

Self-Reflection and Transformation Among Ningxia International Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study investigated the learning experiences and the adaptation process among Ningxia China international students studying in Malaysia. The paper aims to highlight the researcher's self-reflection on the learning experience which led to self-transformation. The study employed a qualitative paradigm where a total of the ten participants were interviewed. Through a unique self-reflection during analysis, the researcher placed herself in the study and supported by ten other respondents. The researcher went through a rigorous search within herself. In addition, a set of semi-structured questions was used during the interview. The self-reflection of the researcher was conceptualized, interviews were transcribed and data were triangulated. Coding and constant comparison were adopted during data analysis. The findings showed the sub-themes of the learning experiences which led to self-transformation. The results yielded from this study contributed significantly towards the notion of transformation, study abroad and internationalisation. Thus, this implies that to be able to succeed while studying abroad, it is important to understand the learning processes and the outcomes of the transformation within an individual.

Keywords: *adaptations, learning experiences, self-reflection, self-transformation, study abroad*

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1. Introduction

According to reports, Malaysia has become a gathering place for international students from all over the world, and the number continues to increase. As the tertiary-level students from China who study in Malaysia increased to around 15,000 in 2016 (Juwai, 2017), almost a four-time growth than four years before, it connotes attribution of reasons on increasing number of the Chinese students select Malaysia as the target for their higher education. In general, the educational collaboration between China and Malaysia have been widely known among the Chinese families, which enables the Chinese parents and students to believe the higher education opportunities in Malaysia are the trustworthy choices. The main reasons include diversified language environment, perfect education laws and regulations, convenient study abroad policy, preferential study abroad fees and international degree certification (Juwai, 2017; Yang & Huang 2017). It had invited many studies focused on the academic, social, psychological aspects among these international students.

Reports also show an upward trend of tertiary-level students from China who study in Malaysia. During the period of 2012 to 2016, mainland Chinese students studying in the country has increased from 3,800 to 15,000 (Juwai, 2017), which implies the educational attractiveness of Malaysian education. Higher education institutions in Malaysia have been able to attract more international students and improve their teaching quality through preferential policies, such as making it easier to obtain visas, offering full scholarships and offering well-paid jobs after graduation. This phenomenon has led to an increase in students' educational mobility. In fact, due to the rapid economic growth, Mainland Chinese students' studies overseas have become increasingly popular in the recent decade. According to China Ministry of Education (2018), beginning at 2010, the number of students who select studying abroad has rocketed from around 284.7 million to 608.4 million in 2017. In this sense, the increase of studying in Malaysia could be considered as an inevitable momentum under the surge of studying overseas among Mainland Chinese students.

Not all the regions in China have the equal record in sending students abroad. In particular, as a landlocked province in northwest China, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (Ningxia) comprises 13.9% of China's population in 2017, or a real number of 6.82 million people. According to a statistical report by the Ningxia Government in 2015, the Muslim people living in the province were 2,403,890, comprising 36.05% of the total population in the area (Ningxia Hui

Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Between 2016 and 2017, the number of students from Ningxia studying overseas at the tertiary level has only increased from 1,038 to 1,335, and within that, the annual number of new students from Ningxia to Malaysia are approximately 500 on average (Zhang, 2018). In other words, Malaysia is one of the major host countries receiving student outflow from Ningxia.

With the Chinese and Malaysian students close cross-cultural and social exchanges, Malaysia has become a gathering place for international students from all over the world, and the number shows a good trend of continuous increase. Since the reform and opening up, China's economy has developed rapidly, people's living standard has been improved, study abroad is no longer as remote as before, and the number of overseas students has increased sharply. With this increasing trend, the aim of this study was to investigate the learning experience among Ningxia students studying in Malaysia. In particular, this paper highlights the outcomes of Ningxia students' self-transformation having studied overseas.

2. The Study Context

Almost one third of Malaysian citizens are ethnic Chinese. Many students from China study in Malaysia because the country does not only share some cultural similarities with China, but also provide the society highly influenced by the British culture due to the colonial history. It attracted the students from China to experience a foreign culture that exhibits the differences and similarities at the same time, and also encouraged many Chinese Muslim students to live and study in Malaysia. With their religious advantage, many Chinese Muslim students expected to immigrate to this country (Zhou & Zhang, 2007). In more recent years, due to the One-belt-one-road Initiatives since 2012, China's citizens were more aware of the importance of intercultural communication and collaboration.

