

Finding a New ‘Normal’: Factors Affecting Resilience of Female Burmese International Students at a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

Studying in a foreign country is a big challenge for many international students. They face many difficulties in adapting to an unfamiliar situation. Under such circumstances, they need good resilience to overcome and bounce back from these difficulties. This study aims to explore (i) the problems encountered by international Burmese female students while studying abroad and (ii) the factors contributing to their resilience to continue pursuing their graduate degrees. Four Burmese female students studying at one university in China were purposely chosen and interviewed for this study. Findings showed that they mostly encountered language and academic problems and psychological distress at the beginning of their studies, but they adjusted well and were able to overcome these problems. Moreover, both internal (e.g., optimism and self-confidence) and external factors (e.g., social support and religious practices) were important in the development of their resilience to survive in a foreign country and continue pursuing their graduate studies.

Keywords: China, external factors, international Burmese female students, internal factors, resilience

FINDING A NEW ‘NORMAL’: FACTORS AFFECTING RESILIENCE OF FEMALE BURMESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A CHINESE UNIVERSITY

Currently, many students all over the world are choosing to study abroad to widen their horizons, gain international experience, and progress in their academic careers. Among the most popular destinations

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for international students in China. It stands as the third most popular destination after the United States and the United Kingdom since 2017 (Callan, 2020; Yan, 2017). Each year, the number of international students studying in China is rapidly increasing. Like international students in other countries, they face many difficulties in adapting to different cultures, languages, weather, foods, and social relationship styles. Resilience is an essential ability for all international students to bounce back from these difficulties. The resilience of a student in the university context is best conceptualized as a personality characteristic that moderates the negative effects of stress and promotes adaptation; it has been associated with increased psychological well-being (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

Higher education institutions have identified the characteristics of an at-risk student: racial and ethnic minorities, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, the first generation to attend college, international students, women, non-traditional age students, athletes, and transfer students (Martin, 1991). Female international students in China meet several characteristics of at-risk students. They certainly struggle to survive as women in a foreign country with different gender norms than in their home countries. International students face many problems that arise from maladjustment when first living in a foreign country. However, students differ greatly from each other in adjusting to their new circumstances because a person's resilience level may vary according to different internal and external factors. Despite a large body of quantitative studies about the concept of resilience and factors affecting it, little attempt has been made to use a qualitative approach to understand them more deeply. A qualitative approach is suitable to explore more fruitful information thoroughly to achieve an in-depth understanding of the construct of resilience and the factors affecting it. It particularly addresses two specific shortcomings noted by resilience researchers: arbitrariness in selecting outcome variables and the challenge of accounting for the sociocultural context in which resilience occurs (Ungar, 2003).

Previous studies have primarily focused on resilience in children who are either deemed at risk or already experiencing trauma or psychopathology (Himmel, 2015). Little research has been done on resilience in healthy, emerging adult populations. Moreover, of the studies of resilience within college populations, very few have focused on female international students. Therefore, there is a need to investigate in greater depth to understand the factors affecting their resilience. This study explores (1) the problems encountered by international Burmese female students while studying abroad and (2) the factors contributing to their resilience through the interviews of four international female students studying at a university in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resilience emerged as a concept in the literature on psychopathology in the early 1970s. It was conceptualized as a personality characteristic that remains stable (Himmel, 2015). In contrast, Bernard encouraged educators to think about resilience as an innate capacity that can be developed rather than a preexisting trait in some people but not all. An online brochure from the American Psychology Association (APA) in 2010 supported Bernard's thought: "Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thought, and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone" (APA, 2010).

When coming from different cultures, international students cannot avoid culture shock and often face astounding difficulties (Pruitt, 1978). While all students entering higher education institutions have to cope with the myriad new facets of the educational environment, the majority of international students have to deal with additional challenges such as language (Le et al., 2016), academic, and social problems.

International students in China mainly face language, academic, social (Mohsin & Naseem, 2018; Sumra, 2012), and emotional problems (Mohsin & Naseem, 2018).

