

**An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Chinese
Students' Satisfaction with Postgraduate University Study
and Life in New Zealand**

By

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Abstract

Chinese students are one of the largest groups of international students studying in New Zealand. The wellbeing of Chinese students in the New Zealand educational context has aroused interest from educators from both China and New Zealand. This research explores the satisfaction of Chinese students from a cultural perspective. It adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach to investigate Chinese students' definitions of satisfaction and the role of Chinese culture values, particularly, *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi* in influencing their experience of satisfaction while they living and studying in New Zealand. Data were collected through six in-depth interviews with Chinese postgraduate students at one university. Based their experience studying and living in New Zealand, most of the participants reported very individualized understandings of the term "satisfaction", They also, described their experiences of adjustments in living and learning, their mismatched expectations and how their life attitudes had affected their experience in New Zealand. While the students do not explicitly acknowledge Chinese values, their influence can be seen in the way the students experience satisfaction with their study in New Zealand. This has implications for institutions in New Zealand as these insights have a potential to inform practices to support these students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Rational of research

With more and more people choosing to undertake tertiary qualifications beyond their home countries, international education has become a worldwide industry (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2005). The demand for overseas education at tertiary level has grown dramatically in the last decade (Foskett, 2010). The number of international students enrolled in higher education outside their country of citizenship has risen from 0.6 million worldwide in 1975 to three million in 2007 (OECD, 2009). The number of international students is estimated to reach eight million by 2025 (Bohm et al., 2004). Meanwhile, beyond the traditional overseas study destinations like the United States, the UK and Australia, newer host countries, such as New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore provide students more choices in the global education market (Woodfield, 2010).

The export education industry has become the fourth biggest industry in New Zealand, (Yang, Li & Sligo, 2008). Export education is, in other words, when education is considered a service which can be purchased by worldwide customers, thus giving financial benefits to the host institutions. The contribution of export education to New Zealand gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at approximately \$2.1 billion (after allowing for flow-on effects to other industries and leakage offshore) over 2007/2008 (Ministry of Education, 2008). The export education industry has been one of the leading export earners for New Zealand (Butcher, 2009; Ward, Masgoret, & Gezentsvey, 2009).

With more and more Chinese students choosing to study overseas, China has become one of the major exporting countries (sending students abroad to study) in the higher education marketplace (Foskett & Maringe, 2010). After the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Canada and Singapore, New Zealand is among the top eight popular destinations for Chinese international students (Institute for International Education, 2009). According to New Zealand government statistics, there were 21,258 Chinese international students out of 98,474 international students enrolled in New Zealand education providers (Ministry of Education, 2011). The latest statistics indicate that during the period from 1 January to 30 April 2012, there were 22,811 international students enrolled in New Zealand tertiary educational institutions (polytechnics, colleges of education, universities, wananga), and 28.2% of those international students were from China (Educationcounts, 2012)

From a financial perspective, recruitment of international students will offer direct benefits to the economy of the host countries and higher education providers (Taylor, 2010). The prosperity of the Chinese economy and the growth of Chinese participation in tertiary study gave the New Zealand Ministry of Education confidence that there is significant potential for expansion in the number of students from China (Ministry of Education, 2011). In addition to the financial benefits that international students bring to New Zealand, international students also bring social, political, or economic information about their home countries and thus widen the host students' perspectives on the multicultural world (Ladd & Ruby, 1999).

Globalization and internationalization of higher education creates opportunities for the development of international education providers and host countries through internationalisation of curricula and opportunities to develop intercultural skills. However

this process also brings some challenges (Foskett & Maringe, 2010). The fierce competition between worldwide education providers requires universities and host countries to make considerable efforts to attract and keep international students within their classrooms. Improving the satisfaction of international students, and maintaining their loyalty have become key objectives for universities (Arambewela & Hall, 2008).

According to a nation-wide survey of the experiences of international students, Chinese students are the most dissatisfied group in New Zealand, compared to students from Europe, South Africa, North America and other Asian countries (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Despite this low level of satisfaction, Chinese students indicated intentions to stay or work in New Zealand after graduation and they were likely to apply for permanent residency (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). This phenomenon indicates a complex picture of factors influencing Chinese international students' satisfaction with their experiences of living and studying in New Zealand. As the largest group of international students, Chinese international students' satisfaction with their experience of living and studying in New Zealand may not only influence their own lives but also the wellbeing of future Chinese international students. In addition, the export of New Zealand education will be affected because fewer students will select New Zealand as a destination for their studies (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Chinese students differ from other international students and from domestic students because they have been immersed in Chinese cultural values during their upbringing and previous education in China. However, I was unable to find any studies of how Chinese cultural values have influenced Chinese students' experience of satisfaction when studying in New Zealand. This was the rationale for me to develop this project. An exploration of how Chinese international students experience satisfaction has

implications for current and future Chinese international students' wellbeing and give clues to tertiary educators and institutions about how to better meet the needs of Chinese students.

Currently, I am studying at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). My own experience of being a Chinese postgraduate international student in a New Zealand tertiary institution and the accounts told by my Chinese friends who also studied in VUW provided me with an opportunity to get to know how Chinese students try to survive and reach their goals in a different cultural and educational environment. This also inspired me to explore how Chinese students experience satisfaction from the point of view of this group of students when living and studying at postgraduates level in New Zealand tertiary education context.

1.2 Purpose of the study

This research aims to explore the experiences of Chinese students from the perspectives of Chinese students themselves, through a phenomenological approach. This study aimed to find out how Chinese postgraduate students define satisfaction, and how they experience satisfaction when studying and living in New Zealand tertiary education context. Particularly, this research examined how Chinese cultural values have impact on Chinese students' perceptions of satisfaction. Finally, this research gathered data that produced a descriptive narrative of the participants' understandings and experiences of satisfaction in New Zealand.

1.3 Research questions

1. How do Chinese tertiary students in New Zealand experience “satisfaction” with their stay in New Zealand?
2. How might Chinese cultural values, particularly *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi* influence Chinese students’ experiences of satisfaction in New Zealand.
3. How do Chinese students interpret their experience of satisfaction, and what does it mean to be satisfied.

1.4 The structure of thesis

In this section, I will outline the structure of the thesis and briefly describe what is in each chapter.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter considered the rationale for conducting this research. A general overview of New Zealand export education and background information about Chinese international students in New Zealand tertiary education context are also provided together with the research questions.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter reviews literature on Chinese international students’ experiences of studying and living overseas in New Zealand and findings from the literature on factors that might influence Chinese students’ level of satisfaction. In addition, the literature that explores Chinese cultural values and Chinese international students’ experience of satisfaction with study experiences is also explored.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

In this chapter, reasons for choosing a qualitative research method and particularly a phenomenological approach for this research are discussed. The process of participant selection, data collection and data analysis also are also described. In addition, the ethical considerations are considered in this chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the interview data. The findings were categorized into patterns to present the voices of Chinese students that reflect their perceptions of living and studying experience in New Zealand.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, using the interpretive phenomenological data analysis approaches, themes are drawn from the patterns addressed in Chapter 4: Findings. These themes are discussed in relation to literature. The the research questions are used as a framework to discuss the findings.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and limitations

Recommendations are made based on the findings and discussions. The recommendations have potential to shed some lights on the experience of satisfaction of Chinese international students who share similar backgrounds with the participants. In addition, limitations of this research project are also addressed in this chapter. I conclude with a personal reflection.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, literature on Chinese international students' satisfaction with their overseas experience in New Zealand is explored. While there is a growing body of research about Chinese students' experiences while studying in New Zealand, (Campbell & Li, 2007; Guan & Jones, 2011; Zhang & Brunton, 2007) only three of the studies, Bai (2008), Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007), Yang, Li and Sligo (2008), particularly focused on the satisfaction of Chinese international students.

This literature review provides a general overview of Chinese international students' learning experiences in New Zealand and the factors that might impact Chinese international students' satisfaction in New Zealand education context. Specifically, the literature exploring the themes of Chinese cultural values and Chinese students' satisfaction is reviewed.

2.2 Definitions of key terms

The following key terms will be defined in this section. They are Chinese international students, student satisfaction, and the Chinese cultural values of *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi*. The definitions are developed from literature and serve to focus the purpose of the study. The definitions of the cultural values are used as a lens to critically analyse some of the findings of studies reviewed in this chapter.

2.2.1 Chinese international students

In this research, Chinese tertiary international students are defined as students who:

1. Hold passports issued by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and have a visa to allow them to study in New Zealand.
2. Have completed some of their primary, secondary or tertiary education in mainland China.
3. Pay full tuition fees, rather than have a government subsidy on their fees as domestic students do.
4. Come from the mainland China only. Students from Hong Kong and Taiwan are excluded in this study.

Clear definitions of Chinese international students are not always provided in published research studies. This included the studies reviewed in this thesis. To develop the definition above, I drew on the definitions used by Bai (2008), Yang, Li and Sligo (2007) and Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) when recruiting participants for their studies. Students from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan area were excluded in this research because they may have very different upbringings and education backgrounds than students from mainland China. For example, students from Hong Kong may have experienced Cantonese or English as the medium of instruction in their earlier education.

2.2.2 Student satisfaction

In the literature reviewed for this research, it was not possible to find a definition on student satisfaction. Though Bai (2008), Yang, Li and Sligo (2007), Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) conducted studies specifically on Chinese international students' satisfaction in New Zealand, there was no definition of student satisfaction in these

studies. Therefore, I will draw on other research that considers the satisfaction of international students studying outside their home countries.

In 2011, Sinclair conducted research on students' satisfaction with online learning and suggested that literature tended to fail to define this term. Sinclair (2011) claimed that in the 34 studies reviewed for his research, there were only six studies that gave definitions of students' satisfaction. Sinclair concluded that, students' satisfaction could be defined differently in different types of learning environment.

Student satisfaction was defined as "the perception of enjoyment and accomplishment in the learning environment" (Sweeny & Ingram, 2001, p.57) in traditional learning environments with the incorporation of online learning facilities. While Wu, Tennyson and Hsia (2010) considered student satisfaction in a blended or hybrid environment as "the sum of a student's behavioural beliefs and attitudes that result from aggregating all the benefits that a student receives from using the blended system" (p. 157). Sinclair (2011) also provided his understanding of students' satisfaction in the online learning environment. He suggested that student satisfaction could be regarded as an enjoyable and successful experience achieved from online learning.

All the definitions listed above showed that student satisfaction was focused on the students' experience of enjoyment in learning, success achieved from learning experiences, or beliefs, and attitudes they constructed during learning process. Elliot and Shin (2002) stated that "student satisfaction is a subtle yet complex phenomenon" (p.198). In my research, understandings of satisfaction with the experience of tertiary study are developed from the perspective of Chinese international student as they

experience the phenomenon of study at postgraduate level in a university in New Zealand.

2.2.3 *Guanxi* (关系)

Guanxi, is a traditional Chinese value. It is a social psychological phenomenon which is displayed in the daily life of most people in Chinese society. It means social networking, mutual obligations and interrelationships (Kulich & Zhang, 2010). It had been widely discussed and explored in psychology and business studies (Tromina & Gao, 2010).