Under the context, many families decided to send their children to study in Malaysia as the opportunity to uplift their personal quality towards contributing to the bilateral economic and social development (Zhu & Cao, 2017). The popularization of studying in Malaysia among Ningxia students could be sourced from the socio-economic status of the families in the province. In 2017, the disposable income per capita in Ningxia is ¥20,561.66 (RM12139.36 approximately), ranked at 22nd among 31 provinces of China (Hu, 2017). This fact determined that the families would prioritize the economic conditions when sending students to study abroad. In this sense,

Malaysia becomes a satisfactory target due to its beautiful natural scenes, social stability, and economic costs, which do not only attract Chinese Muslim students but also the Han ethnic students who reside in the province. However, Ningxia students may encounter obstacles when studying and living in Malaysia. As Zhang (2018) concerned, one challenge rises from the difference of climate. There is the inland climate in Ningxia, dry and rain-less, compared to the tropical rainforest climate in Malaysia, may not be easily adapted by the Ningxia students. More than that, as the young people who barely live without family's care, they may feel highly stressed for the reasons of fear of failing, the language barrier, homesickness, and isolation from their host culture, resulting in mental issues such as depression, frustration, and students dropping out (Wang, 2016). In addition, due to the ritual differences between the two countries, Ningxia Muslim students may feel difficult to adjust themselves in the local religious environment in Malaysia.

Studies and reports had shown that studying in Malaysia could trigger both the benefits and costs for the Ningxia students (Zhou & Zhang, 2007; Wang, 2016). If they successfully overcome the difficulties faced when staying in the foreign country, their maturity of personality can be highly strengthened, with the cross-cultural experiences that can diversify their worldview (Huang, 2015). Nevertheless, if they fail to adapt themselves to the Malaysian environment, the overseas experiences could be a mental burden and gain much less for academic and social competencies. Hence, the aims of the study were to investigate the Ningxia students' learning experiences and adaptations in all aspects to overcome the problems and adopt the rightful strategies to adapt to the environment and surrounding. As the researcher was on the doctoral studies at a local institution in Malaysia, she used her own experiences and also the experiences embedded in people to inform the and support international students who are studying abroad in a foreign country. This paper highlights the significant self-reflection and self-transformation of herself and also these results were yielded among all the respondents in this study.

3. Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature review, a conceptual framework was established to facilitate in the data collection. The framework was made up of Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic adaptations, Self-reflection, and Self-transformation. The stress-adaptation by Kim (2017) and Zhang (2007) elaborated the stresses and adaptations of students' studying abroad. These models were found apt as the models integrated both the psychological and the sociocultural aspects of adaption rather

than only highlighting the importance of psychological drivers of inter-cultural adaptation. The research method of Jane (2022) was adopted as self-reflection supported by the Heuristic phases and stages. Finally, assuming that learning experiences and their adaptations can be translated, these theories provided the basis for the investigation.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative method in soliciting data. The researcher went through a rigorous search within herself regarding her own learning experience while studying in Malaysia. In addition, a total of ten participants took part in the interviews. The participants comprised of six female students and four male students from the province of Ningxia China. They were currently in their first to final year of academic study. The participants were undergoing Degree programs from various fields. For the purpose of confidentiality, the actual name of the institutions and the participants were not used in this study. The profile of the participants is shown in table 1.

