Academic Adaptation of Chinese Postgraduate Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the number of Chinese applicants seeking admission to Malaysian tertiary education institutions, particularly for postgraduate programmes. This trend can be attributed to the favourable policies implemented by the Malaysian government. For Chinese students themselves, the prior task of studying abroad is to achieve their educational goals, which is challenging for them to study in an unfamiliar educational context. This study aims to explore Chinese postgraduate students' academic adaptation to Malaysian research-oriented universities that provide qualified postgraduate programmes. Using qualitative methods, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 Chinese postgraduate students studying in five Malaysian public universities. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data collected. The study's findings unveiled the various factors affecting Chinese postgraduate students' academic adaptation throughout their postgraduate tenure, encompassing language ability, supervisor-supervisee relationship, pedagogic differences, academic support and emotional support. In addition, the study also highlighted the strategies that Chinese postgraduate students employed to embrace these challenges. The implications of the findings are expected to help Chinese postgraduate students develop effective strategies and programs to facilitate their academic adaptation in Malaysia. Further to this, these findings can offer recommendations to higher education institutions on how to collaborate effectively with Chinese students.

Keywords: *Academic adaptation, Chinese postgraduate students, Malaysian universities, challenges, strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

With the progress of globalisation, mobility of students and academics has become common through knowledge transfer, cooperation and competition between educational institutions (Bedenlier et al., 2018). According to figures issued by UNESCO on its official website UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2023, the number of international students pursuing higher education abroad has exceeded 6.4 million. Nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Canada, and France are well-recognized as preferred destinations for international students. In relation to the origins of these international students, Asian countries export a significant proportion. China notably stands out as the largest contributor, accounting for approximately 33% of the global international student population. Hence, based on the data provided by UNESCO, it is evident that Chinese international students constitute the largest demographic group in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Aside from the abovementioned preferred countries, some others have also been the top choice by Chinese international students in recent years. The Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad (2015) No.4 pointed out that countries like Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have emerged as favoured destinations for international students. According to the data provided by Education Malaysia

Global Services (EMGS), it can be confirmed that this is indeed the situation. The Malaysian government has established an objective, as outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), to augment the enrolment figures in higher education. This amassed a total of 2.5 million students, which would constitute 70% of the higher education population. Additionally, the target includes accommodating 250,000 foreign students in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs).

This friendly policy encourages the rise of higher education applicants. Other reasons that contribute to the attraction of applications are its relatively low tuition fee, affordable cost of living, high academic standard and excellent facilities of universities and university rankings (Abduh & Dahari, 2011; Nachatar et al., 2014; Singh, 2016). Subsequently, the number of applicants applying for Malaysian tertiary education increases annually as well. From the data released by EMGS from 1st April to 30th June 2023, it received 12,665 applications and witnessed a 33% increase compared to the same period in 2022. An interesting fact is that, among these applications, 4700 of them are from China, accounting for the largest proportion of applicants and three times more than the second one, which is Bangladesh. In addition, 2920 and 2895 applicants had applied for Master's degree and PhD programmes, respectively, amounting to 42% of the total applicants.

Situated in a new environment, international students may encounter numerous challenges. For example, Ching et al. (2017) posited that Chinese international students' adaptation in the United States was affected by variables such as cultural distance, cultural shock, language barrier, classroom transition, social support, et cetera. Brunsting et al. (2018) systematically reviewed the article investigating the psychological adjustment of undergraduate international students studying in the United States. Age, gender, belonging or social support, acculturation strategy, English ability and racial discrimination were identified as predictors of international students' well-being. Meanwhile, Ahrari et al. (2019) discovered in their study that many international students in Malaysia can uphold their cultural practices while fostering favourable connections with the local population. However, certain individuals experienced instances of prejudice and discrimination and encountered challenges in effectively interacting with their peers as a result of their limited proficiency in the English language. If international students can overcome challenges, they might adapt well to the new milieu. Otherwise, negative consequences might occur (Zhao et al., 2023).

As the largest proportion of international students, several studies have been conducted in the aforementioned popular countries to explore Chinese international students' cross-cultural adaptation, acculturation or adjustment. Nevertheless, the existing body of research on Chinese international students in Malaysia, particularly Chinese postgraduate students, is somewhat sparse. Through an examination of several databases, only four specific studies delved into the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in Malaysia, and all of them were conducted in one university, which potentially affected the results' representative (Zhao et al., 2023). Furthermore, none of these studies specifically investigate Chinese international students' academic adaptation, which is considered a crucial undertaking throughout their studies in Malaysia.

