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'In-betweeners': Chinese students' experiences in China-Australia articulation programs

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ABSTRACT

Set against globalization and as an expression of it, transnational higher education (TNHE) has become an important part of the Chinese educational higher education (HE) system. Research has widely investigated macro topics, for example, policy and developmental history of Chinese HE. However, limited studies have explored Chinese students' learning experiences in TNHE, especially in 2+2 articulation programs. This study aimed to investigate this under-researched topic and interviewed twelve Chinese students who studied in China-Australia 2+2 articulation programs. Based on analysis of students' learning narratives from the theoretical perspectives of diaspora and space and place, this research found that the 2+2 setting created an in-between or third learning space for students, many of whom became in-between learners. The contours of such space were shaped by several cross-system academic differences in teaching, assessment, usage of internet-based technology and university culture. This positions 2+2 program students in a unique, in-between learning pathway that demands constant negotiations between different HE systems and cultures. These academic differences indicated that articulations between Chinese and Australian universities in such programs may still be only on a surface level.

Keywords: transnational higher education; in-between learning space; diaspora; Chinese students; articulation programs

INTRODUCTION

China has experienced rapid development of its economy which has been accompanied by intensive institutional efforts to improve the quality and competitive standing of its higher education (HE) sector internationally. After joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, China began to play an

increasingly significant role in global engagement predictably in its economy and education (Huang 2008).

Many Chinese universities are actively cooperating with foreign partners to develop various types of articulated educational forms, which are usually referred to as transnational (or cross-border) higher education (TNHE). In the Chinese context, TNHE is known as Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS), which is also referred to “*Zhong Wai He Zuo Ban Xue*” (Huang 2014). In past decades, many researchers (e.g. Yang 2008; Hou, Montgomery & McDowell 2014; Huang 2014; Mok & Ong 2014; Wang, Clarke & Yu 2016) have investigated articulation education in the Chinese context. However, students’ learning experiences in such programs remain under-researched (Qin & Te 2016). This article explores Chinese students’ learning experiences in China-Australia 2+2 programs in order to fill this gap.

The article initially provides an introduction to articulation programs in China through reviewing relevant literature. Here TNHE might be seen as an example of the “flows” or “scapes” that Appadurai (1996) has written about as a central cultural characteristic of globalization; such student flows are an example of an “ethnoscape”. Next, theoretical concepts adopted to help the exploration and analysis of articulation students’ experiences, including the concepts of diaspora, place and third space, will be discussed. These concepts are considered in relation to globalization and articulation programs. The research findings are then outlined utilizing illustrative narratives of Chinese students’ learning experiences. Analysis and discussion are subsequently proffered of the key research findings.

ARTICULATION PROGRAMS IN CHINESE HE

Chinese universities have established different modes of CFCRS with foreign partners, such as independent institutions (e.g. the University of Nottingham Ningbo China campus), affiliated (or second tier) colleges, and joint programs (Hu & Willis 2017). Joint programs (e.g. “1+1”, “2+2”, “3+1”, or “4+0”) are the dominant mode, referred to “*Zhong Wai He Zuo Ban Xue Xiang Mu*” (Lin 2016). The number refers to the years that students need to study in Chinese and foreign universities respectively. Specifically, “2+2” and “3+1” are usually conducted at the undergraduate level, but “1+1” usually happens in postgraduate study. The “4+0” is a special case for undergraduate study as students fully complete their program in China via learning content offered by foreign partners without students actually physically studying overseas. For this article, the 2+2 mode was selected where students spend equal periods of time in two different national HE settings. The first author of this paper had experienced such a program and so was an insider to the research reported here. At the same time, this experience helped facilitate the recruitment of students to the study.

Many researchers (e.g. Ng & Nyland 2016; Pyvis 2011; Wang 2016) have explored practical topics about TNHE and CFCRS at the micro level, for example, teaching issues in cross-system settings. Cross-system settings are different in respect of multiple aspects (e.g. educational system structure, teaching content and assessment modes), providing challenges for both Chinese and foreign universities and educators who design and run CFCRS programs. Zhuang and Tang (2012) identified that many lecturers in several China-the United Kingdom

(UK) articulation programs usually taught in traditional teacher-centered modes without enough English-based teaching activities in the Chinese phase. In this case, it was difficult for students to become familiar with the student-centered learning mode in the UK context. Ng and Nyland (2016) pointed out that many Chinese lecturers did not know how Australian lecturers taught in the Australian context in a China-Australia articulation program and vice versa. Evidently cross-system collaboration in such articulation programs still has various alignment issues, especially in respect of teaching and learning. This paper will illustrate that reality, yet at the same time argue that this very non-alignment has some positive outcomes.

