exchanged at Shanghai Jiao Tong University for four months (2018-2019). Going on exchange is part of the Commerce program at Queens. Participant 11 chose to study in China because of its unique culture and Participant 11's interest in learning Chinese.

Participant 12 majored in Environmental Science at the University of Ottawa and participated in an exchange program at Nanjing University for four months (2018-2019). Participant 12 wanted to do an international exchange program to get out of their comfort zone. Also, participant 12 became interested in Chinese culture after being in China once for a short term before their exchange. They chose Nanjing University because of the compatibility between the courses and their program and the availability of information on the courses. They took courses related to their major and audited Chinese language classes.

Participant 13 majored in International Business at Carleton University and participated in an exchange program at Nanjing University for ten months (2018-2019). The exchange program was a requirement of their undergraduate program. They had to learn a new language during the first two years and then study abroad in the third year. Due to China's economic prospects, participant 13 decided to learn Mandarin. Further, they decided to exchange in China because of the different and unique culture and the bias and misconceptions about China in the media. Shanghai is a very international city, and participant 13 wanted to live in a less

international and more traditional city, which was why they picked Nanjing University. They took finance and human resources classes and Chinese language and culture classes during the exchange.

Participant 14 majored in Industrial Relations at the University of Montreal and engaged in an exchange program at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics for one semester in 2016. Participant 14 chose to study in China because of the special program that includes learning in classrooms and mainly in a law firm. They took courses on American and Chinese law concerning human resources unions and labor law. They also took courses in Chinese language and culture. Further, the Chinese government and the University of Montreal provided funding and scholarships.

The duration of the exchange programs varies. Durations of the exchange program also differ. Half of the participants stayed in China for one semester (4 months); four participants spent two semesters in China (10 months to one year); and three participants (Participants 4, 5, 6) only spent one month in China. Four out of the 14 participants could speak Mandarin before studying in China. Participant 3 has Chinese heritage; participant 8 could speak Mandarin because of their previous studying abroad experiences in other Asian countries; participant 10 started learning Mandarin at their home university for two years before studying in China out of personal interests, and participant 13 started learning Mandarin in their home university for three years before studying in China as part of the requirements of their degree program.

The participants were mainly from economics, commerce, and international relations. One participant was from environmental science, and another was from Law. The 14 participants consist of 12 undergraduate students and 2 graduate students. Moreover, most participants (11 out of 14) chose universities in Beijing and Shanghai, specifically high-ranking universities such

as Tsinghua University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It is also worth noting that although all the participants are Canadian citizens, three had Asian (participant 3), African (participant 7), and Arabic origins (participant 14), respectively.

Access and Rapport

After identifying possible participants, the question was how to access them. Creswell (2012b) advised that as a "stranger" or "outsider," approaching the "gatekeeper" is a wise strategy to study the culture (p. 154). A gatekeeper is defined as "an individual who has an official or unofficial role at the site, provides entrance to a site, helps researchers locate people, and assists in the identification of places to study" (Creswell, 2012b, p. 154). For this study, the gatekeepers were the coordinators working at the UAlberta International Office, the UBC Go Global Vancouver, the McGill Abroad, and the U of R International. They were in charge of the exchange programs between the four Canadian universities and Chinese universities; one coordinator was in charge of the CLIC program at the UAlberta.

Bogdan and Biklen (1997) also noted that the researcher should notify the gatekeepers of the following information, including why I choose the sites, what I will do, how I will report the results, as well as what will the gatekeeper, the participants, or the sites gain from the study. First, I sought ethics approval from the institutional review boards at the four universities (see Appendix B and Appendix C) for a sample of the invitations to participate letter, consent form, and ethics approval letters. After that, I sent the research information letters that included the information mentioned above to the coordinators via email. I approached the coordinators to help send the information letters to the potential participants (exchange students). The coordinator who is in charge of the CLIC was not able to send out the recruitment and information letters due to confidentiality. However, they provided me with a CLIC anniversary, in which I found the

exchange students' information and reached out to them. Third, individuals willing to participate in this study contacted me, and I obtained their permission to participate in this study. Fourth, I asked participants if they could recommend their friends or classmates who also had an exchange experience in China.

This section introduced the selection criteria of participants and the information of the potential participants. The following section will address the methods that I used to collect data.

Data Collection

In accordance with the generic qualitative research approach, this section will introduce the data collection methods. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), data collection methods are the techniques or procedures the researcher uses to gather data. However, data is not simply gathered but based on the research questions and design. Therefore, the data collection methods should be able to answer the research questions (Schwandt, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to answer the research questions.

1. How do Canadian exchange students perceive the benefits and challenges regarding their learning experience in China?
2. How are Canadian exchange students impacted by their learning experience in China?
3. What experiential activities foster exchange students' transformative learning?

Semi-structured Interview

An interview allows the researcher to access and understand other people's perspectives (Patton, 2015). Using interviews, the researcher will focus on the participants' textual and structural descriptions of their experiences and understand their shared experiences (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, the other people are Canadian students who completed exchange programs in China. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined three interview types based on their structures.

Questions in a highly structured interview are predetermined. Questions in an unstructured interview are flexible and open-ended. Its goal is to formulate subsequent interview questions according to the participants' responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured interview is guided by a list of questions without predetermining the exact wording. The questions are typically organized and asked systematically and consistently. Semi-structured interviews allow more leeway for interviewees to talk about what is important for them. Meanwhile, instead of following a pre-set interview guide, interviewers can focus the conversations on the issues related to the research purpose and questions (Brinkmann, 2018). Moreover, the interviewer can probe further beyond the predetermined questions based on the participants' answers because a semi-structured interview assumes that individuals understand the world in unique ways; and the researchers should approach the world from the subject's perspective (Berg, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews because I am interested in how the Canadian exchange students "interpret the world around them"; that is, how they view and reflect on their learning experience in the Chinese university (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Furthermore, while conducting the interviews, the students' comments or responses may inspire new perspectives, which will lead to subsequent interview questions. Hence, a semi-structured interview was the appropriate data collection method for this study.

In terms of the interview questions, Patton (2015) suggested six types of questions: experience and behavior, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, background questions. Furthermore, in qualitative interviews, researchers usually ask open-ended questions and record their answers (Creswell, 2012a). Patton (2015) also highlighted that "why" questions should be avoided because they tend to point at causal relationships and lead to dead-ended

responses. In this study, I asked the exchange students questions about their background, experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (see Appendix D for Interview Guide). I conducted one-on-one interviews through video conferencing (e.g., Zoom). The interviews were recorded.

Since the pool of potential participants was small, I conducted in-depth interviews. As a qualitative research technique, in-depth interviewing means "conducting intensive interviewing with a small number of respondents," which allows the researcher (interviewer) to deeply explore the respondents' perspectives on "a particular idea, program, or situation" (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3; Guion et al., 2001). In-depth interviews are usually long-duration interviews (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Therefore, the interviews for this study lasted around 60 mins to 90 minutes. Boyce and Neale (2006) suggest that in-depth interviews are useful when the researcher wants to deeply understand a person's thoughts or behaviours or new issues.

I applied the reflection guidance developed by the University of Guelph (n.d.) for formulating my interview questions. According to this guidance, three questions can be asked for someone to reflect on their experiences, including what? (what happened?) So what? (analyze the experience) And now what? (the impacts and the future application of the experiences). The reflection process started by asking the participants to describe their academic and social learning experiences in China, such as classroom learning, extracurricular activities, traveling, university clubs, institutional support, and services. Second, I asked the participants to think about how the learning experiences differed from their expectations, how the experiences changed their worldview/ways of thinking/ perspectives/beliefs, the challenges they encountered, and the benefits of their learning experiences. Thirdly, the participants were asked to comment on the impact of this experience, such as applying what they have learned (academic/career

development). Lastly, I sent out the interview question guide one week before their interviews, so the participants had time to recall and think about their experiences.

Guion et al. (2001) outlined four key characteristics of in-depth interviews, including open-ended questions, semi-structured format, seeking understanding and interpretation, and recording responses. Boyce and Neale (2006) recommended that the interviewer should ask factual questions before opinion questions. For example, in the interview guide, I asked the participants, "What are the in-class and outside class learning activities you engaged in" before asking, "what did you think of the activities." Secondly, Boyce and Neale (2006) suggested using probes as needed, such as asking the respondents for examples or elaborating and further explaining an idea.

Furthermore, piloting interviews were also used to improvise for the major study because it is essential to identify potential problems before the full-scale and time-consuming research is undertaken (Adams & Cox, 2008; Kim, 2011; Majid et al., 2017). A pilot study is referred to as a small-scale study designed to inform the main study (Jariath et al., 2000). Piloting interviews allow the researcher to practice interviewing techniques, modify interview guide questions, improve the selection criteria of participants, and identify their bias and expectations (Adams & Cox, 2008; Majid et al., 2017). Harding (2013) stated that piloting interviews are not necessary because a researcher can improve the questions as the interview progresses. However, it is distinctly helpful when the size of potential respondents is small. I selected three participants to conduct pilot interviews.

Based on their responses, I changed the orders of the interview questions. Also, after completing all the interviews, follow-up interviews were conducted with the three participants who did pilot interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the activity of making sense of, theorizing, and interpreting the data (Schwandt, 2014). The process is used to "answer your research questions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). Gay et al. (2012) indicated that data analysis should begin after the first interview and throughout the data collection process. Further, data analysis is a recursive process involving moving back and forth between the raw data, the coded extracts, and the interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this section, I detail the methods and procedures for data analysis. Following a generic qualitative approach, I specifically chose to employ an inductive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Percy et al., 2015). Thematic analysis is a method guided by the research questions for "identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). I selected thematic analysis for its flexibility regarding theoretical standpoints, research questions, sample sizes, and data collection methods. It is particularly effective in identifying the patterns of participants' lived experiences, such as their perspectives, behavior, and practices (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I applied the inductive approach, which is data-driven and aims to extract codes, develop themes from the raw data, and establish links between research questions and findings without trying to fit into an existing frame or analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas, 2003).

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide for thematic data analysis: familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. In phase 1, I immersed myself in the data to understand the depth and breadth of the content. As Giorgi (1997) suggested, the researcher must read through the transcripts to gain a general sense of the

data. Therefore, at the initial stage, I listened to the audio records several times to transcribe the interviews, read through all the transcripts, and get a general sense of the data, which allowed me to memo ideas and consider whether more data was needed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I also started to take notes of the ideas and potential codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second step was coding. Coding is the process of "categorically marking or referencing units of texts (words, sentences, paragraphs, and quotations) with codes and labels as a way to indicate patterns and meaning" (Gay et al., 2012, p. 469). Saldana (2013) defined a code as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). A code can be a word, a phrase summarised by the research, and from the respondents' own words (Lichtman, 2013). During the coding process, I made sense of the data and dissected the interview transcripts with descriptive codes. In the third phase, I categorized the initially coded data into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by identifying the relationship between codes and themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme should capture the essential information related to the research questions. The purpose of classifying themes or categories is to focus on the details and distinctions under each subject (Ritchie et al., 2003).

Phase four includes reviewing the themes, a systematic process that ensures the validity of the themes. I examined the themes, checking if they have enough data to support them, if they might belong into the same category, or if they form a coherent pattern in relation to the whole data set. During phase five, I defined and interpreted the themes by identifying the meaning of the themes, considering how they fit into the whole date set in related to the research questions, and ensuring the themes are not overlapped (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this stage, the researcher steps back from the codes and themes, and "forms some larger meaning about the phenomenon

based on personal views, comparison with past studies, or both" (Creswell, 2012a, p. 257; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lichtman (2013) also stressed that the researcher should identify the most powerful and rich concepts from the themes. In the last phase, I finished the final analysis and wrote the findings, which tells a concise and coherence story of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness

During data collection and analysis, qualitative researchers need to ensure the trustworthiness of their findings and interpretations. The quality or accuracy of research (its findings) is known as trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed four criteria to ensure trustworthiness, which are commonly used in qualitative studies, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility purports that the inquirer's interpretation and representation (research findings) match the respondents' views (reality) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study used three strategies to achieve creditability: member checks, peer examination, and reflexivity. First, I used member checks. Guba (1981) noted that a "member check is the single most important action in the heart of the credibility criterion" (p. 85). After transcribing the audio interviews and interpreting the data, I shared the transcripts and the interpretation (theme analysis) with the participants to check the accuracy of my transcribing and analysis of individual interview themes for accuracy and to avoid misunderstanding. In terms of peer examination, I shared preliminary findings (debriefing of themes and topics arising from the data analysis) with my supervisor. Once reviewed by my supervisor, I shared the study findings for confirmation with the participants again. Reflexivity is also called the researcher's positionality, which requires researchers to examine their assumptions and bracket their personal experiences and

preconceived notions (Marton, 1986; Van Manen, 1990). I explained my positionality and assumptions in the first chapter.

Transferability focuses on the issue of generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Cuba (1985) emphasized that it is up to the readers to decide if the results are transferable to their contexts rather than the researcher's responsibility to provide transferability or generalization. However, a rich description of the context of the study is necessary to make transferability judgment possible for readers or potential appliers (Guba,1981). People who read and use the study findings decide if they are applicable to their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, I provided a detailed description of the exchange programs and the background of the participants, including the program duration, institutions, ethnic origins, levels of study (graduate and undergraduate), and how the different contexts affect the results in the findings so that the readers can "determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259).

Dependability requires the researcher to make sure the inquiry process is logical and traceable; confirmability is related to the fact that the interpretation of the data is discernible rather than simply the inquirer's imagination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the major technique for establishing confirmability and dependability is an audit trail, which should include a detailed process of data collection, data analysis, choices of methodology, and framework (Wolf, 2003). A comprehensive audit trail should examine the inquiry process and product, such as research decisions and activities demonstrating the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes (Bowen, 2009). Halpern (1983) proposed that six categories of information should be collected for the audit trail: raw data (interview transcripts, field notes, documents), data analysis notes (summaries or codes), data synthesis

products (themes, categories, relationships, interpretations), process notes (choices of methodologies or framework), and personal or reflexive notes, and instrument information (interview schedules, pilot studies). I documented the data collection and analysis procedures in my journal to establish confirmability and dependability. Examples of the data analysis process (Appendix E) and preliminary codes and themes (Appendix F) were provided. Also, my supervisor reviewed and confirmed the interview data, and the data analysis process. Further, the research findings and interpretations were linked with other assertions and statements in the discussion.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study only focuses on students participating in exchange programs; thus, it is beyond the scope of this study to include students who participated in other types of programs, such as language, volunteer, or entrepreneurship programs. Due to the small participant pool and the postponed or canceled exchange programs for the past three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants all completed their exchange programs before 2019.

Thirdly, the methodological choices were constrained by data collection. I planned to recruit participants from four Canadian universities, with four participants from each institution. Nonetheless, the number of potential participants was not ideal. I initially aimed to recruit exchange students who studied at the same Chinese university during the same period, so I also contacted the international offices of several Chinese universities, but they could not provide any information due to confidentiality reasons. Therefore, I used different recruitment methods, including contacting the international offices, reaching out to the individual participants on LinkedIn, and asking for their recommendations. The 14 participants were from nine Canadian

universities and went to seven Chinese universities. As such, the case study did not fit the purpose of this study. Instead, a generic qualitative inquiry was applied as the research method.

Further, the 14 students completed their exchange programs before 2019, with the earliest in 2016. Participants recalled their experiences over several years and across different lengths (three to six years). Thus, the recall of past experiences might lack details or accuracy. Moreover, although I sent the interview questions before our interviews, some participants needed more time to reflect fully on their experiences, depending on their ability to recall and remember.

Delimitation of the Study

Delimitations are the limitations the researcher sets to "constrain the scope of the study" and make the study objective more manageable (Ellis & Levy, 2009, p.332). In other words, the researchers consciously set boundaries to indicate what they intend to do or not to do in their studies (Ormrod & Leedy, 2005). In this section, based on the proposed purpose and questions, I delimitated the context and participants of this study. According to Knight (2012), there are six categories of student mobility experiences, including completion of a full degree in a foreign institution, short-term study abroad experiences, cross-border collaborative degree programs, research and fieldwork research, internship, and study tours (conferences, workshops, culture or language courses). This study only focused on exchange students' experiences.

Concerning the participants, as all the exchange programs were canceled or postponed during COVID-19 before 2020, this study only included Canadian students who participated in exchange programs between Canadian and Chinese universities from 2016 to 2019. All the institutions in this study are public universities across four provinces in Canada, including Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. Therefore, it can be assumed that the

targeted participants provided, broadly, a Canadian student perspective of exchange students' learning experiences in China.

Ethical Consideration

The matter of ethics in qualitative inquiry is to justify human actions, especially when the actions affect others (Schwandt, 2014). Ethics behavior is a set of "moral principles, rules, or standards governing a person or profession" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 66). When conducting qualitative research, the two primary ethical considerations are doing no harm and providing informed consent (Gay et al., 2012; Tracy, 2013). Doing no harm means the researcher should avoid doing anything that could harm the participants mentally, physically, or socially (Lichtman, 2013). There are no risks or discomforts associated with the study that would not be encountered in everyday life, except that the participants may feel tired as they recall their experience 2-5 years ago.

