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Exploring the expectations, experiences, and long term plans of Chinese international students studying for a joint Sino-Russian degree

Pechurina, A.; Sablina, Svetlana; Soong, Hannah

Abstract

This article investigates the transitioning process of international Chinese undergraduate students studying in Russia. The paper offers new insights into changes in the expectations and experiences of Chinese students at various stages of their joint educational studies in China and Russia. Drawing on a qualitative study of 20 Chinese undergraduates studying in Russia, the findings of the study indicate that before studying in Russia, most of Chinese students had low expectations about their study program. However, once they were in Russia, students' perception of the value of their international education experiences changes through varied opportunities for self-reflexivity in an unfamiliar cultural environment. The study also offers an example of methodological approach useful for researching international students' experiences, particularly within but not limited to context of Sino-Foreign university partnerships.

Keywords

international higher education, Chinese students, international student experiences, Russian international education, qualitative research

Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) reports that the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship rose from 2.1 million in 2000 to more than 4.6 million in 2015. Given the increased flow of

international students, the role played by international higher education in developing global competencies relevant in current labour markets has become an important issue (Skelly 2009). Currently, China provides the highest number of international students studying in different parts of the world (OECD 2017). This is partly a reflection of the complex Chinese educational system and job market which encourage increasing numbers of students to study abroad. Increased access to higher education in China in recent years has resulted in an excess of graduates for labour market demand (Li et al. 2008; Morgan and Wu 2014). This has increased competition in the labour market and created additional barriers to finding appropriate jobs for graduates in China. Furthermore, according to Kirpartick and Zang (2011), because of the exam-based education system in China, more local Chinese students are going overseas to study in search of a less exam orientated education. While studying abroad, students also gain additional qualifications and have experiences which may increase their chances of building a career on their return to China (Bamber 2014) compared with graduates from China's home universities (Jiani 2017).

Even though Russia is a relatively new actor in internationalising its higher education through transnational programmes, it has become a significant receiver of Chinese higher education students within the last decade (Ivanov 2013). According to Fang (2012), Russia stands as the fourth largest foreign education provider to China (13.6%) after the United Kingdom (20.8%), Australia (15.9%), and the United States of America (15.9%). During the 2014/2015 academic year, approximately twenty thousand Chinese students studied in the Russian Federation (Arefiev and Sheregui 2016: 46). However, despite growing Sino-Russian educational partnerships and an increase in the number of Chinese international students in Russia, their sojourning experiences remain largely understudied. Our study aims to contribute to this relatively unexplored area by focusing on the reflective accounts of expectations and experiences of Chinese students who have chosen to enroll in a joint

Chinese-Russian educational programme which involves residing in both countries. Specifically we wanted to explore how Chinese students' perceptions of their educational experiences change during the course of their educational experience in Russia. In so doing, we respond to the need for understanding the educational and cultural challenges faced by the growing number of Chinese international students and their experiences in a foreign country such as Russia which is under-researched (Ye and Edwards 2015, Yang 2016).

This article is based on qualitative research of a group of Chinese international students who studied at Vekua University in Russia, from 2013 to 2014.¹ This is a collaborative transnational programme launched by Vekua University and Feimei University in 2011 by the Sino-Russian Institute (SRI),² a joint educational institution. The joint study programme is one of the main models for international higher education collaboration in China (Hou et al. 2014; Weber and Duderstadt 2008). This study has explored how international students reflect on, perceive and interpret their experiences of living and studying in Russia. Through applying a qualitative framework of analysis and conceptualising students' experiences through theoretical insights from Giddens' theory on self and structuration (Giddens 1991) the article considers the role of different socio-cultural conditions and wider contexts in shaping students' behaviour and future plans. Such an approach to the design and analysis allows close attention to be given to the detail and complexity of the students' experience and the influence of socio-cultural factors on their interpretation of these experiences. This

¹ All the names (including the names of the universities in China and Russia) have been changed to protect anonymity.

² The study programme runs as follows. During the first year of their studies, Chinese students remain in China and attend introductory courses in their subject area, which are taught in Chinese; and at the same time, they also have to study Russian intensively. During the spring semester of the students' second academic year, some Vekua University lecturers become involved in the teaching process at SRI; they teach students in specific subject areas (Biology, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Economics, or Law) in Russian. At the next stage of the programme (3rd year), the top Chinese students can choose to study at Vekua University within their chosen subject areas. All SRI graduates can then choose either to study on the master's programme at Vekua University or continue at Feimei University with the master's programme. In other words, an initial year at Feimei University can be followed by two more years of study at Vekua University.

involved taking a longer period of time to recruit and develop trust between the participants and the researchers. The findings from this study will contribute to the understanding of how Sino-Foreign university partnerships can create spaces in which diverse expectations and experiences can be understood and mediated, shown to be important for international higher education institutions.