Henceforth, this study focuses on investigating the academic adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students. On the one hand, the increasing number of Chinese postgraduate applications and enrolments demands attention, as there is a dearth of research specifically examining this significant international student population. On the other hand, compared to undergraduate education, postgraduate education necessitates students to possess advanced language skills, research abilities, in-depth knowledge, et cetera. Thus, Chinese postgraduate

students may face more challenges when they study in Malaysia. Given such situations, this study aims to examine Chinese postgraduate students' academic adaptation in Malaysian universities with 2 research objectives: (1) to explore the factors affecting Chinese postgraduate students' academic adaptation during their studies in Malaysia and (2) to probe ways or strategies employed to navigate and address these factors. In response to these research objectives, two research questions are proposed: (1) what factors affect Chinese postgraduate students' academics during their studies in Malaysia? and (2) how do Chinese postgraduate students navigate and address these factors?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Adaptation

International students may undergo "academic shock" when transitioning into a new educational context that differs greatly from their prior experience (Sovic, 2008). Researchers have studied the process and outcome of international students adapting to a new educational environment and have provided their interpretations using the terms "academic adaptation", "academic adjustment", or "academic acculturation". Zhu (2016) explained the difference between adaptation, adjustment and acculturation in her book. The terms adaptation, adjustment and acculturation are employed in different disciplines, namely biology, psychology, and anthropology. Furthermore, they concern individuals' changes at dissimilar levels. Acculturation centred on changes made at the group level, meaning that groups of people contact other groups with distinct cultural backgrounds and then change their original cultural patterns. Meanwhile, adaptation and adjustment focus on the changes made at the individual level. The main difference between them lies in the length of stay, meaning that adaptation depicts the changes of long-term residents, such as immigrants, while adjustment studies the changes of short-term residents, such as international students. Zhu further posited the term "academic adjustment" to depict Chinese students' learning experiences and changes in German because they spent only a temporary period there. Liu et al. (2022) also adopted academic adjustment to describe the process of international students adapting to a new educational context, including academic progress and acquiring the regulations of host culture.

Though Zhu explained the differences between these three terms, scholars such as Xing and Bolden (2019) still explained the academic acculturation of international students as a dynamic psychological process involving interaction between academic and non-academic experiences. Judging from this interpretation, the term acculturation is applied to more than just the anthropology discipline. Other scholars did not offer their definition of academic acculturation but applied an acculturation model to examine the process. For example, Wang and Bai (2020) adopted Ward's acculturation model to examine Chinese students' academic acculturation in Australia. Wang and Räihä (2021) employed Berry's acculturation model in Finland to specifically examine Chinese doctoral students' academic performance. Likewise, academic adaptation was once interpreted by Park (2016) as "the process of appreciation and acquisition of the target culture in academic situations". It can also be viewed as "a process and result of students adapting to the educational environment and involving the system of interpersonal relations in education, educational activities and education space" (Shamionov et al., 2020). Their interpretations of the process involve socio-cultural and academic perspectives.

It is evident that some scholars did not explain these terms based on individual or group level and the length of stay, but different models were used to guide their research or interpret the process based on their research. Kim (2001) once suggested in her book that no matter how long sojourners stay in the new cultural environment, they experience the process of cross-cultural adaptation, involving challenges caused by the new milieu and a certain degree of new cultural learning and modification in their original cultural patterns. This study adopted the term "academic adaptation" to describe the process of Chinese overseas students adapting to the new educational context.

Factors

There are multiple factors that influence Chinese overseas students' academic adaptation. Shanshan et al. (2023) systematically reviewed studies in the past decade and identified related factors, mainly comprehension of language proficiency, pedagogical differences, social support, et cetera. Firstly, language proficiency is a commonly mentioned factor, including English and local language proficiency. Chinese students studying in Canada and the United States admitted their limited spoken English capacity, English proficiency, course readiness and knowledge of American culture as challenges which affect their academic success overseas or even their psychological condition (Li et al.*,* 2018; Chen & Bang, 2020; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Studies conducted in Belgium proved that English proficiency affected students' academic adaptation (Cao & Meng, 2017); English or local language proficiency even brought Chinese students a higher level of global competence to better socio-cultural and academic adaptation (Meng et al., 2018). An interesting fact is that the issue of language proficiency also appears at higher education levels. Chinese PhD candidates studying in Finland also reported oral English as a challenge (Wang & Räihä, 2021). As Liu et al. 's study (2022) suggested, language barriers seemed to be a long-standing obstacle.

