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Examining the Role of Theory in Qualitative Research: A Literature Review of Studies on Chinese International Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Scholars argue that higher education and international student research suffer from a lack of theoretical engagement, which is epistemologically limiting. This is troubling as theory frames research design and findings and pluralizes our understanding of a phenomenon. Given the large number of Chinese international students worldwide (and related research), this article uses them as an analytic example to understand the role of theories in shaping qualitative research designs, focuses, and findings. I reviewed 43 qualitative research articles on Chinese international students' experiences. Twenty-eight percent of the articles were found to lack theoretical engagement. When used, theories clustered around acculturation and sociocultural perspectives. Sixty percent of the articles foregrounded student challenges, as opposed to student agency or changes (40%). I discuss the consequences of a lack of theoretical engagement or diversity on how we understand and support international students, and conclude by urging scholars to increase, diversify, and generate theories as well as embrace cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary collaborations on research on international students.

Keywords: Chinese, higher education, international students, literature review, student mobility, theoretical framework

INTRODUCTION

International students play an important role in the internationalization of higher education. Internationalization has been defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery

of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11). Valued for the economic, cultural, and globalizing benefits they bring, international students are heavily recruited by higher education institutions as an expedient way to internationalize (Guo & Guo, 2017). Given this connection, research on international students and internationalization has been rapidly gaining ground over the past two decades (Bedenlier et al., 2018; Tight, 2018). The recurrence of "students" as a theme in internationalization research since 2007 (Bedenlier et al., 2018), for instance, highlights the centrality of international students in internationalization research. However, scholars have observed that the field of higher education, as with research on international students, is either deeply atheoretical or theoretically narrow, crippling the field's maturity and influence (Abdullah et al., 2014; Marginson et al., 2010; Ryan, 2011; Tight, 2004). In response to these observations, I conducted a literature review to examine in-depth the role theory plays in relation to research design and focus. I used qualitative research on Chinese international students' experiences as an analytic case, as this student population forms the largest source of international students worldwide, and there is a burgeoning body of associated research that I could leverage. Consequently, I argue for more engagement, explication, and diversification of theory in qualitative research on international students in higher education.

To set the context for this article, I begin by first defining theory, theoretical framework, and paradigm, as well as elaborating on the role of theory in research. Thereafter, I discuss empirical research examining the role of theory in higher education and international student research, before explaining why Chinese international students are adopted as an analytic case.

Role of Theory in Research

Maxwell (2005) defined theory in qualitative research as "a set of concepts and the proposed relationships among these, a structure that is intended to represent or model something about the world" (p. 42). This systematic structure of concepts to explain or predict a particular phenomenon guides researchers in thinking about the phenomenon studied and choice of methodologies (Merriam, 2002). Researchers beginning a study may hold a "tentative theory" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33) grounded in personal experiences or concepts from academic literature of the phenomena of investigation. From a tentative theory, a coherent assembly of relevant literature, concepts, and theories, woven in with assumptions, expectations, and beliefs, forms a theoretical framework. This framework drives a study through its justification, definition of research questions, selection of methods, identification of validity threats, and interpretation of findings (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Apart from framing research studies, understanding of phenomena or hypothesizing the validity of theories, theories can also be generated from empirical research. Grounded theory, for instance, is a popular methodology for generating theory through constant comparison and testing of emergent theories with data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

A theoretical framework is not to be confused with a literature review as the latter is a synthesis of major themes in the literature, lacking ideas that impart rigor into how problems, methods, and validity are to be understood (Rocco & Plakhotnik,

2009). While some have used the terms theoretical and conceptual frameworks interchangeably, Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) differentiated them by arguing that the former draws from specific theories with a goal toward its investigation, whereas the latter draws from a network of concepts relevant to the study's goals while in search of an emergent theory. For the purpose of this article, however, I use these terms interchangeably as the focus is on a broad interpretation of theory and its role in qualitative research.