Previous studies of expectations and experiences of Chinese international students

The increased internationalisation of higher education has led to a growing number of studies on the factors influencing students' decisions to study and live in a foreign country, and their experiences of intercultural adaption while studying overseas (Bodycott 2009; Ignatowicz et al. 2009; Soong 2016). More recently, understanding the experiences of Chinese international students has become an important topic in the field of international education. Some studies exploring the motivations of international Chinese students studying overseas have framed their perceptions in a push-pull model of migration, focusing on the impact of the combination of the main factors influencing students to study abroad (Ahmad and Buchanan 2016; Bodycott 2009; Griner and Sobol 2014; Hung et al. 2000; Lee, 2017; Mazzarol and Soutar 2001). Factors that 'push' students out of their home country relate to poor economic prospects and employment opportunities in China, social-political conditions, the low quality of education, and a lack or limited access to accommodation and funding (Ahmad and Buchanan 2016; Bodycott 2009; Hou et al. 2014). 'Pull' factors drawing students to a particular destination, 'that make another country attractive to students' (Bodycott 2009, pp. 354), include the reputation and level of knowledge about the country and the institution,

safety, immigration and employment prospects, and existing social or professional links in the host country (Ahmad and Buchanan 2016; Bodycott 2009).

Lee (2017), on the motivations of Chinese students studying in Korea, reveals a number of ‘pull’ factors such as: greater scholarship opportunities, low living and tuition costs, the low selectivity of Korean institutions and the critical role parents play in influencing their choice of destination for tertiary study. This is relevant in the context of how cultural and family-related factors affect students’ choices of a particular course or university or country (Bodycott 2009; Tsang 2013), where the expectation of parents on how international education can advance one’s career is significant. As Tsang (2013) states, it is the parents who are making the choice to send their children to study at international institutions with a renowned global reputation, to guarantee their children better migration and employment opportunities upon graduation. According to Chen’s (2017) study on motivations for studying in Canada, there are other macro ‘push’ factors operating in China thereby influencing Chinese students’ choice, including their perceptions of the daunting university entrance exam, the increasing competitive job market conditions in China, and the perceived lack of favourable life chances at home.

In the past decade, there have also been extensive studies on a range of impacts resulting from a shift from elite higher education to mass education for domestic and overseas students, and the increased access to mass higher education. Such impacts are said to play an indirect role in changing the expectations of Chinese students’ overseas study, these include: the rapid expansion of Chinese universities and the effect of this on the country’s economic growth (Hayhoe et al. 2011); the increased social and capital mobility of Chinese international students when they become Australian migrants (Soong 2016); the question of equity and quality of higher education in the West and Asia (Cummings and Santner 2013); and the diversification of curriculum and instruction in China and Japan (Huang 2017). While some

studies have highlighted the positive coping strategies adopted by Chinese students studying and living in unfamiliar social and cultural contexts (Soong et al 2015, Yang 2016, Ye and Edwards 2015), there are other studies that have identified challenges experienced by Chinese students such as gaps in expectations, and learning and teaching styles (Holmes 2004, Rawlings and Sue 2013).

In addition, while most research has explored the experiences of Chinese students studying in Western developed countries, this study specifically focuses on Chinese students who choose to study in Russia. To address this gap in the literature, we investigate the reflective accounts of Chinese students studying in Russia paying attention to how their expectations and experiences of studying abroad change as a result of and during their time in Russia. In this study, we aim to explore how individual students reflect on, interpret and perceive their experiences of continual development and their engagement with diverse socio-cultural conditions.

