Empirical Article



Volume 17, Issue 1 (2025), pp. XXX-XXX

Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education

Online | https://ojed.org/jcihe

**Culture Difference: Perceptions of Student Engagement of Chinese International Graduate Students at a Canadian University**

Meng Xiao\*

\*Corresponding Author: Meng Xiao Email: meng.xiao@mail.utoronto.ca

Address: *Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada*, University of Toronto,

**Abstract**

*This article provides the perspectives of Chinese international graduate students about student engagement while attending a university in Canada. The prominent Western perception of student engagement in Canadian universities emphasizes student-oriented and active-participation to hopefully enhance student academic success and better social engagement. However, this Western perspective fails to recognize the broader perceptions of student engagement from a global perspective. The Confucian perspective of student engagement highlights teacher-oriented and deep-thinking engagement through academic achievement and exam-oriented activities. This study found that the student and staff participants have varied perceptions of student engagement based on their prior experiences and cultural backgrounds. However, these different ways of perceiving student engagement are not well acknowledged in Canadian higher education. Chinese international graduate students need to understand the different perceptions of student engagement between Western and Confucian cultures, and they need to enhance their student engagement based on their experiences and cultural backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** student engagement, cultural differences, Chinese international students

**Introduction**

 Internationalization of higher education institutions represents a significant shift from national and local frames to a cross-national global scale (Buckner, 2017). Impacted by the internationalization of higher education, English-speaking education exporting countries have been actively engaged in recruiting international students on a large scale. According to Government of Canada (2019), international students in Canada spent an estimated $21.6 billion on tuition, accommodations, and other expenses in 2018. A total of 721,205 international students at all levels studied in Canada in 2018, which is the largest number ever. The diversification of culture and population in Canada has made Canada attractive to Chinese international students for pursuing high-quality education (Xiang, 2017). The 2019– 2024 Canada’s International Education Strategy (Government of Canada, 2019) aims to make Canada welcoming diverse communities and diversify the countries from which international students come to Canada, as well as their fields, levels, and location of study within Canada.

With the landscape of internationalization, the number of Chinese international students pursuing their graduate study has rapidly increased each year globally (Calder et al., 2016; Li, 2017; Xiang, 2017). Chen (2007) reported Chinese students choose Canadian universities for many reasons, including high-quality programs, affordability, and the perception of Canada as safe and peaceful. The percentage of Chinese international students increased by 886% from 2000 to 2015 and represented one quarter of Canada’s international student population in 2018 (Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), 2019).

In Canadian universities, international student enrolments increased by 11,196 from 2015–2016 to 2016–2017. This was led by higher numbers of international students from both China and India. In 2017, the largest number of international students in Canadian university programs was from China (CBIE, 2019).

This rapid growth of Chinese international students in Canada warrants the examination of their experiences in Canadian schooling and their engagement matters to Canadian post-secondary education. Thus, it is important to raise the awareness among professors, student affairs staff, and student services of the Chinese international students’ perspectives towards their engagement in university graduate schools including such issues as how they understand student engagement and what challenges they have been facing. This acknowledgment will empower those students’ experiences in Canada and initiate support from Canadian institutions and policy practices.

**Literature Review**

The dominant approach of perceiving the notion of student engagement characterizes this notion as a way of engagement impacted by Western cultural norms. According to Grabke (2013), strong student engagement can be defined, created, and improved by better student academic success and better social engagement experiences. Classroom engagement is a motivated behavior, referring to the interests of students in classroom learning including participation in group activities and class discussions (Liu et al., 2016). Social engagement practice consists of social involvement and a sense of community belonging (Adamuti-Trache & Sweet, 2010) that makes people feel connected and engaged. Scheurs and Dumbraveanu (2014) highlighted the importance of social engagement, student voice, and active involvement in and out of the classroom in Canadian education.

Social engagement plays a significant role in student engagement in North America. According to Grabke (2013), strong student engagement can be defined, created, and improved by better student academic success and better social engagement experiences. Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) also indicated three measures of student engagement: social, academic, and intellectual. They argued that social engagement includes the quantity of school clubs that students participate in and the sense of belonging students feel regarding their relations to their peers and schools. Social engagement consists of social involvement and a sense of community belonging (Adamuti-Trache & Sweet, 2010) that makes people feel connected and engaged.