In this thesis, I use Tromina and Gao's (2010) definition of *guanxi* as "a person's network of social connections composed of family, close friends, and people who are interpersonally connected to one's family and friends, as well as individuals linked by traditional connections (such as classmates, teachers, and students)" (p.1196). This definition is appropriate because it enables the research to draw on relationships in China as well as in New Zealand. Both of these networks may influence the experience of *guanxi* for Chinese international students.

2.2.4 *Renqing* (人情)

Renqing, could be translated as "emotional debt" (Chang & Holt, 1994) and means "when one is helped, one receives human emotion from the helper, whereby such human emotion is conceptualized as debt and therefore one must repay the debt in order to balance the interpersonal exchange by returning a favour of equal or greater value"(Chang & Holt, 1994, p.358). This definition allows the obligations that Chinese international students incur to be made explicit as part of their experience of satisfaction.

2.2.5 Mianzi (面子)

Mianzi, also known as “face”, is one of the central concepts in Chinese social life. Since China is a collective society in which social harmony is a significant cultural value thus face plays a profound role in Chinese society (Yang, 1995). *Mianzi* generally refers to a person’s social reputation, respectability, or the way he or she is regarded in society (Ho, 1976) People can “have face” as long as they are respected by others, but they can “lose face” when they experience a public embarrassment. Bond and Hwang (1986) identified six types of face that all relate to either enhancing, saving, or losing one’s own or another person’s face. These were: enhancing one’s own face; enhancing other’s face; losing one’s own face; hurting other’s face; saving one’s own face; and saving other’s face.

Mianzi was included as a cultural value in the research because it pertains to feelings of status within groups. Feelings of gaining or losing status may be factors that students’ perception of the benefits that influence satisfaction with studying in a tertiary environment in a New Zealand university.

2.3 Factors influencing Chinese international students’ satisfaction

Findings from the literature show that even though they were facing a variety of academic challenges and difficulties of adjusting to new education environment, most Chinese tertiary students reported that they were satisfied with the quality of education in New Zealand (Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007). A national survey conducted by Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) particularly targeted the experiences of Chinese students. There were 83 Chinese students, 46 males and 37 females, who participated in 80 individual interviews and four focus groups interviews. Students were recruited

from language schools, private training establishments, secondary schools, polytechnics and universities in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, and Christchurch.

The research also showed that most Chinese students favoured the New Zealand education system over the Chinese one (Bai, 2008). There were 432 Chinese students in total (330 university undergraduates, 34 postgraduate, 28 from other tertiary institutions, 37 from language schools or foundation studies) in Bai's (2008) mixed methods study. The survey of Chinese students located in Auckland, Hamilton, Dunedin, and Christchurch was followed up with 100 interviews. It explored how Chinese perceptions of modernization affected Chinese students' satisfaction level with New Zealand tertiary education.

However, like many Asian students or students from non-English speaking countries, Chinese international students' satisfaction level had been affected by the difficulty of adjusting to unfamiliar western education forms (Holmes, 2004; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007). In addition, language was seen as a great obstacle in their overseas experiences, as it not only affected their academic adjustment but also their interaction with local students and the local community (Campbell & Li, 2007; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Studies also indicated that Chinese students were likely to change their study plans when failing to meet the language requirements of the higher educational institutions (Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Chinese students also encountered challenges of getting through loneliness and difficulties in building interpersonal relationship with local residents (Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Bai, 2008). Bai (2008) found that Chinese students are affected by the gloomy job market both in China and New Zealand, and influenced by the Chinese perspectives of modernization. They seemed to have little

confidence in the degrees they obtained from New Zealand tertiary institutions and they had suffered financial burdens. However, they also had a strong intention to find a permanent job in New Zealand after graduation (Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007; Bai, 2008). In addition, Chinese students also complained the support provided by the university was inadequate (Guan & Jones, 2011). The participants in Guan and Jones (2011) research were all selected from first year undergraduates who were enrolled for a business paper so their complaints about the lack of academic support might also be because they still in the process of getting familiar with the tertiary level study. Different universities may provide different types and levels of learning support so it is possible that the students' reports on their satisfaction with the learning support services might differ across different universities.

To gain a deeper understanding of existing research, I used the lens of the Chinese cultural values *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi* to examine the findings of Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007), Zhang and Brunton (2007) and Bai (2008). The Chinese participants' desire to make local connections may have actually been their efforts to create opportunities for using *guanxi* in the new cultural environment. They may be aware that having local connections would make them feel more involved in the local community and offer them opportunities to know more about New Zealand society, to benefit their learning, living and even job hunting. The Chinese students who reported suffering from financial burdens in Bai (2008) experienced pressure from increasing tuition fees and living costs. However, the financial anxiety might also arise from the participants' feelings of owing *renqing* to their parents or other sponsors for their overseas study and they might need to consider how to repay this debt.

2.3.1 Language as a barrier for Chinese students

Like most students from non-English speaking countries, language is seen as an obstacle for Chinese students. This not only affected their academic adjustment, but also their social interaction with local students, and their involvement in the local community (Campbell & Li, 2007; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Campbell and Li (2007) found that the language barrier prevented Asian university students from communicating effectively, understanding of academic requirement, and socializing with domestic residents. Participants in Zhang and Brunton's (2007) study claimed that difficulty with language was one of the important reasons that contributed to their academic failure.

In addition, inadequate English language ability also required Chinese students to spend a longer time on language learning than they had expected. Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) pointed out that Chinese students underestimated the time they might have to spend on English language learning. They may feel frustrated when they had to spend a longer time in language schools to acquire the appropriate level of English than they anticipated before arrival. Some of the Chinese students had to change their course of study and pursue a lower academic goal with a low IELTS (International English Language Testing System) requirement because they could not achieve a satisfactory English level to meet the requirements of the course that was their first choice (Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007). Given that a change of study plans may destroy Chinese students' overseas study blueprint, it was very likely that they could feel frustrated when struggling to achieve the required English proficiency. Zhang and

Brunton (2007) indicated that the longer Chinese students studied in a language school, the lower their satisfaction with their experience in New Zealand.

These findings can be considered in light of Chinese values. Because Chinese students may need to spend a longer time than planned to attain their goals, they may incur more financial debt, which may make them feel they owe more *renqing* to their financial supporters (usually their parents), and they probably might feel they are losing face when they had to change their study plans due to their lack of language ability. All this would have impact on their experience of satisfaction in New Zealand learning and studying environment.

2.3.2 The challenges of building social connections with the locals

Though they desired quality relationships with host nationals, opportunities for Chinese students to get involved in the local community were limited (Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) found that most participants claimed, that despite their expectation of more freedom without the supervision and control from parents, they suffered from loneliness. They also stated that interaction with local students was more limited than they assumed because local students seemed to have no interest in getting to know international students.

Bai (2008) found out that one of the factors affecting Chinese students' satisfaction level was that they had less contact with local New Zealand students and had fewer New Zealand friends. They were likely to feel being culturally excluded and had a stronger sense of being discriminated against by New Zealanders than other international students.

2.3.3 Insufficient support from host institutions

Guan and Jones (2011) suggested in their study that the adjustment of Chinese students in New Zealand education context was largely a one-way process. They also pointed out that Chinese students had to bear much of the responsibility of adjustment by themselves for the host institutions considered that was the students' own choice to study in New Zealand.

Campbell and Li (2008) found that the participants reported they received insufficient support and this included the lack of accessibility of lecturers, the dissemination of information about learning support, and specific feedback on learning performance from the lecturers. Guan and Jones (2011) also pointed out that some learning support services only solved problems on surface, but were not of long-term benefit in supporting Chinese students. The researchers found that, although international students could receive academic support at the end of each term, it only focused on helping them pass exams, rather than providing them with assistance to cope with writing problems in exam conditions (Guan & Jones, 2011).

Though Chinese students claimed that there was insufficient help from the host institutions or the lecturers, Guan and Jones (2011) also suggested that it was worth noting that Chinese students were reluctant to use the support services provided by the universities for the students because they would feel that they had to admit their lack of competence in studying by using those services. From a cultural perspective, this phenomenon could also indicate that Chinese students might have a strong sense of face saving. Avoiding using those support services or actively seeking help would help those students to protect their *mianzi* in the new learning environment.

2.3.4 Financial burdens

In Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) survey, the two key factors that motivated Chinese students to choose New Zealand as their overseas study destination were the cheap costs and the perception of the quality of education. Participants in Bai (2008) study also implied that cheap tuition fees and cheaper living costs in New Zealand had been the top two reasons for them to choose New Zealand out of other countries such as the United States, the UK, Canada or Australia to study.

Since New Zealand was regarded as the cheapest country for overseas study, Chinese students expected the highest payback with the lowest investment. However, their expectations were dashed by the increasing costs in studying and they had to deal with the financial burdens beyond their budget. As a consequence, these unforeseen costs have become a factor that influences Chinese students' satisfaction level on their overseas experience in New Zealand (Bai, 2008).

Moreover, being far away from the protection of their parents and family, Chinese students had to deal with financial issues all by themselves when they were studying overseas. Many of them had never learned to arrange their living expenses independently before coming to New Zealand, and the imprudent use of money could make their financial situation worse (Zhang & Burton, 2007).

2.3.5 The goal of employment in New Zealand

Despite their low satisfaction level with New Zealand learning experience, Chinese students wanted to find a job in New Zealand after graduation and aim to apply for permanent residence in New Zealand (Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) and Bai (2008) pointed out that Chinese students were likely to seek jobs in New Zealand after graduation. However, the sharp contrast between the expectation of Chinese students of finding a job in New Zealand and the gloomy employment market dashed the hopes of Chinese students of getting their investment in their overseas study back and this had an undeniable influence on their satisfaction level (Bai, 2008; Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007).

2.3.6 Chinese cultural values and satisfaction

In 2008, Bai explored how the perception of modernization in Chinese culture affects Chinese international students' satisfaction level on their overseas experience in New Zealand.

In Bai's study, the researcher suggested that, influenced by the flourishing construction industry, Chinese perception of modernization was strongly connected with material prosperity. Chinese believed that a modern city should have crowded streets with shops selling international brands, high building, neon lights, and be highly commercialized (Bai,2008). However, New Zealand's agricultural image was so different from Chinese people's perceptions of a developed country such as America or the UK.

Chinese students in New Zealand complained that New Zealand was more like the countryside than a modern city and the leisure activities here were too limited. They could not feel a sense of living in a developed country where life should be energetic and competitive. The lifestyle in New Zealand was seen as quite peaceful and relaxed which, in Chinese students' words, made them "uncompetitive and lazy" (Bai, 2008, p.225). In addition, once they had lived here, Chinese students' observations of New Zealand gave them the idea that New Zealand was not competitive and commercialized

and there were not ample opportunities for employment. However, if they could qualify for residency and citizenship by working in New Zealand, further international opportunities for employment would be open to them with a New Zealand passport. Therefore, on the one hand, they complained for the limited employment opportunities that New Zealand offered, while on the other, they pictured themselves with a possible promising futures they might achieved from this overseas investment.