Lichtman (2013) also outlined other principles of ethical considerations, including protecting the privacy and anonymity of the participants, maintaining the confidentiality of information, avoiding inappropriate behavior, and interpreting the data honestly. Additionally, Tracy (2013) suggested that ethical issues exist in the guidelines "prescribed by certain organizational or institutional review boards (IRB) as being universal or necessary" (p. 243). Hence, I first applied for ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Once approved at UAlberta, I also applied for ethics approval at McGill, UBC, and U of R. After receiving the ethics approval from all the institutions, I sent out invitation letters to the coordinators. They emailed the potential participants to inform them of the study information, including the research background, purposes, and the participants' rights and risks (Appendix A). Finally, information letters and consent forms (Appendix B) were sent to the individuals who

agreed to participate in this study to get their permission. Participants were asked to give verbal consent before each interview, which was also recorded. The consent forms informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop at any time during the interview and withdraw from the study before the data analysis started. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality, all the participants remained anonymous by using pseudonyms during the data analysis procedure and in the final project.

As importantly, practicing ethics in research is not simply following the guidelines of the institutional review boards; instead, it should be immersed throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting process. Also, it should reflect the researcher's values and sensitivity (Creswell, 2012a; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The ethics in data collection and analysis were explained in the last section (trustworthiness). Finally, the data reporting was honest, free of jargon, and understandable to the public (Creswell, 2012a).

In this chapter, I first discussed my ontological and epistemological stance as a researcher. I positioned myself as constructivist-interpretive, underpinning a relativist ontology and a subjective and transactional epistemology. I applied the generic qualitative research design with in-depth semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. Purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used for participant selection and recruitment. Fourteen exchange students participated in the interviews. They were from nine Canadian universities that completed their exchange programs in seven Chinese universities from 2016 to 2022. Under the generic qualitative approach and interview data collection method, I specifically chose to employ an inductive thematic analysis method, following a six-step guide for thematic data analysis: familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. In the next

section, I discussed the strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The strategies include member checks, peer examination, reflexivity, providing detailed and rich descriptions of the context and background of the participants, and conducting a comprehensive audit trail. In the end, I introduced the limitations and delimitations of this study and discussed some ethical considerations. In the following chapter, I will outline the findings from analyzing the data.

CHAPTER FIVE: Findings

This chapter, I outline the findings from analyzing the semi-structured interviews. By asking Canadian exchange students to reflect on their academic and social learning experiences in China, this study aimed to explore the perceived benefits and challenges of their learning experiences in China. In accordance with the research purpose, this chapter has three sections. The first section will discuss exchange students' perceived benefits of their learning experiences in China. The second section will present the challenges students encountered during their stay in China. In the third section, I will explain the factors that the participants perceived to influence their learning experience in China. Finally, the last two sections will link the findings to the concepts of Mezirow's TLT and Kolb's ELT.

Benefits of Studying Abroad Experiences

Following the first and second stages (concrete experience and reflective observation) of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984, 2015), I asked the participants to reflect on their academic and social learning experiences before describing the benefits of studying in China. All the participants perceived their experiences in China to be beneficial. Most of the participants described the benefits of their learning experiences in China to be "enormous," "great," "profound," and "phenomenal." Participant 9 commented "it totally changed my life for the better." The perceived benefits included personal growth, improved language proficiency and critical thinking abilities, improved intercultural awareness and competencies, and enhanced academic and career development.

Personal Growth

Personal growth was identified as a benefit by all the participants. When probed as to what this meant, the participants described personal growth as being more open-minded and

increased self-awareness and self-confidence. Seven of the participants believed they became more open-minded after exposure to a different culture. These seven participants also believed they developed more objective perspectives by understanding different worldviews and lifestyles. As Participant 9 stated, "getting to see so many diverse lifestyles across China helped me see the world in new ways, in different ways." Moreover, improving self-awareness and confidence was mentioned by several participants, such as "I learned so much about myself" (participant 9), "I have a better sense of myself as an individual" (participant 1), and "I became more confident about myself" (participant 5). Participant 1 also noted, "when I came home, I felt much more like an individual, and that really resulted in me having more specific focus and purpose on what I'm doing with my life, whether that be school, career, sports, relationships." Participants 2 and 10's comments also demonstrated that all the challenges in a different country, such as the language barrier, cultural differences, and the bureaucracy in China, made them more independent, resilient, and patient.

Coming from small towns in Canada, participants 5 and 6 both shared how living in Shanghai challenged them to step out of their comfort zones and enhanced their self-confidence and independence.

> After I went to China and experienced that, I realized I've always had a sense that I wanted to move and live in a bigger city or experience different things in my life and not necessarily just tie myself down to where I was born and raised. If I can live in Shanghai for six weeks and do all those things, I can do a lot of other things, too. After finishing my last year of school and then moving to Toronto. Toronto is obviously a big city. But when I moved here, I didn't feel too bad. I was in Shanghai; it was like ten times this. (Participant 5)

Language Proficiency

Half of the respondents viewed the opportunity to learn Chinese and the ability to speak Chinese as beneficial. Three of them also mentioned they had forgotten most of it after returning to Canada. The ability to speak Chinese appeared to be closely connected to their motivation to study in China. For example, four participants were passionate about learning Chinese, which was one of the reasons they chose to study in China. For instance, participant 10 took Chinese classes at the University of Calgary before leaving for China; similarly, participant 6 was learning Chinese from the Confucius Institute at the University of Regina before and after studying in China. These examples illustrated that many participants tried to immerse themselves in the language environment prior to studying abroad. Another participant mentioned some practical activities to learn Chinese, such as finding language partners by engaging in clubs (Chinese Corner Club and International Student Club) and using the Hello Talk app (participant 10).

It should also be noted that one participant complained about the Chinese courses offered by Shanghai Jiaotong University by saying,

> I think they should give more advanced options for language classes to all exchange students. Since I only had a faculty-specific exchange agreement, they said if you wanted to go for those intensive courses, then you have to pay on top. Whereas the other students who had university-wide agreements could just sign up for free. (Participant 7)

Critical Thinking Abilities

The participants in this study also believed they enhanced their critical thinking abilities. While the participants did not provide definitions of what critical thinking means to them, Paul and Elder (2019) provided a basic definition as the ability to think "open-mindedly within

alternative systems of thought" and "recognizes and assesses their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences" (p. 2). Mccune (2022) further stated the key to critical thinking is the ability to analyze different viewpoints and perspectives objectively to reach a conclusion. Based on the above definition, the critical thinking skills are reflected in the following participants' comments: "I'm able to think more objectively about the fact and interpret things through different perspectives" (participant 1), "the main way it changed me is to help me think about things differently. I'm not sure how to put it in words, just giving things a more well-rounded objective analysis" (participant 4), "spending so much time in China helped me to really absorb and understand things at a deeper level" (participant 9), and "one of the big things I also learned is that media is biased on both sides. You just got to be open to understand both sides and have your own and balanced perspectives on both sides" (participant 13). The following three statements demonstrate how the participants developed critical thinking skills. For example, two participants mentioned they started to realize how the news and media shaped their perceptions of China and the world and how the history and past of China influenced the present after gaining first-hand experiences and a better understanding of China.

> I did not realize that at the very foundation of the way people think and look at the world, there is such a difference between the west and Asia or just China before. I began to have a realization about how differently we think about the world and how the news influences us. I also realized the pace of change in the future is determined by the influence of the past. It really helped me to look at the world and understand the world better. (Participant 1)

> I think it was just being able to build my own narrative of what China is all about. You go in there, and you've read media, or you've heard from other people, and you kind of

> build this perception of what it may or may not be. And when you kind of go there, then you're finally able to confirm things or disprove things and you come back, and you think completely different of it. (Participant 5)

Likewise, participant 14 also suggested that one needs to understand the history and culture of China before making judgments or conclusions.

> Because China is very rich culturally and historically, there are a lot of things that people should see and understand before judging; you should know the history of China. Why China or Chinese people are this way or doing things this way? (Participant 14)

The above statements indicate that the participants seem to have non-judgemental perceptions about China and what appears to be reflecting on their assumptions and previous perceptions before making judgements. Furthermore, eight participants stated they started to perceive things through different lenses by presenting examples of their experiences and observations in China, such as the transportation system and infrastructure construction, the government systems, economic development, equality, and poverty issues. For example, participants 3 illustrated their understanding of how the inequality issue is portrayed in Chinese and Canadian societies.

> When I look at things like inequality, I think we're going through a very weird cultural moment in the West where people are screaming about certain social issues, and some of the answers never really made sense to me. But having a different perspective of coming from a country that is in some parts very rich and some parts still developing completely gives me a different viewpoint. (Participant 3)

Five of the participants in this study also started to question and develop a deeper understanding of how the Chinese and Canadian governments operate, including freedom of

speech, human rights, and diplomacy. For example, participant 10 stated having too much freedom of speech may drive people apart, and keeping the balance is necessary. He further explained his thoughts about the communist system by saying, "if people have been raised in a communist society, they don't know any different. It's like us in democratic systems. There are certain things where people from here were trying to look at us and ask why they would even do that" (Participant 10). Similarly, two participants' (participants 1 and 9) comments echo the above statement by using the rapid infrastructure development in China.

> The way the Chinese government works, it's an extremely efficient system and they've had all this economic growth for the last handful of years. But on the other hand, there are a lot of human rights costs that have come to be able to achieve that. So not to be too critical, but it's just another way of thinking about all these different situations, like how would a Canadian government go about it? How would a Chinese government go about it? It's just very different perspectives and just introduces more thought into your life. (Participant 9)

Intercultural Awareness and Competencies

Developing and improving intercultural competencies is another theme emerging from the codes: cultural sensitivity, Chinese mindset, mutual level of respect, relating to and connecting with people from different backgrounds, more empathy for people, more appreciation for how others look at the world, and respect for other cultures. Based on participants' statements, it can be concluded that intercultural awareness and competencies allow them to empathize with, collaborate, and communicate with people from other cultures. Moreover, some participants built meaningful and long-lasting friendships with students from other countries while in China.

Several participants' comments also demonstrated improved intercultural awareness and competencies, such as relating more to different people due to their time abroad and feeling more confident to communicate and collaborate with people from other countries, especially from China. For example, participant 7 said, "through group projects with people from different countries and also with students from China, I got to learn how to collaborate in a multicultural environment."

Secondly, three participants pointed out that their experience in China allowed them to develop empathy for people from other backgrounds. Intercultural empathy refers to the ability to place oneself into another cultural background and to communicate effectively his/her understanding of that culture, which is essential for effective intercultural communication and building good relationships (Zhao, 2011). Participant 10 noted the developed cultural sensitivity. Participant 4 developed an understanding of people who have trouble with language barriers: "After being in a place where no one at all even speaks your language, I am glad when people just try" (participant 4). Furthermore, some respondents formed long-term friendships with local and other international students. Some also became more comfortable making friends with international students after returning to Canada. Participant 3 stated, "the people I met there are really helpful, and I still know them today. If I want to return to China, I still have some people I can call. I think that was really important." Participant 4 specifically shared that the host university paired him up with a local student, which helped and influenced them deeply.

> I think part of it might have just been the student I got paired with. We really got along. We occasionally still email each other, but he's very smart. Seeing the standards and expectations that he had to live up to made me want to try harder here. (Participant 4)

Lastly, it was also noted the improved intercultural understanding and competencies allowed some participants to communicate and collaborate with their coworkers and clients from different backgrounds, especially from China. Three participants also shared their experiences with Chinese coworkers and clients.

> It's definitely intercultural competencies and skills. It's also a good way to kind of strike up a conversation with someone from China or at least who has a Chinese background. So, my work stuff, being able to relate to people from China and understand how China works, helps. (Participant 2)

Another participant also mentioned their experiences in China made them more confident when communicating with Chinese clients because of a better understanding of the culture.

> I work for a client now who has a subsidiary in China, and I was pretty much one of the natural people who wanted to oversee that subsidiary and so forth. And that really came down to my experience from being there. A lot of my communication with them and like we have a mutual level of respect. (Participant 5)

Academic and Career Development

The last perceived benefit is enhanced career prospects and academic development. All the participants acknowledged the positive influences of their learning experiences in China on their future employment and career prospects. When asked how their academic and social learning experiences impacted their future career and academic development, several participants commented, "it opened new doors" (participant 9), "it made me more ambitious" (participant 1)", it looks good on the resume" (participant 3 and 9), "it generally makes it easier to get a job" (participant 2), "it directly helped me to get a position in the United Nation" (participant 8), "I became more motivated and did better in my classes after I came back" (participant 9), "I

became a better student" (participant 3). Three participants specifically shared the experiences that affected their careers. Participant 2 worked on a project on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and they learned about the education issues of migrant children in China, which led to their career now in consulting for higher education. Participant 3 interned in an English-speaking company in Beijing four months before the academic semester started. They made many connections with the expat community in the company, which provided them with more job opportunities. Participant 9 started a student association on financial analysis and investment with other international students, which was very rewarding. These participants' comments can indicate perceived positive aspects in both career and academic development.

Additionally, eight participants believe the opportunity to learn to speak Chinese is a valuable asset in general but also for job applications. One participant explained the benefit of learning Chinese on career and academic development:

> I think at that point in my career, really improving my Chinese in my field was really helpful. I think I really gained a level of proficiency and environmental law in my field in Chinese, which was a really nice sort of benefit. I applied to do an internship at the United Nation, and I was able to say in my application that I was comfortable in Chinese. then I was taking classes in Chinese, and I got the offer right away. (Participant 8)

Additionally, nine participants underscored the positive impact of the exchange experience on their academic development, including motivating them to pursue master's degrees in another country, helping with their thesis and final assignments, changing their learning attitude and study habits, and a better understanding of the Chinese context. For example, three participants explained that their academic learning experiences in China contributed to a better understanding of Chinese diplomacy, economics, trade, and politics,

which inspired their research topics and directions after returning to their home universities. For example, participants 1 and 10 did research and a thesis on China's relation, connection, and trade with the rest of the world. Participant 2 also worked as an event organizer for the Canada China Forum. Participants 5 and 13 also told stories about how they could rely on their first-hand experience in China in international consumer behavior and business strategy classes. Further, participants 3 and 9 believed they became more "self-motivated" and "became a better student" after returning to Canada.

Three participants also believed the experiences looked good on their resumes and helped them stand out during job interviews. Participant 4 and Participant 9 commented on their interview experiences, "it made my resume interesting," and "they asked a lot of questions about China during the interview." It is also worth noting that one respondent emphasized how an internship opportunity in Beijing contributed to the success of their career:

> I met some relevant people in China who helped me find a role at a Chinese fund company in Canada. It has been a big help because it catapulted me. I think it's responsible for at least 30% to 50% of the success of my career, which is a lot. (Participant 3)

In summary, all the participants benefited from their study abroad experiences in China regardless of the time duration and their home and host universities. Language proficiency is related to their motivation to study in China and their interest in learning another language. Participants' motivations to study in China appeared to influence their learning experiences, especially gained benefits. For instance, participants' key motivations to study in China are learning the Chinese language and culture, personal growth, China's potential for economic development, and the availability of programs. Other reasons include improving intercultural

awareness and competencies, benefiting future careers, seeking adventures and novelty, the influence of family and community, the reputation of the institution, the availability of scholarships and funding, and the promotion of exchange programs.

More than half of the participants viewed personal growth as the main motivation to study in China, which resonates with the findings that personal growth is one of the main benefits. When facing challenges in a country with a different language and culture, the participants became more independent, mature, confident, and resilient. Personal growth is intertwined with seeking adventures and improving intercultural competencies. Four respondents who decided to study in China for their personal growth view China as an "extreme," which is entirely different from Canada. They were challenged to step out of their comfort zone by experiencing new things. One participant commented on the population size in Shanghai,

> Regina has 200,000 people, and then going to Shanghai with 40 million people, I wanted to experience that. I want to have a completely different culture, from the food to the language to all those things. (Participant 5)

Additionally, and also related to one of the main perceived benefits, in terms of gaining intercultural awareness and improving intercultural abilities, two participants expressed their desire to get first-person perspectives and experiences of China. Participant 13 mentioned they wanted to gain first-hand experience because there are a lot of biases and misconceptions in the media.

> I knew that the world was growing and changing before, and I was fascinated I really wanted to understand from a first-person perspective how the world was changing and maybe try to understand the future. (Participant 1)

Understanding the Chinese culture and language is another significant motivational factor for some students to choose China, which goes hand in hand with enhancing their career prospects. Most participants expressed interest and passion in experiencing the unique Chinese culture and improving Chinese skills. Respondents shared such opinions:

> I figured if I was familiar with China and Chinese business and Chinese culture and the language, then I would have an asset throughout my career. It would help me in my career. (Participant 9)

> I wanted to go there to really understand the culture and how it operates and stuff there because I saw it as a benefit as I progressed in my career. (Participant 5)

Although most of them could not engage in conversations in Chinese, some of them started to learn Chinese through the Confucius Institute and university programs before leaving for China. Therefore, studying in China allows them to immerse themselves in the language environment and learn Chinese. Three participants expressed that they wanted to go somewhere "unique" and "different." One participant further explained that compared to European countries, China is "another level of cultural difference" (participant 13).

Challenges of Studying in China

While the benefits were many, as described above, there were also challenges the participants experienced. The challenges faced can be explained from both personal and external experiences. The personal challenge revolves around culture shock, mainly caused by the language barrier and different cultures and customs. The external challenges include bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient institutional administration, such as confusion in course registration and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information. It is worth noting that only two participants (5 and 10) perceived their academic experiences to be

challenging. Participant 10's goal was to learn Chinese, so most of this participant's classes were in Chinese, which was challenging.