Exploring socio-cultural contexts to study international students' experiences

This research uses a socio-cultural approach to examine the complexity of people's experiences and the meanings they bring to their experiences. This approach is influenced by theories which emphasise the duality of relationships between social structure and the individual (Giddens 1990). Specifically, the study draws on Giddens' theory of self and structuration which provides a conceptual framework for understanding the relationships between the self and the wider socio-cultural context as dynamic and continuous; these relationships shape, and are reflected in, the changing behaviour of an individual (Giddens 1990). Identity is understood as a dynamic and socially constructed concept which is

constantly in the process of development, 'examination', and 'reformation' (Giddens 1991: 38) in relation to changing socio-cultural contexts. Giddens' emphasis on the reflexive character of identity is important for this study. The main focus is on students' own accounts and interpretations of their experiences rather than the 'push-pull' model of both external and structural factors affecting student motivations to move country. In Giddens' terms, structure 'is not 'external' to individuals: it is present 'as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices' (Giddens 1984: 25); it can also constrain the individual or enable additional opportunities for development. For instance, an existing educational system can put restrictions on the potential development of the self in terms of the choice of institution or subject. At the same time, well-established educational structures can provide additional opportunities, such as moving abroad, as part of the joint study programme.

The 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991) puts greater focus on the individual's interpretations of their experience and permits an exploration of the range of factors and conditions which play a role in shaping the individual's experiences, including cultural, social, psychological, intrinsic, extrinsic, and instrumental factors. Such a concept describes how individuals process unfamiliar external conditions, and thereby learn how to navigate new socio-cultural environments. By applying this approach to the context of international higher education, the study aims to understand the complexity of student experiences of studying abroad, in particular the decision-making process of Chinese students, their reflections and perceptions of studying and living in Russia, and to understand the role of reflexivity within the broader diverse and changing cultural context of higher education.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003), which focused on examining and understanding how Chinese international students interpret, reflect

on and perceive their experiences of studying in Russia. The research was conducted with 20 Chinese male and female students (5 males; 15 females), aged between 20 to 25 years old who were admitted to SRI in 2011 and received financial support from the Chinese government to study at Vekua University. The research participants were recruited from the first group of the 2013/2014 cohort of SRI undergraduate students who were enrolled at Vekua University. This project was part of a larger study conducted by a team of researchers at Vekua University focusing on the image of Russia and Russian education among Chinese students regarding their study experiences, issues related to cultural integration and adaptation in Russia and future plans.

The specific focus of the study – individual interpretations of international university experience – resulted in the choice of in-depth qualitative interviews as the main method of data collection. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were encouraged to discuss their personal stories related to their decisions to study at Vekua and the circumstances in which they first acquired knowledge about Russia or Russian education. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and all information de-identified. The interviews helped to reveal participants' reflections on their decision making process in relation to several aspects of their experiences such as: the perception and choice of Russia as a place of study, life experiences before and during their course of study, and potential career progression after graduation. The informants' narratives and interpretations of events that occurred before and during their time at Vekua University allowed us to better understand the processes surrounding students' decisions.

However, some additional issues related to the interview situation and the subsequent analysis of the data need to be acknowledged. First, we are aware that Chinese participants might be sensitive to the cultural, social background and power relationships between the interviewers and participants. Recent research by Liu et al. (2013) has indicated that Chinese participants

in their study tended to be influenced by who their interviewers are because they want to make sure that they are saying what the interviewers might want to hear. Such pursuit of socially acceptable behaviour or a reluctance to uncover personal problems in order to ‘save face’ was said to be influenced by Confucianism.³ In this sense, the extended period of recruitment helped to establish rapport and encourage disclosure as well as helping to generate further interest in the research.

The choice of Russian as the language of the interview also had implications for methodology. At the time of the interview Chinese students had intermediate proficiency in Russian which made it possible for the researchers to conduct the study in Russian as the interviewers did not speak Chinese. It should be acknowledged that as a result participants had difficulties in articulating longer narratives. The semi-structured nature of the interview helped to deal with this issue by specifying interview themes and directing the interview. The interviewers were instructed to encourage participants to talk freely and choose the direction of the conversation. By using the semi-structured method, we wanted to avoid getting into formal question-answer situations and tried to build conversation. On some occasions, prompts were important to ease conversation, clarify the meaning, and help with articulating longer thoughts in Russian, which were difficult for some participants.

To overcome some of these methodological challenges, we adopted several strategies to overcome the challenges in relation to the participants’ recruitment, choice of interviewers, and interviewing style. These are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Conducting research with international students: recruiting the participants

³ China is one of the countries that is influenced by Confucian philosophical principles, which emphasize ‘proper human relationships as the basis of society’ (Yum 1988: 377). These principles form the basis of the Chinese value system which is broadly focused on humanism, faithfulness, propriety, and wisdom. (Yum 1988: 377) These principles reveal themselves in communication practices within East Asian cultures with greater emphasis on reciprocity, long-term relationships, respect for authorities and elders, and values of collectivism (Park and Lunt: 2015). Park and Lunt (2015) also note that ‘western’ cultural roots of the research methods can increase tensions within cross-cultural study contexts involving Asian students.