Intimately related to a theoretical or conceptual framework is the paradigm within which a study is situated. A paradigm, or interpretive framework, is a complex interplay of a "researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). Indeed, this article is premised upon Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) argument that theoretical perspectives drive research goals, questions, methods, and findings, and are linked to a researcher's paradigm, which is in turn shaped by his or her personal history, sociocultural environment, and any other external influences. Embedded within a paradigm are assumptions around how and what we know, as well as the nature of being, and these assumptions are tied to fundamental beliefs and value systems (Kuhn, 1970).

By extension, educational research is value laden as it is influenced by a researcher's sense of what is useful or important. In turn, values influence how we construct, implement, and interpret our research (Lather, 1992; Pillow, 2003; Smith, 1983). Some values and beliefs are implicit and taken for granted, while others are explicit and contentious. Positionality statements included in qualitative research, for instance, foreground this nonneutral nature of knowledge development when researchers question how their identity shaped awareness, interpretations, and evaluations of the research approach or phenomenon investigated (Caelli et al., 2003). In the domain of social science research where the study of human society and relationships is "inseparably connected to our minds with all the attendant subjectivity, emotions, and values" (Smith, 1983, p. 5), I contend that absolute objectivity is elusive. Scholars have also cautioned that narrow adoption of paradigms in research can limit or skew understandings (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Marginson et al., 2010; Stein, 2017). Thus, I assume that a diversity of paradigms and positionalities in research are to be valued as they allow us to access multiple perspectives around the phenomena being researched. A pluralist stance acknowledges that we need to live with complexity and uncertainty, and that there are diverse forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that are situated within specific contexts (Andreotti et al., 2011). In short, these assumptions around the subjectivity of research and importance of diverse paradigms frame this article as I approach my literature review from a qualitative, interpretative, and pluralist stance.

Theory in Higher Education and International Student Research

Bedenlier et al. (2018) observed that market and institutional perspectives tend to dominate research on internationalization before 2007. Scholars have impressed on the need to diversify theoretical paradigms around internationalization beyond a market-based model, and suggested new paradigms—such as governance and regulation (Ramia et al., 2013), human security (Marginson et al., 2010),

transculturalism (Ryan, 2011), and decolonization (Stein, 2017)—to embrace. Changing patterns of student mobility, influenced by economic, political, technological, and institutional developments, likewise necessitate constant updating of theoretical paradigms. To illustrate, amidst increasing regional movements within higher education, Lee et al. (2017) observed that prevailing theoretical models of neo-racism and discrimination analyzing the treatment of ethnic minority international students from less developed, non-Western countries studying in more developed Western countries are insufficient in explaining the discrimination faced by Chinese international students in South Korea because of overlapping racial phenotype and cultural values. Instead, Lee et al. developed a newer theoretical paradigm—neo-nationalism—as it better explains discrimination around international students studying within similar geographic or economic development zones. Thus, the continuous evolution of international students' mobility and experiences in higher education spells a need to diversify and update theoretical paradigms.

Yet, scholars argue that a large amount of research in higher education can be construed as "atheoretical"—i.e., "without explicit description, review or re-examination or modification of theories/ concepts/ models/ paradigms in guiding the research or review concerned" (Abdullah et al., 2014, p. 244). Out of 406 articles reviewed from prominent higher education journals in 2000, Tight (2004) found that 58% of them were atheoretical, 16% showed some evidence of theory engagement, while 26% were explicit in theory engagement. Theory, when discussed, tended to be shallow, with minimal deep engagement or debates. In particular, research on themes like student experience in higher education, tended to exhibit the least theoretical engagement. Ryan's (2011) observation that research around teaching and learning for international students "lacks a conceptual framework to underpin and transform research and practice" (p. 638) echoes Tight's (2004) findings. Abdullah et al. (2014) found similar results: 66% out of the 497 journal articles on international students they reviewed over the past 30 years were classified as atheoretical. They attributed the atheoretical nature of research on international students to different reasons: First, higher education institutions view international students as being on the periphery and tend to see them as problems; consequently, this restricts their engagement and understanding of international students through different lenses. Next, the commodification of higher education results in a top-down or transactional approach that prevents more holistic and bottom-up ways of understanding international students. Relatedly, Tight (2004) observed that one plausible reason for the atheoretical nature of higher education research is an unbalanced privileging of evidence-based practice—in examining what works best, less emphasis is consequently directed to theory.