Language Barrier

As most of the participants for this study are non-Chinese speaking Canadian students, it is not surprising that half of them view the language barrier as the main challenge. Language barriers brought difficulties in making friends and navigating daily life and caused misunderstandings, such as shopping, public transportation, setting up bank accounts, going to the hospital, and eating in restaurants. Additionally, the language barrier makes registering for courses difficult.

> When it came to actually picking classes, the entire student interface was entirely in Chinese, and I don't speak any of that, which made it a very difficult process for selecting my classes and building my class schedule. (Participant 11)

One participant also described how the language barrier caused problems in filling out documents/forms.

> We had to go to the administration building to fill out a bunch of forms. We had to do all kinds of other administrative stuff. When you don't speak the language, and when they don't speak English either, it makes things very difficult. (Participant 12)

Since most courses were taught in English, only two participants (2 and 10) viewed language as a barrier in academic contexts due to the professor's low English proficiency. While Participant 2 viewed this as negative, participant 10 took this as a motivation and opportunity to learn Chinese. For instance, participant 2 said, "there were definitely times where the professor would speak in Chinese for maybe a third of the class because their English just wasn't great, and I just sit there and not really understand anything." The differences between Chinese and

Canadian cultures and customs were stated as another reason leading to culture shock. Two participants addressed it is hard to "simulate into Chinese customs" and "keep up with a lot of cultural norms" because they had to understand and learn "the ways people live" and how "things are done in China" are very different from what they were used to in Canada (Participants 6 & 12).

Bureaucratic Hurdles

Bureaucracy in higher education is defined in literature as regulatory policies from governments or other organizations and the university's internal process for addressing the regulations and rules (Terjesen, 2022). The bureaucratic hurdle was a challenge mentioned by half of the participants. When talking about the bureaucratic hurdles they encountered, some participants used words and phrases such as "bureaucracy," "bureaucratic problems," and "so much paperwork," which was "such a hassle," "scary," "confusing," "inconvenient," and "stressful." One participant shared the following opinion about dealing with bureaucracy:

> I found dealing with all the forms, like the visa and the forms, was really hard. I never encountered that much bureaucracy before in my life. Anything to do with anything official. Like, the government was really hard. (Participant 3)

The bureaucratic barriers mainly occurred during course registration and the temporary residency application process. Five participants addressed the complicated process of changing their student visas/study permits to temporary resident visas. For example, Participants 2 and 10 noted that finding the locations to get temporary visas took time due to unclear instructions and limited guidance. They expressed frustration by giving the following kinds of examples:

> You have to submit some documents to one place, and if something's wrong, they'll send it back, and then you have to resubmit it, and then you have to go to a different location, which is two hours outside of the city. (Participant 2)
>
> Getting my Chinese visa was stressful, and I felt it was very convoluted. Even the location, I could barely find the place. So that was a bit complicated. I was a bit confused during that whole process. (Participant 10)

Additionally, a lot of paperwork was involved when registering for courses. Participant 13 commented, "in so many ways, I feel like China is so advanced with technology. But then when it came to registering for classes and for school paperwork and processes, it was very like paper focused". Many participants emphasized that the language barrier made dealing with all the paperwork more complex, and they wished there could be more assistance and guidance. It is worth noting that one participant shared a positive story about dealing with the documents:

> They organized a very nice process where the students had to come with very specific documents and just stop at each booth. Then we would come out with a piece of paper. It was very well organized and streamlined (Participant 7).

Insufficient Institutional Support

Lacking support and guidance from the host institutions was pointed out by several participants, including comments such as "no clear answer or clear guidance" (participant 9), "the university did not provide much" (participant 3), and "I felt that I had absolutely no support" (participant 12). Registering for courses was a key challenge encountered by many participants, resulting from the unavailability and inaccessibility of the information on their websites, poor translation and course descriptions, and dealing with bureaucratic forms. Four participants view inaccessibility and unclarity of information as barriers to course registration.

Two participants gave an example of how they could not obtain any information about the courses until last minute, which was frustrating.

> I didn't know in advance what courses were actually offered for that semester. That's partly why it's so difficult to get information about courses. But before I left my home university, I didn't know which courses I was going to take. After I arrived at Nanjing University, I still didn't know what courses there were until after a week, I got one spreadsheet that was forwarded from another international student on WeChat. But they were not complete, and there was information missing, and there was no description. (Participant 12)

> Course registration was difficult because I couldn't find any list of classes online. And they didn't have a list for us until the day before classes started. I had one day to try to figure out what classes I needed and what would transfer over. (Participant 13)

As might be expected, language was again a barrier when registering for courses. Participant 11 recalled that as the course enrolment window was the same for everyone and the course descriptions were in Chinese, this participant and the other exchange students had to ask local students at the cafeteria for help registering for courses because the institution did not provide adequate support. Participants 9 and 13 both emphasized the large amount of paperwork required to register for courses, which was also very confusing. In addition to course registration, four participants indicated unavailability and unclarity of information is another challenge. For instance,

> I would say the support I got out of the university in China was a little worse. For example, orientation and check-in as a student, where I go, and I get access to my room

and stuff like that. I didn't know when that was going to be until a week before when I had to be there. So it was a little difficult to plan something like that. (Participant 11)

In addition, participant 12 explained that although there were information sessions for international students, the university failed to provide the exact time and location of the sessions. Similarly, participant 3 told their story of being passed back and forth by different administrative staff, "there are so many people, they constantly kept on passing us back and forth between people, and then the instructions were unclear. Maybe they could have someone do that full-time." Lastly, two participants commented on the difficulties in receiving transcripts upon completing their exchange programs due to poor communication with host universities.

Finally, it is worth noting that Participant 2 noted that their learning experiences in China increased their job opportunities in general, but also expressed concerns:

> The way that relations between China and the West are developing makes it a little bit worse, I would say. People look at Westerners who have experience in China with a bit of suspicion. They're like, why did you go to China? They have negative things to say about China. So if you go there and spend time there, it's kind of a red flag. (Participant 2)

Participant 2's comment resonates with Participant 6, who believed they would not go to China now based on the current political climate, including increasing tensions between China and Canada.

Further, participants' perceived benefits and challenges and the transformative learning were not directly affected by different home and host universities. Although the city and university were not inquired about during the interviews, some participants described why they chose a specific university or city, including the availability of information, institutional reputation, and geographical location. In terms of the cities, it is not surprising that Shanghai and

Beijing are the two most popular cities among all the participants as they are more familiar with these two cities. However, four participants indicated a less popular city or institution would be better for cultural immersion. For example, participant 2, who studied at Tsinghua University in Beijing, said they would choose a second or third-tier city if given another chance because Beijing is a cosmopolitan and international city with a lot of foreigners, which did not push him to step out of his comfort zone and interact with locals. Similarly, Participant 13, who studied at Nanjing University, said, "I didn't want to go to Shanghai because it was a very international city. I wanted to live in a city that was less international. It's really hard to step out of your comfort zone (13). Although Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Fudan University are both located in Shanghai, Fudan University seems to be more popular among Canadian exchange students due to its high ranking. However, Participant 7 decided to go to Shanghai Jiao Tong University because they wanted to be by themselves so they could interact with local students and engage in social learning.

Further, when discussing the challenges and the support services the home and host university provided, it is also worth noting that two effective forms of services offered by several universities (Tsinghua University, Jilin University, Shanghai Lixin, and Nanjing University) helped the participants find information and transition to the Chinese university. The first support is the peer mentor system provided by host universities, which five participants mentioned. Participants 4 and 6 both shared positive stories with their peer mentors.

> The university paired us with two or three local students, so our group primarily hung out with them most of the time. They took us around, and we did a bunch of extracurriculars. (Participant 6)

Participant 4 also highlighted the peer mentor's positive impacts on them, and they learned a lot from the peer mentor.

> While we were there, each of us got paired with a student from Jilin. They would always stay in contact with us and help us around the community and the university. Also, I learned a lot from them, and I started to study harder after I came back to Canada (Participant 4)

However, one participant did not perceive this service as helpful as this participant could not get in touch with the peer mentor for the first three weeks explaining that, "for me, it was not helpful in that particular perspective. But there were other students that had peer mentors from the start, and so they were able to help disseminate information to other people" (Participant 12). The host universities (McGill University, Carleton University, University of Montreal) offered the second form of support underscored by four participants: previous exchange students giving presentations. Two participants noted that previous students talking about their experiences helped them with their experiences in China. For instance, McGill University provided preparation seminars where people who went to China were invited to give presentations about their experiences. Participant 7 explained that it was much easier for them to relate and adapt because they were mentally prepared for the challenges by listening to those presentations. (Participant 7). Participant 13 also mentioned that although not many people chose to study in China, their presentations were still very helpful.

> Those people from previous years who had gone to China or other countries would make presentations for the students going next year. So we learned from their experiences. But not that many people chose to study Mandarin or go to China. So there weren't too many

presentations about China from previous students, but those were still useful. (Participant 13)

Being in a country with a different culture and language, it is normal for all the participants to encounter challenges, especially culture shock. However, short-term exchange students (one month) did not report encountering other challenges except for culture shock. The three participants who studied in China for one month (Participants 4, 5, and 6) expressed satisfaction with the host universities' support. For instance, participant 4 said, "There were never any issues; I could always talk to someone when I needed help." Despite the language barrier and different cultural customs, they still found the experiences very interesting as they spent most of their time in the community, traveling, and experiencing the culture.

Transformative Impact of Short-Term Exchange Programs

In this section, I will discuss the findings based on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), explained in Chapter 3. Three concepts of Mezirow's TLT were used to analyze the data: the ten phases of perspective transformation (phases 7-10) (Mezirow, 1991) and the transformation of habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 2000). Stages 7-10 of Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation focuses on executing actions based on transformative experiences (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011), which were used in this study to explain the impacts of Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in China. The four stages are the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing plans, provisionally trying new roles, building competencies and self-confidence, and integrating into one's life based on transformed perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

According to Mezirow (1997, 2000, 2009), when circumstance permits, through transformative learning, the learners will move from a problematic to a more "inclusive,

discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" frame of reference (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). TLT focuses on changing an individual's frames of reference, the assumptions and expectations that individuals use to interpret the meaning of their experiences (Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2000). Mezirow (2000) proposed two dimensions of a frame of reference: a habit of mind and resulting points of view. The six habits of mind include epistemic, sociolinguistic, psychological, philosophical, aesthetic, and moral-ethical. Stage 7 of transformative learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing plans (Mezirow, 1991), which is reflected in this study as gaining knowledge on Chinese culture, diplomacy, economics, trade, and politics and enhancing their language proficiency and critical thinking abilities.

Additionally, TLT focuses on the advancement and change of beliefs, attitudes, and emotions based on the impact of the experiences on the individuals (Mezirow). Further, stage 10 is integrating into one's life based on the new perspectives. Applying the three concepts of Mezirow's TLT (1991, 1997, 2000, 2009), the transformative impacts are viewed as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, changes in habits of mind, points of view, and changes in actions. *Figure 1* illustrates the two forms of transformative learning.

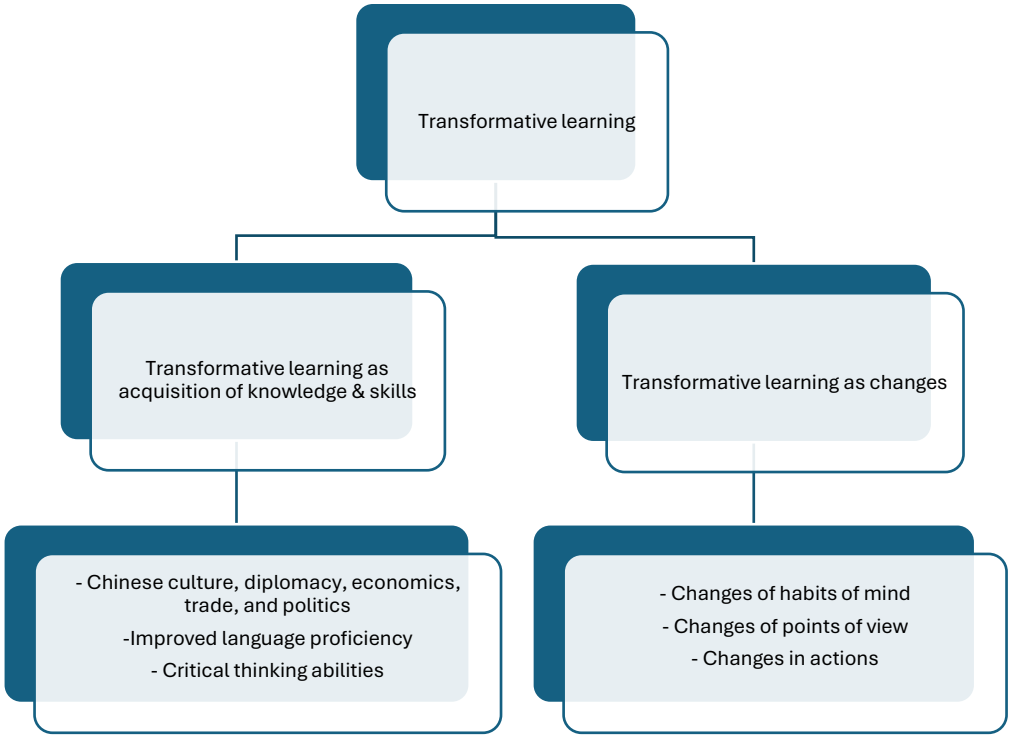

Figure 2. Two Forms of Transformative Learning. Adapted from Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000).

Transformative Learning as Changes of Habits of Mind

Mezirow (1997, 2000) defined a habit of mind as broad, abstract, and habitual ways of thinking, feeling, or acting based on assumptions individuals use to interpret the meaning of their experiences. Mezirow (2000) proposed six habits of mind, which are described in Chapter 3. Based on my understanding, changes of habits of mind focus on advancing and changing beliefs, attitudes, and emotions based on the impact of the experiences on the individuals. Therefore, I asked the participants how their learning experiences in China impacted them and changed their ways of thinking and worldview. Most participants reflected on and compared their experiences in China with their experiences in Canada, such as "I began to separate myself from the Western view of the world" (participant 1) and "I was more sensitive and more aware about the racial discrimination that people of Asian descent can encounter in Western countries" (participant 7). These statements are reflected in the last section as the exchange students perceived themselves

as more open-minded, increased self-awareness, and improved intercultural understanding and competencies. Seven participants believed they became more open-minded after exposure to a different culture. They also developed more objective perspectives by understanding different worldviews and lifestyles, which concurs with Mezirow's (1997, 2000, 2009) statement that the learners will move from a problematic to a more inclusive, discriminating, and open frame of reference through transformative learning. Nonetheless, the student's previous frames of reference are not necessarily "problematic." For instance, participant 1 shared how his ways of thinking were changed after being in China.

> Before, I didn't think attending a good school was so important. But in China, it is ingrained in the culture at a very deep level that attending a good university makes you much better. Coming back to Canada, I don't necessarily want to comment on whether or not that is good at a philosophical level. Now, going about my life, I take that into account and consider how people will look at what school I went to and what company I work at and use that as a very important factor in judging my ability to do something or who I am (Participant 1).

In my view, changes of psychological habits of mind refer to changes of one's self-perception, needs, and personality traits. Improved self-awareness and confidence reflect the change of self-concept of the psychological habits of minds (Mezirow, 1991, 2000) and stage 9 of perspective transformation: developing self-confidence (Mezirow, 1991). Further, for international students to achieve transformative learning, it is crucial to seek out and consider viewpoints that challenge or contradict the prevailing norms of the dominant culture (Mezirow, 2000). Therefore, interacting with local students is a factor that affects participants' transformative learning. However, half of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the

divided management between international and local students, which deprived them of opportunities to interact with their local peers, integrate into the local culture, and learn Chinese. They proposed two main factors that contributed to this separation. First, the exchange students took most of their courses with other international students because Chinese is the primary language of instruction. Participant 12 argued that it was particularly challenging to integrate exchange students into a regular Chinese university campus compared to universities in English-speaking countries because they can easily take any class with local students.

Moreover, separate accommodations were assigned to international and local students. Participant 12 felt that, for the most part, international exchange students were kept separate from the campus because all international students live in the same building. Also, two respondents strongly wished they could have lived with local students in the same dorm buildings.

> I wish I were in the same building as domestic students because that really hurt me. It would be really nice to be in closer proximity to domestic students. I am sure you have also heard that the Chinese student dorms are really bad compared to the international student ones and eliminating some animosity [sic] between the two would be nice. (Participant 2)

Participant 13 believed it would be a great learning experiences if they could live with the local students.

> We all lived in an international student dorm. So, that whole building was just international students living together, which was a shame because I was interested in living in the dorms with Chinese students because it would be a cool learning experience. (Participant 13)

In addition to the separated management from the institutions, three participants attributed the divide between international and local students to the students themselves. Three participants viewed the language barrier and cultural friction as challenges that kept them from interacting with local students. In other words, both student groups want to stay in their comfort zone and do not try to interact with each other. For example, "I wasn't able to connect very closely with a lot of domestic students because of my language difficulties" (Participant 9), "My interaction with the locals is pretty limited. We all kind of stuck to our group" (Participant 6). Participant 14 explained that because they had only been in China for four months, it was difficult to interact closely with locals because "Chinese people are very reserved, and you have to build the relationship." Specifically, participant 12 pointed out the differences between exchange and international students. For instance, international students typically stay longer than exchange students and have more opportunities to take classes and interact with local students. By contrast, one exchange student shared a positive experience about the dorm setups at their host university.