To deal with such challenges of miss-alignment across the articulation in 2+2 programs, it is necessary to consider the strategy of “both-and” (Shams & Huisman, cited in Wang 2016, p. 226), which means that home and host universities should strategically manage the connections between teaching and learning in both sites. As Wang (2016, p. 226) suggested, it is important for educators to consider and ensure “the equivalence of learning experience” between home and host universities. Although these studies have widely investigated teaching issues related to CFCRS, as Mok and Ong (2014) indicated, there are limited studies focused on students’ learning experiences in CFCRS (e.g. the 2+2 setting), reinforced by Qin and Te (2016), who found that existing research related to students’ learning experiences in TNHE and CFCRS was limited in the period 1995 to 2015.

The research inquiry reported in this paper undertook detailed research of a group of Chinese HE students’ lived learning experiences in China-Australia 2+2 articulation programs and was guided by the question “How do Chinese students experience learning in China-Australia 2+2 programs?” Such a cross-system setting might position students to develop multiple strategies to deal with potential cultural, educational, and social disjunctions and collisions.

GLOBALIZATION, DIASPORA, PLACE, AND THIRD SPACE

Globalization is a contested concept (Hay 2002), which has various meanings in different fields, such as political science, cultural studies, sociology, economic research, and also education (Altbach 2004; Appadurai 1996, 2000; Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton 2000; Rizvi & Lingard 2010). For instance, globalization might be seen to represent a series of disjunctive “flows” of multiple social, cultural, economic “scapes” between and across national borders (Appadurai 1996). Furthermore, as Altbach (2004, p. 5) indicated, “globalization in the 21st century is truly worldwide in reach – few places can elude contemporary trends, and innovations and practices seem to spread ever faster due to modern technology”. The movement of these social elements around the world leads to the constant (re)construction of “transnational diasporic networks” (Rizvi 2005, p. 188).

Influenced by globalization, the Chinese government has actively sought to reform the education system in order to enhance the quality of its HE provision (R. Yang 2008). TNHE (e.g. 2+2 articulation program) can be seen as a way to achieve proposed goals of reforming the HE system and enhancing its quality in the context of globalization (Huang 2008). Specifically, China-Australia 2+2

programs potentially enable the constant physical and virtual movements of students, lecturers, and information between the two national sites. According to Rizvi, Louie, and Evans (2016), long-stay international students can be seen as an important component of what they refer to as diaspora, a Greek originated term to describe people who left their home country and settled in a new land. Rizvi and colleagues have utilised the concept of diaspora to distinguish the experience of contemporary migration from earlier forms, where today new information and communication technologies (ICTs) allow ongoing and immediate communications with “home”. For example, Appadurai (1996) has referred to the ways some migrants today continue to participate in the politics of their homelands as resulting from a diasporic public sphere. As such, diaspora refers to “a system of personal networks, shared culture and language, and an imaginary relationship to the homeland” (Kapur, cited in R. Yang & Welch 2010, p. 594). The concept of diaspora highlights the importance of continuing influences of students’ homeland on their lives during overseas study and the continuing transitional interactions between home and host nations (R. Yang & Welch 2010). 2+2 students could be considered as a specific group of the diaspora and ethnoscapes, because their learning occurs across two settings, which through new communication technologies allows them to have constant connections with home and host contexts. We note, though, that these students are part of what we might see as a temporary or short-term diaspora, sojourners perhaps. As will be shown in the analysis proffered here, the students interviewed lived such an ICT mediated diasporic experience.

The 2+2 setting potentially makes learning spaces and places more complex when compared with usual educational modes, as it mixes cultures, societies, and higher educational systems and their varying cultures and practices into one program. As Brennan (cited in Rizvi & Lingard 2010, p. 66) suggested, “space is more abstract and ubiquitous: it connotes capital, history, and activity, and gestures towards the meaninglessness of distance in a world of instantaneous communication and virtuality”. In contrast, place could be considered as “the kernel or centre of one’s memory and experience – a dwelling, a familiar park or city street, one’s family or community” (Brennan, cited in Rizvi & Lingard 2010, p. 66). Under the ongoing trend of globalization and internationalization, time, space, and place become somewhat compressed (Harvey 1999; Rizvi & Lingard 2010) and the ontological distinction between the two almost elided (Amin 2001) facilitated by new communication technologies. These changes are associated with the new spatialities endemic to globalization that work across national borders (Amin 2001). While we might be able to argue that the new ICTs help people overcome this space/place distinction, at least to some extent, we still need to acknowledge that face-to-face encounters and their materiality remain different from technologically mediated ones. For example, when in Australia the Chinese students are located in a particular place (their Australian universities), but also in the space of China enabled through the internet.

It is worth noting that the 2+2 setting positions students in different “places”. However, students may establish their individual “spaces” in the process of experiencing the change of “places” because each individual may have different reactions towards the change of “place”. They may face different issues and

develop different strategies to deal with the change of “place”. In this process, students may (re)shape their understandings towards cross-system differences as part of a diaspora in the movement between different “places”. Consequently, individual students may establish their own specific “spaces” influenced by the surroundings. Such “spaces” might reflect their reactions to changes of “places” and also precipitate a diasporic experience for these students.