The lack of theoretical engagement in research of international students is troubling. Studies lacking engagement in theory may run into study-related issues like loss of focus (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). Field-related issues may include the omission of diverse perspectives (Stein, 2017), perpetuation of implicit bias (Heng, 2019), delay of a field's maturity (Kuhn, 1970), or restriction of findings to the local, rather than global (Abdullah et al., 2014). As such, one aim of this article is to update Tight (2004) and Abdullah et al.'s (2014) work by investigating the state of existing qualitative research on the experiences of Chinese international students in higher

education institutions through a review of literature. This scope is motivated by a desire to explore deeper descriptive details related to the use of theory in research to complement Tight (2004) and Abdullah et al.'s (2014) findings, as their studies tended to be high-level and synoptic. Another aim of this article is to provide an overview of the research landscape on Chinese international students' experiences, understand how theory has been used in this body of work, and explore its consequent implications. To this end, I conducted a literature review on Chinese international students in higher education.

Research on Chinese International Students

Chinese international students are used as an analytic example in this study as they constitute the largest proportion of international students worldwide and are the top source of international students in both traditional (e.g., Australia, the United Kingdom) and nontraditional destinations (e.g., Korea, Malaysia; UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). Perspectives of Chinese international students are not always positive as evident by the press's negative reports (Abelmann & Kang, 2014) and research's frequent portrayal of them as a "challenge" (Henze & Zhu, 2012, p. 91). The body of work around Chinese international students has bloomed to the extent that in an analysis of two decades of literature on internationalization in the *Journal of Studies in International Education*, "China" emerged as one of three name-like concepts (the others being "United States" and "Europe"; Bedenlier et al., 2018). Thus, this literature offers fertile ground for close analysis of how theory is engaged in international student research. Through a review of the literature on Chinese international students, I analyze how theory has been used and how it affects research design and focus.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

As Abdullah et al.'s (2014) research follows from Tight's (2004) and focuses squarely on international students, I took reference predominantly from the former's research approach and analytic framework. Abdullah et al. utilized 15 of Tight's higher education journals and included the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (*JSIE*). *JSIE* was included as it yielded a large number of articles, is established internationally in the field of international and higher education, and has a higher impact factor. A total of 16 higher education journals were searched and are listed in Table 1. I searched for research articles that involved more than 50% Chinese international students as participants to ensure findings are reflective of the dominant group. I also searched for articles focused on understanding Chinese international students' experiences (e.g., academic, emotional, language, social experiences, coping strategies) as Abdullah et al.'s (2014) research found that such a focus constituted more than half of international student research. Search keywords included, but were not limited to, "China," "Chinese," "international students," "experience" and "satisf*" (e.g., satisfaction). The search period was restricted to 2005 and 2017. As evident in Figure 1, the acceleration in outbound Chinese students occurred after 2002; given the time lag associated with the research and publication

process, I included articles from 2005 onward. At the time of writing this article, 2017 was the final year of inclusion as there was no outbound mobility data from China after 2017 (UIS, 2019). I only included articles that utilized qualitative research approaches and review of literature (as with Abdullah et al.), and excluded causal and co-relational research, as such research may approach theory differently. Further, the predominance of qualitative over quantitative research on international students justified this decision (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Table 1: Higher Education Journals Reviewed