> I was in a dorm where they would have one local and one foreign student. So that was good for making some local friends immediately. The Chinese students were collaborative in a nice way, so they were always willing to help each other and help us out. (Participant 8)

Despite the separated management, the language barrier, and cultural differences, most exchange students were willing to step out of their comfort zone and make an effort to talk to local students or engage in university activities. The participants made such comments, "I made a strong effort to make friends during lunchtime" (Participant 2), "I tried really hard to spend as much time as possible with local friends, which was very helpful" (Participant 3), "I tried to

work through this feeling of discomfort to interact with more Chinese students at the events that International Students Association organized" (Participant 10). Moreover, participant 13, who could speak Chinese during the interview, noted that the language barrier was initially discouraging, but it also motivated them to interact with local people and learn Chinese. Participant 11 highlighted that the language barrier worked with their personality by saying "because they did not worry about anything very much. You have to roll with it and see what happens along the way. Furthermore, as mentioned in the last section, cities, and institutions also play a factor in transformative learning as exchange students who went to a less popular city or institution are more likely to be pushed to step out of their comfort zone and interact with locals.

Some students also suggested practical ways to make local friends and interact with domestic students. For example, participant 10 attended many events organized by the International Student Association, where he met other international and local students. He said it encouraged him to leave his comfort zone and collaborate with Chinese national students. Participant 1 made friends with Chinese students at the tennis court and fitness gym. Participant 3 also joined sports teams on campus. Furthermore, participant 13 travelled and volunteered at Workaway in Xi'an, a platform that allows them to volunteer in exchange for food and accommodation, during which friends were made with locals.

> I did that in Xi'an for a week and lived with Chinese people for a week. And doing that was probably my best cultural and language experience there. (Participant 13)

Furthermore, four participants mentioned it was valuable to learn the similarities and differences between people across cultures as they made friends with students from other regions, such as Australia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Two participants (Participants 3 and 9) specifically explained that although Canada is a diverse country, most

international students are from China and India, so they only had a few opportunities to meet people from other countries.

Berwick and Whalley (2000) also explained that in international education, transformative learning allows students to create a new frame of reference that promotes cultural pluralism. Improved intercultural understanding and competencies were discussed in the first section, such as developing cultural sensitivity, mutual respect, empathy for people, appreciation for how others look at the world, respect for other cultures, and relating to and connecting with people from different backgrounds.

It is also important to note that four participants noticed and compared the individualist and collectivist cultural differences between China and Canada. Clarifying the definition of individualism and collectivism from a cultural perspective is essential to understanding their comments. Individualism prioritizes the well-being of an individual, while the core of collectivism is the group (Morris et al., 1994; Oyserman et al., 2002; Parker et al., 2009). Collectivism requires the individual to put the group interests ahead of personal interests, whereas individualism emphasizes the accomplishment of individual goals (Morris et al., 1994). Three participants noted that the Chinese mindset tends to be more collectivist, and the Western mindset (Canadian) is more individualist.

Further, participants 7 and 14, coming from a African and Arabic background, identified the similarities between their own culture and Chinese culture, which may also foster transformative learning. Participant 7 found that the collectivity in China is similar to that of their home country. However, growing up in Canada, this participant said, “sometimes people paint collectivism in a very negative way.” They further explained, “there are negative aspects of being more collectivistic. But this exchange semester made me see some really good aspects of a

collectivistic culture because people who didn't have anything to do with me helped me in many situations". Similarly, participant 14 also noted that some Chinese culture is familiar by giving an example of the relationship between parents and children. "I found the relationship between the children and parents the same. You should care about and take care of your parents". Moreover, they had positive experiences in China as Muslims. They felt a sense of belonging when they discovered the Muslim culture in China, interacted with Muslim Chinese people, and went to Muslim canteens or restaurants.

Participant 3 highlighted that having a balanced view of individualism and collectivism is essential when dealing with different situations.

> There are some cases where you should take more responsibility yourself or adopt a Chinese mindset. Then, in some cases, we should adopt a more Western mindset. Having a different perspective helps me look at things differently. (Participant 3)

Noteworthy, participant 10 noticed that the Chinese are becoming more individualistic, contrary to his previous education about China and out of his expectations.

> I learned from those one-on-one interactions that there's tremendous individuality. People are trying to live fulfilling lives for themselves. I just thought that was really nice. It definitely deconstructed that stereotype I had before going. I wasn't expecting that because I had heard things about the communist country; it was very homogenized, and there was this group mindset. (Participant 10)

This reflects Mezirow's (1991) transformation of sociolinguistic and moral-ethical habits of mind. I view the sociolinguistic mind as the thoughts of social norms, customs, and cultural symbols. The moral-ethical habits of mind are related to morality, such as good or evil and justice. Based on the participants' comments, the ways they view social norms and customs and

cultural symbols and their perceptions of good or bad and right or wrong have changed, which is also demonstrated in the critical-thinking section, where the participants mentioned viewing controversial issues with balanced and objective perspectives instead of good or bad, such as equality, freedom of speech, the conflict between the fast-paced infrastructure and human rights costs.

Moreover, epistemic habits of mind pertain to one's preferred learning and teaching styles and how one acquires, assesses, and applies knowledge. In this study, participants' epistemic habits of mind also changed regarding how they acquired knowledge and described their learning styles and preferences. For example, instead of receiving knowledge solely from classroom learning, three participants reported that their social learning, such as traveling, interacting with the locals, and engaging in activities related to Chinese culture, is more meaningful. Moreover, more than half of the participants noticed the different teaching and learning styles between their home and host universities and stated their preferred learning styles. The key descriptors of the interviews related to the teaching style in their host Chinese universities are "statement-oriented," "less engagement," "not interactive," "very lecture-based," and "the professor pretty much just talked for the whole class." Participant 4 pointed out that the professors prefer having a book and documents to accompany the lessons. Participant 1 also explained that although there was discussion, it was unrelated to the facts, "the professor would just present something and then leave it at that." By contrast, in student-centered classrooms, students play an active role in learning, such as reflecting on prior knowledge, engaging in discussions, self-directing the learning process, and managing learning activities (Brophy, 1999; Emaliana, 2017).

The keywords related to the teaching style in their home universities in Canada are "discussion-oriented," "more engagement," and "conversationally structured." However, most participants noted that the different teaching styles did not affect them negatively. For example, participant 9 said, "the professor is talking for the whole class, and you just listen for most of it. But I liked my professors. I thought most of them were very good."

Additionally, participant 4 commented that teacher-centered teaching worked out for him because it was easier if someone was talking and you were paying attention and listening. However, three participants emphasized that they would prefer more engagement and discussion. Two examples are as follows:

> Whereas in Western universities, there is more engagement and more being able to ask the professor questions. Listening to the entire class is boring, and I prefer to engage with the professor. (Participant 2)
>
> I think the teaching style I've experienced in Canada is more interactive; for example, the teachers would make the class more attractive to students by engaging in conversations. (Participant 13)

Transformative Learning as Changes of Points of View

Habits of mind are expressed visually through a point of view, which represents specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments that "direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, justify objects, and attribute causality" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). I view individuals' points of view as their beliefs and judgments used to shape their interpretation or perception of objects and events. Therefore, changes in points of view are reflected in participants' comments as their perceptions of China and attitudes toward their life in Canada change. First, their mindsets and perceptions about China as a country changed. For

instance, several participants specifically talked about the negative news and stereotypes about China they heard in Canada and how their actual experiences in China changed their mindsets.

> In Canada, especially in the last two or three years, since the political climate has changed quite a bit in China, people tend to talk quite negatively about China. My perspective of China really changed after I went there. I realized this isn't the country that many people panned out to be. I think there are a lot of good things happening here. China in the 90s was completely different from what it was in 2020. (Participant 5)
>
> My mindset changed about what China is and what China does culturally and politically. So, there are all these barriers and stereotypes. After getting back, I just realized that there are a lot of barriers to people, like giving China a chance. (Participant 10)

Finally, it is worth noting that two participants (Participants 11 and 12) reported that although the experiences influenced them deeply regarding their values and belief systems, they could not illustrate how they were changed and influenced or offer examples. For example, when asked how the learning experiences in China changed their values and beliefs, participant 11 answered, "I didn't have any huge kind of epiphany moments or anything like that when I was there. I'm sure it did change me, but I can't necessarily identify specifically how."

Transformative Learning as Changes in Actions

Mezirow (2003) explains that a subsequent change in action can be expected when a change occurs in an individual's frame of reference. This is also demonstrated in stage 10 of Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformation: integrating new perspectives into one's life. Based on my understanding, transformative learning as changes in actions is when someone applies what they have learned and acquired, such as new ways of thinking, thoughts, or skills, in life.

Thus, based on the participants' comments, I demonstrated changes in actions as changes in career and academic directions and lifestyles.

Half of the participants argued that they developed an interest in China after the exchange experiences, which changed or may change the direction of their future careers, made them more invested in the news about China, and advocated for China. Firstly, five participants noticed the different study cultures of local students; that is, the local students are generally more hard-working academically but less socially engaged. Participants 3 and 9 viewed this culture as positive, motivating them to work harder after returning to their home universities. Participants 2 and 11 believed this different study culture made it difficult to befriend local students. Participant 11 understood it was tough for Chinese students to attend Tsinghua University, so they focused on classes instead of social aspects. However, participant 2 was disappointed because they expected the students to be academically smart and socially active because Tsinghua is a top university in China.

Second, several participants said studying in China changed or might change their career paths. For example, participant 12, who was working in China at the time of the interview, said, "If I didn't come on the exchange, then there is no way that I would be working in China at the moment. I would also be very unlikely to live in China." On the other hand, participant 2, who currently works in consulting, said, "I am considering applying for jobs at the Asia Pacific Foundation to do China studies or Asia Pacific studies. It would be really interesting to work in some Chinese universities." Similarly, participant 11 proposed that because they had an actual connection to China, they would like to work in a bank branch in Hong Kong after COVID-19. Further, as mentioned in the personal growth section, two participants from small towns stated

that studying in Shanghai gave them the courage to move and work in a big city in Canada after completing university.

Two participants noted that their study abroad experience in China was one of the factors that motivated them to continue a master's program abroad. For instance, participant 1 explained how his experience in China influenced his decision to study in the UK.

> I became more interested in interacting with the rest of the world with people from China, Asia, and Africa. I became fascinated with how people think and how they are different, so I'm pursuing my master's degree in London. London is still in the west, but it's a big, big city. London. I know that I will encounter people from everywhere in the world there. And I can continue the journey of growth and learning. That started in China. (Participant 1)

Two participants stated that after returning to Canada, they advocated for China when someone made negative criticisms and claims about China that they believed were not true. This resonated with the last section when some participants developed a positive and more realistic perception of China.

> There will be situations where someone may talk negatively about China, and I'll be like you've never been there. It's like standing up for it because many people in Canada will speak about things they see in the media. And since I've experienced it, I have a different take on it than most people. (Participant 3)

Participant 10, after gaining a more holistic view of China, started to advocate for China when they heard people making claims or statements that were obviously not true.

> I used my experience as first-hand evidence that people can't make these sorts of broad, overarching claims about the way China is without ever having experienced it

themselves. So, I've been able to advocate for a more holistic view of China. (Participant 10)

The second form of change in actions relates to lifestyles. For example, three participants noted that they started cooking Chinese food and shopping in Chinese grocery stores after returning to Canada. "I would go to Richmond in Vancouver because I was still able to order my food in Chinese and read the menu. And that's definitely like an experience that not even many Canadians experience in Canada" (Participant 13). The two forms of change in actions align with stages 8 and 10 of transformative learning: trying new roles and integrating new perspectives into one's life (Mezirow, 1991).

The findings reveal that for most participants, the learning experiences resulted in transformative impacts to some extent. It is worth noting that the duration of the exchange programs, participants' background and past experiences, and their career directions affected participants' transformative learning. First, the short-term exchange students, especially the three participants who studied in China for one month, believed that their personal beliefs and values did not change much. For example, participant 4 noted, "I had no real change before the trip and after. Participant 6 also said, "I really don't think I was in China long enough to form solid opinions about the culture or customs."

Moreover, half of the participants highlighted the transformative impacts of their current jobs. For instance, several participants work in a multicultural field or international company, where they could apply the knowledge and skills gained from studying abroad. Participant 8 believed improving Mandarin skills benefited their career in environmental law, which was really beneficial. Participant 5, who is working in an international company, said,

> I work in a very multicultural field now. I have people on my team and clients born and raised in China. Moreover, it's been great for me because I have some idea of the culture and things in China, which helped me connect with those people.

Nonetheless, some participants believed their current career is not affected by the skills or knowledge acquired from their study abroad experiences. As noted by Participant 14, "It did not impact my employment in Canada because I'm working in a bank; we are not at such a level that it will impact employment. (Participant 14) Participant 6 also mentioned that the study abroad experiences would be more meaningful if their current job values international education, "maybe if I had done a marketing job or human resources, it would have come into play a bit more because there is the cultural aspect, especially if you're doing marketing for large corporations that operate overseas, like Vancouver and Toronto" (participant 6).

Participants' backgrounds and past study abroad experiences may also influence transformative learning. For example, participant 2 exchanged in Europe for one year during high school and became more resilient and independent, which helped during their exchange in China. Additionally, participant 8 explained that after studying and traveling in other Asian countries for many years, their beliefs were well-established and primed prior to studying in China. Participant 7, who had also lived in multiple countries before studying in China, noted that they were already able to evolve in a multicultural environment, but studying in China allowed them to connect with Chinese specifically. Moreover, six participants had been to China to travel, study, or work before their exchange. The comments did not indicate that their past experience in China affected their learning experiences regarding benefits, challenges, or transformative impacts, but they affected their motivations to study in China. For instance, participants 6, 9, and 12 had a good impression of China after their short-term stay, so they chose

China as the exchange destination to explore more about the culture. Furthermore, although they did not mention if their background affects transformative learning, participant 1 grew up in a city with many Chinese people, so they felt a certain level of familiarity with the culture when they were in China; by contrast, participants 5 grew up in a city of Western Canada, and they grew up being more conservative.

Most importantly, despite the perceived benefits and transformative learning, by the end of the interview, the transformative impacts might fade after returning to their home country, which is reflected in one participant's comment.

> It definitely made me appreciate the Canadian way of life. After coming back from China, I really appreciate Canada more and the ways of living here because I'm more comfortable with it. I'm grateful for the values that we have here in Canada. (Participant 2)

It is also worth mentioning that some participants made interesting observations and comments about different races in China. Half the participants felt a sense of otherness due to their physical appearances, which attracted lots of attention from the locals, such as being stared at or asked to take pictures on the street, on campus, and in tourist areas. Although they did not perceive this behavior as negative or positive, they all commented on it. For instance, three participants found this behavior strange and surprising. "I was shocked how many people wanted to take pictures, but I'm still not sure what to think of it" (Participant 4); "People asked for it very respectfully most of the time. So, I was okay with it" (Participant 7); and "taking pictures isn't common in our Canadian culture, but that was something we had to get used to" (Participant 5). Participants 6 and 11 believed being a white person in China was like a novelty, and that is why people wanted to take pictures with them. Participant 6 specifically noted that

many people wanted to take photos with them but didn't necessarily want to interact or communicate. Participant 1, who expected to be more exotic or attract attention being a foreigner in China, made an interesting observation by saying,

> What I noticed when traveling with a friend with blonde hair and blue eyes. People were often very fascinated with him because of his complexion, but they didn't really look at me too much because I'm a bit darker.

As Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2000, 2003) noted, a disorienting dilemma that conflicts with or challenges an established perspective is essential to changing frames of reference, thus leading to transformation. In this case, although some participants thought taking photos was strange, they did not feel uncomfortable or give it too much thought. This is also reflected when two participants mentioned the importance of proper connection (Guanxi) in China. Before discussing this issue, it is necessary to clarify what Guanxi is in the Chinese context. Li et al. (2016) argue that Guanxi (connections), in the Chinese context, is a reciprocal obligation or mutual assurance; unlike in the Western context, trust and commitment play major factors in networking. Under this context, it can be seen as unfair and problematic for those without guanxi because those with influential connections may get better treatment (Nolan & Rowley, 2020). Participant 2 noted that knowing a senior administrator at the host university was helpful by saying, "You probably notice that if you want help in China, you need to know the right people; Otherwise, it's very tough for the average student to navigate." Participant 3, who also recognized the importance of Guanxi, expressed a positive attitude toward having those connections. They said, "it is very guanxi-based in China, which was good."

Most importantly, participant 7, who self-identified as a black person from Africa, expressed their concerns about being discriminated against before studying in China as they

heard stories about black students having negative experiences of prejudice or discrimination in China. However, participant 7 did not believe they had such experiences during their four-month stay in China. This concern demonstrates that learning about other people's experiences and comparing them with one's own experiences may also lead to transformation.