Several researchers (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Feng 2009) have proposed the concept of “third space” or “in-between space” to conceptualize the complexity of the changes of “spaces” and “places” across culture, societies, and countries associated with migration and globalization today. For instance, Bhabha (1994) argued that there is an in-between space that blurs the concept of nation and its borders and as such people are able to move physically and psychologically between their own and host cultural contexts. Consequently, a sense of cultural hybridity and liminality, ‘in-betweenness’, is generated from the in-between space that provides a platform for people to experience “something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 1990, p. 211). In this space, people potentially engage in a process of being in-between, experiencing liminality, and may develop complex and mediated views and attitudes towards different cultural and social contexts (Bhabha 1994).

Such third or in-between space is abstract allowing people to see the essence of the visible “appearance of solidity” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 92). In this space, people may shift between different contexts as insiders and/or outsiders (McNess, Arthur & Crossley 2016). For most international students, the learning journey from homeland to other countries can be regarded as “a movement from a known place into something at first unknown—a space—which with time itself becomes known as a place” (Burnapp 2006, p. 83). Importantly, third, liminal or in-between spaces have become an important theoretical lens to investigate and understand international students’ cross-system learning experiences (Feng 2009).

Research about Chinese students’ adaptation to new cultural and educational contexts is not new, but still has many issues that are under-researched. Gill (2007) suggested that Chinese students usually experience initial stress, constant adjustment, and development with reshaping identities. This framework is in line with Kim’s (2001) three stages model of “stress-adaptation-growth”. Similar findings were also documented by Campbell and Li (2007) in New Zealand, Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) in the UK, and Zhu (2016) in Germany. As Marginson (2014) summarised, even though international students usually face many barriers in a new system, they are eventually able to deal with differences and finally adjust to the new context. However, limited studies have examined the perceptions of Chinese students towards the changes of educational setting in articulation education (e.g. 2+2 setting). The research reported here is located against that research gap and utilises the concept of in-betweenness rather than the psychologically oriented stress-adaptation-growth argument because it fits better with the data collected.

RESEARCH METHOD: AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW BASED QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

An in-depth interview based case study was adopted as research method. Case study is suitable to explore research participants' subjective views of their lived experiences from a qualitative perspective (Yin 2014). The study adopted a purposive sampling approach to find students who were studying in China-Australia 2+2 programs. Students were recruited from the first author's personal networks and also through university student unions. Twelve Chinese students voluntarily participated, including six males and six females. They had completed their Chinese learning stages and were in Australia, enabling them to share comparisons of the Chinese and the Australian stages. They studied in multiple majors and different years, increasing the diversity of collected data. Demographic information is listed in Table 1 with each student given a pseudonym for privacy and confidentiality. The study was approved by the university Ethics Committee and each student who participated in the research gave informed consent for their involvement.

TABLE 1. STUDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

| Students | Gender | Years in Australia | Fields of major |
|----------|--------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Louis | Male | 1 | Business-related |
| Amy | Female | 1 | Business-related |
| Olivia | Female | 1 | Design-related |
| Hannah | Female | 1 | Education |
| Ivy | Female | 2 | Design-related |
| Alex | Male | 2 | Business-related |
| Katie | Female | 2 | Engineering-related |
| Peter | Male | 2 | Engineering-related |
| Anna | Female | 2 | Design-related |
| Jack | Male | 2 | Business-related |
| Leo | Male | Graduated | Design-related |
| David | Male | Graduated | Design-related |

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data as this provided useful evidence to assist in answering the framing research question that drove the study. These interviews allowed the research participants to talk about their sense-making of articulation programs in a narrative way. Interviews were conducted in safe places (e.g. university study rooms and students' homes). All interviews were in Mandarin as students can present their stories without language barriers. Interviews took from 60 to 90 minutes allowing participants to talk freely about their learning experiences in 2+2 programs. Interview transcripts were translated into English¹. The collected data were analyzed and presented in narrative form providing thick and rich data facilitating understanding of

¹ There are real complexities involved in the translation of Mandarin to English here, but the methodological issues involved are beyond the scope of this paper.

participants' experiences and complex life stories in detail (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). This data analysis was conducted both inductively and deductively from the framing theoretical concepts and captured the narrative experiences of the research participants. The selected data were considered as the illustrative evidence that accurately reflects key features of students' 2+2 experiences.

IN-BETWEENNERS

This inquiry posits that the 2+2 program created an in-between or liminal space for students through which they constantly shifted their learning focus and strategies as "in-betweeners". The contours of the 2+2 in-between learning space were constituted by four aspects in the process of student transition from China to Australia, including the use of ICTs (e.g. internet-based tools), teaching strategies, assessment modes and university academic cultures.

Chinese students in China: Learning mainly happened in "physical places"

In China, learning activities seemed to occur in "physical places" without deep engagement in "virtual spaces". The "physical" here mainly refers to classroom-based, textbook-based, and limited internet-assisted modes of teaching and learning. The "virtual" can be simply understood as ICT-assisted approaches. For instance, learning focused on textbooks without many ICT-assisted experiences in the Chinese phase of the articulation programs. On this point, Ivy observed:

I did not use many Internet-based technologies in learning at Chinese university. If I used, it often happened when I needed to have more understandings about a concept shown on textbook. Then I searched relevant information. That was all. In China, internet-based technologies were supplementary and they did not play the core role in my learning.