Name of journal	Number of articles
Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education	1
Higher Education	4
Higher Education Management and Policy	0
Higher Education Policy	0
Higher Education Quarterly	3
Higher Education Research & Development	5
Innovative Higher Education	0
Journal of College Student Development	4
Journal of Higher Education	0
Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	2
Journal of Studies in International Education	10
Research in Higher Education	0
Review of Higher Education	0
Studies in Higher Education	4
Teaching in Higher Education	9
Tertiary Education and Management	1
Total	43
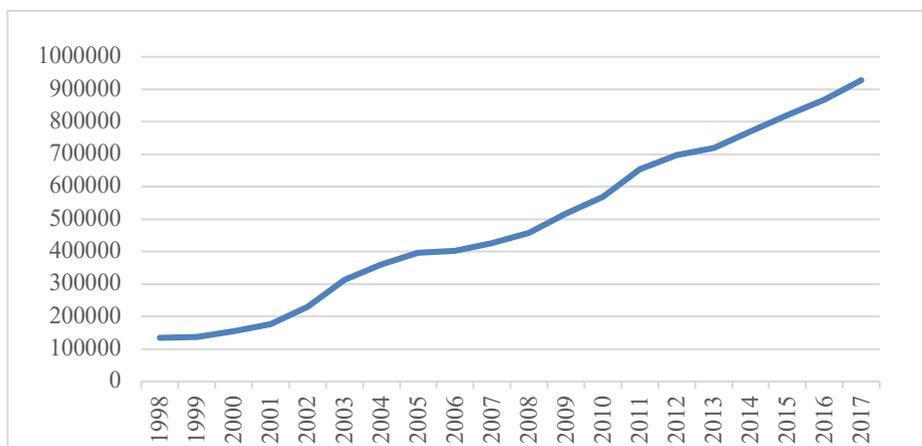
Figure 1: Outbound Tertiary Students from China (1998–2017)

The search yielded 43 articles in total (see Appendix A). Subsequently, I analyzed these articles using Abdullah et al.'s (2014) indicators. These included: general patterns (herein renamed "publication trends"), location, theoretical perspective, degree of theoretical explicitness, target agent (renamed "participants"), core issue (renamed "research focus"), and method/ologies (Table 2). Given that most of these indicators are fairly self-explanatory and can be inferred from the findings below, I will not elaborate on each. Degree of theoretical explicitness deserves further mention: Using Tight's (2004) guidelines, where theories, paradigms, models, or positionality were overtly stated or a theory was generated, they were classified as "explicit." Where they could be inferred, they were classified as "some," and where there was scant reference or no theory generated, classified as "implicit." Under "research focus," I further broke down my analysis by focus and whether problems participants faced were explained (omitted in Abdullah et al.'s research) as I wanted to explore the theory–research focus nexus. Given that one conceptual premise of this article is the intimate relationship between theoretical perspectives and research design and findings, such an analysis offered me the platform to deepen this discussion, which was underexplored in Abdullah et al.'s and Tight's work as they focused on more macro analyses. I omitted analysis on some of Abdullah et al.'s indicators: For example, "author details" was omitted as many authors had transferred across institutions rendering credible analysis untenable, and "intercultural review"— whether present or absent—was omitted as I subsumed it under theoretical perspective. Unlike Abdullah et al., it was not a critical part of my conceptual framing.

Table 2: Analysis of Journal Articles Around Chinese International Students' Experiences

| Type of analysis	*n*	*%*
Total number of articles	43	
Publication period		
2010 and before	14	33
Post 2010	29	67
Theoretical explicitness		
Explicit	17	39
Some evidence	14	33
Implicit	12	28
Method/ologies		
Interviews	36	84
Survey/questionnaires	17	39
Artefacts/document analysis	6	14
Focus group	6	14
Journals/reflections	2	5
Review of literature	1	2
Observations	1	2
Dataset	0	0
Location		
UK	11	26
Australia	7	16
USA	7	16
New Zealand	5	12
Canada	4	9
Multiple locations	3	7
Singapore	2	5
Belgium	1	2
Denmark	1	2
Hong Kong / Macau	1	2
South Korea	1	2
Participants		
Undergraduates	8	19
Graduates (master's and doctoral)	20	47
Across all levels	11	25
Not stated	4	9

RESULTS

Findings clustered around three main categories: frequency and research design, theoretical engagement, as well as theory and research focus.