Experiential Learning Activities

In this study, ELT serves two purposes: guiding the interview questions and examining the experiences or activities likely to bring about a transformative learning experience. Experiential learning was defined as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Kolb et al. (2014) emphasized that the central role experience plays in learning distinguishes experiential learning from other cognitive and behavioral learning theories. The premise of ELT is that learning occurs through experiences, which are then reflected upon, resulting in holistic outcomes (Tarrant, 2010; Ritz, 2011). Additionally, the first stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984, 2015) is concrete experience, which investigates what students are doing in their exchange programs, such as curricula (subject matter, curriculum), in-class learning, extracurricular activities, field site visits, group tasks, student-centred research, and projects. The second stage, reflective observation, allows individuals to reflect on and interpret their concrete experience to draw meanings from it (Kolb, 2015). Strong and Gibson (2017) stressed that the design and structure of international study programs play a significant role in facilitating students' experiential learning. Therefore, following concrete experience and reflective observation of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984, 2015), I asked the participants to reflect on their academic and social learning experiences in China, how they applied what they learned from this trip, and how these experiences impacted them. Three participants highlighted that the social learning experience was more impactful and

valuable than the academic learning experience. When explaining the impacts of their learning experiences, students commented on the activities and experiences they perceived beneficial, which induced transformative learning. These experiential activities and experiences were categorized into academic learning, extracurricular activities, and travelling.

Academic Learning

Academic learning refers to China-oriented classes and language courses, from which students mainly acquired knowledge of Chinese culture, diplomacy, economics, trade, and politics, in addition to improved language proficiency. Several participants expressed that they would have benefited more from taking courses in Chinese because of the higher quality of course content and more opportunities to interact with local students. However, most of them only took courses in English with other international students due to the language barrier. Among the courses taught in English, six participants reported the courses being "overly easy," "shockingly easy," "much easier," and "not challenging at all" so that they did not learn and study much in the classroom. To demonstrate how easy the course is, participant 12 said, "especially there was one of the classes that I had that was extremely easy, in which 70% of the grade was participation." On the other hand, two participants did not view easy course content as negative by saying, "it was easier for me to be in the top range of the class in China, but it was not so easy for me to be in the top range of a class in Canada" (participant 7) and "I didn't do a lot of work in my classes, and I still got A's in all of them" (participant 2). However, the others felt disappointed with the course quality. Below are two excerpts from interviews with the exchange students:

> I took a course in the Master School of Public Policy, and it was shockingly easy. And it didn't make sense for the content to be included at the top university in China for a

> master's program. It was thrown together haphazardly and marked very easily. Because it was Tsinghua University, I thought it was going to be very rigorous and very tough, but it was very easy to do well. And the class content was very poor. (Participant 2)
>
> I really didn't think I learned some, not quite what I would expect from a university-level exchange. It was very easy. A lot of people didn't even pay attention in class. Maybe academically, I felt a little bit let down. The only thing that I would like to see improved is the academic part of it, like making it a little bit more difficult or more applicable to our courses and our degree program. (Participate 6)

Moreover, four participants assumed that the courses were easy for three reasons. For example, participants 2 and 6 explained that a high pass rate might indicate that the program is good, which is a means to attract international students. Additionally, participants 2 and 12 mentioned that classes taught in English are designed at different levels than Chinese courses for two reasons. First is the lack of resources. Second, in some universities, courses in English are also mandatory for local students to improve their English proficiency. Therefore, the courses focus on teaching English terms rather than the subject matter content. Lastly, participant 4 stated that the courses are underdeveloped because the exchange programs between their home university and the host university are relatively new. The above reasons are participants' hypotheses and perceptions only.

Nevertheless, two participants highlighted the course content as intense and more difficult than in their home countries. Most of the courses Participant 10 took were taught in Chinese, which was challenging. Nevertheless, this participant viewed that as positive as his Chinese language skills were significantly improved by the end of the exchange program. Additionally, participant 5 commented that the courses being challenging were within

expectation. In addition to the easy course content, different pedagogical approaches in the classroom were another topic discussed by most of the respondents.

Further, six participants stated that they learned a lot from China-oriented classes (Chinese culture, history, diplomacy, economy, politics, and society), which allowed a comprehensive understanding of China and China's relationship with the rest of the world and improved their critical thinking abilities. For example, participants 5 and 10 took courses on Chinese culture. Participant 10 learned about the traditions of Chinese cultural festivals. Participant 5 noted that the instructors of the Chinese culture class took them to Shanghai city center and the historical sites in Beijing, which contributed to further understanding of cultural immersion and the Chinese economy. Further, two participants mentioned their diplomacy classes. Participant 1 stated, "I learned a lot from the diplomacy and Chinese society classes. They really paired well with my social learning because I had a structured historical understanding of the dynamics that contributed to it". Similarly, participant 4 shared their experience with a public diplomacy class:

> Our public diplomacy class made me realize how many different ways governments do things. I could start applying it to things our government does to see whether it's good or bad or actually just propaganda. (Participant 4)

Language programs also contributed to the transformative learning of some participants by improving their language proficiency and increasing their cultural integration and intercultural awareness, which was mentioned previously in the language proficiency section.

Additionally, several participants stressed that they not only learned about Chinese culture from language courses but also met international students from other countries. For instance, participant 8 mentioned, "taking Chinese classes is both a good way to meet people and

a fun way to integrate into the local culture. It's also great because you get to meet other international students".

Extracurricular Activities

In addition to academic and language courses, extracurricular activities also contribute to exchange students' transformation. Extracurricular activities include internships, field trips, intramural sports, university clubs, activities organized by student unions and international student organizations, and university-organized activities. Most participants stated that they benefited greatly from joining extracurricular activities, which provided them with opportunities to learn about Chinese culture, engage with international and local students, and help with future employment. For example, participant 3 worked as an intern in an English-speaking company in Beijing, which allowed him to build networks and helped with future employment. Similarly, participant 14 shared several experiences in a Chinese law firm, where they had a deeper connection with the locals. Also, by comparing the Chinese and Canadian labor laws and unions, they had a better understanding of both sides. In addition, several participants joined activities organized by the student unions, international student committees and organizations. For example, participant 10 engaged in two student clubs: the Chinese Corner and the international student club, in which they stepped out of their comfort zone, had chances to interact with local and international students, learned about Chinese and other cultures and improved their language proficiency. Moreover, participant 9 joined a student association focusing on companies around China, the Chinese economy and trade with other countries. This experience motivated them to start a student association on financial analysis and investment at Tsinghua University, which this participant viewed as very "rewarding."

Lastly, participant 2 talked about a group project they did on a case competition on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, during which they learned about migrant children in Beijing and the difficulties of them receiving education and analyzed how the relevant policies might influence the migrant children. This experience perceived this experience as promoting critical thinking and helped with future career development. For example, as participant 2 said:

> It was really relevant and made me think more about people who are having a hard time around the world generally. It gave me some experience in education and also set me on the path to further explore that when I graduated. It also helped combine my interest in China and my interest in higher education and education in general. It led to where I am now, working in consulting for higher education and advising colleges and universities in Canada on how to improve their operations. (Participant 2)

Traveling

The third form of experiential learning activity is traveling. Eight participants shared that their traveling experiences benefited them in various ways. Participant 5 said they learned about the Chinese economy and international trade by visiting downtown Shanghai and were immersed in Chinese culture and history by visiting Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, and other historical sites. Further, three participants noted that traveling provided opportunities to interact with the locals, which improved their language abilities. For example, travelling by high-speed or sleeper train every weekend during their stay in China, participant 12 learned how to use the transport systems and all the travel-related languages. Participant 1 emphasized that travelling to different parts of China motivated them to immerse themselves more in the culture because each part of China is unique. Participant 13 travelled to Xi'an and joined a volunteer organization called Workaway, which they perceived as "the best experience culturally and language-wise."

Moreover, participants 1 and 2 recommended travelling to rural and remote areas because they got more opportunities to communicate with the locals. Participant 2 also reflected on their experiences in the countryside of Beijing and commented:

> If you drive two or 3 hours from Beijing city center, you're in the rural area, it's very underdeveloped. So it made me think about all the underdevelopment and rural areas in Canada and how we can improve development here. It cemented some of the views I already had on China in the world. (Participant 2)

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the findings from the interviews. In the first section, I discussed the benefits of academic and social learning experiences in China. All participants perceived their learning experiences in China to be beneficial. The most significant benefits include personal growth, improved language proficiency and critical thinking abilities, improved intercultural awareness and competencies, and enhanced academic and career development. The three main challenges that students encountered were described as personal and external perspectives. The personal challenge was language barrier. External challenges were mainly caused by the host institutions, including bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient institutional administration, such as confusion in course registration and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information. In the third section, I presented four factors that influenced exchange students' learning experiences: poor quality of course content, different pedagogical approaches, the divide between international and local students, and students' motivations to study in China.

In the fourth section, I discussed Canadian exchange students' learning experiences in China through the lens of Mezirow's TLT (1991, 1997, 2000, 2009). The findings revealed that

most participants' learning experiences brought what they described as transformative learning experiences. Applying the concepts of Mezirow's TLT, including the ten phases of perspective transformation (phases 7-10), transformation of habits of mind and points of view (1991, 1997, 2000, 2009), the transformative impacts were illustrated as the acquisition of knowledge and skills and changes in behavior, perceptions, values and beliefs. The perceived acquisition of knowledge and skills includes knowledge of Chinese culture, diplomacy, economics, trade, and politics, improved language proficiency and enhanced critical thinking. Transformative learning as changes of perceptions, beliefs and values was described by the participants in this study as becoming more open-minded, increasing self-awareness and confidence, promoting intercultural understanding and competencies and changing perceptions of China. Changes in actions were described as involving changes in career, academic directions and lifestyles. The last section outlined the experiential learning activities that contributed to transformative learning, including academic learning, extracurricular activities, and travelling.

CHAPTER SIX: Discussion

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings from data analysis. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) purported, the discussion chapter provides readers with the meaning of the findings. Therefore, in this chapter, I will analyze and interpret the key findings. I will first restate the research purpose and questions. Next is to summarize the key findings based on the research questions by reporting the themes. The last step is to unpack and interpret the findings by comparing them with existing research. The purpose of this study is to explore the learning experiences of Canadian exchange students in Chinese universities, explicitly understanding the benefits and challenges of their learning experiences. I also aimed to examine the transformative impacts and influencing factors of their learning experiences. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do Canadian exchange students perceive the benefits and challenges regarding their learning experience in Chinese Universities?
2. How do Canadian exchange students reflect on the impacts of their learning experience in Chinese universities?
3. What experiential activities foster exchange students' transformative learning?

Key Findings

Regarding the first question, all the participants perceived their learning experiences in China as beneficial, including personal growth, improved language proficiency, critical thinking abilities, intercultural awareness, and competencies, and enhanced academic and career development. The perceived challenges included personal and external challenges. The personal challenge was language barrier. The external challenges were caused by insufficient

administration, which involved bureaucratic barriers, confusion in course registration and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information.

The second research question inquired about the impact of exchange students' learning experiences. This question was answered along with the benefits of the perceived learning experiences. Applying the concepts of Mezirow's TLT (1991, 1997, 2000), including the ten phases of perspective transformation (phases 7-10), the changes of habits of mind and points of view, I asked the participants the following interview questions: How do you perceive the impact of your academic and social learning experience on your academic and career development? Sub-questions included: How did this experience change your beliefs, values, or worldview? How did you apply what you learned from this trip after returning to Canada? Have you ever acted or behaved differently after coming back from China?

Most participants believed the learning experiences in China changed them to some extent. The transformative impacts were illustrated in two aspects: transformative learning as the acquisition of knowledge and skills and transformative learning as changes.

The third research question investigated the experiential learning activities that promote transformative learning by applying ELT (Kolb, 1984, 2015), including academic learning activities, extracurricular activities, and travelling.

Discussion of the Perceived Benefits

As a study that explores Canadian students' learning experiences in China, the findings support the existing research that study abroad programs benefit students in various ways. Personal growth was identified as the most significant benefit by all participants. Personal growth was described by the participants as becoming more open-minded, self-aware, and confident. Personal growth has been perceived as one of the most common benefits of studying

abroad in many studies. For example, Dwyer and Peters (2004) surveyed more than 3400 international students and concluded that studying abroad is perceived as positively influencing personal growth, with over 90% of the participants reporting increased maturity, self-confidence and expanded worldview. American students from Yang's (2020) study also reported increased global-mindedness and expanded worldview after studying in China. similar to the results of this study, with Canadian students. Enhanced proficiency in Mandarin was also mentioned in several studies that explored international students studying in China (English et al., 2016; Singh, 2022).

In this study, critical thinking abilities were reflected by the participants as perceiving things from a different lens, reflecting on their assumptions, thinking objectively, and being non-judgmental, which are consistent with the findings of Nguyen's (2012) study where studying abroad was found to improve students' critical thinking abilities by helping them become aware of their cultural biases, developing more sophisticated ways of viewing the world, and empowering them to tolerate ambiguity of other cultures. Following Facione (1990) 's definition of critical thinking as "the purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in the interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference as well as the explanation of the considerations upon which the judgment is based" (p. 2), Roberts et al. (2018) concluded that a short-term study abroad program allowed students to enhance critical thinking abilities, especially analysis, inference, and self-regulation, which means making meaning of their observations and what they heard from others and assessing and drawing conclusions based on what they saw and heard. As noted in the findings of this study, participants believed they started to perceive things differently and make judgments based on their observations and experiences in China, such as noticing and comparing the differences between Canada and China (e.g., transportation systems, infrastructure construction, news, government systems, interaction with locals). These experiences, as

described by the participants in this study, illustrate the critical thinking abilities are consistent with the second stage of the experiential learning cycle: reflective observation (Kolb, 2015). In turn, it seems possible from the data that acquiring critical thinking abilities might be connected with transformative learning. Although critical thinking skills were not commonly mentioned as a benefit of studying in China, similar concepts were reported by students in Singh's (2022) study, in which the experiences allowed participants to better understand their values, reflect on their biases, respect other cultures, as well as political and economic systems.

Improved intercultural competency has also been identified as a primary benefit in many studying abroad studies (Knight & Madden, 2010; Li & Zhang, 2011; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). Intercultural awareness refers to understanding culturally based forms and concepts, as well as the ability to put the concepts into practice in intercultural communication and context (Baker, 2012). Zhu (2011b) further illustrated intercultural awareness as being aware of one's own culture and other's cultures, which means one needs to be able to reflect on personal perceptions, cultural values and beliefs and consider those of other cultures. Johnson et al. (2006) defined intercultural competence as "an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad" (p. 530). In this study, improved intercultural understanding and competencies represent understanding and appreciating cultural differences, developing cultural sensitivity and empathy, and respect for other cultures. The two benefits noted above suggests that there is a possibility critical thinking abilities may lay the foundation for intercultural development. These findings also support the statement that critical thinking might be a premise for developing intercultural competence, as other research has suggested (Miller & Tucker, 2015; Soboleva & Lomakina, 2018).

Further, in the section on Intercultural Awareness and competencies, several participants commented that they became more confident and comfortable collaborating with people from other countries. This noted, coming from Canada, a multicultural country, students should be expected to have learned to work in a multicultural environment already. This is also supported by the fact that four participants found it valuable to have the opportunities to interact and make friends with international students from other regions, such as Australia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Based on my experience as an international student in Canada, the possible explanation for this belief by the participants could be that unless students are assigned to work in a group with international students, most of them do not feel the necessity to step out of their comfort zone. Therefore, being in China challenged them to step out of their comfort zone and interact with students from other backgrounds. Two participants in this study also gave their explanation that although Canada is a diverse country, most international students are from China and India, so they did not have many opportunities to meet people from other countries.

The last main benefit of studying abroad noted by the participants in this study was the perception of enhanced career choices and job opportunities. This too has been mentioned in previous studies (Knight, 2012; Li & Zhang, 2011; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). In addition to the perceived future career prospects, the participants in this study also commented on positive impacts on their academic development, including motivating them to pursue master's degrees in another country, helping with their thesis and final assignments, and changing their learning attitude and study habits. However, it is worth noting that one participant expressed concerns about the impacts of their learning experiences in China on their career due to the current relations between China and Canada. Another participant's comment echoes the statement that

based on the current political climate, such as the increasing tensions between China and Canada, they probably would not choose to study in China now. It is necessary to acknowledge that the current situation between China and Canada may affect the outbound mobility of Canadian students, although no statistics have demonstrated this yet. This is also reflected in Dehaas (2016)'s report that a concern about studying in China is safety, such as human rights abuses.

Based on these concerns, conveying positive messages about studying in China is essential, such as inviting previous exchange students who studied in China to talk about their experiences. For example, four of the participants in this study highlighted that this kind of information helped them with deciding about their trip to China. Moreover, Zhao et al. (2022) noted that international students play a significant role in constructing an unbiased country image of China; exchange programs help countries establish stable ties and strong relations. This point resonates with previous studies that current students and alumni could significantly influence prospective students' choices of institutions (Chang et al., 2014; Oladipo & Sugandi, 2022). Thus, previous students' presentations could focus on the impact of their learning experience on their employment and help students develop a more realistic perception of China and address their concerns. It is also important to acknowledge the decentralized governance of the internationalization of Canadian higher education (Mcbride et al., 2015), as Canadian universities hold a high degree of autonomy in developing their policies and strategies (CBIE, 2012). Therefore, Canadian universities should consider focusing on strengthening their collaboration with their Chinese partner institutions to ensure the safety of Canadian students in China, such as holding workshops about introducing Chinese laws and regulations and taking precautions before studying in China. Noteworthy, the interviews took place in 2022, during which the Chinese and Canadian governments had an intense political relationship due to the

detention of the Huawei executive and the arrest of two high-profile Canadian citizens. The Foreign Affairs Minister of Canada will visit Beijing in 2024, the first time since 2017, to have a deep conversation about the bilateral relationship between China and Canada and their mutual interests. Also, for the past two years, students from many European countries have been allowed visa-free travel to China for short trips, but not Canadians. I assume this visit might be a turning point for China-Canada relations, during which in-depth communications and mutual agreements could be reached in various areas. This may lead to Canadian and Chinese universities strengthening their partnerships and encouraging more Canadian students to study in China.