In addition, their lack of confidence in the degrees they achieved from the New Zealand education institutions made the situation worse. Chinese students tended to believe that their New Zealand degrees were less competitive compared to those achieved from countries such as America or the UK (Bai, 2008). This was largely influenced by the Chinese dream of emulating developed countries like the US or the UK, which were recognized wealthy and developed according to the Chinese way of ranking a country. As a result, Chinese people had the idea that a degrees achieved from more developed countries would be much better than those from a country such as New Zealand which was perceived as less developed. This bias, with the gloomy employment opportunities both in China and New Zealand, has been an important factor for Chinese international students' low satisfaction level.

Bai's work suggests that differences in cultural values would impact on the experience of satisfaction of Chinese students. One way of gaining insight into different cultural values especially cultural differences is to use the work of Hofstede and Bond (1984) and Hofstede (1984,1986) to explore dimensions such as power/distance and individualism/collectivism. With their Chinese upbringing and education with in the Chinese cultural values, when these students came to study and live in a different

cultural context, their satisfaction might be explored and analysed from this cultural perspective.

2.4 Summary

From the literature reviewed for this research, the low satisfaction level of Chinese international students in New Zealand has aroused the interest of the host institutions and New Zealand educators. The national survey conducted in 2004 by Ward and Masgoret and the follow up survey carried out in 2007 (Ho, Li, Cooper & Holmes, 2007) both indicated that Chinese international students' wellbeing and satisfaction had become an important education issue in New Zealand. In addition, the learning and living experiences of Chinese students in New Zealand had come to the attention of both Chinese and New Zealand educators. Chinese and New Zealand researchers had collaborated in research studies, the work of Guan and Jones (2007), Campbell and Li (2008) provided new perspectives in the study of Chinese students' overseas experience in New Zealand.

However, literature specifically on Chinese international students' experience of satisfaction with their study experience in New Zealand is limited. There was only one study, Bai (2008) that discussed how Chinese students' perceptions of modernization had impacted Chinese international students' satisfaction when studying and living in New Zealand. The lack of studies on Chinese cultural values and Chinese international students' satisfaction with their experience in New Zealand indicated the need for more studies conducted from this point of view.

In addition, the literature also indicates that studies on Chinese international students' satisfaction were designed from the perspectives of educators, the host institutions or

the government. Although all studies shed light on Chinese international students' satisfaction in New Zealand from different perspectives, it might also be important to explore this topic from the point of view of Chinese international students themselves. Their statements and understandings on their experience of satisfaction could also be enlightening. Therefore, this study was conducted to make a contribution to the studies of Chinese international students' experience of satisfaction with their overseas experience in New Zealand, particularly in the area of postgraduate students where there was little research available.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1 The research approach

This research aimed to collect descriptive data from Chinese students on their overseas experience in New Zealand and achieve indepth understanding of Chinese students' experience of satisfaction of studying and living in New Zealand from the point of view of Chinese student themselves. Therefore, a qualitative research method was employed for this research project. Qualitative research focuses on "understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective, not the researcher's" (Merriam, 2001, p.6). It allows the researcher to be the research instrument and to talk directly to the participants. Participants share their stories and their experiences they have in the world, and how they make sense of the world they live in (Merriam, 2001; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

Among major types of qualitative research methods: phenomenology, ethnography, case study research, ground theory and historical research (Christensen & Johnson, 2008), a phenomenological research approach was chosen for this research. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), "The key element of a phenomenological research study is that the researcher attempts to understand how people experience a phenomenon from the person's own perspectives" (p.48).

Further, Interpretive Phenomenology was selected for this research. Interpretive phenomenologists (Koch, 1995; Lopez & Willis, 2004; van Manen, 1997) believe that the researchers' background understandings and knowledge of the phenomenon

motivate them to consider a topic worthy of research, and lead to form specific ideas about how the inquiry needs to proceed. The researcher's personal knowledge, as Geanellos (2000) asserts "is both useful and necessary to phenomenological research" (cited in Lopez and Willis, 2004, p. 730).

As a Chinese student myself, my experience of being an international student in Victoria University of Wellington was a rationale for conducting research on Chinese international students' overseas experience in New Zealand. It would be hard, or even impossible, for me not to be influenced by my personal experience and knowledge of this research topic. Considering this, an interpretive phenomenology approach became more practical and suitable for this research as it allowed me to acknowledge my own experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This also allowed me the perspective of an insider both in terms of the language and the culture of my participants.

In addition, interpretive phenomenology involves analyzing how historical, social, or political forces would influence human beings' experiences (Smith, 1987). Interpretive phenomenology aimed at "describing the meanings of the individuals' being-in-the world and how these meanings influence the choices they make" (Lopez & Willis, 2004). From this point of view, interpretive phenomenology is best suited for addressing the research questions since the research questions intended to explore how Chinese cultural values might influence the experience of satisfaction of Chinese international students.

3.2 Recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited with snowball sampling. For this research, participants were only selected among postgraduates who had completed course work at Victoria University of Wellington. Most of the postgraduates were in their 20s or early 30s, and

since they may be more articulate than undergraduates, they could have more thoughts and reflections on their experiences in New Zealand to share in interviews.

Detailed information about this research project, with the researcher's contact details were given to personal acquaintances and they were asked to pass this information to suitable potential participants. (See the criteria in the definition of Chinese international students, (Section 2.2.1). These potential participants were asked to contact the researcher if they were willingly to participate in this project. With this snowball sampling method, six participants were recruited for this research. Reid, Flower, and Lakin (2005) suggested that fewer participants in interpretive phenomenology is preferable so that a depth of understanding of the collected data could be achieved. Smith, Flower and Lakin (2009) also suggested that the sample size for Master's level of Interpretive Phenomenology Approach could be between three and six. Therefore, the number of the participants for this research was six.

3.3 Participants' profiles

Table 1: Information about each participant

Name Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Hometown	Disciplines studied	Education background	Years have been in NZ
Zhang	28	Male	Hebei	Master of Professional Accounting	Bachelor's degree in China	Two years
Bei	32	Female	Shanghai	Master of Professional Accounting	Bachelor's degree in China	Two years
Nan	24	Female	Shandong	Master of Professional Accounting	Bachelor's degree in China	One year
Ling	24	Female	Yunnan	Master of Education	Bachelor's degree in China	One year
Chen	25	Male	Guangdong	Master of Finance	Bachelor's degree in China	Three years
Sun	28	Female	Henan	Master of Professional Accounting	Bachelor's and Honor's degree in NZ	Eight years

3.4 Data collection

Ways of collecting data for phenomenology research suggested by van Manen (1997) including: writing, interviewing and observation. For this research project, semi-structured interviews were employed. The six participants were interviewed either in English or Chinese Mandarin according to their preference. As a result, there was only one interview conducted in English and all others were in Chinese. All interviews were about 45-60mins, and all were audio-recorded. They were conducted at a place and time convenient for the participants. The prompts for the interview are in Appendix Three.

3.5 Data analysis

Before data analysis, the data was transcribed. I translated all the Chinese interviews into English, sent the translations to the participants and asked for confirmation of the details to make sure the participants felt their responses had been interpreted accurately.

Following the data analysis method for phenomenology suggested by Creswell (2007), I firstly highlighted the important statements from the participants to obtain general ideas about the students' experience studying and living in New Zealand, how they defined or understood satisfaction, and their thoughts about their experiences of satisfaction and Chinese cultural values. From those statements, several patterns were identified. After a further analysis of the patterns, I categorized them into different themes. Thus, in the words of Creswell (2007, p.61), "clusters of meanings" were developed for this research.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

From the qualitative researcher's perspective, Golafshani (2003) claimed that reliability and validity should be "conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm" (p. 604). The researchers, as the research instrument for qualitative research, should increase their trustworthiness using triangulation. This is defined as "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Rather than use methodological triangulation, I sought to triangulate among participants in the themes that emerged from the data. I considered how the data converged into themes and also any differences among the participants.

For this research, in order to improve the trustworthiness of the data, when conducting the interviews, I always endeavoured to position myself as a researcher rather than a Chinese postgraduate who had her own answers to all the interview questions. I prevented myself from sharing my own experiences with the participants to avoid misleading them and to facilitate them to tell their own stories. I continually checked the data and my process of interpretation with my supervisors, who were able to challenge my assumptions from an outsider's perspective and provide me with further opportunities for reflection.

I also asked the participants to check my translations of their interviews in the process of triangulation to make sure that their stories had been correctly translated and understood. All the audio recorded interviews have been transcribed into English and all the translations have been discussed with my participants and modified if necessary according to their feedback, I had made adjustments of wording so to make sure their information was readable in English. I used direct quotes of the statements of the participants so as to make sure the information could be interpreted by the reader. Some Chinese words were used in my description of the findings to ensure the accuracy of the information and some grammatical inaccuracies remain in the quotations used in the thesis. I did not edit these again once they had been checked back with participants because I did not wish to distort meanings.

In addition, with the help of my supervisor, I have received support from 16 Hong Kong students who were also currently studying at VUW for a postgraduate programme. They were asked for their translation of some Chinese key words and phrases from the findings (without any identification of participants), and they gave similar translations, which enhanced the trustworthiness of the translation process of key terms in the data.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the Victoria University Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. The participants were assigned pseudonyms and any identifying details were masked to protect their privacy. The participants were fully informed about the aims of the research and their right to withdraw at any time up to the analysis of data. They were given information sheets and asked to sign consent forms before the interviews. Though the information sheets and consent forms were all in English, the participants were encouraged to ask questions and talk about their concerns with the researcher before they signed them. These are included in Appendix One. Postgraduate students in this university will all have an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) 6.5 or above and the information sheets and consent forms should be able to be read and understood by the participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

With the exception of one participant, the other five participants all defined satisfaction from their own point of view, and the definitions were very individualized. Following their own understandings of satisfaction and relating to their own life stories in New Zealand, most of them claimed that their satisfaction was “above average” or “not bad”. However, the participant who could not provide a definition on satisfaction said that she had never thought about this and did not give an answer to this question.

When describing their experiences of living and studying in New Zealand, each participant had their own stories, but some similarities and commonalities of their experiences were found in their personal statements. The findings of this research were categorized into the following patterns: satisfaction; adjustment to the new learning environment; adjustment to the new living environment; comparisons; mismatched expectation; and life attitudes.

4.1. Satisfaction

4.1.1 Understandings of satisfaction

Only one out of the six participants could not define the term satisfaction.

I have not really thought about satisfaction. I can't give you a definition. What I can say is that life is a mixture of bitter and sweet (Sun).

Though Sun could not give a definition of satisfaction, she shared her understandings about life, which might indicate that for her, satisfaction could be related to her understanding of life experience.

The other participants all expressed their understandings of satisfaction explicitly. Satisfaction was about being happy with current life and fearful of changes, as stated by Chen:

You are happy with your current life and you don't want to have any changes since there is a possibility that your happiness would be destroyed by those change.

In contrast with Chen's opinion about avoiding changes, Ling said that satisfaction was about making positive changes in her life. These changes seemed to help her to make self-improvements. To her, satisfaction was about self-improvement:

Satisfaction to me is about self- improvements. It is about changes, about growing up. I become more independent after I came to New Zealand, and I am quite happy that I got the freedom to control my own life after came here. (Ling)

Similar to Ling, Bei also talked about self-improvements when sharing her understandings of satisfaction.

