

# Chinese Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Learning: The Role of Language and Culture in a Short-term Public Health Study Abroad Program

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## Introduction

Due to globalization, the demand for cross-cultural experiences for healthcare professionals is on the rise (Drain, Primack, Hunt, Fawzi, Holmes, and Gardner 2007). Recently, short-term education abroad programs in the U.S. are becoming increasingly popular for Chinese students (Huang et al. 2018; Powell and Biederman 2017). Powell and Biederman (2017) mentioned several benefits of study abroad, such as improvement in language skills and cultural immersion. Powell and Biederman (2017) also argued that study abroad programs enhance global learning, global awareness, civic engagement, and positively impact personal development, social intelligence, and future career prospects of the participating students.

In the past two decades, many studies have focused on the experiences of international students and the challenges they face at foreign campuses (Ackers 1997; Andrade 2006; Constantine, Okazaki, and Utsey 2004; Lewthwaite 1996; Myles and Cheng 2003; Sawir et al. 2008; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010). These studies demonstrate that international students experience considerable pressure to navigate new systems, learn a new language, and create social and academic networks, reflecting the prominence of globalization and neoliberalism in international education (Altbach and Teichler 2001; Altbach and Knight 2007). In the past few years, the number of Chinese undergraduate students in short term study abroad programs have substantially increased, especially in the field of public health (Huang et al. 2018; Powell and Biederman 2017). However, little is known about the experiences of Chinese students in short-term study abroad programs in the U.S., especially in the field of healthcare (Mapp 2012). In this study, we sought to develop a deeper understanding of the learning and development needs of Chinese undergraduate students who participated in a short-term study abroad program in the field of public health at an American university.

## Theoretical Framework

We sought to move beyond the adjustment and neo-liberal perspectives that have been used to conceptualize the experiences of international students, especially Chinese students. For this reason, Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow 1991; Taylor and Cranton 2012; Savicki 2008) was used to help define how participants perceived and made sense of the experiences and activities in which they were engaged while at their host institution. In experiences we include academic, professional, social, and cultural aspects of their lives during this study abroad program. This theory allowed us to interpret participants' descriptions of their experiences through what Mezirow (1991) refers to as meaning perspectives. The overall research question pursued in this study was: How do Chinese undergraduate students perceive, understand, and make sense of their experiences in a short-term study abroad program in the field of public health?

## **Research Design**

This paper is a part of a large study which explored the experiences of Chinese undergraduate students from East China Medical University who participated in a short-term study abroad program in public health and nursing at an American Midwestern University. The first half of the eight-week long programs consisted of four weeks of classes on learning English and American culture and academic lectures on healthcare topics. The second four weeks consisted of shadowing in hospitals and the county health department and making professional visits to local public health and health care-related organizations. A group of 15 undergraduate students from the public health field aging between 18-21 years old participated in this program. A qualitative study design was used to study how individuals and the group as a whole perceived and made sense of their experiences in this program. Data collection included semi-structured interviews of six participants and a focus group interview at the end the program. Since reflection is central to the meaning making process in Transformative Learning Theory, each student was requested to write a reflection paper in English. Students also kept a journal during the program, in which they used their native language, Chinese, for more precise recording of their thoughts and experiences. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

## **Findings**

In this study, we found that learning was not confined to academic content or settings, but the participants wanted to learn and explore foreign culture and language to develop themselves as global professionals. Chinese undergraduate students perceived this experience as an opportunity to develop their global professional identity. The most important learning goals were learning English, especially spoken English, and learning about the American healthcare system and the differences between Chinese and American policies and practices. The meaning making process of our participants was of a comparative nature, through constant reflection. Most participants mentioned experiencing culture shock, but they denied any change in their behaviors as a result of cultural learning. However, in reflection papers, they mentioned a significant shift in their approach to their field and future career plans. Overall, we found learning cross-cultural competencies and developing themselves as global professionals were really important goals for our participants. Often professional and technical knowledge building takes precedence as the main component of international study abroad programs and the cultural learning aspect is not formally included in the curriculum. So, it is important to create opportunities for learning the foreign language and culture alongside delivering technical content in study abroad programs to develop well rounded global professionals.

## **Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education**

Most researchers in the field of international higher education have focused on degree seeking students' experience and the neo-liberal perspective to explain these international experiences. Also, in study abroad literature often the focus is on American students studying in foreign countries. This study focuses on incoming Chinese undergraduate students in America and provides some insights about short-term, non-degree learning experiences at an American campus. This study confirms some of the previous findings in the research about Chinese students' study abroad experiences, particularly their struggle with English language and its impact on their overall experience. This study adds to our understanding of global professional identity development and the significance of cultural learning, by which we mean learning about academic, professional, and social culture and language in short term study abroad programs.

Findings from this study can be helpful for administrators and faculty members to plan and organize short-term study abroad programs from a holistic perspective by equally focusing on cultural learning and professional training.

This study also pushes the current focus of the field of study abroad from the cultural shock and adjustment paradigm to critically thinking about larger questions about learning and the nature of cross-cultural learning experiences from students' perspectives. Future research in the field should focus on questions such as, what constitutes learning in a cross-cultural environment from students' perspectives? What does transformative learning mean in an international setting? And, how can we assess these transformative learning experiences.

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