Table 1

Biographical Profile of Participants

| Name | Age | Academic Year | Type of Programs |
|--------------------------------|------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Raine - The Primary researcher | 30 | Year 4 | Education |
| Sophia | 22 | Year 1 | Psychology |
| Peter | 24 | Year 2 | Accounting |
| Zoe | 26 | Year 2 | Education |
| Mark | 22 | Year 2 | Business Administration |
| Xiao Qi | 23 | Year 3 | Sports science |
| Max | 25 | Year 3 | HRD |
| Sue Fei | 28 | Year 4 | Entrepreneurship |
| Momo | 23 | Year 1 | HRD |
| Anita | 21 | Year 1 | Education |
| Karen | 27 | Year 4 | Early Child hood |

Among the ten participants, three are from Education program in Psychology, and early childhood. Five are from the Business and Entrepreneurships program. The students were from different higher institutions in Malaysia. It attempted to understand the challenges, the shocks and adaptations experienced by the Ningxia students in local higher institutions. Several sessions of

in-depth interviews using the semi-structured questions were asked upon participants during interviews. A review into some episodes of the experience were recalled and recorded. Thus, the strategy of critical incident technique and discourse analysis had also been adopted as methods to obtain relevant and quality data.

For purpose of confidentiality, and adhering to the ethics on research, the actual names of the institutions and participants were not used in this paper. The data obtained from all the twenty interviews were collectively analysed to uncover common themes and sub-themes on the shocks impact which led to their adaptations to succeed in studying abroad.

Specifically, the researcher identified the model of Jane (2022), to begin her self-reflection. The researcher adopted the core processes in the study of Jane investigating her own self-learning experiences engaging in her experiences with her mother's critical illness. Jane explored the phenomenon as she is the 'eye' to her own meaning making process of experience and by sharing people's stories that have the same lived experience to enhance a better understanding of the investigation in this study (Jane, 2022). In brief, the study also was an experiential and reflective exploration with the respondents that has the same learning during their study abroad experiences. This approach enabled the researcher to delve more deeply and personally into the complexity and uncertainty that she was experiencing within herself as a doctoral student in Malaysia.

5. Findings and Discussion

The self-reflection of the researcher's outcomes was placed in the context. In this nature, the researcher served not only as the instrument of data collection, the tool of analysis but as the major part of data contribution. As in qualitative research, this study was, in fact, influenced by the interpersonal relations of the respondents and researcher. The researcher's transformation was illustrated in the creative synthesis below.

5.1. The researcher's journey of self-transformation

Turning to a summary of the researcher's experience illustrates the journey of transformation at various stages. She began by having fear and uncertainty upon reaching at a foreign country to begin her doctoral studies. She was afraid of the unknown. In most situations, she learnt to take risks, trying out new perspectives, engaging in self-reflection. She questioned

her attitudes and her approach to life and ultimately creating new meanings during her studies in a foreign land.

At that point in her life, she would say that most of her learning experiences have been positive and she agreed that learning and adaptations and self-change were something that holds high importance in life. For example, the learning to open her heart and begin to see others as they are. Being more respectful for others and embraced those differences that she came across. In some situations, she learnt to face the anxiety as part of learning and take risk to voice what was here and now, using her experience and trusting her intuition. Hence, the use of this psychological knowledge helps to empower people to make informed choices, express them freely, and was able to be herself and function more effectively. This is supported by Rohana et al. (2019) that to encourage international students to be capable to complete their study, social intelligence is possible, programs which develop in students a strong sense of responsibility in managing oneself as well as developing good social connection or relationship with others including one's environment is required.

This learning from the experiences also enhances a personal growth and development as the quest of understanding experience and learning in her. For instance, it has provided her an opportunity to learn more about herself and be more fully integrated and assimilate information to work through important issues more thoroughly than before during her studies. On the affective aspect, she felt the opportunity to tell one's story and speak one's own voice has healing power. Additionally, hearing the stories of a participant or participants and working together with them on the issues addressed in the study can result in change and transformation on the part of each individual. She believed, one can do one's work and progress in one's personal and spiritual growth and development in their context.

Another aspect which was worth noting during the learning experience was the coping strategies that she adopted. She had to find her own coping strategies during her studies as a doctoral student in a different setting. Coping refers to the attitudes she had developed and the actions she took to maintain her equilibrium and adjust to the stresses caused by different cultural, different beliefs, different people that she had to deal with. Her life had changed. She derived an inner strength that enabled her to help others and most importantly to take care of herself in certain ways so that she can cope better in her studies.

More than this, she could share her experience and learning, to inform and support who were embarking on the kind of journey. It gave and provided not only information but morale support to all the students who were studying abroad. Additionally, these results on the process of self-transformation among the Ningxia students while studying abroad were presented and discussed in this section. The examination of this section was carried out based on the sub-questions at these areas of more reflective, more open, less defensive and the learning of living within a community at large.