However, the perception of student engagement in China, strongly affected by Chinese educational values, highlights the significance of academic engagement. According to Ryan (2010), there are essential differences between Western and Confucian academic values towards academic engagement. According to traditional Confucian academic values, academic engagement requires students to follow the master and respect the teachers on teaching and learning (Chung, 2021; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). This academic engagement reflects a strong hierarchical teacher-student relationship (Li, 2017). Teachers provide lecture-based communication, indicating that teachers have absolute authority; students receive this knowledge and avoid challenging teachers’ authority. Student engagement, from a Chinese lens, requires students to follow the master and respect the teachers to engage in and out of the classroom, reflecting a strong hierarchical teacher-student relationship (Chung, 2021). This engagement reflects that Chinese students are encouraged to replicate the lecture of instructors instead of presenting their own understanding in academic assignments (Jin, 2017).

Those different interpretations of perceiving student engagement are reflected in different academic and social values illustrated in Canada and China. Some existing research showed the experiences of Chinese international students in Canadian post-secondary education, indicating a new understanding of student engagement based on those students’ encounters. Toward Chinese international student experiences, Xiao (2020) reported impacted by the dominant White culture and Canadian multiculturalism, Chinese international students face challenges towards cultural differences (Tsai, 2017; Wang, 2009; Xiang, 2017).

During the transitioning period, some international postgraduate students engaging at English universities including Canada still experienced depression, loneliness, anxiety, and stress due to cultural differences between their home country and Canada (Brown & Holloway, 2008). These cultural differences, including different languages and cultural perspectives, made them feel challenged and uncomfortable to orally and mentally engage in the schools and society in Canada. Even in a multicultural society, different cultural experiences were still not represented equally, and some of their cultural identities were still not represented because the Anglo western dominance of being and doing is still deeply preferred within Canadian multiculturalism.

Tsai (2017) pointed out an educational paradox of Chinese learners on student engagement. Intriguingly, those students, regarded as passive and shallow learners, learning by “reliance upon rote memorization were, in fact, are not only good but even deep and possibly superior learners” (Tsai, 2017, p. 49). The essential differences regarding Western and Confucian academic values as shown in Figure 1 indicate a Western positive and Eastern passive relationship towards engagement (Ryan, 2010).

**Figure 1**

*Differences in Western and Confucian Academic Values*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Western | Confucian |
| * Deep learners
 | * Surface or rote learners
 |
| * Independent learners
 | * dependence on the teacher
 |
| * Critical thinking
 | * “Follow the master”
 |
| * Student-centered learning
 | * Respect for the teacher
 |
| * Adversarial stance
 | * Harmony
 |
| * Argumentative learners
 | * Passive learners
 |
| * Achievement of the individual
 | * Achievement of the group
 |
| * Constructing new knowledge
 | * Respect for historical text
 |

Figure 1. Western versus Confucian academic values (Ryan, 2010, p. 43)

Mukminin and McMahon (2013) stated that lack of confidence leads students to be afraid of engaging in class discussions. Acting as obstacles to asking questions of others and comprehending lectures, some Chinese students have been facing language barriers because of lacking confidence to speak the language in and out of the classroom because they feel they are not fluent enough in English. “The feelings of lack of confidence and experience made it difficult to actively engage in delivering their academic assignments due to their cultural influences and limited English ability” (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013, p. 8).

Overall, student engagement is perceived as positively involved in and out of the classroom in Western schooling while the perception of student engagement in China focuses on the compliance engagement of following teachers in academic settings highlighted by Chinese educational values. The Western perspective fails to recognize the broader social and cultural inclusivity and diversities of student engagement. Specifically, Chinese international graduate students in Canada, who are situated within the Chinese and Canadian educational systems and deeply impacted by Chinese values and culture, have been stereotyped as less engaged in and out of the classroom in Canada schooling (Chung, 2021; Xiang, 2017). As described by Xiao (2020), Chinese students’ silent behavior in class as a concern of wasting others’ time or as a way to show respect are regarded as lack of engagement or as a concern in the class.