Secondly, pedagogical differences are normally reflected in teaching and learning styles, assessment and intellectual background (Shanshan et al., 2023). The Chinese teaching method was didactic, structured, textbook-and test-based. Most Chinese students were passive learners. However, the teaching method may be different in Western countries, and it stresses dialogic knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, and open-ended and autonomous learning. What's more, the Chinese education system placed a strong emphasis on test scores. Chinese students may not feel pressure during the non-exam period but great pressure during exam week. Meanwhile, in Western countries, lecturers may adopt individual or group presentations, essays and so forth (Wang & Bai, 2020). Another obvious difference was reflected in teacher-student relations. Chinese students expected more explicit supervision, but supervisors wished students to develop self-motivated learning (Wang & Räihä, 2021). Based on these academic differences, Chinese students were supposed to learn the mechanism and change their mindset to accept the host educational system and to avoid cheating and plagiarism; in other words, to cultivate ethical integrity (Jian et al., 2018). In addition, students' insufficiency of interdisciplinary knowledge, knowledge of disciplines, unfamiliarity with major subject knowledge, et cetera. were taken as intellectual background factors affecting Chinese students' study abroad (Zhu, 2016).

Thirdly, when Chinese students experienced challenges in language and pedagogy, they reported their need for social support. Chinese students with social support from host institutions, co-nationals and other international students experienced fewer challenges in terms of psychological and academic adaptation (Yu et al., 2019). Both Pang (2020) and Forbush and Foucault-Welles's (2016) studies proved that social support from the host and

home social networking sites and diverse networks promote Chinese students' academic and psychological adaptation. Aside from these three main factors, Zhu (2016) also identified academic support, intercultural communication with peers, part-time jobs, open attitude and extrovert personality as factors in academic adaptation.

Strategies

To cope with language challenges, Chinese students were found to sign up for English training programs to obtain good scores in IELTS and TOFEL and participated in language preparation programs taught by native English speakers to enhance their motivation and prepare for their overseas studies (Chen & Bang, 2020). Moreover, when they met learning difficulties, they sought external help and made internal changes. For example, Chinese students studying in Germany and Finland sought help from group members and online communities (Li, 2019). Nevertheless, there were also other students who preferred to rely on and cope with issues themselves by developing self-improvement, self-motivation and self-worth (Li et al., 2018). Likewise, postgraduate students who are more mature and capable of dealing with academic challenges, such as Chinese PhD candidates in Finland, sought ways to improve their English and changed their learning habits to fit into the local education system, eventually reconstructing self-identity.

Theoretical Framework

As individuals enter or reside in a new and unfamiliar environment, they undergo acculturation and deculturation over time (Kim, 2001). Acculturation refers to the cultural and psychological changes that occur when individuals come into contact with people, groups, and social influences with different cultural characteristics (Berry, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2010). Meanwhile, to some extent, individuals lose some original cultural patterns as they embark on another culture. Deculturation is adopted to describe this process (Padilla & Perez, 2003). If individuals were unable to adapt to the demands of the new milieu, the conflicts arising from acculturation and deculturation caused them to experience confusion, anxiety and stress (Kim, 2001). However, Kim perceived human beings as open systems, which implies that humans' innate self-organising drive and capacity to environmental challenges allowed them to achieve a state of integration. Individuals are aware of their stress, which drives them to surmount the predicament and cultivate new cultural understanding and habits to reach the adaptation goal.

Then Kim (2001) introduced her definition of cross-cultural adaptation as "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationships with those environments". In addition, she proposed a cyclic and continual Stress-Adaptation-Growth Model to depict individuals' process of cross-cultural adaptation and a Structural Model to reveal the factors affecting cross-cultural adaptation. The Structural Model encompasses six dimensions: Personal Communication, Host Social Communication, Ethnic Social Communication, Environment, Predisposition, and Intercultural Transformation. These six dimensions help to identify factors affecting cross-cultural adaptation from both individual and host society perspectives in the Malaysian academic environment, such as understanding the host language and culture (Personal Communication), host receptivity (Environment), and prior cross-cultural experience (Predisposition).