Satisfaction for me is about the achievements and improvements I have made during my studying and living in New Zealand. (Bei)

According to Nan, satisfaction is about happiness:

Satisfaction is about happiness, is about whether you feel happy about your life. (Nan)

As for Zhang, satisfaction is about self-expectations and peer comparison:

Satisfaction is about how much you have met your expectations on yourself. Whether you are better than people who have the similar backgrounds with you. (Zhang)

In addition, Zhang also pointed out that satisfaction might be a dynamic term and understandings of satisfaction could be different at different life stages:

You might form different understandings of satisfactions at different life stages. With the increase of your age, you could have more life experiences, and you might have more social characters, such as a wife, a professional or mother in future, your understandings of satisfaction at that time could be very different from that when you were still a student. (Zhang)

Perceptions of satisfaction could be different across cultures and closely linked to identity.:

People from different cultures may have different understandings on satisfaction. My understandings of satisfaction were based on my Chinese identity, people from other cultures, such as the Kiwis might feel it is hard for them to understand or agree with my ideas on satisfaction. (Zhang)

With the exception of Chen, the participants all expressed satisfaction as something their actions contributed to and that they could have some control over.

4.1.2 Influences on satisfaction

Sun could not give a clear definition of satisfaction, but she shared her thoughts about influences on satisfaction:

Factors influencing our satisfaction could be different when we were at different life stages. As students, our satisfaction could be

influenced by our studying results, whether we could achieve accomplishments in learning. However, when we started working, our satisfaction might be largely impacted by our working conditions.
(Sun)

She viewed satisfaction as a notion that might change over time. She talked spoke about her lived experiences now as a student but she was reluctant to pin her definition on her present lived experiences. Rather she postulated how lived experiences might influence satisfaction.

4.2 Adjustment to the new learning environment

Chinese students have to experience the process of adjusting to a new learning environment. Participants for this research particularly talked about their worries about low assignments grades, study pressures, and also their experience of using the English language as a learning tool. In addition, participants spoke highly of the facilities and support services provided by the university.

4.2.1 Low assignment grades

Completing assignments is an enormous task for the participants' postgraduate study. When referring to their learning experience, most of them would immediately talk about their experience of completing assignments in New Zealand learning context, and complained that they could not achieve good assignment grades:

Giving presentation is an important part of assignments for MPA, Chinese students' presentation usually couldn't get a really good mark... (Zhang)

Our assignment grades were relatively low compared with other local students. (Nan)

Participants also tried to articulate the factors that may influence the result of their assignments. Some of them blamed their previous education and their Chinese perspective of thinking:

Adjustment to the New Zealand learning environment was a big challenge for me, and also for my Chinese classmates. I recommend that education we received in China became an obstacle for our adjustment. The Chinese way of thinking had affected our grades since we always had different thoughts with our professors, we may have totally different understandings about an issue and we had no ideas about what the professors would expect for our assignments. (Nan)

Moreover, maybe because of different cultural backgrounds, I always had different understandings about certain issues with my professors, I couldn't meet their expectations for my assignments, they are all laowai, and as a Chinese, it was impossible for me to know how would a laowai¹ think about those issues. (Bei)

For those two participants, it seems that meeting the expectations of their lecturers was very important in achieving good grades. Their Chinese identity and previous learning experience were perceived by them as a barrier to being able to think like their lecturers.

Being unfamiliar with certain academic conventions became another obstacle for the participants in achieving good assignment results, and the participants mostly talked about their difficulties with using references when writing their assignments. One of the participant also suggested the lack of training about referencing in Chinese education made the situation worse:

¹ A Chinese word that particularly means people who come from other countries, especially those from the western countries

It was hard to find proper and sufficient references for my assignments, it was a real challenge for me. (Ling)

Different from what I had experienced in China, I had to do more researches [finding references] rather than simply finding answers from text books. Requirements for referencing were very strict in New Zealand, and I felt so confused at the beginning since I had never been full trained about referencing in China. (Bei)

Before enrolling in VUW, all participants' undergraduate academic results had been checked by the university to see whether they were qualified for postgraduate study. Although all participants had sufficient grades to enter the university, it still seemed that the participants felt that their previous education did not help them prepare adequately for the study in New Zealand.

In addition, not being familiar with the assignment requirements was also brought up. Zhang pointed out that he was not familiar with the requirements for giving presentations in New Zealand postgraduate study. However, he could only learn about this method of assessment from observing the local students. Nobody, including the tutors, offered him any help with this method of assessment:

Their (the professors') expectations for a good presentation are quite different with what we had been taught in China, according to my own observation, it should be more open, creative, and provide guidelines for people thinking more on the topic. However, nobody told me about this until I got low grade on my presentations and started to observe how New Zealand students did their presentation. (Zhang)

This kind of "trial and error" approach to assessment meant that Zhang had to experience failure before he could understand what was required. Failure at

postgraduates level may be high stakes for students because fees are higher than undergraduate fees and a greater investment has been made in education because of the longer time spent studying,

The participants struggled to understand how assessment tasks were graded and how to gain satisfactory grades. They attributed this to the differences between in the education systems in China and New Zealand. They had experience confusion, anxiety and failure.

4.2.2 Study pressures

Each participant gave different reasons for their study stresses. Zhang's study pressures were mainly due to the fact that the postgraduate study had to be finished in two years. He suggested that the study task was overloaded within such a short study period:

I felt quite stressful about my study since I had to accomplish 16 papers in 2 years' study. (Zhang)

Sun also had a similar comment on the postgraduate study:

The postgraduate study was very stressful, a lot of readings, and all assignments could be due at almost the same time, you could never feel relaxed or you may result in failing to meet the deadlines. (Sun)

Those comments suggested that those participants might experience hardship when managing the workload in their New Zealand postgraduate learning context so that their degree could be completed within the two years.

According to Chen and Ling, stress also came from meeting the requirements for future study. Chen experienced study stresses while studying in the language learning program because the grades would decide whether he could move into postgraduate study:

I felt quite stressful during my study in the English language learning program, the learning was about whether I could enrol for my master's studying. (Chen)

Ling felt stressed by her study since the Master's degree for her discipline involved two phases. If she could not achieve satisfactory academic grades such as a B+ grade average at the first stage, she could not enrol for her thesis writing. Thus she would lose the chance to achieve a master's degree as she planned:

I felt stressful since I have to achieve B+ on average for my four papers to enrol for the thesis writing. (Ling)

While it also took about two or three years for postgraduate study in China, as long as the students passed the enrolment examination, their Master's degree was largely guaranteed. This contrasted with New Zealand where each stage of study depended on success at a previous stage. This could be a source of motivation for the students' learning but it also created study pressures for them.

Apart from the reasons above, a lack of self-confidence in studying also contributed to the students' learning stress.

I had no confidence about myself and worried about the results on my assignments. (Ling)

This lack of confidence could indicate that the requirement of B+ on average was a challenging goal for Ling, especially when she also encountered adjustment difficulties in the new learning environment.

When talking about lacking of confidence, some participants also suggested that they had no confidence in their English language ability:

Language had been a challenge in my learning. For example, when asked to answer questions in class, even if we knew the answers, me and also my other Chinese classmates would always remain quiet, this largely because the we had no confidence about our English, we were not sure whether could we explain ourselves well. (Zhang)

Some participants claimed that they kept silent in class because of their worries about failing to explain their ideas in English. However, this reluctance to speak may have been influenced by the possibility of losing face in class, as the consequence of failing to giving good explanations in English.

The participants reported that their lives were stressful, with a series of high stakes assessments and a heavy workload. Learning in English was also stressful for them.

4.2.3 English as a learning tool

The language requirement set by Victoria University of Wellington for Chinese international postgraduates students is an overall band of 6.5 with no sub-score below 6.0 in IELTS. Although all the participants had met this requirement for entry into their courses, English language was still a great challenge.

According to the participants, the language problems they encountered included writing assignments, reading learning materials, listening and understanding lecturers in class:

Language had been a problem for me. I couldn't understand my tutors well in class. My writing skills were not good either, I could not get satisfying results for my writing assignments, especially when the tutor was particularly strict with grammar. (Bei)

I felt it was difficult to understanding what my teachers were talking about since they usually spoke so fast. I also had to read my learning materials several times for all of them were in English, or I could not understand the contents. (Ling)

Chen also suggested that not enough time was available to spend on reflecting on how to make improvements in learning since he needed so much time to read and understand learning materials:

If my English could be better, I may spend less time on reading the textbooks or journal articles, but reflecting on my mistakes so I could make more improvements.

Although Nan had received three months English training in a program before she started her postgraduate study, she still regarded English as a big learning obstacle:

Though I had made some improvements on my English through the three months' training program, it was still so hard for me to well understand my tutors during class. As a consequence, I had no ideas about what should I write for my assignments. My writing skills were terrible, and I had always lost points for my assignments because of grammar problems. (Nan)

Although some of the participants mentioned language problems when talking about difficulties to make local friends, most of them were more concerned about how their English functioned as a learning tool in the new learning environment. They were aware of the feeling that their English ability was inadequate for postgraduate study but none of them talked about taking actions to improve their English.

4.2.4 University facilities and Learning Support Services

Despite all difficulties encountered during their adjustment to the new studying environment, participants, in general, had positive comments about the support services and facilities provided by the university.

Bei talked about the learning support service, where students could get help with checking their writing assignments:

The supporting services offered by the university were beyond my expectations. I was impressed by the help I received from Student Learning Support Service. My assignments could be checked and I could always achieve better grades. (Bei)

Back in China, academic learning support service for students was not as well developed as that in New Zealand. Getting help with doing assignments was a very new experience for this participant.

However, according to Ling's statements, experiences of using this service could also be disappointing

Student Learning Support Service could be very helpful, however, it also could be disappointing sometimes. I used to search for help on how to write systematic literature reviews from the learning support team, however, instead of getting help from the academic staff, I had to explain what was "systematic literature review" to the one helped me. I felt it was a waste of my time. (Ling)

This may indicate that the generic help given by learning support is not necessarily specific enough within disciplines at a postgraduate level.

Participants also appreciated the efforts made by the university to improve the learning facilities:

Learning facilities provided by the university could well meet our need.

(Nan)

Facilities provided by university have been improved, the university has become more beautiful. (Sun)

Facilities provided by our university were quite satisfying, especially the library, was so comfortable, and the studying environment was very pleasant. (Ling)

The perception of learning support services was positive but it did not necessarily indicate an understanding of the range of services offered. Some of the participants' comments were focused on the physical provisions rather than the services that were available.

4.3 Adjustment to the new living environment

In Chinese culture, *yi* (clothing), *shi* (food), *zhu* (accommodation), *xing* (transportation) are the basic needs for human being's daily life, when describing adjustments to the new living environment, the participants shared stories about their *yi*, *shi*, *zhu*, *xing* in New Zealand, also they talked about their financial worries and difficulties building quality relationships with the local people.