Language problems also indirectly increase the workload burden of international students (Okusolubo, 2018). International students studying in non-English speaking countries may encounter two types of language problems. The first one is a lack of confidence in their English ability. It is a common problem inevitably encountered by international students who are studying either in English-speaking (Andrade, 2006; Lin & Scherz, 2014) or non-English-speaking countries (Nwokedi & Khanare, 2020) including Asian countries (Lee, 2017; Yu et al., 2019). They feel inadequate in their English ability when communicating with others both inside and outside the classroom. The second one is a lack of knowledge of the local language of the host country. It creates a gap in communicating with local people for international students in China (Mohsin & Naseem, 2018). Most universities provide Chinese language courses for them, but they are less effective (Yang & de Wit, 2019) and can provide minimal linguistic skills (Zhu & Ma, 2011). International students have suggested that host universities should provide much more time for language learning (Sumra, 2012).

Another problem is the academic problem concerned with the curriculum gap, different teaching styles, and communication with their professors. These realities create a stressful situation and make it difficult for them to achieve their academic goals. Moreover, socialization is also a common problem faced by international students in China (Sumra, 2012). International students' behaviors, values, and social interaction styles may vary because they come from quite different cultures and circumstances (Wang, 2009). Even the normal behavior, actions, and gestures often used within a country sometimes lead to misunderstanding in a new social context.

Emotional and mental health problems, such as depression, psychosomatic complaints, and anxiety, have been found to be more common than physical effects for international students (Le et al., 2016). International students who leave their families, friends, and home country to pursue a degree often experience ups and downs as part of the process of cultural adjustment (Subhan et al., 2015). As they adapt to a new social and academic environment, they are susceptible to psychological distress, and consequently, they are likely to experience mental health problems. One study found depressive symptoms in international students in China (Liu et al., 2016).

FACTORS AFFECTING THE RESILIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

An Atlanta-based consulting firm, Organizational Development Resources (now Conner Partners, 2001) concluded that resilient persons were positive about life and themselves; flexible in thoughts and social relations; and could be described as concentrated, organized, and proactive. In addition to internal factors, the development of a person's resilience includes environmental or external influences, such as social support, spirituality, and religious practices. Previous literature on this subject describes two main agents affecting resilience: intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Intrinsic Factors Affecting Resilience

- **Optimism** is a strong predictor of resilience in university students (Dawson & Pooley, 2013; Himmel, 2015). Optimistic people believe that they can overcome inevitable obstacles in the future and that setbacks are only temporary (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017). There is an interactive relationship between optimism and resilience of international students (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015).

- **Goal-setting** is a process that promotes purpose and agency. Goals direct and sustain people's energies toward performing a particular action and achieving a successful outcome. Resilient students have high expectations and goals concerning their academic future (Cavazos et al., 2010; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Splan et al., 2011).

- **Self-confidence** is a positive belief that one can generally accomplish what one wishes to do in the future (Zellner, 1970). People with strong self-confidence can effectively and efficiently solve everyday life problems and overcome many barriers that would otherwise delay or prevent them from achieving their goals. Rutter (1985) stated that resilience is characterized by several related elements: self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy belief, and adaptation (p.608).

- **Self-control** is the ability to wait longer or delay gratification to achieve a better, more positive outcome in the future (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017). It is an essential characteristic of the development of resilience. People who can control their emotions are unflappable and calm even when they face stress in their daily life.

- **Endurance and persistence** are needed to overcome obstacles and complete work successfully. Endurance is the personal strength and fortitude that one possesses to withstand unpleasant or difficult situations without giving up (Taormina, 2015); according to the Oxford English Dictionary, persistence is the act of adhering to an opinion or course of action despite difficulty or opposition. A combination of both abilities is required to be a resilient person.