METHODOLOGY

This study explores the current state of Chinese postgraduate students' academic performance and their deep thoughts on their academic experience in Malaysian higher institutions; then, a qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews is adopted. Semi-structured interviews are in the middle of structured and unstructured interviews and combine open-ended and theoretically driven questions (Galletta, 2013). It draws respondents more fully into the topic to explore phenomena and identify and explain themes and patterns. Specifically, the words and ideas described by interviewees in a particular way allow interviewers to probe meanings to improve the significance and depth of data. In addition, the interviewer may also find some areas they did not expect before the interview, but these are important to address research objectives (Saunders et al., 2003). Hence, this study predominantly selected semi-structured interviews to gather valid and reliable data.

Participants

This study applied snowball sampling to recruit three interviewees from each of the five public universities, including Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), with a total of fifteen respondents who have stayed in Malaysia for more than six months. Firstly, the reason for selecting these five public universities was because they offer qualified postgraduate education and enjoy favourable ranks on QS Universities Rankings, which attract applicants. Secondly, this study hired respondents regarding their length of stay in Malaysia. Usually, the cultural shock stage lasts 6-18 months (Oberg, 1960). Wang et al. (2018) suggested that the duration of cultural shock ranges from nine to 24 months. Then, to comprehend their academic experience and changes in Malaysia, the minimum duration of stay was set at six months in this study.

The author initially contacted Chinese postgraduate students in the UKM to invite them to participate in the interview and then asked them to forward recruitment information to other Chinese postgraduate students studying in the UM, UPM, USM and UTM to meet the snowball effect. Fifteen eligible respondents met the criteria, including seven females and eight males, spanning from 25 years old to 41 years old. Five are master's students, and the other ten are PhD candidates. It is worth noting that, first, most of them received online courses in China because of the lockdown policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why they stayed in Malaysia for months but were doing their third or fourth semester, such as Student C, Student G, H and I. Second, some PhD candidates accomplished their master's program or transferred to different universities in Malaysia, meaning they had stayed in Malaysia before their PhD study, such as Student D, J and K.

Table 1: Demographic information

Univ.	Pseud	Gender	Age	Marital Status	LE	Major	Sem	LS
UM	Student A	F	36	married	PhD	Education Leadership	10th	1.5 years
	Student B	F	41	married	PhD	TESOL	10th	2.5 years
	Student C	M	30	unmarried	PhD	Media & Comm	2nd	6 months
UPM	Student D	F	28	unmarried	PhD	UDP	6th	5 years
	Student E	M	34	married	PhD	Comm	8th	4 years
	Student F	M	24	unmarried	Master	CI	3rd	1 year
UKM	Student G	F	25	unmarried	Master	Accounting	4th	10 months
	Student H	M	31	unmarried	Master	Accounting	4th	6 months
	Student I	F	38	unmarried	PhD	Comm	6th	7 months

USM	Student J	F	31	unmarried	PhD	AEP	5th	4 years
	Student K	M	40	married	PhD	HEPGL	5th	3 years
	Student L	M	31	unmarried	PhD	Education	6th	3.5 years
UTM	Student M	F	33	unmarried	PhD	MAE	6th	6 months
	Student N	M	25	unmarried	Master	MAE	1st	6 months
	Student O	M	27	unmarried	Master	Computer Science	2nd	8 months

Note. Univ=University, Pseud=Pseudonym, LE=Level of Education, Sem=Semester, LS=Length of Stay, UDP=Urban Design and Planning, Comm=Communication; CI=Curriculum and Instruction, AEP=Applied & Engineering Physics, HEPGL=Higher Education Policy Government and Leadership, MAE=Management and Administration in Education

Data Collection
Once consent was obtained from each respondent, the interviewer sent them an invitation letter and asked for time, place and interview methods based on the respondents' preferences. Both online and offline interviews were adopted to conduct interviews because online interviews removed the geographic constraints and brought convenience to interview students from USM and UTM, which are situated in different states, Penang and Johor. Online interviews were carried out with the aid of the platform Tecent Meeting. In addition, all respondents communicated with the interviewer in Chinese during the interview, enabling them to freely express their feelings and experiences without considering language proficiency. Respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding their opinions and experience of studying in Malaysia. Questions were designed based on Young Yun Kim's theory and the two models of Stress-Adaptation-Growth and Structural Model, involving individuals' perspectives such as previous overseas education experience, language ability, and host environmental perspective such as academic difference, adaptation to the new academic context, communication with lecturers and supervisors and so on. Each interview lasted for one hour and was recorded.