4.3.1 *Yi, shi, zhu, xing* in New Zealand

The beautiful and friendly living environment of New Zealand was appreciated by one of the participant:

I was fascinated by the natural beauty of New Zealand and most of the local people are friendly. It was a beautiful country with fresh air, health food, and amazing sceneries. (Nan)

However, the wet and rainy climate of Wellington was also brought up by one of the participants. According to him, although he had been in Wellington for about three years, he still could not adjust to the coldness of Wellington city:

It has been three years, but I still can't adjust to the cold and wet weather of Wellington city. I am from a much warmer place, living in such a windy and rainy city could make me feel annoyed and even depressed sometimes. (Chen)

This unpleasant climate of Wellington city had not only influenced Chen's living satisfaction in New Zealand but had also made him consider the weather of a city when deciding his future study destination:

I was thinking about transfer to other cities for my PhD study, Wellington was not a perfect place for me, I really don't like the climate. I prefer a sunny city just like home. (Chen)

Experiences of taking buses were also mentioned up by two participants:

At the very beginning, I felt everything here seemed quite different with that in China. Taking the public transportation as an example, the

first time when I took a bus, I had no idea that I had to press the red button so let the driver know that I was going to get off, and I had to figure out the bus station by myself, nobody would tell me the name of the bus stations. (Zhang)

During weekends and public holidays, usually, I had to spend at least 30 minutes to get on the bus. When the weather was awful, the experience could be a disaster. (Nan)

It seems that experiences of using the public transportations were not pleasant for these participants. They had to learn the living strategies in the new surroundings all by themselves. They unfavourably compared their experiences with the local weather and transport to those of their homes in China.

Except for Sun, who lived with a homestay family at the beginning of her settlement in New Zealand, all other participants chose to live in the self-catered accommodations offered by the university. Cooking by themselves became a popular topic among them. They were pleased about improvements they made on cooking skills, but also brought up their complaints about the simple diet in New Zealand life:

My diet become so simple after I came to New Zealand, you could only get several choices of cooking materials, I had to buy almost the same kind of vegetables for every week. Though there were Asian supermarkets, but they usually small and choices for food were limited as well. (Bei)

In China, whether in big cities or small villages, almost every place has their own traditional food. The wide range of Chinese cuisine are even regarded as part of Chinese culture. Hence, the participants expressed disappointment about their simple diet in New Zealand, but they also said that they could get used to it after a while.

Shopping is regarded as a major form of leisure in China (Bai, 2008). Participants in this research also shared their shopping experience in Wellington. Bei's story was the most representative one:

I was so disappointed about shopping in Wellington, compared to Shanghai, products sold here were quite old-fashioned. After the first disappointing shopping experience in a relatively fancy shopping mall of Wellington, I hardly went shopping again. (Bei)

The experience of shopping in New Zealand was a sharp contrast between shopping malls in China.

Although they were disappointed with shopping activity in Wellington, the participants explored other forms of entertainment. However, according to Chen's observation, the locals only have fun by having parties or going to pubs, which could hardly be accepted and enjoyed by people from a relatively conservative culture:

The entertainment here is not my type. Go to pubs, drinking, dancing will not make me feel happy to live here. Because of my Chinese cultural background, I can't really adjust to the New Zealand culture. Such as they love rugby, which could be part of their culture, I tried to love it, but I just cannot enjoy that. (Chen)

While the participants tried to search for new forms of entertainment in the new living environment, it also suggested that they were disappointed with the recreation activities in New Zealand.

As the only student who had the experience of living with a homestay family, Sun spoke highly of this experience and suggested it was a good start for her adjustment to the new living environment.

I lived with a good homestay family for the first three months. They helped me to adjust to the new living environment, told me how could I take buses, where shall I buy really good food. My English improved as well. (Sun)

Sun clearly appreciated the support that the family provided in the adjustment process.

Perceptions of *yi* (clothing), *shi* (food), *zhu* (accommodation), *xing* (transportation) are closely connected with life and satisfaction. The role of these in the lives of the students was recognised by the students within the new culture of New Zealand. These concepts were perceived as very different in New Zealand and the participants expressed their concern that the opportunities to shop for clothing, the range of food, and the availability of public transportation all seemed to be lacking in New Zealand compared to China.

4.3.2 Financial worries

In addition to all those adjustment difficulties the participants had experienced, some of them also expressed their worries about their financial situations.

Bei talked about her concerns for the costs of tuition fees:

The tuition fees for international students in Victoria is three times more than the locals, it was way too expensive. We would not allow ourselves to fail any course or it would cost us a fortune. (Bei)

Possibilities of failing a course in the New Zealand educational context would be a threat for most Chinese students, since this not only means that they might have to spend more time to finish their study but also have to pay more tuition fees than they had originally budgeted.

Nan chose New Zealand for its cheapness of fees, but she did not expect the living costs in New Zealand, especially the costs for rent would be much higher than she thought:

I have some complaints on the price of renting in Wellington, it was too high and I had to spend most of my money on my rent payment. I have to take part-time jobs for I could cover all my living expenses, and I hope I could reduce my parents' financial pressures by doing so. (Nan)

In China, all university students are required to live in the dormitories provided by the university. The weekly rent in New Zealand was approximately as much as the annual payment for living on campus in China. This sharp contrast could be part of the reason for the participants' complaints. In addition, the unstable exchange rate between Chinese Yuan and New Zealand Dollar could also have contributed to the participants' financial worries.

4.3.3 Making friends with the Kiwis

Building quality connections or friendships with the locals has been a concern for some of the participants. Although they had a strong desire to get along with the Kiwis and they expected that living in New Zealand would provide them with many chances to build interpersonal connections with the locals. However, the reality was not that

promising. They claimed that they could seldom make friends with the Kiwis, and blamed language difficulties and different cultural backgrounds as the major barriers:

It is hard for us to make friends with the kiwis. Though living in New Zealand provided me more chances to meet the local people, however, the cultural differences still prevented us having good Kiwi friends.(Bei)

The students expected that socializing with classmates would be an important part of their social life in New Zealand. However, one of the participants had experienced being isolated in class:

I was being isolated in class, all my classmates were much older than me, and it was so hard for us to find common topics. As the only international student in class, I felt lonely and even helpless during classes, my classmates probably could never understand feelings of being international students. Also, my English was not good enough to build up conversations with those local students. (Ling)

In Chinese educational institutions, no matter in which level, almost all students were at the same age. Hence, it was easier for students to build quality connections with their peers and classmates. However, in New Zealand at postgraduate level, the participants had to face the challenge of building connections with students from different age groups, with different studying and working backgrounds. All those differences, together with language problems seemed to have inhibited the participants from building up relationships and friendships in class.

One of the participants suggested sharing some common interests with classmates could make it easier to have local friends.

I felt lucky for making friends with the local students. Though I am one of the few international students in my program, I am good at math, I made friends by helping my classmates in study groups. (Chen)

This participant's more successful experience of socializing with classmates might be related to having something in common with the New Zealand students. The shared interest in maths was helpful on building quality connections with the locals. This Chinese student felt that that he could make a unique contribution to the host nationals in his class.

In short, the expectation of having meaningful social relationships with host nationals was only met for one of the interviewees. Isolation and cultural difference were experienced by others.

4.4 Comparisons

The participants' responses showed that they also made some comparisons when talking about their experience of satisfaction in New Zealand. Comparisons made by participants mainly focused on comparison with other developed countries and comparison with China;

4.4.1 Comparisons with other developed countries

Participants compared the education in New Zealand with that in other developed countries, mainly the United States, the United Kingdom (or other European countries), Canada, Australia, when deciding on their overseas study destination. Money and the quality of education were two closely connected factors. They chose New Zealand because of relatively cheaper tuition fees:

I chose New Zealand mainly because studying cost here is cheaper than other countries like the United States, European countries or Australia. (Nan)

Tuition fees of New Zealand universities are relatively cheaper compared with other developed countries. (Chen)

One student indicated that he felt that the education in New Zealand was similar to that of Australia but New Zealand tuition fees were less:

I did not choose Australia mainly because I felt it was not worth to pay higher tuition fees to receive education that more alike what I can get in New Zealand with paying less. (Chen)

Although the New Zealand postgraduates qualifications were longer, this was seen as an advantage and it contributed to the perception of the quality of the education:

I did not choose the United Kingdom mainly because the master's study is only for one year and I don't think I can learn that much, not to mention to do a really good research for my thesis. New Zealand Master's study will be two years, and provide me enough time to learn and then conduct my research. (Chen)

The participants selected New Zealand because New Zealand universities offered a two-year Master's degree. This preference indicates that these Chinese students may believe that the longer they study the more they could learn. Neither the discipline nor area of study was mentioned as a factor in deciding on New Zealand as a destination for study .

Less restrictive entry requirements were also mentioned. These included a lower GPA or language requirement:

Most European countries require the applicants to also study their native language. (Nan)

As for not choosing America, mainly because I cannot meet the requirement of GPA to study in American universities. (Chen)

Although the low GPAs and language requirements of most New Zealand universities attract some Chinese students, these conditions also increase the risk that language could be a real obstacle for Chinese students to achieve academic success in their study.

One student saw the relatively stable immigration policy in New Zealand as a factor that influenced her decision making.

I also want to stay in New Zealand after graduation, the immigration policy of New Zealand, compared with other countries, especially Australia, is more stable. (Nan)

This view of the immigration policy as a criteria for selecting an overseas study destination suggests that at least one of the participants may have been influenced by having a chance to immigrate to the country of study.

None of the participants mentioned having compared the quality of education among those developed countries before they chose New Zealand as their study destination. They are more concerned about how much money they should invest, how long they could study abroad, whether there is any possibility that they could stay in their overseas study country.

Participants also talked about comparing the different living environment of New Zealand and other countries, especially how Chinese culture was accepted in different countries:

Asian culture still being a minor culture in New Zealand. Not like other developed countries such as the United States, Asian countries' culture could be better accepted by the local culture, there are China towns in big cities in America or the Great Britain. I cannot feel a sense of home when I staying in New Zealand. (Chen)

This sense of home was quite important to Chinese students who were far away from their family support. Communities of Chinese immigrants may help them by providing a bridge and becoming more connected or involved in the local culture.

4.4.2 Comparisons with China

When the participants considered the comparisons they made between China and New Zealand, they mainly focused on different ways of learning and teaching between Chinese and New Zealand education, the different and similar cultural values of those two countries.

As for the different teaching and learning methods, two participants mentioned about group discussion, which is a very distinctive feature of teaching and learning in New Zealand postgraduate education, but seldom used in Chinese education:

I also have to participate in group discussions during tutorials, which is way different from the learning and teaching method in China. (Bei)

However, in New Zealand, students have to participate in group discussions during tutorials...It is hard for us Chinese students to participate in group discussions... (Zhang)

A participant said that he would feel anxiety when he had to contribute to group discussions, since previous education he received in China made him more comfortable to be a listener in class.

