

A NARRATIVE DISCOURSE OF A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY EXPERIENCE IN A CHINESE UNIVERSITY

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Received: Jul. 16, 2022

Revised: Aug. 9 & Sept. 11, 2022

Accepted: Oct. 12, 2022

Published: Oct. 31, 2022

Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Djiraro Mangué, C. L. (2022). A narrative discourse of a cross-cultural study experience in a Chinese university. *Journal of Sino-African Studies*, 1(1), 186–194.
<https://doi.org/10.56377/jsas.vInI.8694>

Abstract

In this paper, through a personal narrative discourse, I explore the influence and the contribution of my cross-cultural study experience in China on my development as a young researcher. Through the Chinese academic culture, I learned some best practices that I consider essential for the blossoming and development of a student. Nonetheless, I also face some challenges such as language problems, communication with teachers, and even with classmates. Despite the issue of language and cultural disparities that were significant upon my arrival, I have managed to adapt and learn from Chinese society, teachers, and students. Also, the challenges that I had to overcome were not comparable to the knowledge acquired, and the rich experience that I have accumulated throughout the years spent in China. Through this personal narrative discourse, the different metaphors used to depict our academic life experience in China can enable the reader to have a kind of educative outlook.

Keywords: China, Chinese culture, Chinese academic culture, education, experience.

DISCOURS NARRATIF D'UNE EXPÉRIENCE D'ÉTUDE INTERCULTURELLE DANS UNE UNIVERSITÉ CHINOISE

Résumé

Dans cet article, à travers un discours narratif, j'analyse l'influence et la contribution de mon expérience d'étude interculturelle en Chine sur mon développement en tant que jeune chercheur. À travers la culture académique chinoise, j'ai appris certaines *best practices* que je considère comme essentielles pour l'épanouissement et le développement d'un étudiant. Néanmoins, j'ai également été confrontée à certains défis tels que des problèmes de langue et de communication avec les enseignants et même avec mes camarades de classe. Malgré les difficultés communicationnelles et les disparités culturelles qui étaient considérables à mon arrivée, j'ai réussi à m'adapter et à apprendre de la société chinoise, des enseignants et des étudiants. Aussi, les

défis que j'ai dû surmonter n'étaient pas comparables aux connaissances acquises, et à la riche expérience que j'ai accumulée tout au long des années passées en Chine. Les différentes métaphores utilisées dans ce discours narratif peuvent inspirer d'autres chercheurs à travers une perspective éducative.

Mots clés : Chine, culture chinoise, culture académique chinoise, éducation, expérience.

Introduction

The number of international students in Mainland China is increasing due to the economic boom. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai World Expo 2010, and the success of the promotion of the Chinese language and culture are among the factors that attract foreign students to Mainland China (P. Yang, 2018, pp. 47–48). The role of China as an important receiving country of international students is sometimes overlooked, as the country is more reputed as a major “sending” nation of international students’ (Jiani, 2017, p. 563). The Ministry of Education Statistical report on international students in China for 2018 stated that there were a total of 492,185 international students from 196 countries/areas pursuing their studies in 1,004 higher education institutions in China’s 31 provinces/autonomous regions/provincial-level municipalities (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

Several kinds of scholarships are available for international students in China, such as the Chinese government scholarship, the Confucius Institute scholarship, the local government scholarship, and the university scholarship, however, their number is limited, and thus the great numbers of international students are self-funded. China has adopted several measures for attracting more international students. The government succeeded to create and establish several world-class universities through two key programmes, namely the “211” and “985” projects, which aimed to “subsidise a certain number of selected universities or disciplines to make them globally competitive” (Yi, 2011, p. 501). However, some challenges such as the limited number of scholarships, the language issue, and limited opportunities for international students’ immigration and work, are remaining (Z. Yang & De Wit, 2019, p. 20).

The existing literature on international students’ experience in China is rich and varied as the trend is on the internationalisation of higher education and students’ mobility. However, our contribution has the merit of using a personal narrative discourse to present an academic experience in a Chinese university. With the increasing number of international students in China, a contribution related to an intercultural study experience would not be superfluous, but rather will further enrich the field, especially with the use of the narrative approach which is very attractive. This paper aimed at presenting my cross-cultural experience as an international student at a Chinese public and comprehensive university, with a focus on my academic life in China, challenges, and opportunities. Living in a cross-cultural context is to some extent complex with the problem of language and cultural disparities. Nevertheless, it remains an enriching experience, because, after four years of study in China, excepted my field of study, I learned many things such as the Chinese language, and I have a better understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese academic culture.