5.2. Self-reflections on self-transformations

The self-reflection of the researcher's learning experiences was elaborated at the previous section. In addition, the study was supported by ten other Ningxia students who were studying in Malaysia. These results on the self-transformation at stages is presented and discussed in this section. The examination of this section was carried out based on the sub-questions at these areas:

5.2.1. How adaptations lead to self-transformation?

A major learning occurred within the participants at various levels of adaptations, shifting their understanding of reality, and thus affecting how they perceived and subsequently act in this world. Some participants report growth or changed of world views resulting from the learning experience in local institutions. Most of the participants agreed that their experiences had certainly changed them in the three aspects as shown by the three themes:

- Becoming more reflective and critical
- Being more open to other's perspectives
- Learning to live within the community

As shown in table 2, the sub-themes that emerged strongly from the categories during coding demonstrated the processes of self-transformation with each of the respondent.

Table 2

The categories and the extract of the process of self-transformation among the Ningxia China students studying abroad in Malaysia

| Primary Categories | Respondents | Extracts |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| More reflective and critical | Mark L191 | <i>It was totally different. It changed me a bit, my outlook in life, my perspective of success. We need to change quite a bit. I am trying to adopt this. However, I find it difficult to do. So, I have to. I am conscious.</i> |
| | Sue Fei L193 | <i>I saw myself think more now. I also listen to others...</i> |
| | Max L201 | <i>So go through it and face it. We will be better. All people can adapt. Just had to see how. It took times</i> |
| More open to other's perspectives | Mark L217 | <i>One thing is you have to accept. It is going to be a challenge for you. Be ready for whatever that comes along. And number 2, you can't take other risks, you have to seek help...</i> |
| | Peter L198 | <i>Life is like –you walk with many people. You stop and see and think, take what is suitable for you and adapt all along</i> |
| | Zoe L182 | <i>I saw myself think more now. I also listen to others...I think seriously when problems come. I ask for help.</i> |
| Less Defensive | Momo L183 | <i>Some of us know very well, we have to change and adapt and our motivations to complete our studies make us stay and we now try to enjoy our time here.</i> |
| | Anita L176 | <i>Be open minded now. Accept the people's behaviors and styles.</i> |
| Live within the community | Karen L218 | <i>Now I see family is very important. Bigger family is okay. The society also very good as we feel we belong to a place or a home. I learn to live with different kind of people now. I can understand now how the local people can live together...</i> |
| | Sophia L201 | <i>I am happy now as I know I can live in a big society with different races, culture and beliefs. We need to be open and respect each other.</i> |
| | Max L211 | <i>Life experience, campus life, we learn to work as a big group.</i> |

5.2.2. Becoming more reflective and critical

At any stage, insights might arise 'out of the blue'. The awareness through all these transformation experiences allowed the participants to reflect more frequent. Hence, once a new level of reflection took place; one had the capacity to transform that reality through action upon it. All off the participants identified with this element after having analyzed the learning and adaptations experience as Mark reviewed, when he thought he had found the right path, he had found himself becoming more reflective and looked forward to walk 'his right path' in the near

future. He has taken it quite lightly before his experience. Note here also, Sue Fei who has begun to understand how to separate what she felt from what she was supposed to feel, what she valued from what she should value, foster a new mind set as she recalled from the process. Furthermore, Max made a new shift of his meaning making and became more critically reflective of his assumptions and consequences as he now believes. Mark's view and also supported by other participants, "transformation experiences become the basis for them to reflect and made new perspectives in all aspects". These transformations allowed them to use the abilities in varied contexts. Hence, it helped them to explore new principles or perspectives such as becoming more reflective and critical in life. At this initial stage of transformation, their confidence grew and felt freer to voice their unhappiness with their previous knowledge. According to Rohana et al (2019), that spiritual intelligence as its foundation to be confident and comfortable with oneself helped to developing a strong sense of responsibility among human being.