As a Chinese international student I have been educated for years in a teacher oriented or teacher-centred learning environment, I should listen to teachers and take notes at class. However, in New Zealand, students have to participate in group discussions during tutorials.
(Zhang)

Also, participants realized that they could not rely too much on teachers when studying in New Zealand:

I felt that I had to depend more on myself rather than the teachers in learning. (Bei)

Zhang provided more detailed information on his experiences of this issue:

Chinese students were likely to assume that teachers in New Zealand would provide them basic background knowledge as Chinese teachers did, however, the fact is that teachers would not discuss about those basic knowledge during tutorials, we have to well prepared by ourselves before class instead, or we could not really understand what we discussed. (Zhang)

One of the participants also described the different teaching philosophy between New Zealand and Chinese teachers that he had experienced:

Not like Chinese teachers giving you a lot of exams to help you to improve (your English), teachers here are more likely to give you suggestions according to your learning performance. It seems that New Zealand teachers are more open-minded, they believe that you can be well self-motivated, they never force you to learn. (Chen)

This statement also echoed the idea of independent learning in New Zealand.

Besides the differences in studying experiences, participants also compared the different cultural values between these two countries:

Chinese people worshiped heroic ancient stories, they focused more on process but not the results, as long as they tried, no matter what the result was, their efforts would always be appreciated. However, as I had observed, the local people valued more about results, nobody would really care about how much effort you had expended.
(Zhang)

Chinese people were likely search for shortcuts. Even if it was not morally accepted, such as cheating in exams. (Zhang)

One participant particularly talked about the different values of degrees between Chinese and New Zealand culture, which also implies that he had great concerns about his future.

For most Chinese people, they believe that a diploma or certificate would be useless, only a higher qualification, such as a Master's degree could guarantee them a job. However, at the job market of New Zealand, especially for jobs require practice skills, you could easily get a job offer with a diploma. Though Chinese students came to New Zealand, invested a large amount money on their Master's education but ended jobless. Most of them were not fully aware of what the New Zealand employers really wanted. (Zhang)

These participants phrased these experiences in a way that indicated that they were not necessarily their own personal experience. However, these views are the perceptions of

the students and may influence satisfaction and the way they experience life in New Zealand

As well as the differences of New Zealand and Chinese culture values, one participant also pointed out the similarities between those two cultures, which, as she said, has been a positive influence on her satisfaction:

The similarities of Chinese and New Zealand culture make me felt more satisfied about my overseas study experience. For example, I felt that almost all New Zealand people are kind and friendly, well-behaved, just like what I have been taught in Chinese culture.
(Ling)

The participants raised differences in pedagogical practices between China and New Zealand. Underlying these differences were values such as learner autonomy, the role of effort in learning, and the value of the degree as a tool for future employment.

4.5 Mismatched expectations

Some of the participants also expressed their disappointment about their overseas study experience in New Zealand. They said what they had experienced was “quite different” to what they had thought. It is also obvious that the mismatched expectations are closely related to the participants’ concerns for their future.

I did have very high expectations on this overseas experience. I do hope that I could find a job in New Zealand through my Master’s study. However, I felt it was so hard to get employed and I was afraid I would be very disappointed. (Zhang)

Bei was concerned about her aim to find a job in New Zealand. She particularly talked about her dissatisfaction about the courses she took for her master’s study. She claimed

that she could not learn practical skills but only theories, which could be useless for her working practice in future.

Before came to New Zealand, I already had some working experiences in China, and I did expect to be an accountant in a New Zealand company after graduation. I hoped my Master's study could help me gain some practical skills on this profession, however, what I had learned were basic knowledge, and most of the courses were rather theoretical, I felt so disappointed on the curriculum, and I don't think I could get a job in New Zealand as I expected. (Bei)

Nan regarded study in New Zealand as an investment. She suggested chances for her to get her investment back was so limited and the costs of studying in New Zealand also beyond her expectations:

I felt disappointed sometimes, though I chose New Zealand for its cheapness, but the tuition fee is still quite expensive, especially when I felt that I cannot get a decent job after all those investment. Sometimes, I even felt I was wasting my time. (Nan)

One of the participants also talked about the influence of the overseas study agency. It seems that, to some degree, the study agency has led the participant to form unreasonable expectations about studying in New Zealand:

The overseas study agency told me that it was very easy for MPA students to find a job in New Zealand and suggested me to take this degree. However, when I was going to finish my degree and tried to find a job, it was not as easy as what they have described, I felt I was cheated. (Zhang)

Before coming to New Zealand, ways for my participants to collect information about New Zealand were limited to searching the internet or consulting the study overseas

agencies. The students' experienced a difference in the reality as described by the study agencies (who earn commission for each student sent overseas) and the reality of using their degree in the workplace in the future.

The participants had expectations about potential employment opportunities that their degree would enable them to access. After coming to New Zealand, they realised that these expectations were unlikely to be met.

4.6 Life attitudes

During the interviews, some of the participants also revealed their life attitudes when talking about their experience of studying and living in New Zealand.

4.6.1 A willingness to accept the reality

One of the participant said that she is willingly to accept the reality;

Studying and living overseas made a lot of things quite natural, such as cook by ourselves, take care of ourselves. I won't treat all these as challenges. That's life and I am willingly to accept all the changes and the reality, whether it is good or not.(Ling)

4.6.2 Focus on the present life

In contrast to participants who had great concerns about their future, some participants would rather focus more on current life. Though having the similar life attitude, different participants had different reasons.

One of the participants said she was believed in destiny, and this could be an important reason for her to in the the moment and to see some aspects of her life as beyond her control:.

Though life was not easy for me as an international student, and I had many expectations before came to New Zealand. However, I tried to put aside all those expectations, and live in the current life. I did believe in destiny, and always felt that we could not dream too much. There would be a part of our life that we could not control by ourselves, our destiny, instead, would take over and make the decisions for us. Such as places we are going to settle down, jobs we were doomed to take. No matter how hard you would try, you just can't change your destiny. (Nan)

Ling could not think too much about her future since she needed all her efforts to deal with her current worries:

Now I just worried about the final results of my four papers, I really had to study hard and I got part-time jobs to deal with, I can't think too much about my future. (Ling)

It is much easier to control current life than future according to Sun:

I haven't decided whether should I come back to China. I don't want to work just for getting PR (permanent residency) in New Zealand. It is useless to think too much about future, you will never know what would happen in your life, why don't we just live at the moment. (Sun)

The attribution of satisfaction to things outside of the control of the students suggested a belief in destiny.

4.7 Summary of the findings

The participants, themselves, suggested that, based on their own living and studying experiences in New Zealand as Chinese international students, satisfaction was defined by taking into consideration personal understandings of happiness, self-expectations, and changes in life. Some of the participants also said that understandings of satisfaction could be varied between different cultures and life stages.

Most of the participants thought that Chinese cultural values did not influence their experience of satisfaction in New Zealand when they were asked directly but, some of their explanations and stories actually implied the influence of *mianzi*, *renqing*, *guanxi* on their overseas experience in New Zealand. This will be further discussed in the next section of the thesis.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Participants in this research shared their individual stories about living and studying in New Zealand. They shared personal understandings of satisfaction according to their own life stories and experiences. Most of them said that their satisfaction was not influenced by Chinese cultural values and they would not consider that the Chinese cultural values *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi*, used in dealing with social connections, had big influence on their experience of satisfaction.

However, based on patterns drawn from the collected data and employing interpretive phenomenology analysis approaches, the following themes were found for this research: fostering of independence; influences of assumptions; mismatched expectations; using supporting resources; and cultural awareness. These themes arose from the patterns evident in the data. Adjustment included adapting to a different academic environment and the adjustment to a new living environment. Underlying this was the fostering of independence and the dispelling of assumptions about living and learning that had been formed in Chinese cultural environments.

Assumptions about a new environment led to a mismatch of expectations between what learning and living would be like as a student in China and as a student studying in New Zealand. The degree to which students use support services was interconnected with cultural awareness and knowledge.

These themes will also be discussed using the three Chinese cultural values where appropriate. The discussion section will connect those themes with the literature, so to allow further insight into the participants' voices.

5.1 Fostering of independence

Prior experience living and study in China may have contrasted with the education and values that the participants experienced in New Zealand and necessitated the adjustments that the students spoke about. Chinese students have been raised and educated in a collectivist society where the individuals are strongly related to the benefits of the group (Hofstede, 2008). The participants are likely to have received great care from their parents, relatives and friends. When enrolled for undergraduate study in China, students are all required to live in dorms managed by universities where, in addition to the restaurants around campus, food was also provided by the university-owned cafeterias. Relations between teachers and students in the China are usually very close. Students can seek help from their teachers almost whenever they needed as many teachers live on campus. This situation was likely to foster interdependence rather than independence. Upon coming to New Zealand, where independence seemed to be valued much more than in their previous education in China, the participants were faced the challenge of becoming independent, both in living and studying.

5.1.1 Being independent in living

Except for the participant who lived with her homestay family at the beginning of her stay in New Zealand, all other participants chose to live in the self-catered accommodations provided by the university.

The participants were likely to have little experience of cooking. Cooking is prohibited in the dormitories of universities in China for safety reasons. Students may seldom have chances to cook at home since the mother would cook every meal for the whole family

as a Chinese tradition. Hence, cooking had become a real challenge for most participants. Though they complained about the limited choice of food in the New Zealand market, and missed the wide range of traditional Chinese food available at home, all participants valued this challenge and regarded it as an opportunity to become independent. They were happy about the improvement they made in their cooking skills and said that they could get used to the simple diet in New Zealand after a while. More importantly, they also considered this improvement as a symbol of their independence.

Learning new living strategies in the new environment was also regarded as a challenge. Some participants mentioned their unpleasant experiences of learning how to use public transport. While this could also be a chance for the participants to foster their independence, this was very different from the familiar environment in China.

Three of the participants had taken part-time jobs to cover their living expenses in Wellington and to try to alleviate the financial burdens for their parents. This also indicated that the participants also tried to become more independent financially in New Zealand.

5.1.2 Being independent in learning

In addition to becoming independent in the new living environment, participants also faced the challenge of becoming independent in a New Zealand university learning context.

After coming to New Zealand, and starting their postgraduate education, the participants began to realize that they could not expect their teachers to “feed” them

knowledge as they experienced in China. In accordance with Hofstede's (1986) theory of teacher and student interaction in low power distance societies such as New Zealand, teachers would usually respect and encourage the students' learning autonomy and their independence in academic studying. The participants also suggested that teachers in New Zealand did not force their students to learn. New Zealand teachers believed that students could be self-motivated in their own learning. In contrast, participants in Campbell and Li's (2008) study complained they received insufficient help received from lecturers, some of the participants in this research wanted to adjust their learning strategies to improve their academic learning. One of the participants suggested making more preparations before class in order to keep up with the content of the learning. Although the participants might not have realised it themselves, the consideration and implementation of their new learning strategies in New Zealand could actually be turning them into more independent learners.

The participants had to go through many changes and challenges to adjust to their new living and studying environments, but they claimed that they had become more 'grown-up' and independent after coming to New Zealand. They regarded this overseas study experience as a chance for them to know their potential and make self-improvements. This echoed the findings of Campbell and Li (2008) in that their participants cultivated both personal and intellectual growth during their study in New Zealand.