Lai (2016) stated that while Asian culture encouraged learners to observe what is going on in class first and then show what they do, this does not mean that Asian learners lack critical thinking skills or the willingness to engage. These misunderstandings based on cultural difference and language barriers such as Asian learners’ lack of critical thinking skills have been impacting how the engagement of Chinese international students is perceived.

Framing the engagement integration of Chinese international students into Canadian graduate programs, those Chinese international students’ perceptions of student engagement and their needs for better student experience need to be examined. With the cross-cultural understanding of Chinese and Canadian education and values, this study particularly explored the cultural challenges faced by Chinese international students as they engage in Canadian higher education. Given the magnitude of current global challenges facing Chinese international student engagement, the research questions the Western ways of understanding Chinese student engagement and how student engagement is perceived by Canadian university students and staff in Canadian higher education. The results of this study can help Western institutions become aware of the features of Chinese international student engagement in Canadian higher education and a broader understanding of student engagement. Thus, those institutions can have a more inclusive academic environment and offer better community support to Chinese international students in order to assist their engagement based on a better understanding of their cultural experiences in and out of the classroom.

**Methodology**

Although the international undergraduate student experience has been studied extensively, there is little research about Chinese students’ engagement in Canadian graduate schools. This study generated a better understanding about Chinese graduate students’ engaging experience in their graduate life that relates to the particular context of Western schools. Based on the qualitative data examining the lived experiences of these students, the present study tries to generate a better understanding about Chinese graduate students’ engaging experience impacted by cultural differences in the particular context of Canadian schools.

The study examines both in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences of Chinese international graduate students with regard to cultural differences. A case study approach was used to provide insight into the perspectives of current Canadian graduate schools in terms of equity and inclusive education policy enactment, and into the perspectives of students, teachers, and university administrative professionals in university communities. This can help enhance the engagement of prospective Chinese international students in Canadian graduate schools. The interviews in this case study were designed to explore the level of Chinese international graduate students’ engagement in a Canadian graduate school based on interviewees’ own perceptions and experiences.

According to Gelling (2015), qualitative research is appropriate for an exploratory study to examine the experiences of a particular group of students who share their own experience in their own words. Qualitative research helps investigators understand social and cultural experiences, learning and practicing experiences, as well as the factors that impact these experiences. This qualitative study has adopted a case study approach of providing “tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.544). Throughout the phenomenon under the investigation, the case study was selected as the research method. According to Creswell (2013), case study research involves studying a case within “a real life, contemporary context settings” (p. 99), and exploring research questions illustrated by “how” and “why.”

The interviews in this case study were designed to explore the level of Chinese international graduate students’ engagement in Canadian graduate schools based on interviewees’ own perceptions and experiences toward cultural differences. Chinese international graduate students, the staff in their departments, and central university staff were asked to share their stories and experiences of their perceptions of student engagement in a Canadian university. A convenience sample of twelve interviewees, including six students, three student service staff from three various graduate faculties, and three central university staff in an urban university were selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity in this study. The reason for interviewing participants from various faculties and departments was to increase the diversity of opinions based on students’ experiences in different faculties and departments, especially since different disciplines offer different programs and activities.

The interviews in this study took place at an urban university in Canada. This site was selected because it has the largest number of Chinese international graduate students in Canada. To ensure that the participants could effectively help to explore Chinese graduate students’ engagement in Canada and the socio-cultural factors that affect their participation, the participants were selected through the following strategies.

1. The participants of this study were ethnic Chinese who were born and grew up in Mainland China before they began their studies in Canada. Chinese students who were born and received their education in Canada were excluded from the study.
2. The participants of this study have earned a post-secondary degree in Mainland China before they began their studies in Canada. Additionally, those who had any form of relationship with the investigator were excluded.
3. When they began their graduate study in Canada, the participants had not studied in Western graduate schools before and must have had no previous learning and practicing experience in Canada, North America, or other English-speaking countries. This recruitment criterion is important, because international students including Chinese English as a Second Language students may change their engagement styles after exposure to Western culture and education system (Smith & Smith, 1999).