Extrinsic Factors Affecting Resilience

- **Perceived social support** is a person's perception of physical and emotional care received from family, friends, and significant others. Social support significantly impacts the resilience of international students (Sabouripour & Roslan, 2015). International students with lower resilience levels have reported lower perceived social support (Pidgeon et al., 2014). One's social network is a student's fortress: it plays a vital role in their well-being and their decisions to accomplish their goals in college (Mullen, 2008). Family support results in high expectations and encourages students to pursue their academic goals and expectations. International students whose parents strongly encourage their academic goals are resilient (Cavazos et al., 2010). Moreover, having a strong network of good friends supports the spiritual strength of students when facing adverse circumstances (Mullen, 2008).

- **Spirituality and religious practices:** Spirituality is the human experience of discovering meaning, purpose, and values, which may or may not include the concept of a god or transcendent being (Prest & Keller, 1993). It can assist people in overcoming conditions caused by stress and protect them when facing depression. Religion plays a vital role throughout the lifespan and may be particularly important when people confront stressful life experiences (Park, 2005). Studies indicate that religious practices have a positive correlation to a person's general well-being and enhance their resilience (Ellison et al., 2009; Javanmard, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In the present study, a qualitative research design was used to deeply and comprehensively explore the problems encountered by female international students in China and how they navigate them.

Qualitative research can explain a particular phenomenon under investigation (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) and uncover the nature of experiences related to a social phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Participants

A total of eight international students from Myanmar including the researcher are currently studying at a Normal University in China. There is one, male, Master's level student and seven, female, doctoral candidates. Among them, four female Ph.D. students were purposely chosen following these criteria: (i) participants must be female, (ii) they must be pursuing a Ph.D. degree, and (iii) the medium of instruction must be English. All are scholarship students and had already been in China for three years at the time of this study. The participants' true names have been anonymized with the following nicknames: Tresa (28), Sophie (29), Ame (29), and Rosy (38). Tresa and Sophie are majoring in Education and were formerly senior teachers at high schools; Ame and Rosy are majoring in Science and were university teachers in their home country.

Data Collection

Based on previous literature regarding the resilience of international students, a semi-structured interview guideline was designed to elicit the participants' perspectives on the problems they encountered during studying abroad and the factors influencing their resilience. The researcher constructed the questions carefully to ensure that they reflected the participants' own experiences related to their problems and factors affecting their resilience. First, general questions such as, "What kind of problems did you encounter while studying abroad?", "How did you handle these problems?", and "What factors motivated you to return to your normal condition after escaping from the stress and problems?" were asked to get a wide scope of their answers. Based on their answers, specific follow-up questions were asked. The individual face-to-face interviews were conducted in their native language, Burmese. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. These transcribed interviews were then checked three times for accuracy to avoid losing and missing data. During the interview sessions, the researcher encouraged the participants to share their experiences and feelings by prompting them with responses such as, "Yes, of course, next?", "Anything else?", and "Would you tell me more about that?".

Data Analysis

The process of accurately analyzing the data is critical for any research study. It involves determining the meaning of the information by looking for themes, commonalities, and patterns to make sense of the information (Guion, 2001). To analyze the data collected through these interviews, the researcher applied the thematic analysis approach in which the researcher identifies, organizes, and develops themes and principal categories to condense content into key ideas. The data were analyzed according to the phases identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher read the transcript of each interview at least three times to become familiarized with the data and gain an initial impression of themes in the responses. The researcher then elicited the meaningful responses and discarded the irrelevant ones from each transcribed interview. After generating codes for each meaningful unit, the researcher clustered codes that share a unifying feature and put them into two main themes named: (i) the problems encountered during studying abroad, and (ii) the factors affecting their resilience. Each theme was then subdivided into smaller categories for a more granular and comprehensive understanding of the data. Afterward, the words from the participants' responses were coded into psychological terminology.

RESULTS

The results from interviews of four female international students were discussed in two main themes: (i) the problems encountered during studying abroad, and (ii) the factors affecting their resilience. The data for each theme has been purposely categorized into subthemes for clarity and easy comprehension. The first main theme was divided into three subthemes: (a) language problem, (b) academic problem, and (c) psychological distress. The second main theme was divided into two subthemes: (a) intrinsic factors affecting resilience, and (b) extrinsic factors affecting resilience.