Negotiating access to research participants is paramount for qualitative studies and has additional implications within cross-cultural contexts due to insider/outsider dynamics that continuously affect the interactions taking place between the researcher and the participants (Shah 2014: 556-564). In our study there were several issues that restricted both the physical and social access to our potential research participants. First, all Chinese students were housed on the same floor in the hall of residence and thus were clustered together when carrying out their daily routines. Secondly, the SRI timetable did not overlap with domestic study programmes. As a result, despite living and studying within the same area and in the same buildings, the existing spatial and structural distinctions placed limitations on potential informal interaction with other Vekua students and restricted further opportunities for inter-cultural communication and cultural exchange.

To overcome this problem, the decision was made to commit to a longer period of recruitment in order to gain participants' trust and become a 'familiar face' within the group (Ganga and Scott 2006: 33). At the beginning of the project, final year female sociology students at Vekua, who were recruited to the project as interviewers acted as student ambassadors, helping the Chinese students get to know university life and their surroundings, and assisted them in getting around on and off campus (see the following section for details). The Chinese students were briefed about the study at that time, but no formal recruitment took place. Once relatively close and friendly relationships had been established between the ambassadors and the Chinese students, a special inter-cultural informal event 'An evening of Russian-Chinese food' was organised at the Chinese students' hall of residence. The event, focused on introducing cultural traditions of the two countries, brought together a group of students and was aimed at easing relationships between the Chinese and Russian students. This was followed by another meeting with Chinese students in which they could ask questions about

different aspects of life in Russia. At the end of the meeting 13 students volunteered to participate in the study.

Establishing informal relationships with the Chinese participants overtime gave the Chinese students more confidence to approach the research team, and share their thoughts openly about their studies and experiences in Russia. These accounts were essential in helping to generate key themes for the interview schedule. Furthermore, when students got involved in the study, more participants showed increased interest in the conversations and, as a result, assisted in recruiting other students to the study. This, however, resulted in a smaller number of male students, as women tended to invite other women into the study (5 males vs 15 females).

Collecting and Analysing Data: students interviewing students

The interviews were conducted by two research assistants who were final year female sociology students at the same university. Normally, sociology students at Vekua choose to work on a particular project under the supervision of a Project Investigator for their annual course papers and final year dissertation. The sociology students who assisted with this project also used it in their final year dissertation. All ethical procedures were overseen by the first author who supervised the students and managed the project.

The practice of students interviewing other students also proved to be effective in other studies of international students abroad. For instance, the qualitative study of students from Hong-Kong coming to study at Aston University (UK) emphasised the positive value of this approach; it enabled the interviewees to open up and be more relaxed in sharing their experiences with fellow students, some of whom also had a foreign background. Furthermore, the interviewing experience provided opportunities for mutual inter-cultural exchange and

reflexivity (Ignatowicz et al. 2009) which expanded and enriched the collected data. Such qualitative student-focused interviews reveal an additional level of reflexivity which was a valuable source in previous research in the higher education context (Soong et al. 2015).

The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, in accordance with the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). The names of the participants were removed and a number was assigned to each interview (R1 stands for “Respondent 1”). The first stage of the analysis identified particular situations, events and sequences of events within each interview that were meaningful to the respondent. Accordingly, the range of informant expectations about their course in Russia at different stages of the respondents’ life were determined and analysed. During the next stage of the analysis, we looked for consistent and repeated episodes in the interview narrative using the principles of reconstructive analysis. This allowed us to see how a respondent made choices between study alternatives. Common themes identified in the narrative were verified and cross referenced with quotations from the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). The multi-staged analysis allowed us to explore students’ explanations of their decisions before and during their studies in Russia.

Findings

The findings of the study are structured around three key themes. The first theme is the students’ experiences of choosing the university and the related discussion of other factors and circumstances that could have influenced their choice. The second theme is the students’ experiences of their studies at the time of the interview. The third theme is students’ discussions of their future plans.