The recruitment process started by placing posters strategically around campus and by sending emails to Chinese international graduate students and staff. The emails of participation confirmation were sent to six interested students and six staff through their e-mail addresses provided. Eventually, the participants were recruited through e-mail responses.

For the sake of confidentiality and to protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms are used. The names of the female-identified, male-identified, and queer-identified international student participants will be substituted with IF1, IF2, IF3, IF4, IM1, IQ1, while the female-identified and male-identified student service staff participants will be described as SF1, SF2, SM1, SM2, SM3, SM4. For student participants, IF1 is a profession-based Master’s parent student with social science background from Education, and IQ1 is a research-based Ph.D. student with social science background from Education; IF2 and IM1 are profession-based master’s students with science background from Engineering; IF3 is a profession-based Master’s student with business background; and IF4 is a research-based Ph.D. student with business background. For student service staff participants, SF1 is from Business; SF2 is from the graduate school; SM1 is from Education; SM2 is from Engineering; SM3 is from the International Student Center; and SM4 is from the student life services (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Participant Breakdown*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participants | Student/Staff | Program/Background | Research-based/Profession-based | Identity |
| IF1 | Student | Education | Profession-based, Master’s degree | Chinese; Female-identified; Parent Student |
| IQ1 | Student | Education | Research-based, Ph.D. | Chinese; Queer-identified |
| IF2 | Student | Engineering | Profession-based, MEng | Chinese; Female-identified |
| IM1 | Student | Engineering | Profession-based, MEng | Chinese; Male-identified |
| IF3 | Student | Business | Profession-based, MBA | Chinese; Female-identified |
| IF4 | Student | Business | Research-based, Ph.D. | Chinese; Female-identified |
| SF1 | Staff | Business |  | Non-Chinese; Female-identified |
| SF2 | Staff | Graduate Studies |  | Non-Chinese; Female-identified |
| SM1 | Staff | Education |  | Chinese Canadian; Male-identified |
| SM2 | Staff | Engineering |  | Non-Chinese; Male-identified |
| SM3 | Staff | International Student Center |  | Non-Chinese; Male-identified |
| SM4 | Staff | Student Life Center |  | Non-Chinese; Male-identified |

In terms of the language adopted in the interview, all of the student participants were informed that they could speak either in Mandarin or English to answer the questions. All of the students choose to share their experience in English.

The interview of staff participants was in English because they were all English speakers. The one-on-one interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and each interview took approximately one hour.

In terms of the data collecting, Gelling (2015) stated that, although interviews are time-consuming in terms of scheduling, conducting, and analysis, they could provide rich data associated with individual’s experiences and relevant knowledge of the phenomena. Each interview in this study started with some basic questions such as basic participant information and their course and activities, and then they were asked to answer some questions regarding their perceptions and experiences towards student engagement in a Canadian graduate school. Finally, those participants were asked to share their own experiences and stories and then provide some suggestions for enhancing their student engagement regarding their experience.

Ethical approval to undertake this study was given by the university’s Research Ethics Board. Accordingly, the participants were informed of their rights to voluntary participation. The selected participants were informed of their rights including the fact that they could withdraw from the research at any time during the process, and also have the right to ask any questions with regards to the research.

**Results**

Cultural Difference in the Classroom

All of the student interviewees stated that how different cultures impact student engagement in the classroom. Their perceptions of student engagement in Chinese and Canadian education are different. With regard to Chinese education, the dominant relationship between teachers and students, teachers’ motivations, and parents’ expectations are highlighted in those participants’ experiences and perceptions.

According to Chinese culture, the importance of study in Chinese education is deeply rooted in most Chinese students’ minds. In general, IQ1 believed that, in Chinese education, study is the primary focus for most students and there is not a lot of student engagement outside of the classrooms. Similarly, IF2 shared her perspective that, before beginning their university career, the Chinese students’ engagement is guided by studying hard and getting good grades. It is the only thing that students care about. In university, student engagement depends on the goals of the student, especially what they want to do in the future.

The dominant relationship between teachers and students is highlighted in a Chinese classroom due to Chinese traditional hierarchical culture. IF3 strongly believed the cultural differences matter, noting:

Even when I was taking my undergraduate degree in China, in our classroom, we do not really speak very often. Usually, teachers give us the knowledge and we just write down the notes. So that is how we did in China. Here, we are still using that kind of way of learning to study our courses but putting it in a Canadian context. You will find that “Oh, professors valued class participation such a lot and even put credits on this aspect”. So it is a new thing for us.