Data Analysis
The recorded audio and video were transcribed verbatim into Chinese transcripts first and then translated into English. During the translation, the authors followed the translation fidelity by meeting the semantic, idiomatic, empirical and conceptual equivalence (Thompson & Dooley, 2019). Upon the completion of the translation, thematic analysis was adopted to analyse data. According to Clarke and Braun (2021), there are six phases of thematic analysis, including data familiarisation, data coding, initial theme generation, theme development and review, theme refining, defining and naming, and writing up. Guided by these six phases, the authors first read the transcripts to familiarise themselves. Then, transcripts were labelled with new codes to generate themes. Finally, the themes were carefully refined and defined by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Research results demonstrated the challenges that Chinese postgraduate students encountered during their postgraduate study in Malaysian public universities. Four themes and two sub-themes were identified through coding and analysis of the interview transcript to reveal the factors affecting Chinese postgraduate students' academic adaptation. Related strategies employed by students are also found.

Theme 1: Language Ability

As aforementioned, language proficiency is a common challenge for Chinese and international students. Thirteen respondents in this study acknowledged the language challenges at the initial stage, and the other two respondents did not report it as a major difficulty because they were English teachers in China with a qualified English ability to manage studies in Malaysia. Firstly, many respondents expressed difficulties listening and comprehending academic lectures and everyday situations upon commencing their studies and living in Malaysia. For example, master students Student N and Student H could only initially understand 30 or 50 per cent of the lectures. Student F, also a master's student, admitted that he did not understand lecturers during the first semester, especially the first month. He stated:

> …I started school in October 2021. Then I remembered that in the first month, no matter which course or lectures I took, though I basically listened very carefully, it was really difficult for me to understand what they were saying. I felt that I was outside the classroom at that time. The most obvious contrast was with the Malaysian Chinese students, local students, and some international students in their second or third semester. They could communicate with lecturers fluently, but I did not understand them! What were they doing? What were they talking about? How come I did not know anything… (Informant SF).

PhD candidates encountered identical circumstances. For instance, Student L said he required assistance from fellow Chinese classmates to translate supervisors' instructions when he originally met and communicated with his supervisor. Student K's embarrassment regarding his English ability was evident at the first meeting with the supervisor. He recalled that:

> …I remember the first meeting with my supervisor; I forgot certain words during the communication and asked her if I could look them up on my mobile phone. The atmosphere was really awkward at that time, and I wanted to crawl into a small box and hide from it… (Informant SK).

Although all respondents met the language requirement of their universities, most of them were unable to understand lecturers and engage in daily conversation due to the absence of an English-speaking environment and limited opportunities to practice English in China. In addition, the Malaysian accent posed a vital obstacle in comprehending lectures, communicating with supervisors, and engaging in everyday conversations. Student A, who is an English teacher in China, admitted to having proficient communication with supervisors, yet she occasionally encountered difficulty in understanding the accents of waiters or waitresses.

Secondly, academic writing also affects their thesis or article writing. Some students expressed the belief that their writing skills still need to be improved, particularly in terms of the accurate use of words and sentence construction. Thirdly, some respondents also mentioned knowledge of terminology. Student A and Student J, who major in Education Leadership and Applied and Engineering Physics, confessed that they did not understand some specific terminology at the initial stage, reflecting on slow literature reading and lecture comprehension, respectively. Student J said:

…Even though I took the IELTS test, the test did not test physics terms. There was a lot of physics terminology in class that I could not understand and could not give my reaction… (Informant SJ).

The findings illustrated the significance of language ability in academic adaptation in Malaysia. Almost all interviewees announced their initial maladaptation to English listening and speaking during class and daily life conversations due to their Malaysian accent and lack of English practice in China. Proficiency in terminology and adeptness in academic writing significantly affect comprehension of the profession and the ability to write articles and thesis, which are integral components of their postgraduate studies. This aligns with the findings of Abd Malek and Ahmad's study (2023), which indicates that international students who pursue their education in Malaysia face difficulties in achieving proficiency in the English language within the academic structure.

Theme 2: Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship
The supervisor-supervisee relationship plays a crucial role in the progress of Chinese postgraduate students during postgraduate studies, which determines the completion of their graduation. Some respondents appraised their harmonious relationship with supervisors (including the main supervisor and co-supervisor) by receiving instruction, encouragement and care.

…He (the supervisor) is a very careful person. When he revised my proposal…… Guess how many times I revised? I made about five revisions. He helped me figure out the details word by word… (Informant SC).

…In the beginning, my English was not that good, I could not clearly express my ideas, I worried that my supervisor wouldn't understand what I said, and I also worried about my studies. However, after I came to Malaysia, I communicated with the supervisor face-to-face. As I mentioned, the supervisor actively helped me, reduced my worries, and made me more enthusiastic about my studies… (Informant SG).