Frequency and Research Design

Publication Frequency

Since 2005, there has been growing research around Chinese international students, as evident in the trend line in Figure 2, with an average of 2.3 articles published per year from 2005 to 2010, rising to 4.1 articles per year after 2010. The year 2010 is used as a divider as it is close to the midpoint of 2005-2017. Thirty-three percent of the articles were published on or before 2010, with publications more than doubling (67%) post 2010 (Table 2). This trend mapped against the increase of Chinese international students worldwide, illuminating growing interest among researchers in this population.
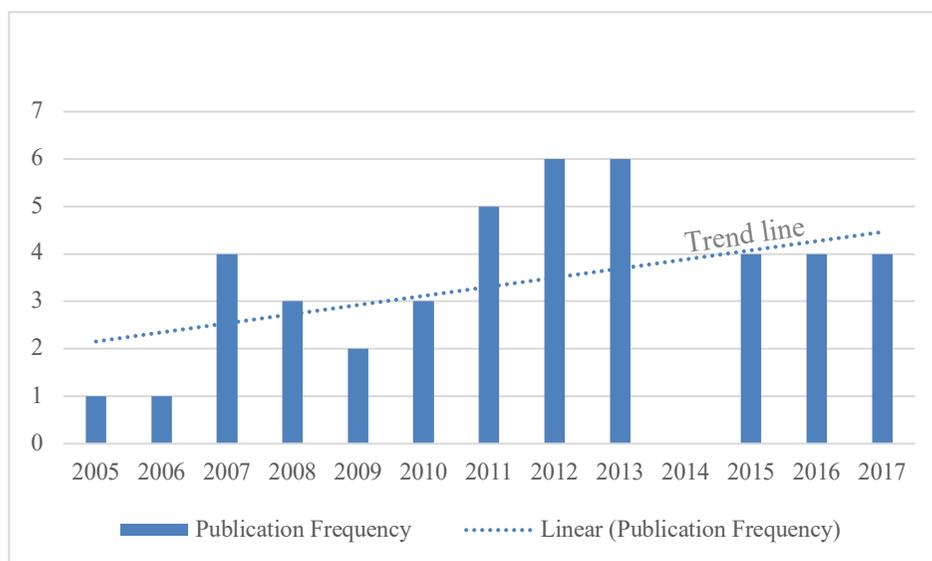
Figure 2: Number of Articles on Chinese International Students, 2005–2017

Methodologies

The most popular data collection method was interviews (84%), followed by survey/questionnaires (39%; data in survey/questionnaires are used for descriptive, not causal/correlational, purposes), and focus group (14%; Table 2). Rarely were observations (2%) and journals/reflections (5%) used. Qualitative researchers predominantly relied on self-reported data (interviews, surveys, focus groups),

privileging the role of the participant and rarely embedding themselves in participants' natural contexts to observe the world through participants' eyes.

Participants Involved

Existing studies tended to involve graduate students (47%) more than undergraduates (19%), with 25% of the studies involving both levels (Table 2), pointing to comparatively fewer studies understanding undergraduates. Graduate students include both master's and doctoral students.

Location of Study

The country where most studies was located is the United Kingdom (26%), followed by Australia (16%) and the United States (16%), Canada (9%), and New Zealand (12%; Table 2). More studies were located in traditional destinations (e.g., the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, Canada) than nontraditional ones like South Korea (2%) and Hong Kong or Macau (2%). Two thirds of the studies in nontraditional locations were done in recent years, reflecting the increasing regional movements of international students.

Theoretical Engagement

Theoretical Explicitness

Twenty-eight percent of all articles did not explicitly state the theory used or generated, 33% provided some evidence, while 39% was theoretically explicit (Table 3).

Theories Used in Articles

Thirty-three articles incorporated theories from different paradigms (see Table 3). Theories around sociocultural perspectives or how the sociocultural environment influences human development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) were most popular, with 13 out of 33 (39%) articles using them. In particular, those relating to Chinese international students' learning vis-à-vis an analysis of their Confucian-heritage-culture were commonly used (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Theories around acculturation, by scholars like Berry (1997) and Ward et al. (2001), suggesting that changes within the cultural and social environments trigger modifications in how and how well individuals respond to the environments psychologically, were almost as popular (33%). Identity theories—theories related to one's formation of self or sense of self within a group—were also used (15%) and spread across aspects as wide as graduate school socialization (Golde, 1998), neo-nationalism and neo-racism (Gingrich, 2006; Lee et al., 2017), and space or education as identity construction (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007; Moore, 2004). Internationalization theories, exploring how institutions incorporate a global or intercultural dimension into their mission and programs, were used (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Leask, 2005), albeit not commonly (12%).