Theme 1: Problems Encountered During Studying Abroad

(a) Language Problem

In this study, participants encountered both English and Chinese language problems. Regarding the first, they described their experiences in detail. In their home country, the official language is Burmese and English is a foreign language. Therefore, communication in English is not common for most people from Myanmar. Sophie reported this situation: “English was a challenge to me before. Back then, my speaking skill was poor to have even a normal conversation. Listening skill was poor as well, but better than speaking. So, it was difficult to participate in classroom discussions.”

Similarly, Ame admitted her poor skill in speaking: “I already studied four skills of English in my country before studying here. But I think I did not have enough practice with speaking and listening.”

Rosy shared her weak English skills impacted her interactions with other students: “Because of my poor skills, I did not want to communicate with other students, I always avoided their eye contact because I was afraid to speak with them.”

It appears that they faced English language problems at the beginning of their studies. In particular, they were weak in listening and speaking rather than reading and writing. Related to the Chinese language problem, Sophie expressed her experience:

I missed the flight on the way to the university from my own country. Almost all instructions at the airport were in Chinese. Moreover, most of the staff there could not understand and speak English well. Therefore, I could not ask them for any information.

Ame said that she struggled in public settings when shopping, going to the medical clinic, and traveling because she had very limited Chinese language proficiency. Likewise, Tresa attested to her own struggles with the language barrier when seeking out services in China:

The worst thing was when we got sick and need to go to the hospital, the staff there could not speak English. So, I had to always ask for help from a Chinese friend who can speak both languages. But we should not ask help from others many times.

Host universities in China provide a basic Chinese course as a compulsory subject for all new international students in which they have to learn only daily Chinese conversations mostly used in public places. Due to its character-based writing system and tonal nature, the Chinese language is a relatively difficult foreign language for most learners. Samimy and Lee (1997) found that speaking Chinese is more difficult than understanding (listening). The process of language acquisition requires significant time and effort. Rosy reflected on her tribulations learning Chinese: “I think it was the most difficult language in the world. I could not communicate with others in Chinese well until now even though our university gives Chinese language courses.”

All participants were studying their respective majors in English as a medium of instruction. Although they struggled with English at the beginning of their study abroad experience, they had more

difficulties using Chinese. According to their statements, a basic Chinese language course was not sufficient for them to become proficient enough to communicate with local people.

(b) Academic Problem

International students often experience linguistic, cultural, instructional, and academic challenges (Lin & Scherz, 2014). When they come into a new academic environment, they experience different teaching-learning styles and curriculum gaps. In this study, all participants faced each kind of academic problem despite their different majors.

Rosy, a Cell Biology major, shared that she confronted some difficulties because of the curriculum gap; there were some curriculum and syllabus differences between her home country institution and Normal University. Ame, who is majoring in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, described a similar problem: “I could not handle the machines well in the laboratory here. Honestly, the universities in my home country mostly provided lectures, and thus, we had less exposure to using machines.”

The other problem was “supervisor” (faculty advisor) involvement in their academic progress. Three of the participants spoke about their difficulties in this area. Rosy noted:

My supervisor is an American citizen, a mixed American-Chinese. He stayed in China just for a few months per year. Even during his stay, I did not have enough time to discuss my research progress because he was always busy with his other work.

Similarly, Tresa stated her academic difficulty related to her faculty advisor and her dissertation: My supervisor and I had different research interests because we are from different fields of interest (backgrounds). So, we have many arguments in choosing my research topic and I felt like I lost my way at the beginning of the journey.

(c) Psychological distress

When people encounter a new intercultural situation, such as living in a foreign country for the first time, they may feel uncomfortable. Consequently, their self-confidence and ability to navigate daily life decline gradually. These symptoms can cause stress, anxiety, and depression. Ame attested to experiencing these feelings during her studies:

My big problem was unfamiliarity with new machines and techniques. I failed, again and again, although I tried to get the expected result in my experiments. I felt things were not going through as I expected and then hopeless, stressed, and depressed at that time.