5.2 The influence of assumptions on satisfaction

The participants had a number of assumptions about living and studying in New Zealand, these were influenced by their upbringing background and previous education. Those assumptions were largely formed before they came to New Zealand but

influenced and changed their perceived satisfaction during their experiences in New Zealand. When considering their lifestyles, the participants' had made assumptions about developed countries. Another area where assumptions were made was the role of the assessment criteria of the tasks given as assignments and assessment activities such as presentations.

5.2.1 Assumption about developed countries

Even in the area of recreation, the participants made comparison between their experiences in New Zealand and China. Bai (2008) suggested that many Chinese people are likely to combine leisure with shopping. Participants in this research were not exceptions. Most of the participants claimed that they had very disappointing shopping experiences in Wellington.

For the participants, especially those from big cities, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, their home cities had experienced economic prosperity in the last decades. In those developed cities, shopping malls would open until midnight and created a sense of the latest fashion for their customers. There are fancy stores selling world famous brands of clothing on one floor and the cinema was playing the newest movie on the other, together with food courts offering a variety of choices of tasty food. Everything can be found in one building with a pleasant temperature, elaborate decor and respectful service. However, the participants shopping experiences in Wellington seemed quite different. Though they did not complain about the early closing hours for most shops like the participants in Bai's (2008) research, but they were disappointed at the comparatively shabby shopping malls and seemingly old-fashioned products.

Bai (2008) suggested that, for most Chinese students, their assumptions about developed countries were largely built on movies produced by American entertainment companies, which created the image of developed countries as places with crowded streets, hundreds of fancy stores, and modern tall buildings. Prior to departing from China, the participants may have regarded New Zealand as a developed country and expected extensive shopping and fashion retail markets just like those in the American movies but this image of New Zealand did not correspond to the reality as they found it. This disappointment with entertainment may have influenced their evaluations of their satisfaction with living in New Zealand.

5.2.2 Assumptions on assessment criteria

Another assumption that impacted the participants' experiences in New Zealand was their knowledge about how assessment tasks were communicated to students, in particular, their experience on the access to the assessment criteria in New Zealand was rather different with what they had experienced in China. When enrolled in Chinese universities for their undergraduate study, students could get access to the assignments requirements, but seldom had a chance to see the assessment criteria for their assignments. While in New Zealand, both teachers and students were given the assessment criteria before the assignments getting assessed.

In addition, being educated in a teacher-authorized education context, in which students were educated to show absolute respect to their teachers. (Hofstede, 1987).The participants believe that teachers could have the absolute power to evaluate their assignments rather than follow institutional and programme assessment criteria. In other words, the participants assumed the expectations of their teachers about their assignments were paramount, teachers own the absolute power on giving grades on

their assignments. Therefore, although the assessment criteria was transparent to both teachers and students in New Zealand, the participants tried to guess the lecturers' additional expectations and believed that if they could think like their lecturers or anticipate what their lecturers expected they might achieve better grades.. Some of them became anxious about their grades because they believed that their Chinese identity had prevented them thinking like their western lecturers and there would be no way for them to meet the lecturers' expectations.

Campbell and Li's (2008) study indicated that Asian students (Chinese students included) often had difficulties understanding academic requirements due to their language problems. However, this study provided evidence that if the participants are tightly focused on guessing what their lecturer wants from the task itself, they might overlook the academic requirements that are implicit in the assessment criteria that accompany the task.

5.3 Mismatched expectations

Participants in this research shared some examples of mismatched expectations about living costs, job hunting experiences, and building connections with the locals. These aspects of living in New Zealand were very different from what they had expected before arrival and their expectations did not match the reality of life in New Zealand. These mismatched expectations might have come from the inaccurate information the participants received before arrival and the lack of information resources. Mismatched expectations not only brought unexpected troubles for the participants' adjustment to the new living and studying environment, but also had impacted their satisfaction in their overseas experience in New Zealand.

5.3.1 Mismatched expectations about living costs

Most of the participants already knew and were prepared for the expenses of overseas study before coming to New Zealand. However, when they started living in Wellington, they did not expect these costs to exceed their expectations. Apart from paying tuition fees, they claimed that most of their money was spend on paying rent. If they chose the accommodation offered by the university, even living in the cheapest flat, they had to spend at least \$6270 NZ a year to secure a place. As international students, they were not allowed to pay on a weekly basis as domestic students did, but required to pay the whole trimester or whole academic year's rent instead. This situation could be exacerbated by the unstable exchange rate between the Chinese Yuan and New Zealand Dollars. In addition, before they could finish their study, fees for staying in Halls of Residence were very likely to be increased by the university.

Though some of the participants claimed that they chose New Zealand largely for its cheapness, and expected they could achieve the maximum benefits with minimum investment on their overseas study, it seemed that they overlooked the fact that the living expenses in New Zealand could increase during their study period.

Bai (2008) and Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) also found out that many Chinese students choose New Zealand for its cheapness. However, the increasing costs of tuition fees and living expenses during their study period created financial burdens for the participants in the present study and may have lowered the students' satisfaction with their study in New Zealand. Some of the participants in Zhang and Burton (2007) study also claimed that they had experienced financial difficulties because the costs of living in New Zealand were higher than they expected.

5.3.2 Mismatched expectations about postgraduate courses

The content of the Masters programme and the limited job market in New Zealand were criticized by the participants. They claimed that the courses offered by the university did not provide an opportunity for students to learn practical skills, and job opportunities for students with postgraduate degrees were limited. Before coming to New Zealand, some of the participants expected that they could find a job and then immigrate to New Zealand by obtaining a Master's study. However, when they tried to find jobs, the reality seemed not that promising. For the participants nearly at the end of their postgraduate study, mismatched expectations were more related to their concerns about job hunting in New Zealand.

One of the participants suggested that the different ideas on degrees held by Chinese and New Zealand people could be one of the reasons why they failed to find jobs in New Zealand employment market. The participant pointed out that Chinese people believed that a higher degree could possibly bring better job opportunities. However, in New Zealand, the employers valued the practical skills and working experience more than the degrees. The Master's degree might be useful for the job applications in China, but not so much in New Zealand.

The participants' desire to find jobs in New Zealand confirmed the findings of Ward and Masgoret (2004), Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) and Bai (2008). In all these studies, the researchers suggested that their participants expressed a goal of finding a New Zealand job and this was also evident among this group of participants who were all at postgraduate level.

This mismatched expectation of gaining permanent residence made some of the participants feel anxious. One of the reasons for choosing New Zealand as their overseas study destination was finding a permanent job in New Zealand by studying in New Zealand. Their anxieties about employment influenced their experience of satisfaction because they could not see a promising outcome of their investment in study in New Zealand.

5.3.3 Mismatched expectations about making connections in the local communities

Building quality connections with the locals was regarded by the participants as a way to be involved in the new social community. Most of them, expected the experience of studying and living in the local community would provide more chances for them to meet

and socialize with the local students and the Kiwi residence. They believed that a sense of belonging in a foreign society would help them to build a more satisfying overseas living and studying experience in New Zealand. However, even the participants who had been in New Zealand for almost three years claimed that, no matter at or outside university, making Kiwi friends was not that easy as they wished

The participants identified cultural differences and language problems as the major barriers on this mismatched expectation. Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes's research (2007) also found it was hard for Chinese students to establish friendships with the local students. This was largely due to Chinese students' level of language proficiency and not having common interests with the local students. Zhang and Brunton (2007) also reported inadequate language ability as a barrier to making friends but also pointed out that cultural differences stopped Chinese students building connections with the locals.

Like the participants in Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007), the participants in my study could only get information about living and studying in New Zealand from internet or from overseas study agencies. The participants suggested that the reality was quite different from what they have thought about life in New Zealand prior to coming. Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) also suggested in their research that more information should be delivered to the potential Chinese international students before their departure for New Zealand, so their families and themselves could be better prepared for their life in New Zealand.

5.4 Using support

All my participants were living far away from their family and friends, and they may not have always been able to get timely help in New Zealand, especially at the beginning of

their stay. Their adjustment process to the new living and learning environment was full of difficulties and challenges. They had experiences of struggling all by themselves but they also received help from other supportive resources in New Zealand.

Experience of living with homestay families and getting help from the Student Learning Support Services had positive impacts on my participants' experience of satisfaction in New Zealand. However, it is also worth noting that the participants might not make full use of the support service offered by the university on their academic learning.

5.4.1 Support from homestay families

Though only one participant had the experience of living with homestay families, she did spoke highly of this homestay experience, and claimed that it offered her a chance to acquire some practical skills of living in New Zealand. In addition, living with homestay families also helped her to improve her English communication skills.

Ho, Li, Cooper and Holmes (2007) pointed out that though participants expressed various views of homestay accommodation. Students considered that "having a good relationship with homestay family was considered an important source of satisfaction and support" (p.33). Ho et al., (2007) also suggested that homestay experience could help students to enhance their language ability and get useful information about living in New Zealand.

5.4.2 The university support services

Though participants in this research made positive comments about the support services offered by the university, their statements also indicated that they might not make full use of those services.

Experiences of using Student Learning Support Service were mentioned by almost all the participants, but their statements also suggested that they only used this service for assignment checking and seldom used other services to improve their academic learning ability. The Student Learning Support Service (SLSS) was part of the Student Academic Service Group of the university. SLSS provided a wide range of programmes for students at all levels to improve their academic learning experiences. Although all the participants were facing academic learning problems such as getting familiar with academic conventions, writing in English, or understanding assessment criteria, none of them had mentioned that they sought any help to solve those problems. Problems of referencing in their assignments were brought up by four participants. However, none of them reported attending the workshops offered by the SLSS on referencing.

Another indication that the participants did not see the potential for making use of university learning support was the lack of uptake of services to enhance their English language learning. Though the participants complained that English had been a great obstacle on their academic learning, none of them had ever used the help offered by the university on language learning. The Language Learning Center of the university provides students various learning materials and facilities for their English language improvement. It seemed that the participants either did not know about these services, did not perceive them as useful or stopped learning English after meet the language requirements for postgraduate enrolment. Perhaps the participants did not realize that meeting the language requirements did not guarantee adequate English ability for academic learning at postgraduate level.

As suggested by Guan and Jones (2010), one of the reasons for Chinese why international students are reluctant to use support services is that they believed that searching for help with academic learning would indicate their lack of ability. Students in this research though did not have the problem of being unwillingly to look for help, but did not realize that they could make full use of the support services.

In contrast with participants in Campbell and Li's (2008) study, participants in this research did not complain that the learning support services provided by the university was insufficient. Perhaps this could have been because this study was confined to a single university and participants in this research were postgraduates, who were more mature and had more learning experiences than the undergraduate students in Campbell and Li (2008) research. Moreover, the learning support services could have improved over the five years period.

5.5 Cultural awareness

Though participants in this research claiming that Chinese cultural values did not influence their experience of satisfaction when studying and living in New Zealand, some similarities and differences between Chinese and New Zealand culture were also brought up by the participants. However, from their statements, some other evidence of the cultural values: *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi* of the participants had been found. They might not be aware of some deeper interpretations of their reports using a cultural lens.

Because of their lack of confidence in their English, one participant suggested that he and his Chinese classmates would avoid answering questions in class, though the participant did not say it, but their silence in class might due to their efforts to save face in public, the cultural value, *mianzi*.