Furthermore, some students also mentioned the reasons why they did not have many ICT-based learning experiences. For instance, Anna attributed such a situation to course design.

I thought that the curriculum design influenced the use of Internet-based technology in learning process. In China, I did not think that we had many courses that needed students to use internet in learning. All students always sit in a classroom and lecturers taught knowledge in the front of the classroom based on textbooks or other related resources.

Textbook-based learning potentially reduced the knowledge interactions and transformations between physical places and virtual spaces. Moreover, learning was highly guided by exams, pushing students to concentrate on physical materials in daily study without much exploration and interactions with virtual spaces. Studying in such a highly exam-dominated learning context, Jack seemed to be weary.

The exams of my Chinese university were very rigid. Such exams did not test academic ability but they just tested out-of-date knowledge printed on

textbook. To pass exams, I just needed to remember textbooks and did more practices before the final test. In short, if I directly copy contents of textbook to my exam paper, I can pass it easily.

This experience confirmed a well-documented finding that assessment shapes “how much, how (their approach), and what (the content) students learn” (Scouller 1998, p. 454). Furthermore, their experiences suggested that the “end-of-course” examination was still widely adopted as the dominant assessment approach in the first two years of undergraduate Chinese study (Scouller 1998). In line with the use of ICTs in the Chinese stage, it seemed that such an assessment mode ensured students had limited engagement with the ICT-based virtual space in doing their academic tasks. Consequently, their learning activities mainly happened in physical places through limited ICT-assistance. Hannah noted:

Although most courses were taught by foreign lecturers in English, I feel their assessing approaches were Chinese-style. They did not give us assignments or quizzes in learning progress. Normally we just have mid-semester and final exams. During the whole semester, there were limited interaction or other creative teaching and learning contents. All courses relied on very exam-directed learning and teaching method.

Hannah’s interview excerpt indicates an important issue in the 2+2 context. Foreign lecturers taught in the Chinese stage, which indicated the movement of academics from a foreign country to China, another element of ethnoscaping. Such movement actually produced an in-between learning space for these Chinese students even in the Chinese stage. Theoretically, this mode should ensure the “equivalence” of teaching and learning to the new national HE system (Wang 2016). However, this did not appear to be the case. A multi-cultural context was successfully constructed in Hannah’s class at her Chinese university. However, as Hannah suggested, it seems that there were few differences between teaching strategies adopted by foreign or Chinese lecturers.

When participants discussed the role of assessment in shaping their in-between learning space, many of them also comparatively mentioned their views of lecturers in the Chinese and Australian contexts. According to Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999), assessments also reflect teaching approaches. The role of lecturers in the Chinese stage can be summarized through the following key words, such as teaching activity dominator, textbook-based knowledge delivery, and exam-based assessor. Hannah elaborated on her experiences:

At my Chinese university, many lecturers were still the centre of class. They were in charge of teaching and learning activities. Most courses did not provide opportunities to students to do some works by themselves after class.

Anna also had similar views that her lecturers usually dominated the learning process and students had limited autonomy in study.

When I was studying at my Chinese university, learning was usually based on lecturers' teaching. They often controlled the learning and teaching activities. Students usually needed to follow their steps without enough autonomy.

With regard to the role of lecturers and the application of technology in teaching, many students (e.g. Olivia, Leo, Jack and Peter) noted that many lecturers did not adopt various technologies to support their teaching activities. Olivia shared her experiences:

Most lecturers were used to teaching by reading textbook. The learning goal in China was to remember the key sections of the textbook that were mentioned by lecturers in class and then to catch these points to pass the final exam. It seemed that students mechanically followed the lecturers without their own thinking. So in Chinese mode, I only needed to focus on the textbook and did not need to pay more attention to other kind of learning strategies, for example, internet-based study. As a result, it was difficult to evaluate the role of Internet-based technology in helping students achieve their goals in study because students even do not use it for learning purposes ... Generally, Internet-based technology always seemed to be "extra contents" in study. The teacher was still the centre of the classroom.

Such teaching strategies indicated some features of teaching in the Chinese higher education context. For instance, Jin and Cortazzi (2006, p. 11) suggested that teaching commonly refers to "*Jiao Shu*" or "teach the book". Although the concept of book is a metaphor, it still indicates that the knowledge of books in the Chinese culture of education played an important role. Interview extracts partly reflected the significant roles of "books" in students' first two years of study at Chinese universities. Moreover, it seemed that exam-directed teaching approaches guided students to study by following the line of examination. These experiences further indicated that teaching and learning approaches were highly influenced by assessment (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 1999). In this educational context, many students were able to pass assessments by simply focusing on learning textbook-based knowledge.