IF3 highlighted how different cultures have impacted their perception of student engagement in different ways. Similarly, IF1 stated that, in the Chinese value system, students always respect teachers as authorities, do not question their teachers and professors, and do not take initiative to answer questions. Also, as IF4 mentioned:

From my perception of engagement in the primary school, I do not think there is any engagement. I think it is because China is very hierarchical where the school, the professor, or a teacher asks you what to do. I did not interact with my classmates a lot or with the teachers. You do not really talk about your experience. You can only do whatever they ask you to do.

For those current Chinese international grad students, IF4 explained:

[I]t is culture background where we are located. When you think of grad students, they were definitely over twenty years old, right? That means that they are getting their education maybe in the 1990s. At that time, I feel like the Chinese culture is still a little bit conservative, not very encouraging for you to speak up. I think that is where most of the grad students that I know are now. We have a similar value that you listen to and respect your professors.

IF4 describes how Chinese graduate students perceive student engagement as teacher-oriented in a hierarchical educational system. One of the staff participants shared his perceptions of the teacher-oriented experience of Chinese international students:

[In] China, lecturing or teaching [is] usually in one way, and they are expected to kind of listen. This is what they told me. I do not know if it is true or not. They also said that when students are expected to challenge and ask questions and engage in classroom, which was new for them. So that is something that they have to adjust to. So that is something that they probably found a challenge initially.

 In terms of engaging in the classroom in China, IF1 opined that the parents’ expectations need to be taken into consideration. The other two important factors are the teachers’ motivation and the learners’ self-regulation. Engagement is a physical requirement or duty but it does not mean the learners feel engaged in building knowledge.

 Compared to Chinese education, all of the student participants believed that there are many different ways of perceiving student engagement in Canadian education. We need to hear the voice of international students and empower their experience based on their needs and freedom in Canadian education. As IF1 mentioned:

I think students here are much more not open-minded but at least open mouth. I mean they know how to engage and they feel authorized to participate the class and feel free to share their ideas no matter right or wrong. However, I do not think all answers that they give could be regarded as open-minded or excellent, but we can choose whatever we need.

IF1 stated how these students in Canada make their voice heard and empower their own experiences through their engagement. Similarly, IQ1 shared his opinion of in-classroom engagement, believing that, in Canada, there is definitely more freedom in terms of what a student can say in class and can connect with other people who are open-minded. IF4 opined that the Canadian educational system encourages students to have their voices on student classroom engagement. She held the opinion that at least the classrooms really encourage students to participate and at least there is a lot of acknowledge and encouragement for you to do community activities. Acknowledgement and encouragement of those international student experiences can play an important role to improve their engagement.

 Two student participants shared some other perspectives of their engagement in Canadian classroom based on the differences between Chinese and Canadian education and culture. IF3 shared her experience of student engagement in a different culture:

I would say my behaviors are actually the same, no matter in China or in Canada…. But obviously, people here are more outgoing…. So I feel in terms of the perception of student engagement, I am less engaged in the Canadian context compared to the Chinese context. But I am pretty sure that how I did was exactly the same thing.

IF4 also noted that students may engage in the classroom based on their different culture. She explained that her personality and Chinese cultural background led her to feel uncomfortable to engage by asking questions or interrupting in seminars because she is afraid to speak, especially where there is a speaker and many people. In China, interrupting can be regarded as disrespect; in Canada, it can be seen as engaging in the conversation.

 Comparing cultural differences in China and Canada, IF1 held a positive opinion about the challenges associated with her classroom engagement in Canadian graduate life. As she said:

In my cohort, I am the only international student and the only student from China, which means I had no one to talk with after class in my familiar mother tongue. Even worse, I do experience some cultural shock or cultural differences at the beginning, but up to I adapted the situation, I found it is OK to make mistakes.

Similarly, IF4 believed cultural differences have changed the way that she engages in classroom.