The reasons for choosing SRI: ‘accidental’ factors and third party recommendations

Despite the variety of themes expressed by the Chinese students, there is a common thread running through their stories shaping their decisions to study in Russia. The specificity of the

Chinese education system means that the educational path of many Chinese students was predetermined in high school when students had to choose between studying the humanities or the natural sciences. Students had to take a set of specified subjects which they had to study for to pass the National Entrance Examination known as *Gaokao* or ‘高考’ at the end of their high school years. Such an academic track not only restricts the students’ later selection of majors at university; *Gaokao* is considered to be one of the most stressful standardised national examination systems in the world (Kirkpatrick and Zang 2011). This was reflected in some of the interviews:

In high school we can choose between two directions of study: humanities and natural sciences. The high school finishing exam is very, very difficult. So, no one changes their chosen field. Because it would be very difficult to pass it. It’s high risk ... So when going to university everyone chooses the same field they studied in school. Some people change it, but that’s very rare, because it’s too difficult to study one set of subjects at school and then change to a completely different set of subjects at university. (R.1)

In some Chinese provinces, entrants must send their applications to the universities before knowing the results of *Gaokao*. They can evaluate their scores only tentatively to work out whether they might be given a place at their desired university. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation is created by the gap between decentralised admissions, the quota policy and the centralised entrance examination. This combination affects not only the number but also the kind of opportunities students from different geographical origins might have (Liu 2015). The interviewees’ responses confirm this:

The end of school exam is very important. The results define where one will be studying so it’s very important to get a good mark... But when we choose a university

we don't know our results yet. We can guess the results because the correct answers get published online after the exam. If we remember our answers, we can calculate our marks. So we have to choose universities before we know the official results. It's not good. Some people want to get into one university, choose it and then have to study somewhere else because they didn't get high enough marks. (R.6, finished school in the northern province)

We live in the south of China, but [R.6] in the north. We get our results and then choose a university. School graduates from the northern provinces have to guess their marks and work out their chances. They choose the university, and only after that do they find out their results. That's bad! I think it's really bad! [R.8, finished school in the southern province]

Not only is the period of admissions to higher educational institutions strictly time-limited, entry to some elite universities is often very competitive and uncertain. In such circumstances it is likely that a student may be refused admission to an elite university, and be accepted by a second or third tier university or be forced to choose a less popular major. Applicants who fail to meet the minimum criteria, or 'cut-off' point, for entry to their choice of universities within the province (Liu 2015) must choose either to study at an allocated university, undertake a major to which they have been allocated, or re-sit *Gaokao* by attending one more year of high school and try to enter the university the next year:

At first I did not select Feimei University, but, unfortunately, I didn't gain admission to any other institution. Then I decided to study economics at Feimei University, but did not get into that either. Then I chose mathematics. I did not want to. I can return to school, but if I do so, I will have to spend one more year there. That is too long. (R.14)

These circumstances illuminate why the majority of participants revealed that their decision to study at Feimei University had occurred very much ‘by accident’. The pressure to ‘get somewhere’ is immense, students want to get into any university, which may not necessarily be their university of choice:

When I finished my school exams I didn’t know what to study, so eventually I chose this university. In the beginning I wanted to specialise in Russian language, but I didn’t have high enough marks to enroll on this programme at this university. So I chose economics ... for many reasons, I can’t say exactly why. I just checked my exam results and the required entry points at university and so decided this way.

(R.10)

Based on this, it can be argued that for these students their choice of institution very much depended on external conditions, which were beyond the students’ control, leading to a more unpredictable future. Importantly, an understanding of and a reflection on why this particular university and subject was chosen occurred later, in our case, it happened when students had already started studying in Russia. In other words, the arrival in Russia and the experience of studying there encouraged students to be self-reflexive and then to relate this to the explanation of their choices (even though on many occasions the opportunities for making that choice were very limited at the time).

In most of the informants’ narratives there was also a ‘third person’ who initiated the action or had authority and gave influential advice to the young person at the point of uncertainty. When the informants talked about their choice of a Russian education they mentioned that it often was influenced by the advice or at the insistence of parents, relatives, or teachers. This limited degree of freedom that most Chinese students experience after high school, and the weight of traditional values of ‘Confucianism’ such as listening to authorities accounts for the presence and influences of a ‘third party’ voice within the decision-making process.