Furthermore, many students' experiences also reflected the collective features of the educational context and experience in the Chinese stage. Jack shared his views:

In China, most students in the same major had the same course plan. Students did not need to manage their course and learning plan independently ... Students usually attended class as a fixed group. No matter which course they selected, most classmates were all the same group. In this case, many students may want to rely on other peers. One student searched and knew learning contents first. Then he/she will let other students know it. So students did not have motivation to study by themselves and become lazy.

Peter summarized his views in the following statement: "Chinese university is

considered as a semi-enclosed society. Students have their autonomy but they still need to follow certain rules". It is apparent that Peter's extract is in line with collectivist cultural characteristics of Chinese society post 1949 (Hofstede 1986). As Amy identified, one of the major advantages of this mode was that students were able to establish tight connections with other peers in the same class and group. However, many interviewees suggested some disadvantages in this situation. Louis, for example, felt that "the quality of students determined the quality of learning context". Hannah also shared her experiences:

At my Chinese university, I feel most students did not care too much about their academic results. Some feel failing in the exam is quite often. Some do not submit assignments as usual.

Such feeling was not unique. Other interviewees also reported similar experiences. As Amy noted:

Generally, my Chinese university environment was not good for study and most classmates did not study very hard. In such context, it was difficult to be independent. When other people play games, why I study?

In the Chinese learning stage, many students interacted with other elements in a semi-closed setting where in-between activities usually occurred in physical places with highly collective features. However, when these students came to Australia, the sense of in-between became more complex than that of their Chinese experiences.

Chinese students in Australia: Learning in between "physical places" and "virtual spaces" across two HE systems

Considering their learning in Australia, many students reflected different experiences from those in the first two years at a Chinese university. For instance, learning activities had many interactions between physical places and virtual spaces, which positioned students in between different learning settings. Consequently, many students created their in-between space of learning via both physical and virtual mediation. Alex mentioned that:

I usually followed the lecturers' teaching and review course content regularly. I used the Blackboard to download lecture slides. Sometimes I listened to the recording if I missed a class. I also did assignments online and search some definitions of Finance which were hard to be understood in class.

Similarly, Katie shared that:

At my Australian university, all learning contents were uploaded to an online learning system, which helped me to review taught knowledge and enhance understanding easily. During writing an essay or doing other assignment, I did need to use Internet-based technology as the main tool to help me complete my works, for example, searching articles on Google Scholar.

These extracts illustrate differences in learning spaces and places in the transition from China to Australia. ICTs were widely adopted to support learning and teaching in the Australian context, especially in students' daily study. Hence, the students seemed to start learning in an in-between space that combined features of both physical and virtual contexts, places and spaces.

Many students also established in-between connections with the Chinese context via Internet-based tools in their learning. We might say then that the students also learnt in-between the Chinese and Australian HE contexts. As Harvey (1999) suggested, time and space have been compressed via the wide application of Internet-based technologies. In this compressed virtual space, students achieved knowledge transformations and interactions between different educational and cultural contexts. Louis noted, "I usually searched relevant Chinese information from the Internet to help me understand English meanings". Similarly, Anna further explained that internet-based tools could provide a useful platform to investigate and to understand specific knowledge in her field.

I usually made use of internet-based tools, for example, online directory, professional websites, and search engines, to help me understand professional concepts. Many concepts were difficult to be understood in English so I searched them in Chinese to help me deeply comprehend the real meaning. Furthermore, there are plenty of academic papers and resources online. It was very useful to me to understand knowledge through searching Chinese information. Moreover, I usually checked my grammar through online English learning platforms. Internet-based technology actually helped me to overcome many language problems.

With regard to the "in-between" learning in his major study, Alex stated:

When I was studying in a finance course, I felt difficulty understanding some key knowledge points. Although I thought language was not the major problem, the discipline knowledge were very difficult for me to deeply understand in some cases. To deal with these learning issues, I found a Chinese MOOC website was very helpful, which is called "163 public lecture". In this MOOC platform, I can watch many teaching recorded videos in Chinese. So, I can learn related knowledge by following both Chinese and foreign lecturers. Many courses were taught by famous professors from universities around the world. I felt such platform was very helpful to my study.

These experiences reveal that Internet-based tools became supportive assistants that helped students to overcome language barriers and to learn knowledge, at least to some extent. These students were able to find useful ways to deal with their learning issues in a new context, which are consistent with previous findings by several researchers (e.g. Gill 2007; Gu, Schweisfurth & Day 2010). Such activities further confirmed that technology becomes an important mediation to shorten, as it were, the distance between Australia and their homeland as diaspora (Rizvi, Louie & Evans 2016). They lived in a diasporic educational sphere. Importantly, internet-based tools not only connected the

diaspora with the homeland, but also played important roles in knowledge transformations from Chinese to English and vice versa, which in a sense created a learning space beyond the boundaries of material place. Studying in this space, students experienced learning in “a world of instantaneous communication and virtuality” (Brennan, cited in Rizvi & Lingard 2010, p. 66).