Discussion of Perceived Challenges

The perceived challenges include personal and external challenges. The personal challenge is language barrier. As one of the common challenges of studying abroad, several factors can cause culture shocks, such as language barriers, encountering different cultures, and changes in social roles and interpersonal relations (Pelling, 2000; Winkelman, 1994). As most of the participants for this study are non-Chinese speaking Canadian students, it is not surprising that half of them view the language barrier as the main challenge, which brought difficulties in making friends and navigating daily life, such as public transportation, setting up bank accounts, going to the hospital, and eating in restaurants. Moreover, the other challenges many participants faced were directly caused by the language barrier, such as difficulties in registering for courses, dealing with other visa-related documents, and not being able to communicate with local peers. As Tsegay et al. (2018) noted, many international students in China face language challenges, which restrict their interaction with their local peers and the local people, thus hindering their socio-cultural understanding of China. Chen (2016) attributed the language barrier to the low status of the Chinese language and the no mandatory rule for learning Chinese.

This study also pointed out that the divided management (separated classrooms and dorms) between international and domestic students deprived exchange students of opportunities to interact with their local peers, integrate into the local culture, and learn Chinese. International students in previous studies reported being displeased with the separated accommodations as it limited their chances to interact with local students, which negatively affected their intercultural experiences and language acquisition (Ding, 2016; Larbi & Fu, 2017; Tian & Lowe, 2014). Moreover, interacting with others who often have different frames of reference can help students think about the world from different perspectives (Daloz, 2000), thus providing opportunities to foster transformative learning. Relatedly, convergence management between international and domestic students was recommended as a critical strategy in two national policies: *Study in China Program* (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2010) and *Quality Management of International Students in Chinese Higher Education* (MoE, 2018). Ma (2022) further noted that convergence management is essential, but insufficient administration is a main obstacle, including the unclear division of labor among the related stakeholders, low language proficiency and inexperience of administrative staff. Ma (2022) provided three recommendations for promoting the convergence management between international and domestic students: first is integrating information technology into the international student management system so that the information and data of international students can be shared between relevant departments and reduce miscommunication; second is to standardize international student associations, from where students can feel a sense of belonging, express their needs and give suggestions to the university management; last is familiarizing international students of Chinese laws and regulations.

In terms of shared accommodations, one participant did share a successful experience at Tsinghua University; that is, one international student and one local student were assigned to the

same dorm, which helped them in many ways. Furthermore, under the circumstance of separated management, some participants suggested some practical ways to interact with domestic students and make local friends, such as engaging in activities organized by the International Student Association on language and culture, joining the university sports club and fitness gym, joining Chinese Corner Club, or use the Hello Talk app.

By contrast, language was not a barrier in the academic context since most participants were in English-medium classrooms, which Ma and Wen (2018) referred to as separation mode. Thus, learning the language was optional since all the courses were taught in English unless students with higher levels of Chinese language proficiency chose to take courses in Chinese, which is called merging mode (Ma & Wen, 2018). Students who chose to take classes in Chinese with local students were already proficient in the language through the Confucius Institute and programs offered by their home universities. Chen (2016) reported similar results that students view language as having negative impacts on their out-of-school lives instead of their academic life. Nonetheless, two participants viewed language as a barrier in academic contexts due to the professor's low English proficiency, which was highlighted as a problem in previous studies (Ding, 2016; Wen et al., 2018; Wu, 2018).

As more than half of the participants viewed the opportunity to speak Chinese as a valuable asset in general, especially in job applications, host and home universities need to provide support regarding language training. For example, the findings demonstrated that improved language proficiency is closely connected to their motivation to study in China. In other words, students who chose to study in China to learn the language tended to improve their language proficiency. Moreover, some students shared their experiences of learning Chinese through the Confucius Institute and language programs offered by their home universities. One

participant stressed that studying in China motivated them to continue learning Chinese through the Confucius Institute after returning to Canada. Noteworthy, one participant specifically expressed dissatisfaction with having to pay for the advanced options of language classes. Therefore, Canadian and Chinese universities should increase and promote opportunities to learn Chinese, such as understanding students' language needs, offering free Chinese language courses at different levels, and hosting events or activities with a mix of international and local students.

The external challenges were caused by insufficient administration, bureaucratic barriers, confusion in course registration and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information. Leidenfrost et al. (2016) defined bureaucracies as "administrative systems designed to maintain order, maximize efficiency, and eliminate favoritism" (p. 3), which are typically rule-based, inflexible, complex, and inefficient. The bureaucratic barriers mainly occurred during course registration and the temporary residency application, during which students had to deal with lots of confusing paperwork, especially since most were in Chinese. Jiang (2011) implied that the root cause of bureaucratization within higher education institutions (HEIs) is the strong control and influence of the government. Although the Chinese government has begun to decentralize the authority of educating international students to HEIs (Wen et al., 2018; Zha et al., 2019), it is still the major provider of funding, the executive director and supervisor, and the strategic planner of international education (Chen, 2016; Li, 2016). Consequently, the centralized governance failed to consider international students' needs and expectations and quality assurance (Chen, 2016).

Course registration was another critical challenge encountered by many participants, mainly due to the unavailability and inaccessibility of the information on the university websites, poor translation, and the lack of course descriptions. During the interviews, some participants

also reported difficulties in seeking support and receiving transcripts upon completing their programs because of the unclarity of information and poor communication with host universities. Inadequate support service was identified as one of the major challenges for international students studying in China (Wen et al., 2018; Yang, 2020).

Many students were less satisfied with the institutional support services, such as orientation and other services related to their academic and social adaptation (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Tian & Lowe, 2014). Tsegay et al. (2018) argued that many administrative staff are not proficient in English or experienced with managing international students. In addition, similar to the bureaucratic barrier, Gao and de Wit (2017) suggested that the reason for inadequate support is also related to the exclusive authority of the national government. As the government regulates tuition fees and provides funds to universities regarding international student management, the resources allocated to individual universities are imbalanced. Therefore, some universities do not have sufficient resources to improve their services or educational quality (Gao & de Wit; Yang & de Wit, 2019). Chen (2016) further explained China's rationales to recruit international student can cause the low quality of international programs. For example, the university views international education as mainly instrumental, such as recruiting international students as a political task to build strategic alliances with HEIs in other countries, increase the level of internationalization, improve the institution's reputation, and use the number of international students as a way to rank world-class university. Noteworthy is that past studies suggest that North American students reported the lowest degree of satisfaction with the quality of course content and support services in China compared to their peers from other regions (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016). Hu et al. (2016) further illustrated that the high academic standards and experienced institutional support of international students in North American universities could

be the reason for low satisfaction levels. This is understandable since Canada is one of the most popular destinations for international students, and as such most Canadian universities are experienced in managing international students' needs.

Despite the inadequate support, some participants shared positive experiences with the support services the host and home universities provided, such as peer mentoring systems and presentations given by previous exchange students about their experiences in China. The peer mentors were helpful in providing information and support, in addition to helping with language proficiency and intercultural understanding. Previous students also shared their experiences about possible challenges they might encounter in China, which was helpful for pre-departure preparation.

Finally, it is worth noting that short-term exchange students (one month) did not encounter as many challenges as longer-term ones because their entire trip was organized and guided by the faculty members and staff at the host universities. This is supported by Neff and Apple's (2023) study that although short-term learners also experienced culture shock or isolation, they were more sheltered from the challenges of studying abroad compared to long-term learners, as their schedules were more structured and guided. Long-term learners needed to be more independent for intercultural survival.

Quality Assurance and Pedagogical Approaches

Six participants in this study commented on course content and curriculum as "overly easy" and "not challenging at all." This aligns with Jiani (2017), who observed that Chinese universities' low academic quality is a primary reason international students are against studying in China. More recently, the Chinese government has started to focus on the quality assurance and assessment of international education. For example, several national policies on international

education implemented by MoE recommended improving the quality of international student education. For example, *Numerous Proposals on the Opening up of Education in the New Era* issued in 2016 suggest creating an accreditation system to appraise international student management and service.

Moreover, the *Quality Management of International Students in Chinese Higher Education* (MoE, 2018) recommended that HEIs keep records of international students' performance and assign counsellors specifically to respond to the needs of international students. The education authorities can charge legal liabilities and restrict HEIs' enrolment of international students if they provide low-quality education or poor service. Nonetheless, quality only appears in the policies as a concept instead of a strategy (Wen, 2018; Wen et al., 2018).

Most Chinese universities prioritize research to reach world-class standards, with little effort to improve teaching, especially for international students (Wen et al., 2018; Zha et al., 2019). Furthermore, the government paid inadequate attention to the quality assurance of international students, such as teaching, lacking funds and relevant policies at the institutional level (Li & Zhang, 2011; Wen et al., 2018; Wu, 2018). Although many Chinese universities have developed English-medium instructed courses for international students since the mid-2000s (Kuroda, 2014), the current curriculum is limited in its context and languages, which is not diversified or targeted enough to meet the needs of international students (Gao & de Wit, 2017; Wu, 2018). Additionally, as Chinese is currently the primary language of instruction (Ding, 2016), the efficiency of courses in English remains low because many faculty members are not proficient enough to teach in English (Yang & de Wit, 2019).

In this study, some participants shared three hypotheses about why the courses were easy, including high pass rates which can be interpreted as the program being good, a lack of resources

to design courses in English while maintaining the same level with courses in Chinese, the primary purpose of courses in English is to improve language proficiency for local students, and the programs are relatively new and underdeveloped. Noteworthy was that one participant specifically pointed out the differences between exchange students and other international students who studied in China for degrees. As exchange students typically stay for a short period, they are not given enough attention compared to the full degree students in terms of education quality and support. Hu et al. (2016) also observed this and further explained that the high academic standards and experienced institutional support of international students in North American universities could be the reason that caused their low satisfaction levels.

In addition to the quality of course content, more than half of the participants pointed out the different pedagogical approaches between their home and host universities. For example, the teaching styles in Chinese universities are "less engaging," "not interactive," "very lecture-based," and "the professor pretty much just talked for the whole class," while in their home universities, the teaching style is "discussion-oriented," "more engagement," and "conversationally structured." The different teaching and learning styles can be interpreted from teacher-centered approaches in China and student-centered perspectives in many Western countries. According to Serin (2018), in teacher-centered learning, "the teacher is the primary source of information, and the textbook is the center of activities" (p. 165). In student-centered classrooms, students play an active role in learning, such as reflecting on prior knowledge, engaging in discussions, self-directing the learning process, and managing learning activities (Brophy, 1999; Emaliana, 2017). Four participants did not comment on whether the different teaching styles are positive or negative. Three participants stated that they would prefer more engagement and discussion in the classroom, which aligns with findings from previous studies

that unfamiliar teaching approaches are another challenge for international students studying in China (Wen et al., 2018; Yang, 2020). In other words, teachers are encouraged to develop activities, provide guidance, and direct students' learning (Emaliana, 2017; Nagaraju et al., 2013; Tsegay, 2015). Tian and Lowe (2014) also suggested that the eight American exchange students in their study started to appreciate the different teaching approaches because the instructors combined Chinese culture in the teaching content.

While previous research (Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016), and most participants in this study, perceive the easy curriculum and teacher-centered teaching style to be less effective, some participants commented positively. While perhaps not in the best interest of the students with respect to achieving the demands of a high-quality learning experience, two participants indicated that the easy course content made it easier to get higher grades and spend more time travelling. Moreover, one participant believed it was easier to pay attention to listening than talking in the classroom (Alternatively this is a positive). These findings indicate that students' perceptions of the challenges are affected by their motivations to study in abroad, which aligns with Bian (2013)'s argument that international students' motivations can influence their learning experiences and how they handle their experiences in China.

As outlined in the motivations to study in China section, the key motivations for Canadian exchange students to choose China as their studying destination are learning the Chinese language and culture, personal growth, China's potential for economic development, and the availability of programs. Academic learning did not appear as a motivation for Canadian students to study in China, which aligns with Ding (2016)'s findings that North American students who studied in China did not acquire a strong academic motivation and previous studies exploring Canadian students' motivations to study in the traditional study destinations (UK, US,

Australia, and Europe), including personal growth, escape temporarily from pressure, the availability of programs, enhanced career prospects, gaining adventures and life experiences (Knight & Madden, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2012; Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Therefore, considering exchange students' expectations and motivations is also necessary when developing the programs.

The Application of TLT and ELT

This study used TLT and ELT as the conceptual frameworks guiding this study. It supports prior empirical studies that the combination of TLT and ELT can be used as effective frameworks to analyze study abroad experiences, in which TLT focuses on changing individual's frames of reference, while ELT provides guidance in developing the type of experiences and activities that are likely to foster TL (Nerlich, 2020; Perry et al., 2012; Strange & Gibson, 2017). For example, Ritz (2011) emphasized that pedagogically well-designed short-term study abroad programs have the same potential as longer-term programs. Strange and Gibson (2017) further explained that students are more likely to experience a perspective transformation when higher degrees of experiential learning activities are included. Stone (2014) agreed by noting that matching experiential activities to the stages of perspective transformation can intentionally promote TL.

This study found three experiential activities that promote ETL: academic learning related to China-oriented classes and language courses; extracurricular activities such as internships, field trips, intramural sports, university clubs, and university-organized activities; traveling experiences that allowed them to step out of their comfort zone, interact with locals, and experience Chinese culture. Most importantly, several participants also commented that they benefited more from social learning compared to academic learning experiences. Hence,

experiential activities should consider focusing on social aspects, such as opportunities to interact with locals and community and activities to learn about Chinese culture or history. This resonates with other studies that applied ELT for designing study abroad activities. Those experiential activities include academic learning and extracurricular activities, such as problem-based content and curriculum, case studies, group project, guest speaking, and field trips; and social learning, such as community interaction and intercultural communication (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2005; Strong & Gibson, 2017).

This study provides further insights into how the experiential learning cycle can be an effective tool for developing interview questions to facilitate self-reflection, even though the experiences happened several years ago. According to Passarelli and Kolb (2012), students benefit when they are familiar with the experiential learning cycle regarding being more engaged in the study abroad experience and understanding the learning process to maximize learning. Moreover, the experiential learning cycle is an effective mechanism for planning and implementing study abroad courses as it allows students to take ownership of their learning process (Quesada-Pineda & Haviarova, 2014). Robert et al. (2013) suggest that self-reflection should be encouraged before (pre-reflection activities), during, and after students' education abroad. Montrose (2002) outlined the activities that can facilitate students' self-reflection, including individual assignments and personal journaling during their experience, debriefing sessions, and reflective questions upon returning home. However, the participants of this study are Canadian students who completed their exchange programs in China before 2020. The interviews were conducted in 2022. Therefore, in order to encourage and help participants reflect on their academic and social learning experiences in China, I developed interview questions based on the experiential learning cycle, specifically the first and second stages: concrete

experiences and observative reflection. Also, due to the limited time duration of the interviews, I sent out the interview question guides to the participants before our interviews, allowing them to recall their experiences and reflect on them. Although the reflection might not be as effective as immediately after their exchange programs, the purposefully developed interview questions based on the experiential learning cycle were practical.

The findings in this study also provided implications for TLT. Even though the interviews were conducted two to five years after their trips to China, the findings indicate that the students were still experiencing the transformative impacts of their short-term exchange programs, especially for those who are working in in a multicultural field or international company as they could apply the knowledge and skills gained from studying abroad. This supports Mezirow's (1996) and Dwyer's (2004) statement that study-abroad experiences can have long-term transformative impacts lasting as long as 50 years. First, the findings of this study confirm that TLT can be used to explore the outcomes and impacts of short-term studying abroad programs. The main concepts of TLT, including the ten phases of perspective transformation, critical reflection, and frames of reference, were usually applied in those empirical studies (Bell et al., 2016; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011; Strange & Gibson, 2017). However, the application of TLT in the existing studies usually includes the concept of perspective transformation and frames of reference. For example, Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011) used TLT to examine how students made meaning of their one-week study abroad experience and how they integrated their study abroad experience into their lives. Bell et al. (2016) indicated that students achieved different stages of perspective transformation, but phase 10 of perspective transformation, fully integrating the new habits and assumptions into one's life, is the hardest to achieve. Furthermore, Strange and Gibson (2017) found that almost all students

achieved some level of transformative learning, with some reporting that they achieved a complete perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). Berwick and Whalley (2000) argue that the goal of transformative learning in international education is to move students from ethnocentric and dualistic frames of reference to new ones that promote cultural pluralism.