Sophie described two stressful events that impacted her during her studies:

The first one was my proposal defense time. I felt overwhelmed before this defense and felt like I was carrying a heavy burden on my head. There was nothing in my mind all the time: while eating, walking, and talking with others, but the proposal defense.

Indeed, the proposal defense process can be a source of stress for many graduate students who must complete this requirement. Sophie also mentioned another serious event that had a traumatic impact on her:

It was the first day of snowfall in my life. I was enjoying the view of the outside world through the window. Suddenly, I saw a girl on the 15th floor of the opposite building, who was stepping out of the window. Suddenly, she jumped down right in front of my eyes. I was shocked. Consequently, I was interrogated by police three times as a witness. It was a very stressful time for me.

Except for this traumatic event that Sophie witnessed, most of the participants in this study indicated that they experienced mental problems caused by academic rigors related to their dissertation and work on experiments.

Theme 2: Factors Affecting Their Resilience

Factors affecting the resilience of female Burmese international students: intrinsic and extrinsic factors, will be discussed here. Participants' responses showed that the intrinsic factors affecting their resilience were optimism, goal-setting, self-confidence, self-control, endurance, and perseverance and they contributed to their persistence in continuing their degrees at their host universities.

(a) *Intrinsic Factors Affecting Resilience*

Optimism

Participants in this study commented that an optimistic attitude helps them to release stress and overcome difficulties. Tresa stated: "Life is too short. It is a gift for everyone. Therefore, we have to go on whatever. I often tried to remind myself that nothing lasts forever."

Similarly, Ame also expressed her tendency toward optimism: "I had heard an English proverb, "Every cloud has a silver lining". I realize that difficult times always lead to better days. Every negative situation has the potential to produce something positive."

Likewise, the other two participants shared that they believe adverse circumstances are not permanent and can even benefit them. All participants in this study were accepting of both good and bad things that happened to them and believe in the promise of a bright future.

Goal-setting

Participants in this study had clear and realistic goals. They considered that they were responsible for their dreams and goals. Tresa shared the following reflection about her goal of studying abroad one day: "Studying abroad was one of my dreams. I love to touch with different cultures and customs. So, I was always looking for opportunities to study abroad."

She also described her plans for after she graduates and returns to her home country:

I wanted to share what I learned here with all the ones who have the same interest as me. Furthermore, I wanted to improve my country's education system like other developed countries. I hope my knowledge gained from studying here could contribute to it somehow.

Likewise, Sophie said that her goal to earn her degree abroad gives her the courage to overcome the challenges of her academic work. All participants had a dream of studying abroad. They were interested in gaining international experience. Moreover, after completing their studies in China, they would like to contribute to the good of their home country. According to their statements, goal orientation plays a significant role in overcoming difficulties when studying abroad.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is an individual's trust in his or her own abilities, capacities, and judgments, or belief that he or she can successfully face day-to-day challenges and demands (Psychology Dictionary Online). Even when people face adversity, those with self-confidence believe they can do their best and tackle any problem. Tresa shared how success during her undergraduate studies engendered her self-confidence: "I had been chosen to study in Thailand among many students by a scholarship program in my bachelor student life. Since that time, I believe I can do it. I was motivated to try for any scholarship program."

Ame illustrated her own self-confidence and determination in the following quotation: “I would continue to reach my destination enduring all obstacles. I believe that I can get the benefits from my effort.”

Similarly, Sophie asserted her self-confidence as a means to overcoming adverse situations: “I thought I had enough ability to get a life that I want. I could deal with any problem.”

Participants in this study possessed high self-confidence. They believe that self-confidence is an essential tool to achieve their academic goals.

Self-control

Self-control is an essential tool to become a resilient person who can control their emotions and remain calm even when facing the daily pressures of life. On this topic, Tresa shared the following reflection:

When I felt stressed, I tried to forget anything and stop trying to solve it out. Then, I tried to recall the good things I had done before and the good time I had with my family, relatives, and friends.