As I said, because of my personality, but also because of my background. I was always scared to speak, especially do seminars where there is a speaker and a lot of people. I do not know about the culture here, but they interrupt speakers during their talk. So as soon as you have questions, you just interrupt…. That really makes me very uncomfortable, but I think now I am getting used to it. I feel I have to do it myself. I think that really changed me.

Cultural Difference out of the Classroom

Five of the six student participants highlighted how different cultures impact student engagement out of the classroom. Those five participants shared the common opinion that cultural differences influence their engagement out of the classroom, but two student participants thought that it negatively affects and three that it positively affects. For example, IM1 opined that the culture differences meant that he did not know how to behave in front of his foreign friends because he was worried about the lack of some special skills and not having the same cultural background to engage in the communities. IQ1 shared his perspectives as an international student toward out-of-classroom engagement, highlighting the new cultural unfamiliarity because of cultural differences negatively impacting his engagement in the community:

 [Y]ou come here and feel everything is new. You are not familiar with a lot of things. So fear and anxiety like the emotional mental health factors do influence how I engage. A lot of things that I do not know, and a lot of ways of doing things I do not know. So sometimes I will hear people complain about racism and they are asked about where they are from. That is a racist question but I always think I am not the only person to feel this way. I have talked a lot of people who are also new immigrants. So one thing they think about it that I am not from here. So what if you are not from here but you are still here?

IQ1’s experience of student engagement has been negatively impacted by his cultural identity and new cultural unfamiliarity. Similarly, one staff participant (SM2) gave his perspective on cultural unfamiliarity that may lead those students to be hesitant to try different things. He suggested that, if there were events specifically catering to Chinese students then maybe that might be more appealing to them. He noted:

Let us say a yoga event, and that maybe too general for them who may be too shy, but if there was a yoga event hosted by a Chinese club, maybe they are more willing to attend that because they might be more familiar with people who might speak the same language or may be of the same culture. Eventually, once you get familiar there, maybe you become more adventurous to go outside instead of just going to the specifically Chinese hosted events. They can go to do other things.

However, the different understanding of new cultural unfamiliarity can have a different impact on Chinese international graduate students perceiving student engagement in a positive way as strengthening their engaging experience. IF1 held a different opinion viewing cultural difference.

I found the problem in and out of the classroom is the same. Because we had to, in term of these challenges, recognize these differences. We have the different cultural ideology, but it does not mean we are in fearing to the western ideology. We can take the positive attitude to see through the challenges to take every chance to learn. Taking challenges as the opportunities can help us to grow. Also, we can take part in those community programs because people are really nice and would like to share.

Similarly, IF2 believed the cultural challenge is not really a big problem for her because she thinks from diverse perspectives, and she always can understand people’s different behaviors. IF4 shared her own experience that, at the beginning, she was somewhat afraid to talk to her advisors about things other than her research but now she’s better because she knows them better and feels less guarded.

**Discussion**

All student interviewees mentioned that cultural differences play a crucial role in classroom engagement. They believed that there are many different ways of perceiving student engagement in Canadian education, but students interpreted student engagement perceptions based on their experience of engaging in Canadian graduate schools. Different perceptions of student engagement and student’s voice based on their cultural multiple identities have been highlighted in Canadian education in this study. For example, how to rethink, engage, and take advantage of those cultural differences based on their cultural identities can be positive experiences of Chinese international graduate students in Canadian higher education. This finding supports the studies of Grabke (2013) and Scheurs and Dumbraveanu (2014), highlighting the importance of social engagement, student voice, and active involvement in and out of the classroom in Canadian education.

In previous studies, the Western educational values reflect better student engagement as positive interactions (Grabke, 2013; Jin, 2017), while Chinese culture embodies student engagement as passive interactions (Tsai, 2017; Xiang, 2017). Those Chinese international students whose different interactions can be misunderstood as passive engagement and whose silent engagement may not be well acknowledged in the western schooling. Depending on their programs and development in Canadian schools, some Chinese students need to push themselves to be positively engaged in classroom discussion and actively engaged in this study. However, Chinese education, to some extent, encourages students to be silent and follow the teachers, which leaves them feeling uncomfortable, lacking confidence to offer their opinions, and being afraid and shamed of making mistakes in Canadian classrooms.