Although perspective transformation and frames of reference were commonly discussed and applied, a search of the literature on this topic did not return any studies of international education that used six habits of mind, habits of mind, or points of view. Hence, this study provides insights into combining the concepts of perspective transformation (phases 7-10) and transforming habits of mind and points of view to examine the transformative impacts of short-term study abroad programs. The findings demonstrate TL as the acquisition of knowledge and skills and as changes. TL as changes is reflected in perceived changes of four habits of mind (psychological, sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic), points of view, and changes in actions. TL as perceived changes echo Clark's (1991) three dimensions of TL: psychological, conventional, and behavioral. The psychological dimension refers to the changes in understanding oneself and altered personality; the conventional dimension is the change of belief systems; and the behavioral represents changes in lifestyle (Clark, 1991).

Furthermore, the findings also indicated factors that may influence TL, including participants' interaction with locals, participants' previous experiences, the duration of the program, and what students do after their programs. For example, participant 6, who was only in China for three weeks, believed that their personal beliefs and values did not change much due to the short duration of their stay in China. This supports DeLoach et al. (2021)'s study that longer duration results in more significant changes in global awareness. DeLoach et al. (2021) also highlighted that the impacts are greater when the study abroad destinations are in non-English

speaking countries. Similarly, Stranger and Gibson (2017) illustrated that students had a lower chance of achieving TL when the program is less than 18 days long. Nonetheless, some studies suggest otherwise. For example, participants in Stone's (2014) study reported a higher degree of perspective transformation in a significantly shorter duration program than those in longer ones by stating that a two to six-week study abroad program could have similar effects to a semester-long program. Dwyer (2004) further explained that although longer-term study abroad programs are expected to have more significant impacts on students, summer students are more likely to achieve sustainable benefits than semester students due to careful pedagogical planning and intensive implementation. However, they pointed out that the programs should be at least six weeks, and full-year students tend to have the greatest gains. Blake-Campbell (2014) acknowledged the role that duration plays in the impacts of study abroad programs but stresses that it mostly depends on how and when students reflect on their experiences.

Furthermore, participants' current career also influences long-term transformative impacts. The transformative impacts might fade after returning their home country. Some participants viewed their exchange experiences as very useful as they work in multicultural and international fields. However, other participants mentioned that the experiences of studying abroad would be more meaningful if their current job valued international education. This supports Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus's (2011) results that the extent to which students learn from a short-term study abroad experience may depend on what those students do after they have returned home. Participant 8 explained that after studying and traveling in other Asian countries for many years, their beliefs were well-established and primed before studying in China. This indicates that students' previous experiences influence their TL, which resonates with several studies that students who had prior travel experience are less likely to achieve perspective

transformation during their study abroad (Dirkx et al., 2010; Stone, 2014). Stone (2014) elaborated that students who have previous travel experiences, especially if they traveled to countries with a similar culture to the host country, are less likely to find the experience disorienting; thus, it may decrease the opportunities to experience a perspective transformation. Nevertheless, Cranton and Taylor (2011) suggested otherwise by stating that students with greater prior experiences are more likely to achieve TL as those experiences provide entry points and opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection (Lange, 2004).

It is worth noting that two participants reported that although the experiences influenced them deeply regarding their values and belief systems, they could not identify how they were changed and influenced or provide examples. Similar to the second stage of the experiential learning cycle, Mezirow (1991, 1997) emphasized that self-reflection is critical to leading significant personal transformations, including being aware of their previous assumptions and critiquing these premises. The two participants' comments reveal that students need support and tools to critically reflect on their experiences to extract meaning and identify the impacts of these learning experiences. Mezirow (1997) recommends that educators help learners become aware of their assumptions, recognize their frames of reference, and analyze problems from different perspectives. Chwialkowska's study (2020) also recommends using course content to facilitate thought-provoking discussions and applying experiential activities to trigger potentially disorienting dilemmas and promote critical self-reflection. As previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted three to five after their study abroad programs; therefore, for students to effectively self-reflect and educators to provide support, reflection activities can be provided before, during and right after the programs. For example, students can be provided with pre-departure reflection activities to assess their preexisting knowledge and understand their goals of

studying abroad, such as their expectations and how they plan to achieve them. Reflection can also be encouraged during their stay abroad so that educators or program developers can implement activities that enhance learning and cultural immersion. Students can also incorporate and adjust different activities to help them reach their goals. Post-experience reflection should be connected to the pre-departure reflective activities to learn about their experiences, assess their gained benefits, determine whether students reached their goals, and determine the support they need. The reflection activities include surveys, interviews, reflective writing, journaling, essays, and discussions among returned students. Surveys can be designed based on the experiential learning cycle for exchange students to critically reflect on their experiences upon their return to Canada so that students can explore opportunities to act on new perspectives and roles. Additionally, Dressler et al. (2018) created a Cross-Cultural Reflective Model for post-sojourn reflection, which is useful to guide reflective writing.

Further, although half the participants felt a sense of otherness due to their physical appearance, they did not perceive it negatively or overthink it. The participants in this study did not indicate that they had experienced any form of discrimination in China. When exploring American college students' studying abroad experiences in China, Du (2015) mentioned how some participants were bothered and frustrated by the unwanted attention from the locals due to their physical appearance, such as being stared at and called foreigners ("Laowai" in Chinese). Lee and Rice (2007) found that learners from Western Countries, such as the US, Canada, Europe, or Australia, are most unlikely to experience discrimination in China; in contrast, students from non-White regions, such as Africa, Latin America, or the Middle East, reported experiencing at least some discrimination in China (Lee, 2017). Therefore, as the participants did not feel uncomfortable about this behavior or their previous perspectives being challenged, they

did not demonstrate any transformation. Nonetheless, black students are more vulnerable to discrimination in China (Bodomo, 2012; Chiang, 2015; Tian & Lowe, 2018). This is reflected in participant 7's comments that their black friends had racist experiences in China. Therefore, listening to other people's experiences might provoke deep thinking and lead to transformative learning.

Walters et al. (2017) purported that students' characteristics also play a role in transformative learning. Although personality wasn't inquired about during the interview, one participant in this study mentioned they were not bothered because it worked with their personality and that they tended not to worry about anything very much when discussing the language barrier. This indicates that students who are open-minded are likely to step out of their comfort zone and have better cultural immersion.

Some studies found that international students' gender may affect their study abroad experiences and their abilities to connect to a host country, especially when the host countries have distinct differences in gender roles and expectations. For example, in some cultural norms, female students may be restricted from casual interactions across genders, which can make it difficult to make connections with locals, thus affecting their language acquisition (Coleman & Chafer, 2011). Furthermore, female students also reported being victims of harassment and different levels of sexual assault when studying abroad (Flack et al., 2015; Siddiqui & Jessup-Anger, 2020). Squire et al. (2015) conducted a case study of students studying for two weeks in Italy and found that despite both female and male students being aware of the cultural differences, female students were more pressured and challenged to follow the Italian gender norms compared to their male peers. Lostetter (2010) pointed out that these challenges female students face may lead to a higher level of cultural observation and awareness and benefit their

learning. Nonetheless, Lee et al.'s (2009) study suggested otherwise. Korean female students studying in the US may be less likely to be restrained by gender roles and reported higher levels of cultural adjustment and academic success than male peers.

However, the findings of this study did not indicate that gender affected the participants' learning experiences in China. The reason could be that the participants did not specifically inquire about gender or whether gender played a role in their study abroad experiences so that they could reflect upon this factor.

In this chapter, I first reiterated the research questions and summarized the key findings. Then, I interpreted the findings by comparing them with existing research from four aspects, including the perceived benefits and challenges of studying in China, quality assurance and different pedagogical approaches, the application of TLT and ELT as a conceptual framework, such as the theoretical implication and the factors that affect transformative learning. In the following chapter, I will summarize this study, including the research purpose, conceptual framework, methodology, main findings, and the contribution of this study by providing recommendations for future practice. I will also address the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for future research.

Chapter 7- Conclusion

As an essential element of the internationalization of higher education, international student mobility has transformed the higher education landscape over the last few decades. Although the Canadian HEIs and government encourage students to study abroad, the outbound mobility of Canadian undergraduate students remains small, with only 11% studying abroad during their academic years based on recent statistics (Center for International Policy Studies, 2017). Due to the small size of Canadian students' outbound mobility, there is a lack of studies investigating Canadian students' learning experiences in other countries. Moreover, as most Canadian students chose to study in other English-speaking countries, such as the UK, the US, Australia, and Europe, the existing studies focus on their experiences in those countries. Although China has been attracting a large number of international students during the past decade, most of them are from other Asian countries, with a relatively small number of North American students, specifically Canadian students.

Therefore, this study addresses a gap in understanding Canadian students' outbound mobility in China by investigating their learning experiences in Chinese universities. The concepts of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) were used as a conceptual framework to facilitate participants' self-reflection, examine the transformative impacts of their learning experiences in China, and gain insights on experiential activities that have the potential to foster transformative learning. This chapter summarizes this study, including the research purpose, conceptual framework, methodology, and main findings. This chapter also provides recommendations for future research and practice. Finally, the limitations of this study will be addressed.

Based on the relativist ontology and the subjective and transactional epistemology, a qualitative generic study design (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was applied to explore Canadian exchange students' academic and social learning experiences in China, including the perceived benefits and challenges. Based on the definition in Chapter One, Canadian exchange students refer to students from Canadian universities who undertake an exchange program in Chinese universities. Thus, purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used for participant recruitment. Fourteen exchange students from nine Canadian universities engaged in exchange programs in seven Chinese universities from 2016 to 2022 participated in the interviews.

The data collected through interviews followed the inductive qualitative data analysis procedure, including coding, categorizing and developing themes from the codes, interpreting the themes by establishing links between research questions and findings. During the interviews, by asking the participants to reflect on their academic and social learning experiences in China, I explored how Canadian exchange students perceived the benefits and challenges of their learning experiences. I also analyzed the impacts of their learning experiences through the lens of TLT and examined the experiential learning activities that fostered transformative learning. The findings demonstrated that all the participants benefited from their study abroad experiences in China regardless of the duration and their home and host universities. The most significant perceived benefits are personal growth, improved language proficiency and critical thinking abilities, promoted intercultural awareness and competencies, and enhanced academic and career development. Moreover, participants' motivations to study in China appeared to influence their learning experiences, especially gained benefits. For instance, language proficiency is related to their motivation to study in China and their interest in learning another language.

The perceived challenges are language barrier, insufficient administration, such as bureaucratic barriers, confusion in course registration, and difficulties in receiving transcripts and accessing essential and relevant information. Among the challenges, the language barrier is deemed as the main challenge by half of the participants, which affected their daily lives and kept them from interacting with the locals. Participants found two effective services offered by several universities helpful: the peer mentor system (host universities) and inviting previous exchange students to give presentations about their experiences in China (home universities). Additionally, participants' perceived benefits, challenges, and transformative learning were not directly affected by different home and host universities. Four participants indicated that a less popular city or institution for international students would be better for cultural immersion because they can push them to step out of their comfort zone, interact with locals, and engage in social learning. Further, short-term exchange students (one month) did not encounter as many challenges as longer-term ones.

Applying the experiential learning cycle and the concept of experiential learning activities of ELT (Kolb, 1984, 2015), I guided participants in self-reflection during the interviews and examined the experiential learning activities that promote transformative learning, involving academic learning activities, extracurricular activities, and travelling. Regarding academic learning, China-oriented classes and language courses are viewed as experiential activities promoting transformative learning. It is worth noting that six participants expressed dissatisfaction about the low quality of course content, as they are so easy or not challenging at all so that they did not learn much from those courses.

Furthermore, I applied the concepts of Mezirow's TLT (1991, 1997, 2000), including the 10 phases of perspective transformation (phases 7-10), the changes in habits of mind, and points

of view. The transformative impacts are illustrated in two aspects: transformative learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills, which is reflected in gaining knowledge of Chinese culture, diplomacy, economics, trade, and politics and enhancing their language proficiency and critical thinking abilities. The second is transformative learning as changes, such as changes in habits of mind, points of view, and actions. Findings reveal changes in four habits of mind, including epistemic, sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, and psychological habits of mind. It is worth noting that the two participants with African and Arabic cultural backgrounds experienced a transformation by identifying the similarities between their own culture and Chinese, and they felt a sense of belonging/cultural identity when discovering the Muslim culture in China. Changes in points of view include their perceptions of China and their attitudes toward their life in Canada. Changes in actions are demonstrated in the change of career and academic directions and lifestyles. Further, several factors play a role in the transformative impacts. First, interacting with local students is a factor that affects participants' transformative learning. However, the divided management between international and local students, such as separated classrooms and residential accommodations, the language barrier, and cultural differences, kept some participants from interacting with their local peers, integrating into the local culture, and learning Chinese. However, most exchange students were willing to step out of their comfort zone and interact with the locals. Some of them also suggested practical ways to make local friends and interact with domestic students, such as attending the events organized by the International Student Association, joining sports teams, and engaging in community services. Second, the duration of the exchange programs, participants' background, past experiences, and their career directions also affect participants' transformative learning. For example, the short-term exchange students who studied in China for one month believed that their personal beliefs and values did

not change much. Moreover, participants who worked in a multicultural field or international companies believed they applied the skills or knowledge from their study abroad experiences. One participant said they did not question their values too much because they had studied in other countries with cultures similar to China for many years. Additionally, half the participants felt a sense of otherness due to their physical appearances, which attracted lots of attention from the locals. Although some of them thought this behavior was strange, it did not lead to any transformation as it did not conflict with or challenge their established perspective. Participants identifying cultural similarities and feeling a sense of belonging may also lead to transformative learning.

Furthermore, participants learning about other people's experiences and comparing them with their own experiences may also lead to transformation. Most importantly, two participants reported that although the experiences influenced them deeply regarding their values and belief systems, they could not illustrate how they were changed and influenced or offer examples. Finally, despite the perceived benefits and transformative learning, the transformative impacts might fade after returning to their home country, so they may go back to how they used to be.

Theoretically, this study supports the previous studies that the combination of TLT and ELT can be used as effective frameworks to analyze study abroad experiences, in which TLT focuses on changing individual's frames of reference, while ELT provides guidance in developing the type of experiences and activities that are likely to foster TL. Regarding ELT, this study provides insights into the application of the experiential learning cycle to facilitate self-reflection. In this study, the experiential learning cycle was an efficient tool for developing interview questions to help participants recall and reflect on their experiences that occurred several years ago. Also, phases 3 and 4 of the experiential learning cycle are abstract

conceptualization and active experimentation, during which students critically analyze the meaning of the new experience to form new knowledge and apply it to new situations. These two stages are similar to stages 7-10 of perspective transformation, such as acquiring new knowledge and skills and fully integrating new perspectives into their lives. These two stages can also be used to explore the impacts of their study-abroad experiences, but TLT provides a more holistic and detailed perspective of transformative impacts. Finally, this study also enriches the knowledge of TLT as a search of the literature on the application of TLT in international education did not return any studies that used six habits of mind and points of view. The findings of this study reveal that the concepts of perspective transformation (phases 7-10) and transforming habits of mind and points of view can be combined to examine the transformative impacts of short-term study abroad programs.

Recommendations for Practice

This study provides practical recommendations for the outbound mobility of Canadian students to China. The findings of this study provide insights for Canadian and Chinese universities, such as faculty and staff, into developing and implementing exchange programs that maximize the benefits of students' learning experiences in China and foster transformative learning by providing targeted assistance, developing curriculum, and organizing activities. Moreover, it also provides suggestions for potential students interested in studying in China. First, Chinese universities are encouraged to focus on improving the following practices:

1. The language barrier is deemed as the main challenge, which was mentioned by half of the participants. The language barrier affected their daily lives and kept them from interacting with the locals. Also, language courses are viewed as experiential activities promoting transformative learning. One participant specifically expressed dissatisfaction

with paying for the advanced options of language classes. Learning another language is difficult, especially during a short period of time. Therefore, Chinese universities should consider students' needs in terms of language learning and increase and promote opportunities for international students to learn Chinese at different levels, such as holding events with local and international students, Chinese corners, and language courses at various levels without paying extra.

2. Most participants viewed the course content as overly easy and unchallenging. Several students mentioned that the quality of course content was higher when similar courses were offered in Chinese. In addition, China-oriented classes, such as culture and history courses, were found to be experiential and promote transformative learning. Hence, in light of the quality of teaching content, Chinese universities should pay attention to the quality and the development of courses in English. The faculty and staff can also incorporate culture-related content into the curriculum and experiential activities for cultural immersion, including taking students to historical sites and culturally rich places, planning culture-related activities during traditional Chinese holidays, and promoting extracurricular activities, such as internships, field trips, intramural sports, university clubs, activities organized by student unions and international student organizations.
3. Interacting with local students is a factor that affects participants' transformative learning in terms of seeking out viewpoints that contradict their previous assumptions or norms, improving their language proficiency, and learning about another culture. However, the findings demonstrate that the separate management between international and local students prevented them from interacting with each other. Thus, the Chinese university should consider focusing on the convergence management of exchange students by

starting to offer shared accommodations between local and international students so that exchange students have more opportunities to interact with their local peers, integrate into the local culture, and learn Chinese. The practice of Tsinghua University sets an example of putting one international student and one local student in the same dormitory.