Rosy commented on how she exercises self-control and copes with stress by absorbing herself in her studies: “When I felt very stressed, I always channeled my mind into my work and took more effort to forget everything that made me stressed.”

In this study, Sophie was the only participant who witnessed a traumatic event that caused emotional distress. She admitted that for many months she dared not look at the building across the way from her home where the suicide occurred. Sophie also said that after the incident she sometimes dreamt of jumping to her death from a building. She explained how she was able to cope with the emotional distress she suffered after the event and eventually overcome her fear:

Later on, I decided to face my fear. I told myself that everyone must die and it is just a matter of time. In the daytime, I pulled the curtain and looked at that building. I told myself that Okay, Sophie, I need to be familiar with that view, and I must decondition the effects of that suicide event. It was like I forced myself to get rid of fear, using the ideas of Pavlov’s classical conditioning theory. Now, this memory was no longer a bitter one.

Participants in this study demonstrated self-control when faced with challenging situations during their study abroad experience in China. They knew how to effectively and efficiently handle stressful events. Their statements depicted self-control as an essential skill for overcoming stressful events and obstacles.

Endurance and Persistence

All participants in this study attested to their own experiences enduring adversity, overcoming obstacles, and progressing toward their goals. Ame averred: “I never thought to give up my study here. No one urged me to go to study abroad. It was just my choice.”

Similarly, Rosy also decisively declared her conviction to persevere in her studies:

My sole aim of coming here was to complete a Ph.D. degree and contribute to my country. Why I give up! Even though I encountered many obstacles on my academic way, I tried to remove them and continue my work.

Despite many difficulties, they continued to pursue their academic goals without hesitation as Sophie attested:

When I felt stressed, I wanted to give up my study. But this thought did not last long. I did nothing special to get rid of it. I just sat in silence and sang a song. Then, I braced myself by saying that I must complete my Ph.D. anyhow

Based on their responses, participants in this study resolved themselves not to give up on their academic goals. They appeared to be emotionally strong and determined to complete their Ph.D. programs.

(b) *Extrinsic Factors Affecting Their Resilience*

Social Environment

Family

Although some research has found that international students carry parents' expectations when they study abroad, most participants in this study did not discuss family involvement as a factor in continuing their studies. Only one participant, Sophie, described the importance of family support in helping her reach her academic goals:

I always made video calls with my family members every night, especially my mother and my little sister. Whenever I felt disappointed in something here, I always told my sister. She was like my friend. She always helped, comforted me, and could give good advice.

Friends

Participants in this study stated that during their academic program they received much support from their friends, especially those from their home country. On this topic of friendship, Sophie remarked: "I had many countrymates studying together at my university. One of them got close to me and became like my own sister. We were interdependent with each other and went through both good and hard times together."

Tresa also commented on the importance of her network of friends: "When I had a big problem and cannot move on if I cannot solve it, I often tried to consult with my friends first because I thought they can understand my feelings."

Other participants stated that they usually told their friends about their difficulties, which helped relieve stress and anxiety. Ame explained how studying with classmates from her home country mitigated homesickness: "Studying together with many countrymates at the same university may be a kind of support. I did not feel lonely even though we were staying away from our families."

All participants usually utilized their in-country friend network to vent their stress and cope with the challenges of studying abroad.

Spirituality and Religious practices

Spirituality and religious practices are factors in helping people deal with adversity and attain resilience. Tresa discussed her own religious practices:

When things did not go in their way, I worshipped our Lord Buddha. It was like I left it for God to solve and let Him find the way for me because I did not know what to do and how to go on.

Ame commented on how religion and meditation help her cope with stress: "For me, I got more involved in religious habits than usual whenever I felt stressed. I worshipped to Buddha, followed His teachings, and meditated to calm me down."

Rosy also described how her religion informs how she lives her life:

According to our religious belief (Buddha's teachings), being a human is a rare and invaluable thing in the world. Every person might die in a short time. So, we should forget bad memories, live happily, and do for the good of the world and humans as much as we can.