1. Literature review

1.1. Development of international students' education in China

As noted by Jiani (2017), the education of international students in China has undergone several stages of development. The first stage (1950-1965) constituted the foundation of international students' education. The second stage (1966-1977) was characterised by setbacks and recovery due to the Cultural Revolution that affected the development of education for international students. This stage was followed by a development period (between 1978 and 1989) which exhibited some preliminary progress. The fourth stage (between 1990 and 1998) was characterised by the establishment of a new system with the establishment of the China Scholarship Council in charge of the organization, funding, and management of the study abroad of Chinese citizens and the citizens of other countries coming to study in China (Jiani, 2017, pp. 564–565). For Wen, Hu, and Hao (2017), despite the remaining challenges for international students such as 'limited English resources, inadequate student-faculty interaction on campus, and difficulties in socio-cultural adjustment', China is emerging as a 'key higher education destination' for developing countries, especially for Asian countries. To address the issues related to the development of international students' education, Gao and De Wit (2017) suggested developing courses in other languages and especially in English, the cultivation of mature and multicultural campus culture, and the multiplication of employment or internship opportunities for international students in China. This recommendation seems particularly relevant given all the language difficulties encountered by international students in China.

1.2. International students' experience in China

The literature on international students' experiences in China is plentiful, nevertheless focused more on the number and distribution of students, students' mobility, and intercultural adaptation (An & Chiang, 2015; Anshan, 2018; Ewnetu et al., 2017; Gao & De Wit, 2017; Jiani, 2017; Nerlich et al., 2018; Tian & Lowe, 2018; Wen et al., 2017; P. Yang, 2018; Z. Yang & De Wit, 2019). Some authors such as An and Chiang (2015) investigated the international students' cultural adaptation at a major university in China, through the analysis of their cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social flexibility, and language proficiency. Likewise, Wen, Hu, & Hao (2017) have assessed the learning and socio-cultural experiences of international students in China with a focus on the problems associated with living, learning, and related factors.

Besides, Yang (2018) has explored the experiences of some international students learning the Chinese language and culture in different areas of China. He concluded that these students' general experience was positive and had multiple implications (benefits from study abroad activities, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural communication competence, and intercultural adaptation experience). Nerlich et al. (2018) also investigated the study and the living experiences of some Australian students' in Beijing through in-depth interviews. They analysed the perception and the understanding of Australian students about Chinese students and culture.

As a former international student, I recognized myself in many of these studies related to the socio-cultural experience of international students in China and the challenges faced by them in daily life and at the academic level. Yang's study on "Journey to the East: Intercultural Adaptation of International Students in China" in 2018, is particularly close to my experience as the author focused on the implications of the experiences of some international students, more specifically the benefits from study abroad activities, cross-

linguistic and cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural communication competence and intercultural adaptation experience. Merely, a personal experience remains unique given the particularity of each context and situation.

2. Research method

To present the influence of my cross-cultural study experience in China on my personal development as a young researcher, and to lay out my experience within a Chinese campus, I need a methodology that can enable me to “link education with life” and present education in term of “cultivations, awakenings, and transformations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995). Considering the topic of this paper which is “human-centredness” and focuses on the complexity of the human experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007), it seems necessary to use the narrative inquiry research method. The narrative methodology is a qualitative research approach that provides a framework through which the researchers can investigate “the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It enables to “address human performance in a variety of environment” (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narrative approach can be considered as a way of thinking, and for this purpose involves a theory of the practical and the practice of experiencing experience (Xu & Connelly, 2010).

The narrative method is the proper way to understand people in education. It enables to “address human performance in a variety of environment” (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This method can be considered as a way of thinking, and for this purpose involves a theory of the practical and the practice of experiencing experience (Xu & Connelly, 2010). For a cross-cultural narrative inquiry, it is necessary to use a “critical perspective” and to have “an explicit social justice orientation” (Phillion & Wang, 2011). Indeed, multicultural and cross-cultural narrative inquiry involves a critical self-examination; rigorous methods through the use of documents analysis, observation, and interviews; and also a careful contextualised interpretation and representation (Phillion & Wang, 2011).