…my supervisor is very good. She is very patient and professional. She is tolerant and responsible. At the same time, she cared about our lives. She would ask if we foreign students adapted well to life on campus…… Sometimes, I think that without my supervisor's patience and encouragement, I might have given up my studies… (Informant SK).

There are a few respondents who share different stories. For example, Student J appreciated her supervisor's strictness, which motivated her to advance, but her supervisor hardly offered praise and encouragement. She highlighted the importance of this and conveyed her wish for encouragement from her supervisor. Student M reported her supervisor's experience of psychological difficulty, which rendered her incapable of providing guidance, hindering the progress of research and also causing her own anxiety and pressure. Similarly, Student I raised concerns about her co-supervisor's heavy workload, meaning that

she was too busy to offer feedback on her research, which slowed down the research progress and also caused her distress.

Basically, all master's students in this research reported a good relationship with their supervisors because they had dealt with their supervisors for a relatively short time. They contacted their supervisor until the second or third semester. During the first or second semester, their primary emphasis is on acquiring knowledge in classes. But, the situation for PhD students who had regular and extensive interactions with their supervisor can vary greatly depending on the level of guidance, instruction, assistance, encouragement, and support they received from their supervisors. If the supervisors disregard their request or cannot provide supervision, PhD students may experience heightened academic and psychological challenges.

Theme 3: Pedagogical Differences
a. Teaching and Learning Style
During the interviews, respondents were queried regarding the teaching and learning styles in Malaysia. Some of them thought that Malaysian classrooms were not much different from Chinese ones. Both Chinese and Malaysian lecturers organise group activities and group/ individual presentations. However, some of the respondents pointed out the different teaching methods in Malaysian classes regarding curriculum, group discussion, and supervision from the supervisor. Firstly, master students expressed a lack of textbooks provided by schools, and they normally depended on teaching materials such as lecturers' PowerPoint presentations to acquire new knowledge. Student H stated that:

> In China, if we undergraduate students study accounting management, we have a complete set of teaching materials. I don't know if there is a complete set of teaching materials at the master's level in China, but we don't have them in Malaysia. You feel that the teaching content is quite scattered. There is no set of textbooks for us to learn during the whole postgraduate period. Lecturers picked some parts that they thought were important to teach us, so it felt a bit scattered……..they offered us some suggestions in the textbook, and then we just looked for them by ourselves… (Informant SH).

Other master students also recounted comparable encounters in this situation. Without textbooks, students need to explore knowledge by themselves. Student N admitted that he could only search for information online to familiarise himself with the new knowledge, which made the content he read very cluttered. But it also means that students' ability to search literature has improved. In addition, N also noted that the categories of discipline in Malaysia are more specific than Chinese ones.

Secondly, group discussion extended Chinese students' communication with classmates. Student G demonstrated enhanced critical and logical thinking skills in Malaysian class, and she actively constructed knowledge instead of being a passive learner. She enjoyed group discussions with other classmates, which allowed her to hear different voices.

Thirdly, some PhD students shared their misperception of the supervisors' role. They had expected their supervisors to provide them with explicit supervision before they started their PhD studies. Later, they found their supervisors put more focus on their selection of research topics, offered general instruction, and students implemented the details of the research themselves. Take Student A and Student D as examples.

…I expected my supervisor to supervise me step by step and organise a team meeting once a week, and then everyone discussed some heated topics or shared their study experience. But there were none……My supervisor asked me to read articles and report the findings to him until I had my research topic. After that, I just explored by myself step by step…..he offered me three or four comments on my proposal, but he introduced an expert to check my proposal and thesis word by word… (Informant SA).

…supervisor gave me a research direction and did not specifically tell me how to take the first, the second and the third steps. He just told me which direction I should go………he would ask me to explore, to find the answers myself… (Informant SD).