All participants in the study engaged every day. They believed that their religion supports them and helps them to improve their confidence.

DISCUSSION

Findings showed that female Burmese international students in China mostly encountered language and academic problems that caused psychological distress. All participants in this study encountered both English and Chinese language difficulties. At the beginning of their studies, they had limited proficiency in listening and speaking English, although they had high proficiency in reading and writing. Hnin (2017) also consistently found that Burmese students were not strong in listening and speaking English, but had confidence and proficiency in reading and writing (p.25). Although the Chinese language is less of a barrier in the academic context, it was a significant challenge for Burmese international students when communicating with people in the local community, such as in shopping and clinical settings. Ding's (2016) study on international students studying in China also found that they would encounter significant difficulty communicating in public settings if they could only speak English as a foreign language (p.14). Lack of proficiency in speaking the local language is a big challenge that makes international students feel stressed and insecure when living in a community in a foreign country (Lee, 2017; Nwokedi & Khanare, 2020). It has been found to have a detrimental effect on cross-cultural adaptation (Hsiaowen & Chang, 2011).

When international students transition to a new academic environment, they often experience different teaching-learning styles and curriculum gaps. All participants in this study faced each kind of academic problem despite their different majors. Students majoring in science encountered some difficulties in doing experiments such as lack of foundational knowledge; less exposure to specific machines and their differences, and limited involvement from their faculty advisor during the research process. A student majoring in education, on the contrary, rarely faced this problem. Only one participant stated that she and her supervisor had some arguments in choosing her dissertation topic.

Participants in this study often faced stress, anxiety, and depression. Interestingly, unlike previous studies (Ding, 2016; Zhu & Ma, 2011), the psychological distress they experienced was caused by academic problems rather than other typical stressors such as social relationships. When they faced difficulties in their academic work, they felt anxious about whether they would be able to reach their academic goals.

Factors contributing to the participants' resilience during their study abroad experience were also explored in this study. In an intercultural context, a person needs to possess internal strengths and also leverage environmental or external factors to become a resilient person. Participants reported that the intrinsic factors facilitating their resilience were optimism, goal-setting, self-confidence, self-control, endurance, and perseverance.

Optimism contributes to international students' ability to bounce back from adverse circumstances that arise when adjusting to a new environment. Participants in this study shared the optimistic belief that problems are just temporary and every success that is born from adversity is valuable. Even when suffering from physical and mental problems, they remained hopeful about achieving their academic goals. ODR (2001) stated optimism as a characteristic of resilience and people who view the world optimistically can see opportunities in a difficult situation; find solutions to problems, and create positive change (p.4). From the results of this study, it can be concluded that female, Burmese, international students possessed an optimistic view of the challenges they faced in adjusting to a new environment.

Goal-setting is essential to be a resilient person (Colzato, Szapora, Pannekoek, & Hommel, 2013). Resilient students have clear and realistic goals (Leak, 2003). All participants in this study reported their dreams about their academic goals and their eagerness to serve their country. Moreover, they affirmed that they have the responsibility and commitment to endure and solve every problem they encounter because they chose to study abroad. Their goals seem to remind them to not give up easily on their studies despite many challenges in the academic setting.

Although goal-setting is crucial in academic success, the self-belief that one can accomplish those goals has been found to be more important (Cavazos et al., 2010). Participants in this study considered self-confidence to be an essential tool to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their academic goals. Moreover, they believed that they are capable of creating the life that they want. Leak (2003) found that resilient students felt that they were successful because they opted to work hard to accomplish their academic aims (p.32). They felt good about their abilities and prospects and gave credit to themselves.

Moreover, self-control facilitates the process of cultural adjustment and achievement of academic goals for international students. Resilient people believe that their internal and external worlds are controllable (Kumpfer, 1999). This sense of control allows them to maintain order and structure in their lives. In this study, participants revealed that they could control themselves to overcome physical and mental problems that emerged inside and outside the academic setting in their daily life. Moreover, they claimed that self-control was an essential skill to overcome stressful events and achieve their goals. They handled their problems in various ways, such as recalling good memories; channeling their efforts into their work; and motivating or encouraging themselves.