4. The bureaucratic problems, such as too much paperwork and complicated administrative processes, were stressful and confusing for half of the participants. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the central role that the government plays in managing international education despite its effort to decentralize. In this case, close collaboration and timely communication between the HEIs and the government is necessary because HEIs are links between the government and students. The institutions should consider and collect information about international students' needs and report to the government so that funding, strategies, and support services can be allocated to those in need. Further, staff and local students can be trained to provide guidance and help exchange students deal with the paperwork.
5. The participants also reported having difficulties in course registration, receiving transcripts, and accessing essential and relevant information. Chinese universities can also improve the support services of exchange students by providing necessary information in English on their websites, such as course registration and information about university services. Ensuring that staff is trained in English proficiency and providing targeted assistance to students in need is also essential. Further, based on participants' comments, peer mentors can be matched with students upon arrival to provide timely guidance and support.

Second, Canadian universities can provide the following support before and after exchange students' trips to China.

1. Inviting students who previously studied in China was found to be helpful for students' trips to China. Thus, Canadian universities can invite previous exchange students who studied in China to give presentations on their experiences, such as the precautions and the impacts of their learning experiences and address potential students' concerns and questions.
2. Two participants reported that although the experiences influenced them deeply regarding their values and belief systems, they could not illustrate how they were changed and influenced or offer examples. Also, one participant's comment demonstrates that the transformative impacts might fade after returning to their home country, so they may go back to how they used to be despite the perceived benefits and transformative learning. Therefore, in order to promote transformative learning and the long-term transformative impacts, faculty and staff should provide pre and post-reflection activities before students leave Canada and upon their return to Canada to facilitate reflection so that exchange students can understand their goals and expectations, build on their experiences, and sustain the impacts of their learning experiences abroad. For example, students can be given options, such as journaling, surveys, and interviews, before leaving Canada so that educators and students can understand their goals and plans to achieve them. Surveys can also be designed based on the experiential learning cycle for exchange students to critically reflect on their experiences upon their return to Canada so that students can explore opportunities to act on new perspectives and roles. Additionally, the staff can

gather exchange students to share their experiences and invite them to give presentations to potential exchange students.

Recommendations for Future Research

In accordance with the limitations outlined above, this section provides some possible directions and recommendations for future research.

First, future studies can investigate Canadian students' experiences in different types of programs, such as language programs, summer schools, or internship programs. Additionally, since the participant pool was small and all the students had graduated by the time of the interviews, this study included exchange students from 2016 to 2019. Those students who studied in 2016 are likely to have very different experiences than those who studied in China in 2019. Therefore, with the continuation of the exchange programs after COVID-19, future research can be conducted on students who completed their exchange programs in China in the same year. Also, if the number of participants permits, conducting case studies on one or two universities will provide insights into developing policies and strategies on outbound student mobility.

Moreover, interviews were conducted at least three years after the participants completed their programs. Thus, for students to be aware of their experiences and self-reflect, future research can consider the use of a longitudinal research design to track students' pre-departure, immediately after the program, and long after they return. Additionally, future studies should consider the impacts of study abroad duration on achieving transformative learning, such as comparing one-month and one-year exchange programs. Research is also needed to investigate the influence of individual differences, such as background and life experiences, on the transformative learning of their study abroad experiences. Theoretically, future studies can

combine the six habits of mind and the ten stages of perspective transformation in studying abroad context to examine the transformative impacts of their experiences.

Finally, future researchers might also consider using questionnaires to explore why potential students were interested in studying in China but chose not to, which may reveal insights about possible concerns and barriers. This might provide another perspective in developing targeted support services or programs.

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Appendix A – Invitation to Participate Letter

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Shuai Yu. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study that I am conducting.

The purpose of my research is to study the learning experience of exchange Canadian students in Chinese universities. Specifically, this study proposes to examine students' expectations and perceptions of the challenges and benefits of their learning experience. I am inviting you for this study because you engaged in and completed an exchange program at a Chinese University from 2016-2022. The final report will be my dissertation, and my research findings will be shared more broadly through articles and public/conference presentations.

I am inviting you to participate in a semi-structured interview on Zoom, which should take about one hour of your time. The interview will revolve around your opinion on your learning experiences in Chinese universities, including your perception of the benefits and challenges. I will also take notes during our interview if that is acceptable. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped using a digital voice recorder device and later transcribed. You can choose not to answer any of the questions during the interview. If you are willing to participate in this study, I will contact you to decide on a mutually convenient time and location for the interview. A follow-up interview may also be arranged if necessary.

Your participation in this research will be entirely voluntary. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this research by email at syu9@ualberta.ca or by phone at (306)850-6600.

Thank you very much for considering this invitation.
Sincerely,
Shuai

Appendix B- Information Letter and Consent Form
Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in China

Research Investigator:
Shuai Yu
PhD student
7 Education North
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Albert T6G2G5
syu9@ualberta.ca
(306) 850-6600

Academic Supervisor:
Dr. Heather Kanuka
Professor, Faculty of Education
7-153 Education North
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Albert T6G2G5
heather.kanuka@ualberta.ca
(780) 492-6732

Background

I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you engaged in an exchange program at a Chinese university. The final report will be my dissertation, and my research findings may be shared through professional or academic presentations, reports, articles, or book chapters. The data will solely be used for academic purposes only, not for commercial interest or gain. A copy or a summary of the final dissertation will be available to you. If you would like to receive copies of any resulting publications, please let me know.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the learning experience of non-Chinese speaking exchange Canadian students in Chinese universities. Specifically, this study proposes examining students' motivations to study in China and perceptions of the challenges and benefits of their learning experience. The analysis and interpretation of this information should contribute to a deeper understanding of the outbound mobility of Canadian students and their learning experiences in Chinese universities. In addition, the findings of this study will provide recommendations to further develop the exchange programs and offer suggestions to potential exchange students.

Study Procedures

I am collecting data through zoom interviews and documents related to exchange programs. Your participation will be in the form of a semi-structured interview, which should take about one hour of your time. The interview will be conversational in style and focus on your opinions and experiences about your learning experiences in the Chinese university. I will take hand-

written notes and record the interview if that is acceptable to you. After the interview, I will provide you with transcription and a summary of what I learned so that you can review and verify the accuracy of your statements and my interpretations. You will have two weeks to review the transcripts. After that, you are free to make any changes and provide further information or clarification so that the information accurately reflects what you provided in the interview.

Benefits and Risks

This research aims to better understand the current context and dynamics of Canadian students' outbound mobility and their learning experiences in Chinese universities. Your participation in the study is valuable to increase the understanding of Canadian exchange students' learning experience in Chinese universities, allowing the participating institutions (faculty members, administrators, and researchers) to reflect on and optimize their exchange programs to optimize Canadian students' learning environment. Further, it will benefit potential students who are interested in participating in the exchange programs in China. Finally, this research may inform policymakers to further develop institutional internationalization strategies. There are no costs or compensation for participating in this study. Your participation is deeply appreciated.

I do not anticipate any risks associated with your participation in this research. However, if at any time you think there is something that will affect your willingness to be in the study, please inform me.

Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Participation is completely voluntary. You can, without penalty, opt out of the study at any time up until two weeks after your transcript is sent to you for review. During interviews, you may refuse to answer any questions and can stop the process at any point. You can ask that any collected data be withdrawn and not used. If this happens before the data has been used for analysis and writing as described above, I will delete it from my database.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

Data Collected only be used for my doctoral dissertation and any resulting publications or presentations. All attempts will be made to ensure that the information you provide remains confidential. To protect your identity, your name will not be used in the transcribed documents. Instead, you will be assigned a pseudonym. Data in paper materials will be kept in a locked file

cabinet in my office, and digital materials will be maintained as encrypted files on a password-protected personal computer belonging to the researcher. As the researcher, only my doctoral supervisor and I will have access to these files. All data will be destroyed after five years.

Contact Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email (syu9@ualberta.ca) or telephone (306-850-6600). The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form, and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

Appendix C- Ethics Approval

Notification of Approval

Date:	November 15, 2021
Study ID:	Pro00115112
Principal Investigator:	Shuai Yu
Study Supervisor:	Heather Kanuka
Study Title:	Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in China
Approval Expiry Date:	Monday, November 14, 2022

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

Approved Documents:

Recruitment Materials

Invitation to Participate Letter.docx

Consent Forms

Information Letter and Consent Form. docx.docx

Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.

Interview Guide.docx

Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality agreement.docx

Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the REB for approval prior to implementation. A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the REB does not constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of this research. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring required approvals from other involved organizations (e.g., Alberta Health Services, Covenant Health, community organizations, school boards) are obtained, before the research begins.

Sincerely,

Theresa Garvin, PhD, MUA, BA

Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

McGill

Research Ethics Board Office
James Administration Bldg.
845 Sherbrooke Street West. Rm 325
Montreal, QC H3A 0G4

Website: www.mcgill.ca/research/research/compliance/human/

Research Ethics Board 1
Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans

REB File #: 22-04-020 (University of Alberta Study ID Pro00115112)

Project Title: Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in China

Principal Investigator: Shuai Yu

Status: Doctoral Student

Dept: Educational Administration and Leadership, Department of Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education || University of Alberta

Supervisor: Prof. Heather Kanuka

Approval Period: 18 May, 2022 to November 14, 2022

The REB-1 reviewed and approved this project by delegated review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

Deanna Collin
Research Ethics Officer

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* Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described.
* Modifications to the approved research must be reviewed and approved by the REB before they can be implemented.
* A Request for Renewal form must be submitted before the above expiry date. Research cannot be conducted without a current ethics approval. Submit 2-3 weeks ahead of the expiry date.
* When a project has been completed or terminated, a Study Closure form must be submitted.
* Unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications must be promptly reported to the REB. Serious adverse events experienced by a participant in conjunction with the research must be reported to the REB without delay.
* The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
* The REB must be notified of any suspension or cancellation imposed by a funding agency or regulatory body that is related to this study.
* The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB.

University of Regina

Research Ethics Board
Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Shuai Yu

DEPARTMENT
Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta

REB#
2022-023

SUPERVISOR
Heather Kanuka

TITLE
Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in China

APPROVED ON
February 22, 2022

RENEWAL DATE
February 22, 2023

APPROVAL OF
Application for Behavioural Research Ethics Review
Invitation to Participate Letter
Information Letter and Consent Form
Confidentiality Agreement
Interview Guide
University of Alberta Ethics Application
University of Alberta Ethics Approval

Full Board Meeting ☐ Delegated Review ☒

The University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, or related documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, procedures or related documents should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS
In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration one month in advance of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for the renewal and closure forms:
https://www.uregina.ca/research/for-faculty-staff/ethics-compliance/human/ethicsforms.html

Kim Dorsch PhD
REB Chair
University of Regina

Please send all correspondence to:
Research Office
University of Regina
Centre for Kinesiology Building 227
Regina, SK S4S 0A2
Telephone: (306) 585-4775 Fax: (306) 585-4893
research.ethics@uregina.ca

Appendix D- Interview Guide

Exploring the Learning Experience of Canadian Exchange Students in Chinese Universities

1. **Information about the exchange program**
   - When did you participate in the exchange program in which Chinese university?
   - Can you tell me more about the exchange program?
     - How did you find out the program?
     - How long was the program?
     - What kind of program it is? (Major)

2. **Before going to China**
   - What are your motivations/reasons to study in China?
   - Can you tell me your concerns before studying in China?
   - What preparation you did before going to China?

3. **Reflection on their Learning experiences**
   - Can you talk about your learning experiences in China, such as classroom learning, group projects, extracurricular activities, field site visits?
   - Reflecting on the above experiences
     - What new skills did you learn, e.g., did you develop an interest?
     - Did you hear, learn, or feel something that surprised you?
     - How is the experience different than your expectation?
     - What are the differences between your learning experiences in China and Canada?
     - How do you perceive the benefits of your learning experiences? e.g., improved your intercultural understanding and abilities (function, think, and act appropriately regrading cultural differences, communicate or work with people from different cultural backgrounds), personal growth, job opportunities?
     - Can you talk about the most challenging and stressful experiences you faced in your study?

   - Reflecting on your learning experiences, how would you comment on the impact of this experience?
     - How can/did you apply this learning?
     - How did it impact your academic development?
     - How did it impact your career paths and future development?

4. **Other relative factors**
   - Can you describe the services and support you received from both your home and exchange institutions?
   - What do you think of the quality of learning and teaching?

- How do you feel about the culture or environment of the campus? E.g., do you feel like international education is valued in the university?

5. Recommendations and suggestions

- Do you have any recommendations for the university (home and host universities) to improve its practice for exchange students?
- Do you have any suggestions for future students interested in the programs?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix E- Examples of the Data Analysis Process

Theme 1: Critical Thinking Abilities

Critical thinking is defined as the ability to think "open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought" and "recognize and assess their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences" (Paul & Elder, 2019). In other words, it is the ability to analyze different viewpoints and perspectives objectively to reach a conclusion (Mccune, 2022).

Codes from interviews: think objectively, more well-rounded analysis, think things differently, interpret things from different perspectives, understand things at a deeper level, open to different perspectives,

Quotes from interview transcripts:
"I'm able to think more objectively about the facts and interpret things through different perspectives."

"I did not realize that at the very foundation of the way people think and look at the world, there is such a difference between the West and Asia or just China before. I began to have a realization about how differently we think about the world and how the news influences us. I also realized the pace of change in the future is determined by the influence of the past. It really helped me to look at the world and understand the world better."

"I think it was just being able to build my own narrative of what China is all about. You go in there, and you've read media, or you've heard from other people, and you kind of build this perception of what it may or may not be. And when you kind of go there, then you're finally able to confirm things or disprove things, and you come back, and you think completely differently of it."

"If people have been raised in a communist society, they don't know any different. It's like us in democratic systems. There are certain things where people from here were trying to look at us and ask why they would even do that."

"When I look at things like inequality, I think we're going through a very weird cultural moment in the West where people are screaming about certain social issues, and some of the answers never really made sense to me. But having a different perspective of coming from a country that is in some parts very rich and some parts still developing completely gives me a different viewpoint."

"The way the Chinese government works, it's an extremely efficient system, and they've had all this economic growth for the last handful of years. But on the other hand, there are a lot of human rights costs that have come to be able to achieve that. So, not to be too critical, but it's just another way of thinking about all these different situations, like how would a Canadian government go about it? How would a Chinese government go about it? It's just very different perspectives and just introduces more thought into your life."

Theme 2: Bureaucratic Hurdles

Bureaucracy in higher education is defined in literature as regulatory policies from governments or other organizations and the university's internal process for addressing the regulations and rules (Terjesen, 2022)

Codes from interviews: bureaucracy, bureaucratic problems/hurdles, so much paperwork, hard to deal with anything official, visa/study permit, temporary residency application, course registration forms.

Quotes from interview transcripts:

"You have to submit some documents to one place, and if something's wrong, they'll send it back, and then you have to resubmit it, and then you have to go to a different location, which is two hours outside of the city."

"Getting my Chinese visa was stressful, and I felt it was very convoluted. Even the location, I could barely find the place. It was very difficult to find. So that was a bit complicated. I was a bit confused during that whole process."

"I found dealing with all the forms was really hard, like the visa and the forms. I never encountered that much bureaucracy before in my life. Anything to do with anything official. Like, the government was really hard."

Appendix F-Preliminary Codes and Themes

1. Critical thinking
   Definition: the ability to analyze different viewpoints, recognize and assess their assumptions and perspectives objectively to reach a conclusion
   - past shapes the present
   - objective thinking
   - open-minded
   - think about things differently
   - media is biased on both sides

2. Personal growth
   - increased self-awareness and self-confidence
   - learning about themselves
   - becoming more independent

3. Career and academic
   - It looks good on the resume
   - opened new doors
   - made me more ambitious
   - makes it easier to get a job
   - become more motivated in classes
   - become a better student
   - decide to pursue a master's degree
   - networking

4. Intercultural understanding and competencies
   - Cultural sensitivity
   - Chinese mindset
   - mutual level of respect
   - relate to people from different backgrounds
   - more empathy for people,
   - more appreciation for how others look at the world,
   - respect for other cultures
   - collaborate with coworkers from different background

5. Bureaucratic barriers
   - bureaucracy
   - too much paperwork
   - a bunch of forms
   - all kinds of administrative stuff
   - bureaucracy
   - complicated process

6. Insufficient institutional support
   - no clear guidance or answer

- the university did not provide much
- have absolutely no support
- course registration is confusing
- information is not accessible and unclear

7. Low quality of course content
   - overly/shockingly easy
   - not challenging at all
   - the content was very poor

8. Separation between international and local students
   - International students were kept separate from local students
   - all international students live in the same dorm building
   - International students take classes together
   - wish to live in the same building with local students

9. Different teaching styles
   - statement-oriented vs. discussion-oriented
   - less engagement vs. more engagement
   - not interactive
   - very lecture-based vs. conversationally structured

10. Transformative learning: Change of frames of references
    - separate myself from the Western view of the world
    - more sensitive and more aware of racial discrimination
    - changed mindsets of China as a country
    - a more rounded perspective of good or bad
    - individualism vs. collectivism

11. Transformative learning: Change of actions/behaviors
    - developed an interest in China: following news about China, advocating for China
    - pursue a master's degree abroad
    - changed career direction
    - start cooking Chinese food/eating in Chinese restaurants
    - start shopping in Chinese grocery store

12. Experiential learning activities
    - diplomacy and Chinese society classes
    - classes related to Chinese culture
    - extracurricular activities
    - student clubs
    - group projects
    - traveling