Student L rated his PhD study with ten or twenty percent of supervision from the supervisor and nighty and eighty per cent of self-learning. These findings were consistent with Wang & Räihä (2021). Chinese postgraduate students look forward to rigid and explicit supervision, but supervisors prefer to develop supervisees' self-motivated learning. Therefore, Chinese postgraduate students who highly expected explicit supervision might experience disappointment and change their perception of the role.

b. Assessment

In China, Chinese students normally dedicate themselves to the final exam week as the final score significantly influences their overall course performance and determines whether they can pass the test or not. Then in non-exam weeks, students may not experience academic pressure (Wang & Bai, 2020). However, in this study, respondents voiced differently. They said they had to work hard during the whole semester to ensure they could pass the course. Student M who pursues both master's and PhD studies in Malaysia, specifically expressed her experience and feeling on the assessment difference between China and Malaysia. She said:

…after the first month of the new semester, I started to feel tired. Almost every course had a midterm test. There was also a quiz before and after the midterm test. So, in addition to the final test, there were three tests and one presentation. I remembered that there were two assignments in one course and even four assignments, meaning that in one course, you may have four tests and three to four assignments. From the middle to late semester, I felt extremely tired……. In China, when I was an undergraduate, when the final exam was coming, I spent two- or three days memorising knowledge I had learnt; then I could get a score of 70 or 80. I knew how to get 70 in China because I was familiar with the grading mechanism. But in Malaysia, I didn't know what their education system was like, what the tests were like, and I didn't know how they were graded. I didn't know to what extent I should learn to get a score of 70. So, I just worked hard. I feared failing if I didn't get a B- on my overall performance. Then I worked as hard as I could… (Informant SM).

Student O expressed a comparable experience and admitted his pressure and exhaustion during the final week due to the intensive review and exams. An interesting fact is that other postgraduate students didn't specifically report their pressure from different assessments. Their pressure came from other aspects, such as supervisor-supervisee relationships, different methodologies, et cetera. The potential explanation for the test pressure experienced by Student M and O may be attributed to their Science majors, Applied and Engineering Physics and Computer Science, which involve extensive laboratory experiments and calculation.

Theme 4: Support
When postgraduate students were asked about the significance of social support, they reported receiving support, including academic support and emotional support. In the first place, PhD candidates are required to independently study knowledge and cultivate their self-learning skills. Some PhD students admitted the pivotal contribution of academic workshops, their fellow teammates, other Chinese students and international students providing them with academic support in their PhD research journey. Both Student A and B praised the excellence of their teammates and international students and showed their gratitude for their academic suggestions:

> …I solved my academic confusion by proposing questions in the class and asking my teammates who enrolled earlier than me…..we have a "PhD community" What's App group, and many PhD students from our department are in that group. We often put forward questions there, and they often shared their experience with us, which was quite useful for us. I learnt more from them than from my supervisor. Haha… (Informant SA).

In the second place, emotional support from their family, co-nationals and friends also facilitates their study in Malaysia. For those married PhD students, family support works as a solid backup. Student B said she had wanted to give up PhD studies, but her family encouraged her to continue. Student K, in order to afford his PhD study in Malaysia, sold his car and left his wife and child. What's worse, because of the COVID-19 lockdown, he could not return to China to visit his family. He was grateful for his family's support. And for those unmarried postgraduate students, economic support from parents guarantees their study and life in Malaysia. Emotional support from friends and teammates gave them solace to release their stress. Some of them are unwilling to share their anxiety or pressure with their parents because they think their parents actually don't know what their research is about, and they don't want their parents to be worried. Then, they looked for emotional support from their friends. For example:

> …I was depressed in April. My supervisor asked me to revise my proposal several times, and I have made corresponding revisions many times. I collapsed in my mind and doubted my choice of doing PhD study. I told my friends about this; they invited me to have dinner, offered me suggestions, and encouraged me……... I didn't share the problems I met in Malaysia with my family, but I would share some interesting things with them. They offer me economic support because I don't have a job currently… (Informant SC).

This finding is consistent with Xiong and Zhou's findings (2018). Many Chinese students in the U.S. reported that the lack of academic support from their departments, colleges, institutions and advisors made them upset and frustrated. In addition to the academic support from schools and supervisors, emotional support from friends and family was highlighted. If there is no emotional support in the U.S., they have a sense of loss, loneliness and depression. The significance of academic and emotional support can be easily envisioned.

Strategies

Regarding the challenges Chinese postgraduate students face in the process of their postgraduate study, they took action to cope with these challenges. On the language aspect, some students actively participated in group discussions, and some students signed up for English training programs provided by their university to practise their listening and speaking skills. For instance, during the first semester, Student N dedicated a significant amount of time to improving his English skills and even cancelled his time on sports. He admitted his inability to comprehend over 50 per cent of the lectures at the initial stage. However, through his effort, he grasped seventy per cent of the lecture at the end of the semester. Student K expanded his opportunities for English communication with international students and local students to extend his chances of speaking English, and eventually, he was able to conduct fluent conversation.