According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2001), recommendations from parents often have a strong influence, and for the Chinese informants, parental advice was an important factor leading to study in Russia. Students repeatedly mentioned being influenced by the opinion of an authority figure:

In China, the director of our Institute [SRI] told us to study in Russia ... there are many benefits. In addition, parents and friends told me that it is beneficial. And on TV ... when I watched the news, I learned that studying in Russia is very good. (R.20)

Some informants mentioned the funding from the host university as a great opportunity, and one key reason for continuing their education in Russia.⁴ In particular, state funding of education in Russian universities is mentioned as the most important economic factor: ‘We came here: the state supports us, and if it were another country, it would be necessary to spend my own money. This is the main reason. There was an opportunity, so I came.’ (R.9)

Discussing students’ experiences of studying at SRI

Culture is an important factor in shaping the country’s education system (Samovar et al. 2007). Through socialisation, the educational system is one of the main socio-cultural domains which shapes the students’ process of becoming and sense of self (Ye and Edwards 2015). According to Giddens (1991), such a process is not confined to the internal sphere, it is also socially and culturally produced; one which is constitutive of the social and psychological awareness of possible trajectories of life.

For Giddens (1991), within the globalized socio-economic context, all of us are leading local lives. Giddens (1991) insists that as ‘reflexive project of the self’ we are constantly involved

⁴ Importantly, the participants in this study represented a specific group of state-funded Chinese overseas students.

in negotiation of presented opportunities and risks to develop our self-identity – the process that results in continuous change of the individual self and wider social context. Our interviews revealed an interesting shift in students' narratives with regard to their choice of Russia and subsequent experience of studying there. Due to the influence of the 'accidental' external factors discussed above, most informants did not anticipate that they would start learning Russian and go to Russia; the aim was to get a place at any university and their arrival in Russia was ascribed to luck or an 'accident'. However, once at the university, their expectations and plans began to take shape and students started to reflect on their own contribution to their current situation and potential future opportunities. As one of the students put it 'Then I thought that I could go abroad because, frankly, it did not matter which country. I want to learn a foreign language, and studying in another country is good'. (R.18) Later in the interview this student revealed that within a short period of time she realised she would gain 'the experience of living and studying abroad' and that would also be quite valuable for her.

With the rise of the middle and the upper classes in Chinese society, an increasing number of families consider sending their children to study in developed countries (Rawlings and Sue 2013). For the participants in the study, however, most of them came from rural areas and were not financially secure. Some research has shown that among less wealthy families there is a preconceived idea that those who cannot attend a prestigious Chinese university, will choose to study in Russia rather than other international education providers (eg. Ivanov 2013: 42). Many of the 20 participants viewed studying at SRI as a unique opportunity to see the world, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to acquire new knowledge and experiences that still remains an expensive option for many families. As one interviewee stated: 'When I was choosing a university... Feimei University can give us a chance to study abroad. Study abroad for us is... very expensive!' (R.5)

Other participants were more pragmatic and focused not on the process of studying abroad but on obtaining a ‘diploma from a foreign university’. First, this attainment was thought to guarantee successful employment in the near future. In 2014, the Chinese Ministry of Education published an updated list of international diplomas recognised in China. Ranked third in the list, after the United States and Japan, 542 Russian universities were recognised (Rossiyskaya Gazeta 2014). Second, from a long-term perspective, education is perceived as a social elevator increasing social mobility (Yue 2015). Global economic development has made knowledge of foreign languages a highly desirable competency in the labour market. Some Chinese students showed genuine interest in studying Russian. Therefore, as one participant put it, ‘being among native speakers is helpful’. This expectation appeared in the narratives of informants who were aware of the need to practice their Russian to increase their competitiveness in the labour market. Students referred to potential future expectations from employers and structural requirements to know Russian:

My parents often say that there is collaboration between China and Russia, there is business. I knew that in China very few people study Russian language, so it is easier to find a job. I think that studying Russian language is good for me. (R.6)

The informants demonstrated that they viewed Feimei University as a university that provides a good knowledge of the Russian language, and students therefore expected that they would become proficient in Russian: ‘I knew that Feimei University had a teacher who is very famous. He has travelled a lot in Russia. I really wanted to learn from him.’ (R.19)

The informants also expected to receive a quality education in a specific major in Russia, which is highly valued by Chinese students, who are looking to gain excellent skills and knowledge, primarily in the fields of engineering and science.