In this study, their teacher-oriented ways and other different ways of understanding student engagement have been challenged and not well recognized in the student-oriented and active-participating environment in Western contexts. Moreover, this is coherent with the statement’s Chinese international students’ engagement are misunderstood as ways of lower and passive engagement (Grabke, 2013; Tsai, 2017; Xiang, 2017; Xiao, 2020).

In this study, the stories of some Chinese international student participants indicated that they or their Chinese peers might be more silent and lack confidence in a new and unfamiliar culture. In this way, those students may need time for their transition to the Canadian ways of engagement. It is consistent with the finding of Mukminin and McMahon (2013) showing that Asian students usually are humbler and quieter in and out of the classroom. In previous studies, the Western behavioral dimensions highlighting student participation in school and extra-curricular activities and the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered environment may cause the maladaptation among Chinese international graduate students who are deeply impacted by the Chinese traditional lecture-oriented approach when they study in Canadian universities (Xiao, 2020; Zhao, 2018).

Although it is common for Western behavioral dimensions to highlight student engagement in the classroom and in the extra-curricular activities, the perceptions of student engagement need to be broader. Chinese international graduate students’ peception of engagement is more teacher-oriented while the Western perception of engagement is more verbal and student-oriented. Those different perceptions should be learned by students and their commuties. In this way, Chinese international graduate students can determine a more suitable form of engaging in their schools in Canada to gain better student experience based on their differentiated needs and the support of their communities. Western institutions need to build their awareness of the features of Chinese international student engagement in Canadian graduate schools and a broader understanding of student engagement socially and culturally. Those institutions need to have a more inclusive academic and social-cultural environment and offer better faculty, staff, peer, and community support to Chinese international students’ better learning and practicing experiences in and out of the classroom.

**Conclusion**

This study examined how student engagement is perceived in Canadian and Chinese cultural contexts and educational system due o cultural differences. It explored how Chinese international graduate students’ engagement has been less acknowledged by Canadian higher education. Regarding the level of Chinese international graduate students’ engagement in this study’s Canadian university, this study explored how Chinese international graduate students peceive student engagement and how the Western culture defines student engagement. Their perceptions should be learned by students and their communities. First, this study advocates for a more inclusive lens of perceiving student engagement. Given the focus of this research on the Chinese international student engagement in Canadian graduate schools, Chinese international graduate students’ different cultural experiences have been highlighted in terms of better understanding those students’ experiences in Canadian higher education. Impacted by Confucian culture and Chinese educational values, student engagement in and out of the classroom in the Chinese context reflects the significance of academic achievement, the dominant teacher-student relationship, the high expectations of Chinese parents, and the exam-oriented motivation of students (Tsai, 2017).

Second, throughout questioning these dominant perceptions of student engagement, this study indicated the perception of student engagement now presents a Western ideological understanding on student engagement, which is more student-oriented and values oral engagement in the classroom and visual engagement out of the classroom. However, Chinese international graduate students perceive student engagement as being more teacher-oriented in academic engagement in and out of the classroom. These different cultural perceptions of student engagement should be acknowledged, and these differences and similarities should be learned by students and their peers, faculty members, university staff, institutional leaders, and communities. This study shows how Western perspectives on student engagement can impact Chinese international graduate students’ experience. Thus, how to create a more inclusive environment for non-western students including those international students will begin to make a change.

The importance of supporting international students based on their cultural-ignored needs and sense of belonging in their transitioning period is shown in this study. Institutions in Canadian higher education need to establish learning and practicing system and create a respectful environment in and out of the classroom to effectively meet international students’ needs to address the inherent tension that is set up for those students to fail. Students, their faculty, university staff, and communities need to be aware of and acknowledge different perceptions of student engagement to better support educational experiences of Chinese international graduate students in Canadian higher education. The results of this study can help the faculty, university staff, institutional leaders, and communities in the Western universities become better aware of the features of Chinese international student engagement in Canadian graduate schools and a broader perception of student engagement. With the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) across the globe at the beginning of 2020, online learning has resulted in big challenges for international education worldwide. Canadian higher education can offer a more inclusive academic and social-cultural environment and offer better peer, faculty, staff, and community support to Chinese international students’ better learning and practicing experiences in and out of the classroom in the post COVID-19 era.