Because of the unfamiliarity of terminology and academic writing, students engaged in extensive literature reading, which enabled them to acquire a wide range of terminology and became accustomed to the language and sentence structure used in academic writing. In addition, a few of them adopted language translation or AI to assist them in choosing accurate words when writing their thesis. For instance, Student F demonstrated his enhanced proficiency in academic writing by reading literature and summarising valuable writing techniques from the reading. Student C improved his academic writing through diligent and regular proposal revisions. Student M wrote down every terminology she didn't know on a notepad and memorised them one by one. It can be concluded that Chinese postgraduate students diligently enhance their language ability through frequent practice.

On the aspect of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, according to the interviews, Chinese postgraduate students have a harmonious relationship with their supervisors, but some students also encounter challenges with their supervisors. According to students who didn't receive supervision from their supervisors due to supervisors' workload or physical problems, their solution is to apply for changing supervisors. Student F explained her experience of changing her co-supervisor as:

> …The second time I met my co-supervisor, she approved and signed my application form with agreement. Then I communicated with my new co-supervisor twice. Things were finally confirmed, and I submitted my application form… (Informant SF).

In fact, students who opted to switch their supervisors had experienced struggle in mind and anxiety. To ensure the completion of their doctoral study, they managed to overcome the internal turmoil and submitted their application to the faculty. As a result, they progressed their research.

For different pedagogy, some students previewed and reviewed lecturers' Powerpoints many times to fully understand the content in response to the challenge of providing no textbooks by universities. In addition, they gradually developed the self-learning mode. Some of them signed up for research workshops online and offline to learn how to review literature and how to conduct qualitative and quantitative research. As a result, they independently search literature, edit articles and theses, conduct qualitative and quantitative research, et cetera. Almost all of the respondents reported a huge improvement in research ability, especially PhD candidates.

Aside from support from family, friends, co-nationals, and teammates, some students proposed their strategies for coping with academic stress. Student A suggested swimming to relax; Student O would put everything about studying away, stay alone and have a break, or zone out. Student J put forward a similar strategy of offering a break for oneself to adjust the passive mood. Student I thought there was no meaning to immerse in negative emotions. What a PhD student should do instead is to solve the problem.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated Chinese postgraduate students' challenges in Malaysian public universities. Firstly, regarding language ability, most respondents acknowledged their initial difficulty in comprehending lecturers or supervisors at the initial stage due to their limited English listening and speaking skills, as well as the accent of Malaysian people. Besides, they also reported terminology and academic writing as challenges and long-standing tasks. Secondly, a harmonious supervisor-supervisee relationship is vital in their postgraduate study. Master students generally did not encounter difficulties with their supervisors, but the circumstances for PhD students were distinct. Most PhD respondents have a good and harmonious relationship with their supervisors, but a few of them reported challenges when interacting with their supervisors. Such situations impeded their research progress and also brought them anxiety and pressure. Third, the pedagogic differences brought them challenges in independently seeking academic information, perception of the supervisor's role and assessment.

Academic support and emotional support from fellow students, family, and friends seem important for postgraduate students, which assist them relieve their pressure and work as backup during their postgraduate studies. In addition, in order to address the challenges, the respondents applied some strategies. On the aspect of language barrier, some respondents signed up for free English courses in university, practised English listening and speaking, and intensively read literature. Language is no longer a major problem for them after months or years. Then on the supervisor-supervisee relationship, students who were unable to communicate with supervisors effectively and to receive supervision decided to change their supervisor to ensure their smooth study in Malaysia. Last, respondents reported the advantages of self-learning, peer assistance, and academic workshops to become acquainted with different pedagogical approaches. It can be concluded that Chinese postgraduate students were capable of adapting to the new academic and cultural surroundings, effectively overcoming the hurdles and problems they experienced in their studies to achieve their educational goals.

The findings of this study are aligned with Kim's theory. As suggested by Kim (2001), each person is a dynamic and self-reflexive system, and cross-cultural adaptation involves the perspectives of individuals (micro-level) and the host society (macro-level). Chinese postgraduate students in this study can adapt and improve themselves by engaging with the

academic environment, finding solutions to navigate new challenges, and ultimately making growth in their studies. In addition, aside from individuals themselves, external elements such as supervisors, pedagogical differences, and academic and emotional support play prominent roles in their academic adaptation. The outcomes of this study also enrich Kim's theory by offering evidence to demonstrate the cross-cultural adaptation of international students, so-called short-term sojourners, in a new academic environment, which contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of King's theory.

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