Moreover, assessment modes experienced by the students in Australia were very different from those in the Chinese stage, which positioned students in between different academic tasks during their learning. Amy observed that:

Compared to my previous Chinese exam-based mode, I had various tests (e.g. essay, exam, online quiz, group works, and presentation) during a semester at Australian university and then I needed to keep following lecturers and read lecture notes after class on the learning platform. If I did not study hard in the semester, it will be difficult for me to complete assignments and pass exams.

As Boud and Soler (2016) indicated, it is important to integrate assessments into students' learning activities to build a sustainable assessment system. In Amy's experiences, different types of assignments and tests were inserted into her learning in Australia. Similarly, Jack also mentioned that:

In Australia, the assessment had various types and many tests that aim to examine daily study. For example, we had essays, online quizzes, mid-exam and final exam. Such assessing mode could test students' learning and academic ability from various points rather than only just textbook contents.

Learning with such a stressful assessment mode, many students paid much attention to the daily study rather than rely on final review before exams as they had done in China. To deal with problems in doing assessments, many students' experiences also indicated the sense of in-between. David mentioned that:

I remembered when I was in my first semester I had no ideas about doing assignments and totally cannot understand what I needed to do. As I said, what I have learned from Chinese university was not helpful to Australian study. It was so difficult to let a video editor to program a website, which was an impossible work. In this case, I requested help from lecturers and they gave me some guidance to complete my assignments. If I cannot get help from lecturers, I also asked peers and some friends from China who have relevant experiences to help me deal with learning problems.

The Australian assessment mode made many students engage in a complex learning space, which brought more stresses to them than they experienced in the Chinese system. Their learning strategies became dynamic in this mode. The assessment mode can also reflect and influence teaching strategies. According to David, it is evident that although he physically studied in Australia, he actually constantly shifted in between different contexts to seek support for his study rather than mainly rely on support in the new context alone. Such experiences may provide the critical insight that many Chinese students do not just simply

adjust to and follow the new teaching and learning approaches, but find suitable ways to help them survive in a different context. Furthermore, many research participants provided evidence that they were in between different teaching strategies from China to Australia. Olivia indicated that:

Compared to my Chinese lecturers, many Australian lecturers usually stimulated students to think of learning problems critically and creatively. They rarely taught students how to create an animation step by step but they liked to discuss with students about their ideas. Students needed to develop their software skills by themselves after classes through searching online information and watching tutorial videos. Lecturers may not be interested in the steps or skills that were used in creation but they preferred to examine the design ideas. In this case, students in Australian context seemed to be more creative. We needed to train ourselves to be more creative rather than waiting for “feeding” knowledge by lecturers. Australian lecturers liked to ask questions or gave various small tasks during study to let students practice their thinking and skills.

This comment indicates evidence that many lecturers in the Australian context did not directly “feed knowledge” to students. In contrast, they usually provided flexible directions for students in order to encourage them to actively explore knowledge through researching and investigation by using different tools. Such experiences could reflect the features of the Australian HE academic culture that autonomy is important in learning processes (Wang & Shan 2007). However, although teaching mainly concentrated on textbooks and exams in the Chinese context, many students identified that lecturers usually taught knowledge in detail and in depth, which enabled them to have a clear understanding of specific content. Leo described that:

At my Chinese university, lecturers usually taught software step by step and created a model for students to follow. However, when I studied at my Australian university, lecturers preferred to teach design concepts rather than many details about the use of specific software.

Similarly, Peter shared his experiences:

I think lecturers usually taught knowledge in detail and explained the origin of a certain point, especially in subjects related to Math or Physics. For example, I remembered that my math lecturers usually wrote a lot of formulas to explain how a question to be solved and explained why such question can be solved in specific approaches. After a class, the lecturer could write full of blackboard. I felt such learning process was very understandable. Students can have strong foundations of fundamental knowledge. In Australia, I felt lecturers usually did not teach such detailed knowledge and students usually needed to explore problem after classes.

These experiences show clear evidence that many students had critical views towards the teaching in their intercultural learning programs, indicating that they did not simply believe the foreign teaching was better than the Chinese style. In

contrast, they were able to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each approach in each stage. In doing so, they fostered their negotiated views towards different teaching styles, facilitating an in-between space in their minds. They were living and learning in a liminal space.

Some students suggested that they needed to become more independent in Australia. For instance, Peter indicated that:

In Australia, I felt I have already started my life in an open society. I was not just a leaner at university; I also needed to become more independent and to manage every aspect of my life and study, especially for me in Australia. I needed to learn how to communicate with other, how to adapt to society, and how to deal with every problem that I faced.

In contrast, Amy shared her experience:

I felt it was difficult to make friends in Australia. For example, when I had some learning questions, I wanted to ask other peers. However, some of them did not want to help me. I also felt it was difficult to get in-depth communication with Australian peers ... In Australia, I can feel everyone becomes more independent. I felt difficult to engage in a group in learning as every student can select different courses depending on individual situation even though we were in the same major and program. I thought most Chinese students may still like a collective mode.