When I decided to apply to this university, my parents told me that besides learning a foreign language, which I loved [...], at this institution I could study for a particular major, which is also very good in China. It is very easy to find a job after attending this university, so I applied to it. (R.8)

To summarise, the interviews show that when students describe their decision-making process prior to their arrival in Russia they tend to describe their choice of university in terms of ‘accidental’ factors. All informants, independently or with the help of ‘third parties’, planned to take a higher education degree, as evidenced by their decision to prepare for *Gaokao* in high school. The unwillingness to abandon this path led to a relatively random decision, independent of the applicant's preferences: the choice to enter SRI at Feimei University. Arrival in Russia appeared to be a turning point which stimulated a further revision of life plans. It became apparent in the interviews that the choice of Vekua came to be presented as their own, or there was greater focus on the skills and knowledge the programme offered, along with related career opportunities. In this sense, the educational path ‘prescribed’ by the structural conditions in China was replaced by one more open to varied individual responses with regard to the student's life plans. A ‘reflective self’ began to emerge when they talked about their current experiences in Russia even though they have ‘internalised’ how their experiences of *Gaokao* have impacted their educational path back in China.

Students’ future plans and the influence of the international education context

Once students had entered SRI, they reassessed the events that had taken place, becoming more aware of their competitive advantages and the wider range of future opportunities. As students discussed the educational programme itself and the active involvement of professors from Vekua University in the educational process, they emphasised the importance of

learning Russian, the value of studying in Russia, and the advantage of obtaining a high quality education in a particular major. At this stage, students spoke of individual preferences playing a greater role and they acknowledged variety of their choices.

At the time of the interview, informants had been living in Russia for more than six months and presumably had become more autonomous in their decision-making. They had experienced living independently, away from home, had begun to learn about Russia and its people, and had coped with the requirements of a new academic and cultural environment. While abroad and geographically detached from home, friends and families, students had greater exposure to alternative life paths and previously unknown avenues to development.

At that time I probably thought that I had to continue my postgraduate study in China: good conditions, lower risks. But when I came here, I realised that I have many choices and options: to continue my studies in China, or just to work, but then if I decide, I can continue to study at a university there or abroad. (R.1)

Interestingly, when talking about their life plans informants did not use the same language. The described trajectories differed, so this variability made each ‘story of the future’ unique. The dominance in the narratives of the pronoun ‘I’, the verbs used to express their own desires (‘I want’, ‘I love’), and the absence of the restricting ‘must’, strengthened the arguments for planned action. The mention of external conditions influencing their decisions (following the instructions of a ‘third party’, reconciling oneself to circumstances) became less frequent, showing the narrative of self is even more present in the interviews when they talk about their future.

This variability was manifested primarily in the informants’ discussions about their future educational trajectories. Obtaining a bachelor’s degree was deemed a necessity, predetermined by earlier stages of life, whereas graduate study was not so inevitable. The

discovery of previously unknown alternatives revealed that there are a variety of paths to success. For example, those who wanted to pursue a master's degree can study not only at Chinese universities but also in Russia or other countries. Another alternative is employment without any further study, although the idea of obtaining a master's degree or a PhD was also attractive.

Each informant started to recognize education in Russia as a new impetus for self-development. Their self-confidence had been boosted by language proficiency, a deeper knowledge of their particular majors, and experiences in living independently in another country, interacting with Russian students and learning about Russian culture. The knowledge obtained at Vekua University appeared to create new opportunities for work in different cities and countries.

I want to work either in China or in the U.S. as a biologist, as a scientist! Here [at Vekua University] biology is very strong, but it is not developing very quickly, and in the U.S. it is developing very rapidly. (R.4)

In sum, Chinese students who have become accustomed to the intense pressure of sitting for examinations were presented with opportunities to become more independent in the planning of their own future. International education, including a year abroad, towards the end of the interview was principally perceived as an experience that opened future options, opportunities and trajectories. In this context, a joint education programme was seen as an opportunity to develop one's potential and students showed more willingness to take charge of their decisions with regards to their future career.

Discussion

This article has explored the reflective accounts of Chinese students enrolled in an international study programme in Russia in relation to different stages of their educational path, particularly deciding to study in Russia, their current experience of studying in Russia and their future career plans and expectations.