Other internal characteristics possessed by participants in this study were endurance and persistence. Gandara (1995) argued that hard work, effort, and persistence play a more vital role than intelligence in academic achievement (p. 83). In this study, participants could withstand difficult situations studying and living in China without feeling discouraged or demoralized. Despite many challenges, they did not falter and persevered to reach their goal.

Extrinsic factors, such as perceived social support and spirituality, and religious practices, were also featured in this study. There is a strong link between resilience and perceived social support because the latter contributes to one's ability to navigate adversity (Pidgeon et al., 2014). Moreover, people with high levels of social support have been found to be 40 percent to 60 percent more resilient than those with low levels of social support (Herrman et al., 2011). Aligning with the findings of Sabouripour and Roslan (2015), participants in this study described how social support helped them deal with their academic and emotional problems. Interestingly, most of them acknowledged that they received much social support, especially from their friends but not necessarily from their families.

Previous studies have found that people cope with difficulties more effectively when they have someone with whom they can share their daily struggles (Garmezy, 1991). Having friends with the same academic and social values has empowered international students to achieve their goals (Mullen, 2008). Similarly, participants in this study embraced opportunities to seek out support from their friends. They usually only vented to their friends, especially their home-country peers at the same university, rather than their friends back in Myanmar. Moreover, they consulted their friends when trying to solve problems in both their personal and academic life. Indeed, having a network of home country peers at the same university can be a valuable support to international students during their study abroad experience.

Religion and spirituality played a role as resilience factors in helping people deal with adversity (Ellison et al., 2009; Javanmard, 2013); Sossou et al., 2008). All participants in this study possessed a strong religious orientation and valued their involvement in practicing spirituality. Worshiping and praying to Buddha is a habitual practice for them. However, most of them became more active in their religious activities when faced with adversity. They followed the teachings of Buddha; put them into practice in their daily lives; and meditated when they felt stressed. They believed that such practices calmed their mind and helped them deal with difficulties. It seems that religious teachings instill a moral compass, self-reliance, and an optimistic outlook on life; they helped participants in this study realize the value of life and karma. Moreover, the religious foundation helped them to become resilient people who can endure and overcome difficulties in their daily lives.

In conclusion, the female, Burmese, international students in this study were optimistic about the world; had self-confidence and believed in themselves; and possessed future academic orientation. Moreover, they could control themselves to stay focused on achieving their academic goals without hesitating or feeling demoralized by challenges. These intrinsic factors contributed to their persistence in continuing their degrees at Normal University in China. In terms of extrinsic factors, they received social support from their friends and strength from their religious beliefs. These results highlighted that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors significantly helped international students to be resilient. McMillan and Reed (1994) also claimed that the development of resilience involves a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The results from this study suggest that international students need to cultivate their internal strengths; seek involvement in a social network and respective religion; find additional incentives to motivate them to work on areas of concern to raise their resilience level.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

There may be three limitations in this study. The first one was a small sample size. This study explored the perspectives of only four international students. If future studies involve more participants than this study, they may yield a more generalized figure related to factors affecting resilience.

Secondly, this study was conducted only on international students studying at a university in China. Each culture has its barometer for measuring traumatic life events (Smith, 1985). Therefore, what is stressful in one culture or to one individual will not necessarily be distressing to another. Moreover, factors influencing resilience can vary according to the different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds of a participant group. If future studies are conducted in other countries with different cultural contexts, other kinds of problems and factors affecting resilience may appear.

Finally, this study chose only scholarship students as participants. Other types of students such as self-financed students, students who are taking loans and paying some, if not all, of the cost of their education and working simultaneously while studying, may experience more pressure to succeed. Future researchers should choose self-financed international students as their participants to receive different information about the problems and factors contributing to resilience during a study abroad experience.

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