It is obvious that many students realized the contextual changes from being positioned in a collective context to a much more individual one, where they were required to actively interact with different actors in this new context. According to Ai (2015), each nation has its particular cultural and social features, which affect people's identity and behaviours in different ways. HE is situated in these different cultural contexts. In the process of adapting to the new context, people not only reshaped their sense of being as diaspora, but also constructed their own in-between space to reflect their views towards the cross cultural and societal changes they experienced (Ai 2015).

Comparing Chinese and Australian experiences, most students indicated a sense of in-betweenness. Their learning experiences suggested that their learning usually happened in physical places with limited engagement with virtual space in the Chinese stage. When they moved to Australia, learning happened in an in-between space shaped by the connections between different educational contexts via multiple changes in teaching strategies, ICT usages, assessment modes, and university academic cultures. Through constantly shifting individual preferences and learning strategies many students developed their own sense as in-between learners in the transitional learning process.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH

This paper has illustrated Chinese students' learning experiences in their 2+2 programs. Several key insights can be gleaned as these address the research question: How do Chinese students experience learning in China-Australia 2+2 programs?

The students interviewed manifested deliberate shifts between Chinese and Australian academic features and settings. In the process, these students constructed a sense of in-betweenness. As research findings suggested, the concept of “in-betweenness” indicates two layers. The first layer refers to students’ sense of in-between a material “place” in which they were physically studying and living. When they studied in the Chinese stage, they actually engaged in a process of becoming in-betweeners who had not yet entered a cross-system setting. Their relationships with contextual elements positioned them as in-betweeners in their surroundings. Their communications, interactions, and negotiations with other elements (e.g. lecturers, assessments, and ICTs) in a “place” (e.g. the Chinese university) created their own sense of in-betweenness in one specific context. In short, the first layer can be seen as a vertical in-betweenness, reflecting students’ interactions with other actors via either physical or virtual mediation in one place. In this stage, they mainly studied and lived in a “place” and had not yet begun the cross-system journey in a “space”.

The second layer refers to a blurry or fuzzy space, a third space, where students hover between their home and host educational systems, facilitated by new communication technologies. In this space, students created their sense of in-between or liminality via comparative reflections of experiences of differences (and similarities) between two systems. They segue beyond the boundary of one-place and create an in-between space, allowing them to understand the values and issues of different educational contexts. Such an in-between space becomes much more complex than the previous one generated in one place without cross-system interactions because the educational and cultural differences between China and Australia encourage students to work as in-betweeners. In this space, students can value the differences of cultures and develop their individual identities as in-between learners in a third space (Rutherford 1990; Bhabha 1994). In general, the second layer of in-between can be considered as a horizontal in-between space allowing learners to comparatively reflect on their intercultural learning experiences and changes of learning strategies, attitudes, and experiences.

With regard to the contours of the in-between learning space, as the research suggested, ICTs, assessments, teaching strategies and university academic cultures played important roles in shaping students’ in-between experiences. Considering the literature about the ICTs in TNHE education, this study partly concurred with previous studies. Hou (2011) found that many students in a China-UK articulation program started to use more internet-based tools to support study after moving to the UK, because of the better availability and accessibility of ICTs in the UK context. Transferring from a limited ICT-based context to a highly ICT-assisted mode, many students were potentially positioned in between physical places and virtual spaces, which might lead to a technological shock when they move across systems. In Australia, many research participants also sought learning support from the Chinese context via the virtual worldwide network, which revealed that the rapid development and wide applications of ICTs located the diaspora in between their home and host countries and cultures (Rizvi, Louie & Evans 2016). In doing so, a blended learning context reshaped many students

to become in-between learners who are immersed simultaneously in physical places and virtual learning spaces. As many students' learning experiences indicated, when they studied in an assessment mode that was mainly based on textbook-based summative exams, they tended by and large not to utilize ICTs as learning assisted tools in their learning. However, when they studied in a mode that had multiple and continuous assessments, students seemed to be more likely to use ICTs and the internet to deal with different assignments. In this case, we might say they studied in a place, but also in a space that was constructed by both physical and virtual elements.

Furthermore, the research indicated a dilemma in respect of teaching strategies. Different students also indicated multiple views towards the transitions they experienced in relation to teaching strategies. They constantly negotiated with the new context and continued to compare the Australian teaching approaches with those in China. In the Australian context, nonetheless, it seemed that some students became more independent but were still not intrinsically motivated. They still preferred the Chinese style of teaching. In this case, as a traditional Chinese proverb indicates, people should critically absorb the essence and reject the dross. In other words, every educational context has its strengths and shortcomings. In 2+2 learning programs, students may not simply accept new cultural and educational models or reject their previous experiences without enough critical examination, depending on individual situations and needs.

The dilemma of teaching approaches indicated that teaching activities in many 2+2 programs might not be well articulated; in this case between Chinese and Australian lecturers and courses. This finding is in line with several existing studies (Ng & Nyland 2016; Zhuang & Tang 2012), which also found that teaching approaches adopted by Chinese and foreign lecturers in articulation programs were usually different. These cultural differences saw students becoming stressed initially as they moved into the new HE context. Such a situation potentially indicated that many articulation programs may have so-called collaborations at the macro level but there were still many practical gaps in running articulated education. Such lack of articulation in educational practices potentially influenced students' views and learning experiences in their 2+2 programs. As a result, academic differences created a space for students to become in-betweeners. Although such an educational mode combined different cultural, social, and educational contexts into one program, in practice, the "boundary" of different systems may still exist in students' learning journeys resulting in the emergence of complex attitudes towards such so-called articulation.