**References**

Adamuti-Trache, M., & Sweet, R. (2010). Adult immigrants’ participation in Canadian education and training. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 22*(2), 1–26.

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The qualitative report*, *13*(4), 544-559.

Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008). The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An ethnographic study. *Journal of research in International Education*, *7*(2), 232-249.

Buckner, E. S. (2017). The changing discourse on higher education and the nation-state, 1960– 2010. *Higher Education, 7*4(3), 473–489.

Calder, M. J., Richter, S., Mao, Y., Kovacs Burns, K., Mogale, R. S., & Danko, M. (2016). International students attending Canadian universities: Their experiences with housing, finances, and other issues. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *46*(2), 92–110.

Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2019). *International students in Canada*. https://cbie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/International-Students-in-Canada-ENG.pdf

Chen, L.H. (2007). Choosing Canadian graduate schools from afar: East Asian students’ perspectives. *Higher Education*, *54*(5), 759–780.

Chung, J. H. J. (2021). “We participate, silently”: Explicating Thai university students’ perceptions of their classroom participation and communication. *Qualitative Research in Education*, *10*(1), 62–87.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

Government of Canada. (2019). *Build on success: International education strategy (2019–2024)*. https://www.international.gc.ca/education/assets/pdfs/ies-sei/Building-on-Success-International-Education-Strategy-2019-2024.pdf

Gelling, L. (2015). Qualitative research. *Nursing Standard (2014+)*, *29*(30), 43.

Grabke, S. (2013). *Institutional strategies and factors that contribute to the engagement of* *recent*

 *immigrant adult students in* *Ontario post-secondary education*. Unpublished Doctoral

Dissertation, York University.

Jin, J. (2017). Students’ silence and identity in small group interactions. *Educational Studies*, *43*(3), 328–342.

Lai, C. (2016). The ideas of “educating” and “learning” in Confucian thought. *Chinese Philosophy on Teaching and Learning: Xueji in the Twenty-First Century*, 77-96.

Li, E. (2017). The" Chinese Learner": A Historical and Cultural Biography. *SFU Educational Review*, *10*(1).

Liu, C. C., Wang, P. C., & Tai, S. J. D. (2016). An analysis of student engagement patterns in language learning facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies. *ReCALL: the Journal of EUROCALL*, *28*(2), 104.

Mukminin, A., & McMahon, B. J. (2013). International Graduate Students' Cross-Cultural Academic Engagement: Stories of Indonesian Doctoral Students on an American Campus. *Qualitative Report*, *18*, 69.

Ryan, J. (2010). ‘The Chinese learner’: Misconceptions and realities. *International education and the Chinese learner*, 37–56.

Scheurs, J., & Dumbraveanu, R. (2014). A shift from teacher centered to learner centered approach. *Learning, 1*, 2.

Smith, P. J., & Smith, S. N. (1999). Differences between Chinese and Australian students: some implications for distance educators. *Distance education*, *20*(1), 64-80.

Tsai, S. C. (2017). *East Asian Canadian graduated students, silent but engaged: A dialectical exploration of classroom learner speech in competing educational models*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Toronto.

Wang, F. (2009). Student experiences of English language training: A comparison of teaching in UK and Chinese contexts. *English Language Teaching*, *2*(3), 237–242.

Willms, J. D., Friesen, S., & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement. (first national report)*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506503.pdf

Xiang, B. (2017). Classroom engagement and participation among Chinese international graduate students: A case study.

Xiao, M. (2020). *Student Engagement: Chinese International Student Experiences in Canadian Graduate Schools* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.

Zhao, N., & McDougall, D. (2008). Cultural Influences on Chinese Students’ Asynchronous Online Learning in a Canadian University. *Journal of Distance Education*, *22*(2), 59–79.

Zhao, Y. (2018). *Student engagement in postsecondary English classes in China: The teachers' perspective*. Kansas State University.

**MENG XIAO,** EdD, is a researcher and practitioner at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. Dr. Xiao’s research focuses on student engagement and international education. meng.xiao@utoronto.ca