In addition, some participants in this research also talked about their life attitudes, which also had an impact on their overseas experience in New Zealand. Some of them said that they believed in destiny. Destiny could be translated from “ming” in Chinese. Ming was also a very important Chinese cultural value and some Chinese people believe that as long as one was born, their life, for example, whether they would be rich or poor, successful or not, were all doomed. However, this term could also be used as excuses for people’s failure, and as a way to save face for them since ming is something like superpower that nobody could overcome or defeat. This cultural value could help the participants to have a rather peaceful attitude to the ups and downs in their overseas experience, but it also indicated the participants’ sense of face saving and hence related to *mainzi*.

Renqing and *guanxi* are evident in the debts and obligations that students have to those who financed their study. These are long term obligations that students may anticipate that they will be able to repay by gaining a good job in New Zealand. Because the costs of study are greater than anticipated and the usefulness of the New Zealand degree are less than anticipated, the participants may then feel anxious that they cannot meet the obligations.

The findings of this research suggest that most of the participants consider their experiences of satisfaction with living and studying in New Zealand to be linked to their personal experiences. Their definitions of satisfactions were very individualized but had similarities. They suggested satisfaction was closely related to their feelings of happiness and also life fulfilments. Though most of the participants denied that the Chinese cultural values had influenced their experience of satisfaction in New Zealand,

their statements implied that those influence of Chinese values may underpin their stories without their own awareness.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, some recommendations can be made. These recommendations can support Chinese students who might have similar backgrounds on their overseas experience in New Zealand, and might shed some light on future research on experience of Chinese international students in New Zealand.

6.1 Forming a broader perspective on entertainment activities

Since recreation activities were considered so important for the participants, Chinese students could be introduced to a broader perspective of the entertainment available in New Zealand if the entertainment available was marketed specifically to them.

In this research, participants talked about their disappointing shopping experiences and complained about the lack of entertainment in New Zealand. Though they tried to explore other recreation activities, the participants' limited observations on the local community and the language problems prevented them forming broader perspectives on the western ways of appreciating entertainment. What they had observed were merely people going to pubs, having parties or doing sports. Because all those activities seemed outside their experience and culture they found them hard to really enjoy or even accept.

However, there are varied kinds of affordable entertainment facilities provided in any New Zealand city. There were libraries, museums, cinemas, public gardens and art galleries for people to relax and have fun in their daily life. If the participants were specifically introduced to these activities through university sponsored visits, they might

discover more leisure activities and be less likely to complain about the lack of shopping. This may also give the experiences in common with domestic students that they could then use as ways of starting conversations.

6.2 Improving the participants' English proficiency

If the university could find ways of engaging Chinese postgraduate students with the support services, especially the Language Learning Centre, at an early stage, then the participants learning stories may have been different. The participants claimed that their inadequate English ability was a great barrier to their academic learning. They said that their language difficulties created problems in understanding the lectures and assignment requirements, writing essays and reading English learning materials. However, none of the participants mentioned that they took action to improve their English during their postgraduate studying.

6.3 Making full use of the Student Learning Support Services

On their website, SLSS aims to help students to become independent learners at all levels study. It provided various forms of service to support the students' academic learning. In addition to the assignment checking service, which had been spoken highly of among the participants, there were also other forms of support services available to all students at the university. SLSS offered weekly workshops and seminars for students, and some of them catered for the needs of international students and postgraduate learning.

Though facing challenges of getting to know unfamiliar academic conventions, improving English writing skills and achieving a better understanding of assignment

requirements, the participants seemed only to use the one-to-one appointment programs to have their assignment checked. They regarded SLSS only as a place to help them to achieve better assignment grades. None of the participants mentioned of using other support services to support their adjustment to the learning environment.

For most of the participants, their previous education shaped them to see that most of the learning activities happened in classrooms, but not in workshops or seminars out of class. They may not have seen support services as a way of learning. As a consequence, the participants might face the challenge of getting familiar with this new form of learning and they might need to get to know more about this service rather than only using it solely as an assignments checking service. The university should also be aware that students who had the similar backgrounds to my participants might need extra guides on using the SLSS, so let them to foster and value a sense of independent learning.

Limitations

In this research, all participants were recruited using a snow ball sampling method. The community of Chinese postgraduates students is small so relationships in that community may have affected the interview process. The participants might only speak of what they believed could be largely accepted in this community and may have given the information that they thought I wanted to hear.

In addition, because of our similar cultural and educational background, the participants might have avoided being straightforward on certain issues, especially those related to the Chinese cultural values. For they might feel lose face or ashamed of letting a person from the same culture see them through. In order to encourage the participants to speak

with their true voices, before they agreed to participate in the research they all received consent forms and information sheets to explain the research to them and let them know that their privacy would be well protected and they had the rights to withdraw from the research any time before the data analysis.

As a Chinese international student myself, my education and cultural backgrounds might provide me with an advantage to have a better understanding of the participants' ideas but it also could lead me to form assumptions about their answers for the interview questions. To avoid that, I regularly discussed my findings with my supervisors who challenged me to think about my assumptions and verbalise them. In the interviews I asked myself to be a listener and avoid having discussions or sharing my ideas on the research questions with my participants.

In addition, five participants preferred their interviews to be conducted in Chinese, therefore, the collected data had to be translated into English first and then to be transcribed. In order to make sure the participants' ideas were accurately translated, each translation was sent back to the participant for feedback which was then incorporated if necessary. By doing so, I tried to ensure that the English translations matched the meanings of the participants. In addition, some Chinese words were kept in the presentation of the findings, for it was hard to find the exact words in English to fully convey the participants' ideas. Though explanation of the meanings were provided, that might create difficulties for people from the other culture completely understanding the participants.

Finally this study was interpretive and small scale. I endeavoured to represent the experiences of five Chinese post graduate students. By gathering rich data through

interviews and incorporating a large number of quotes, I sought to allow the readers of this research to gain insight into the context of the participants' lives so they could make judgements whether this research could be applied in other situations. As study situated in the interpretive paradigm, it does not allow me to generalizable to other situations or Chinese students.

Concluding statement

In this research, I have learned six different life stories of the participants. These stories showed that they shared some similar experiences of living and studying in New Zealand while each story also illustrated very individualized understandings of the term satisfaction. They claimed that satisfaction was about happiness, self-development in the new living and learning environment, the realization of their expectations, and also a promising future.

I was surprised that five out of the six participants preferred to conduct the interviews in Chinese, for they said that they explain themselves better in our mother language. When transcribing the data, I realized that sometimes it was hard to find the exact English word for some of the Chinese expressions the participants used and that was one of the reasons why I kept some of the original Chinese words of the participants and only provided an English explanation for them. I realized that language was not merely a communication tool but also attached to cultures. Language grows and develops in culture while also reflects the culture. This is an important notion when analysing and presenting research findings across cultures.

Because there were only six participants involved in this research, I have achieved very rich and in-depth data from the participants, and the relatively small sample allowed me

to have a more comprehensive analysis of the collected data. In addition, from conducting this study, I learned to position myself as a researcher and not share my views with the participants during the interviews. I learned to keep a distance while being close enough with the participants so I could make them feel free to talk, to tell their real stories. I thank the participants for sharing their stories and allowing me to better understand my own story.

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Appendix one: Information sheet

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



**Participant information sheet for a study of Chinese
international students' experiences of satisfaction when living
and studying in New Zealand**

Researcher: Xiaoyan Wang, Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington

I am doing my Master of Education by thesis this year at Victoria University of Wellington. My research explores Chinese international students' experiences of satisfaction when studying and living in New Zealand. It aims to find out how Chinese students experience satisfaction, whether Chinese cultural values such as *mianzi*, *renqing*, *guanxi*, have influenced Chinese students' perception of satisfaction. The research has been approved by the Faculty of Education Human Ethics Sub-committee under delegated authority from the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee, application number 19884.

I would like to invite you, as a Chinese postgraduate student from mainland China enrolled in Victoria University of Wellington, to participate in this project. You will be asked to complete 45-60mins interview at a place and time that is convenient for you. The interview could be in English or Chinese according to your preference. The interviews will be audio recorded and I will translate and transcribe them. You will have a chance to check that I fully understood you when I send you a copy of the transcription by email for you to check. You can withdraw any comments at this stage if you wish. If you feel want to withdraw from the whole project, you can do so without question at any time before the analysis of data at the beginning of July. Just let me know by email or text.

Your name will not be used in the thesis and you will not be identified personally. The data will only be accessed by my supervisor, Dr Carolyn Tait and me. All information will be kept confidential. Record of interviews will be kept in a file which is stored securely either in a password protected computer file or in a locked cabinet and will be destroyed five years since the project is completed.

The thesis will be submitted to the Faculty of Education for marking and deposited in the university library. The research may be used as conference presentations or articles.

If you have any other questions or want to receive more information on this project, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor Carolyn Tait. The following is our contact information:

Xiaoyan Wang, phone: 0220177924

Email address: wangxiao24@myvuw.ac.nz

Post address: Flat No.25 Everton Hall

No.12 Everton Terrace, Wellington, 6012

Dr Carolyn Tait

Email: Carolyn.tait@vuw.ac.nz

Telephone: 4639590

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Allison Kirkman, Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee Allison.kirkman@vuw.ac.nz

Xiaoyan Wang

Signed:

Effective from:

Appendix Two: Consent form

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



Participant consent form

A study of Chinese international students' experiences of satisfaction when living and studying in New Zealand

Please read the following statements and tick the circle to indicate your agreement:

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet for this study.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about this research and have them answered.
- I understand that my identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym I understand that my interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
- I understand that the data will be stored securely and destroyed five years after the project is completed.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this project anytime up to the beginning of July.

I agree to participate in this research project.

Signed _____

I would like a summary of the findings emailed to me.

Email address _____

Appendix Three: Interview questions

1. Would you please talk about yourself first, tell me something about yourself, for example: your age, study area, hometown, years have been in New Zealand, and what are you doing currently, seeking a job, having a part time or only focus on your study

2. Would you please tell me about your studying and living experience in New Zealand.

Following up question: Would you please also tell me about your satisfaction about your experience in New Zealand.

3. How would you define satisfaction when considering the experience of studying and living in New Zealand.

4. What have impact on your satisfaction

Follow up question: Do you think *renqing*, *guanxi*, *mianzi* have influenced you satisfaction, if so, how?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience of satisfaction when studying and living in New Zealand.

调查问卷

1. 可以简单介绍下你自己吗？比如说：你的年龄，专业，家乡，以及你来新西兰的时间，还有就是你现在的的生活学习状况，是在找工作，做兼职或者只是专注学习呢？

2. 可以简单谈下你在新西兰的学习生活经历吗？

又及： 你可以谈下你对新西兰生活经历的满意度是怎样的吗？

3. 结合你在新西兰的学习经历，你是怎样定义“满意度”呢？

4. 你觉得什么会对你在新西兰学习生活的满意度产生影响呢？

又及： 你觉得人情，关系，面子会对你的满意度产生影响吗？

5. 关于我们今天谈到的对新西兰生活学习满意度的话题，你还有哪些想和我分享的吗？