The university context can be regarded as a holistic environmental factor that created different cultures for these students in their 2+2 programs. As the results indicated, typical Chinese universities have a strong sense of collective culture in both learning and living. These experiences concur with Hofstede's (1996, 2001) general account of collectivism of Chinese culture that usually emphasizes that people belong to a tightly knit group and they usually follow group norms to conduct their activities in highly collectivist settings. Notably, no significant differences in respect of the general learning environment in the 2+2 mode emerged from these 2+2 students' learning experiences compared with other

studies that investigated Chinese students' different learning experiences between Chinese and foreign sociocultural contexts (Zhang & Zhou 2010; Zhu, Valcke & Schellens 2008; Heffernan et al. 2010). This finding might suggest that although 2+2 programs were based on cooperation between Chinese and foreign partners, students in many such programs were still studying in a collective setting in their first two years at Chinese universities and then change to an individual context at Australian universities. It seems that cultural features significantly influenced the class setting and operation in 2+2 programs.

In the Australian context, the feature of individualism is distinct, as most students had their own learning plan and usually lived in different places, which reduced opportunities for interactions between students. Their experiences indicated features of individualism that emphasize self-regulation, limited integration and individual behaviors (Hofstede 2001). This research has shown that the students in the Australian phase had to become more individual in orientation. This finding is different from that of Hou's (2011) research, which argued that the 2+2 setting allows students to learn as a group in a foreign university. According to the features of 2+2 programs, theoretically, students can move to Australia and learn together as a group, which would be similar to their Chinese experiences. However, as the current research indicated, it was very difficult in the Australian context for the students to study and live as a group in a 2+2 program. Such changes positioned students to be in between two poles: being in a group and functioning as an individual. A theme worthy of deeper examination would be to determine whether the in-betweenness experienced by the participants in this specific 2+2 program is replicated in other similar articulation programs. Another area for further research would be to investigate the differences experienced by the participants taking into account their subject disciplines.

Research findings indicated that many practical gaps exist in the learning processes of several CFCRS programs. The differences in using ICTs, assessment arrangements, teaching strategies lead to lack of articulation in learning experiences from China to Australia. This is contrary to the argument that home and host universities should ensure the equivalence in teaching and learning because academic cultural differences might be stressful for students during cross-system transition (Wang 2016). Such issues could also suggest that the current articulation programs – as clearly shown in this article – are problematic. These aspects in the 2+2 setting echo Otten's (2003, p. 16) argument that “a common problem to all institutions is that they do not allow differences in interaction because all unknown and unexpected differences are disturbing elements to the institutional procedures”. As a result, the quality of learning in CFCRS could be a problem too due to the academic asymmetry between different institutions that have dramatically different cultural and educational contexts (Otten 2003). Yet, and this is the paradox here, the findings of this research suggest these very cultural differences are central to the production of diasporic experiences and students becoming in-betweeners. Such identities and dispositions would appear to be central and necessary to the dispositions of mobile global elites who participate in global labour markets. As such, this unintended consequence of cultural differences between the HE

systems of China and Australia, which of course will continue, might be one strength of such programs. Gill (2007), from a different perspective, also argued that the stress experienced by such students could also be productive for them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has illustrated several Chinese students' lived learning experiences in the in-between space created by the 2+2 setting. Students' views and learning practices have added insights into the under-researched domain of students' experiences in TNHE and CFCRS programs. Students' journeys revealed that their learning experiences in 2+2 programs are complex and dynamic. They in effect become in-betweeners navigating twists and turns in the transition process from China to Australia, functioning in effect in a liminal space. Students' learning in the 2+2 setting is thus not a simple and straightforward process of adjustment or adaptation as earlier research has suggested; rather, it is a process of experiencing and fostering a sense of in-betweenness.

The qualitative data reported in this paper then demonstrate that liminality or in-betweenness better grasps the experiences of the 2+2 students who participated in the research than concepts of adjustment or adaptation. In a sense, this is a result of limited articulation between the Chinese and Australian components of these programs and is perhaps an unintended consequence of such programs. The suggestion of the necessity of a "both and" approach to designing such articulation programs seems not to have been the norm in the programs the research participants were involved in. Paradoxically though, this visceral outcome of liminality might also be seen as a significant achievement of such programs, echoing the experiences of other parts of contemporary ethnoscapes and the diasporic experiences of migrants today, who are enabled by new technologies to live simultaneously across, within and in-between cultures. To some extent what we see is the elision of the space/place distinction and this elision as experienced by ethnoscapes. Further research involving interviews with academics, policymakers, and program designers would add additionally insights to the "findings" of the research reported in this paper in terms of the design of such programs.

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