Shank (1990) classifies narrative into official stories (stories learned from official sources), invented or adapted stories (stories created by people), firsthand stories (people’s own experience), secondhand stories (firsthand stories of other people), culturally common stories (stories gotten from the environment) (As noted in Akinsanya & Bach, 2014). The present discourse could be considered as a firsthand story as it emphasizes on my personal experience. Thus, this experience constitutes the data of the present study and narrative analysis was used through ‘shared cultural narratives (sociocultural)’ and ‘powerful metaphor and language that define experience (literary)’ (McAlpine, 2016, p. 36).

In this study, I proceeded to the description of my personal experience in China by depicting life in China, some features of the Chinese academic culture, and the different challenges I faced there as an international student. It includes some critical events that have marked my life as an international student in China. For this contribution, I have focused on some significant details of my stay in China. Thus, I relate some of the highlights of my journey that are consistent with my socio-cultural adaptation as a foreign student as well as my various academic challenges during the fourth years of my adventure. This narrative focuses on the little details and scattered events from ordinary life that may be of educational interest and serve to inform and inspire future international students.

3. Results

During my Master's year in Political Science in my country, Cameroon, one of my relatives who at that time was pursuing his studies in China, advised me to do the same and to continue my studies in China. I immediately agreed with this idea and started with the enrolment procedures as I was very tempted by the experience of studying abroad. Once the applications were successful, I went to China right after my master's degree in 2016 for an adventure that lasted four years. I arrived in China in September 2016 and went straight into a language year having not previously learnt Chinese. In 2017, I was able to start my doctoral studies in "Studies of Higher Education" and I successfully achieved it in June 2020.

3.1. Life in China

Before coming to China, I never thought that China was such a rich and advanced country with advanced infrastructural facilities and technological infrastructures. I discovered a State with innovative infrastructures, technologies, and many commodities that make everyday life more straightforward and comfortable. Upon my arrival, I was exposed to a whole new world of public bikes (OFO), public electric cars, ride-hailing services (*DiDi*), the use of WeChat and Alipay to buy things and make online transactions, the online purchase of goods (*Taobao, Pinduoduo, etc.*), express delivery (*Kuaidi*), home meals delivery (*Waimai*), and so on. The trend in Chinese society is in the utilisation of digital and electronics.

In Cameroon, the introduction of online facilities is more recent and still emerging. Indeed, while the online payment and transaction commodities (*Orange Money, Mobile Money*) are growing fastly; some facilities such as express delivery (*Chrono service, Bee group*), home meal delivery, and ride-hailing services (*Yango, Bee group*) remain effective only in the major cities as Douala and Yaoundé. There is a great deal of growth in e-commerce with the use of applications such as Facebook and Whatsapp. Online shopping is relatively expanded in the whole country.

During the first few days, I got to learn that the Chinese people were friendly, hardworking and patriotic.

3.2. Chinese customs

At the beginning of my adaptation, I considered some customs as strange, such as the way of greetings ‘你吃饭了吗？（*ni chi fan le ma?*）’ which means ‘have you eaten?’. However, I got used to these habits rapidly and applied the *chengyu* (idiomatic expression), “入乡随俗（*ru xiang sui su*）” (When in Rome, do as the Roman do). I learned to eat and appreciate Chinese food, to use chopsticks, and to drink hot water as the Chinese do. I found that some Chinese cultural habits are quite similar to my own culture (the author is a native of Cameroon), for instance, the profound respect for elders, filial piety, and so on.

Furthermore, I was struck by the place of culture in Chinese society. The Chinese are indeed remarkably attached to their traditions, such as the culture of tea, and the use of *chengyu* (idiomatic expressions) in communication. Regarding the culture of tea, it is an important part of Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese people consider that “Life is like a cup of tea” (人生如茶 [*ren sheng ru cha*]) and “Drinking tea is like tasting the life” (喝茶就像实在品味人生 [*he cha jiu xiang shi zai pin wei ren sheng*]). The tea culture permeates the unique Chinese philosophy of life.

Concerning the “成语 [*chengyu*]”, they are almost omnipresent in the communication of the Chinese people. Most Chinese, young and old, use them to express profound ideas in a few words, usually four words.

While this mode of communication knows certain decadence in my culture that is also equipped with a rich culture of adages and proverbs, it is highlighted in Chinese society. The multiple visits and exchanges organised by the school enabled me to better understand the realities of Chinese society as well as Chinese culture.