Giddens' (1990) framework allowed the identification of key points which illustrate shifts in the accounts of students' experiences, before and after their arrival in Russia, where students were exposed to unfamiliar cultural and educational contexts. These new contexts challenged their understanding of what it meant to be a university student and encouraged participants to adapt to different (Westernised) ways of studying in Russia. In addition, Giddens' theory of structuration (1991) provided an analytical framework for analysing the students' interpretations of their educational experiences in terms of a 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991: 32). This showed how students' self-identities have been shaped by, and in relation to, changing structural and cultural conditions, and how their own contributions and decisions became more articulated. The extended period of recruitment and the informal interactions with participants before and during the study enabled students to open up and facilitated conditions for more in-depth reflexivity and self-analysis.

Overall, the interview data revealed that there were differences in the ways students described their experiences before arriving in Russia and how they made their choice and saw their current and future lives. The situations described by the respondents entering SRI portrayed a typical scenario constructed by the competitiveness of China's education system. Most students were not considering studying at Vekua when they applied to Feimei. Their admission to SRI was retrospectively perceived as an 'accidental' event. Also, informants mentioned the advice they received from parents or other figures of authority during the stressful period they experienced after they had applied to higher educational institutions. At this time of uncertainty and unpredictability, when they needed to select a university in a

short span of time, the respondents were influenced by those ‘third parties’ so it seemed that their individual contribution in the decision-making process was minimal. At the same time, studying in Russia gradually became a personalised experience and the benefits became individual preferences, which were further reflected in students’ accounts about the future plans.

Although the analysis of this article is based on a small-scale qualitative study conducted in Russia, the findings will be useful for the wider international community of higher education providers working with East Asian students, specifically from China. The processes identified in the article highlight the complex set of relationships between identity, individual experiences and socio-cultural contexts. Similar to Chinese PhD students in the UK described in Ye and Edwards (2015), studying abroad increases students’ sense of self-autonomy and makes them more adaptable to the changing conditions of the international educational environment. In this sense, one should approach Chinese students as a diverse group that exhibit variability in their individual experiences of international education and future career work trajectories.

Conclusion

This paper explores the transitioning process of international Chinese undergraduate students studying in Russia. While the findings of the international Chinese respondents may not necessarily align to the ways in which it represents the general international Chinese student population studying overseas, it is still possible for some groups of the international students to experience self-redefinition at various stages of their sojourn even when they might perceive their fluctuating expectations and trajectories as ‘accidental’.

One of the implications of the SRI programme is that it can be used as a foundation for similar strategic partnerships within international education. In this context, future international partnerships between universities can take into account, and generally be more sensitive to, the specificity of the education system and the demands of the labour market in both countries (i.e. both the education provider and the receiver). For instance, the recent expansion of higher education provisions in China and the subsequent increase of the number of the graduates (Yang 2000) has created extra pressures in the job market; and, this has encouraged more students to continue their education abroad to increase their chances of finding employment. International partnerships could develop programmes that provide training in the subjects/skills that are lacking within bachelor degrees in China.

The ‘random choice’ of university shown by our study also indicates that more effort could be put in place to design a study programme that would prepare students to compete on both regional and international labour markets as many of them develop confidence in developing their career during their studying not before. As our study has shown even though international students were located in the same accommodation hall, greater effort is still needed to bring the domestic and international students together. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the contributions of our local student interviewers to create a positive atmosphere and the possibilities for intercultural exchange over time. Importantly, as was demonstrated by our study, integrating informal cultural events and activities into the recruitment process can be used as an effective methodological tool within similar intercultural studies of the context of international higher education. The joint cultural events and food festivals provide opportunities for informal interactions between home and international students to grow which facilitate self-autonomy and adaptability and thus, create conditions that bring relevant contexts for interviewing into focus (Mason, 2017: 110).

Finally, by offering Chinese students a chance to have their voices heard, we are able to appreciate the nuances and complexities of their experiences in Russia which have potential implications for host institutions in Russia and elsewhere. In order to ensure high-quality joint programmes between Chinese and Western universities, more is expected from the host universities to develop culturally sensitive ways of teaching delivery. Universities need to pay closer attention to fostering a nurturing learning environment by seeing their actions from the students' perspectives. Given that most international students are unfamiliar with the pedagogical practices of the host university, it is important for host academics to understand the cultural specifics and the students' established ways of learning that they have been exposed to in their home countries. In the long run, if the host university community can accommodate cultural differences, they will potentially provide international students new opportunities to maintain a heightened 'robust' sense of self-identity (Giddens 1991: 55) and a deeper understanding of and respect for one another.

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