5.2.3. Being more open to the perspectives of others

The most immediate step they took to move forward after their adaptations and transformation towards the issues was the recognitions of the experience that support them to change in the interest and priorities they live. It was often the phased where they become more open and learn to accept other people perspectives as they can construe the meaning of Mark's in his experience and Peter admittedly accepted people as they were. Meanwhile, Zoe helped herself to review into her life, even though it was like a threatening emotional experience of transformation but it reaffirmed her beliefs that the qualities that come along in one's life were what matters. By being more critical and observing, Peter who had paid too little compassion towards issues around his life and the consequences of taken-for granted beliefs elaborated his new frame of reference. All of them were generally cumbersome with the thousand and one hindrances which wind them, but every now and then, in order to simplify living after self-change, they do have to know to be open to perspectives of others and disengage and free themselves by accepting people's view to learn to learn, to unlearn and to adapt to all situations to make life meaningful.

5.2.4. Learning to live within a community

Many of the Ningxia students report experiencing personal growth from the transformation experiences in the various aspects. Karen felt she immediately realized her own self better as she recalled, "*I mean we are not perfect. In the course of trying to do everything right for ourselves*

sometimes, we made mistakes. Overall, we learnt to adapt.” Furthermore, such growth experiences emerged in multiple domains. Anita also explained that the adaptation experiences had allowed her to want to live within a group of people. As for Sophia, in the midst of her searching to a better answer why she was always making adjustments and this transformation experiences seemed a pleasant outcome that had happened to her, she took a closer look at herself and by observing at others who were having the same fate. It was added by Max as the above quotations, he said coming to accept what happened provide better basis for transformation to face the challenges ahead and becoming more open or being open-minded about the taboo to express oneself and be brave to mix with all people at all levels. Hence, he now sees living in a community is a pleasure and should be encouraged among all the international students. In many occasions, they reminded themselves that to survive in a new environment first one had to accept and adapt and that might help them to fit in more significantly. Once they are more open about the situation and set their mind to learn, changes took place, and it is always for the betterment of oneself.

One of the most profound crises that the students encountered in the transformation and learning experience was the awareness of their own spiritual transformation in them. They re-examined into the belief and values. It would seem a change in personality, it seemed as though the individual had awakened from a real-seeming reality, and things will make sense in a different way. This finding supports Jane (2022) as the study revealed a person transform after struck by a disorienting dilemma and a series of reflection take place for one to rethink and relook into life. A perceptual will have been removed; a filter through which values had been determined, and without that filter, truer values will become evident. The new self may even have different taste in food, clothing, and different personal habits. It becomes a self-transformation. They changed their world views. The changes from the experiences among students studying in local institutions described were fundamental changes where they were trying to cope with the changes and the urgency need related to their living needs and adapted to these confusions and changed of beliefs. In a nutshell, the students learnt to accept the situations, and find ways to adapt so that they can life with ease and move forward to seek to be better themselves as now they view life more meaningful. Most important they do have the capabilities to accomplish their dreams.

6. Conclusion

This investigation on the self-transformation of the researcher supported by the respondents was a unique one. It was found that the four stages of transformation took place and the insights helped them and others to move towards a fuller and more dependable understanding of the meaning of the learning experience while studying abroad. First, becoming more reflective and critical is the initiate step to trigger to rethink and relook into own values, beliefs and assumption whether these still function in most situations. Second, the stage for self-transformation was to be more open to other's perspectives, whereby, situation as the respondents had learnt to accept as themselves and others as who they all are. Third, the most dominate features during this stage was they become less defensive and unlocked some of their previous assumptions and belief and learn to function more effective in a community and also the world.

Despite of all the hurdles, the Ningxia students were able to view their self-change to self-transformation as new outcomes from the learning experience while studying abroad in Malaysia. Ultimately, they were also expected to have equipped themselves with multiple skills and knowledge in living their life within the community. Nonetheless, it can be said that the impacts of self-transformation had significant influence towards their life.

The combination of these results on the four stages of the self-transformation among Ningxia students towards their life is worth reporting as the transformation revealed from the study demonstrated cognitive and affective changes as well as intellectual. The information yielded from the study can be integrated in curriculum planning for international students, students' mobility programs and engagement with community especially in policy making for internationalization. It is recommended that every effort to be made by the internationalisations educational policy to promote the best practice for international students.

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