Also, I was very impressed by the Chinese way of showing respect. Indeed, as highlighted by Huang (2008), I remarked that the Chinese have the habit of using “one's occupation to address him to show respect, either in a formal or informal occasion when their social status is considered to be high or respectful”. When their social status is considered to be low, like most people in service profession, people call them *shifu* (师傅) instead of their profession. Likewise, I thoroughly enjoyed the appellations reserved for foreigners such as *laowai* (老外) or *waiguo pengyou* (外国朋友).

3.3. Chinese academic culture

One of the aspects that literary marked me in China is the academic culture. The Chinese academic culture is interesting because it is different from the Western academic culture and reflects its specific characteristics. Indeed, the Chinese higher education system is rooted in the Confucius philosophy of “gaining wisdom and complying with morality” (Jiang, 2011, p. 96). It was amazing to discover that the relationship between the teachers and the students is both friendly and academic; it is even similar to the parent-child relationship. Despite the deep respect for the supervisor and teachers, the Chinese students are very close to their instructors. The students use to meet their supervisor often and even during the night and on the weekend. It is indeed an enriching experience to be gathered around our supervisor to share a meal, especially since in the context I come from, the relationship between students and supervisors is much more limited to the academic field.

One of these times, I was pleasantly surprised by the invitation of our supervisor to his home. On this day, our supervisor decided to invite all the students that he supervised to congratulate those who had graduated that year. This meeting was delightful and rewarding. The supervisor had exchanges with us and told us many things about his experience as a teacher and university leader. The supervisor proposed to us that we play some games, and recite poems and songs, he even gave us a poem recitation, and it was a very relaxing evening. Such meetings can help to strengthen the bond between the students and their supervisor, and also the relationship among the students. I think this culture of proximity between Chinese teachers and students positively affects talent cultivation.

Likewise, I was also impressed by the culture of publication in Chinese universities even in comprehensive universities. The publication of scientific papers by students even by undergraduate students is promoted in higher education institutions. The release of scientific documents constitutes a condition of graduation in many colleges. This trend surprised me because in my country students can finish their Master's degree without the constraint of publication. This practice presents the advantage of the early initiation of the students to research attitudes, but it also contributes to the proliferation of mediocre papers.

4. Challenges and perspective

The main difficulty I have encountered since my arrival in China is the language issue. Despite my efforts and even my successful completion of the Chinese proficiency test (汉语学平考上 [*Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*]), I still faced severe language difficulties. Given that my curriculum was in Chinese, it was difficult for me to understand some technical concepts in the beginning. I cannot communicate properly with my supervisor, teachers, and comrades. Likewise, I cannot plainly express my academic ideas in the Chinese language.

Moreover, I encountered some difficulties to deal with term papers because I should write some of them in Chinese. Sometimes, I tried to write directly in Chinese and then asked some Chinese students to help me to correct language mistakes. Nevertheless, for field courses, I, first of all, wrote the papers in English, then used translation software to transform them into Chinese, and finally asked for proofreading by a Chinese student. Indeed, this method was not the best, but it was complicated for me to write academic Chinese.

Another challenge that I want to raise is the claim to be treated on an equal footing as Chinese students. Indeed, after observation, I realised that international students are treated with less rigour and much more flexibility than their Chinese classmates. It is true that the language problem greatly hinders international students' academic development in China. However, in my opinion, it is not right to be exempted from some work such as class reports and submissions since rigour and discipline are the guarantees of better training. I greatly envied my Chinese classmates who work a lot with their supervisors and are associated with the realisation of some research projects of their supervisors. I think that these various works constitute an excellent initiation for the researcher and contribute enormously to their training.

Conclusion

Studying abroad is a rich cross-cultural experience that can foster the development of the researcher. The advantage of this experience is double because, at the end of the training, the learner is not only going to finish with a relevant intellectual background in the field of study, but also with significant sociocultural experience. Since I arrived in China, apart from the knowledge gained in the classroom, I have also learnt a lot from observation and the exchange with Chinese people. I find that the Chinese model of education development, more precisely in higher education works well considering the increasing number of world-class universities, the expansion of higher education through the internationalisation of Chinese universities, the growing number of international students, and the innovation of the scholars. I advise all those who want to pursue their studies in China, to learn the Chinese language earnestly, and to benefit more from their training. Despite the singularity of this narrative discourse, as well as being an individual experience that cannot be generalised or assimilated to the experience of other international students in China, the topic is of sociological and practical interest. The growth of such studies based on the narrative method will be of interest to the field of international higher education as it will provide a general insight into the socio-cultural adaptation of international students and the relationship with their personal development.

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