Table 3: Summary of Commonly Used Theories

Theories	Theorists	No.
Theories related to sociocultural perspectives		
Cultures of learning	Cortazzi & Jin (1996), Durkin (2008)	6
Chinese learner / student approaches to learning	Watkins & Biggs (1996), Marton & Säljö (1976)	4
Sociocultural theory of learning	Lave & Wenger (1991), Vygotsky (1978)	3
Theories related to acculturation		
Acculturation	García (2001), Berry (1997), Kim (2001), Ward et al. (2001)	11
Theories related to identity		
Neo-nationalism / neo-racism	Lee (2017), Gingrich (2006)	1
Social identity theory	Tajfel (1978)	1
Graduate school socialisation	Golde, 1998	1
Education and space as identity construction	Moore (2004), Kostogriz & Peeler (2007)	1
Wholeness	Halliburton (1997)	1
Theories related to internationalization and quality		
Internationalization	Altbach & Knight (2007)	2
Curriculum internationalization	Leask (2005)	1
Quality management	Garvin (1987)	1
Total		33

Note. No. = Number of articles using theory

It is evident through this examination of the types of theories most commonly explicated that there is a keen focus on acculturation and sociocultural approaches to understanding Chinese international students' experiences. Simply put, acculturation theories can be categorized into two main types: psychological or group acculturation. Psychological acculturation studies individuals' mental health as they transit into the host or dominant cultural group (Berry, 1997; Ward et al., 2001). How well individuals cope depends on factors like age, personality, education, and cultural distance (e.g., language, religion). Group acculturation studies the changes in the culture of the minority group when in contact with a dominant or host culture. Strategies and outcomes of group acculturation are typically interpreted as how an individual fuses one's own culture with a host/dominant culture and exists along a continuum from assimilation or integration to marginalization or separation,

suggesting acculturation is not essential for survival. Acculturation theories privilege the understanding of individuals' or groups' mental health and cultural identity with comparatively less emphasis on understanding the details of how an environment shapes human development and behavior. Conversely, sociocultural approaches tend to highlight the environmental milieu and how human development is dialectically related to sociocultural contexts. Simultaneously, an examination of the process of enculturation—or acquisition of one's culture for survival—is prioritized. Rooted in both anthropology and psychology, sociocultural theories see human development as a social process (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). By extension, learning is a process of cultural production. For instance, Chinese students expect a good teacher to have deep knowledge, while Chinese teachers expect a good student to be hardworking. These expectations align with Confucian values—like respect for elderly and emphasis on hierarchy and hard work—that undergird the Chinese culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Thus, sociocultural theories privilege understanding both the environment and social processes together with human development.

Theory and Research Focus Nexus

Most articles (60%) focused primarily on problems or challenges Chinese international students faced in universities outside China (Table 4). Of these, 26 articles focused primarily on problems or challenges, and only 38% of the authors attempted to provide extended explanations for why international students faced those problems or challenges.

Table 4: Analysis of Articles

Type of analysis	Frequency	%
Focus		
Problems/Challenges	26 out of 43	60%
Changes/Agency	17 out of 43	40%
Problem explained		
Yes	10 out of 26	38%
No	16 out of 26	62%
Studies on changes/agency		
2010 and before	7 out of 17	41%
Post 2010	10 out of 17	59%

Compared to articles focused primarily on problems or challenges, fewer (40%) examined changes in Chinese international students by acknowledging their agentic potential—i.e., illustrating the active ways by which they respond to their environment and adapt their beliefs, values, or actions. Of these, 59% were published after 2010, suggesting a movement toward a more fluid way of representing Chinese international students' experiences over the past decade.

Different types of theories appeared associated with different research foci. Of the 11 articles that used acculturation theories, eight focused solely on problems

Chinese international students faced, while three incorporated perspectives around international students' agency. On the other hand, of the 13 that used sociocultural-related theories, four focused solely on problems, while nine incorporated findings around international students' agency. Sociocultural theories, with their focus on the dialectical relationship between humans and the environment, appeared to predispose researchers to more empathetic or asset-based ways of understanding their participants, hence the attention on international students' agency. Alternatively, one could argue that researchers who privilege sociocultural ways of seeing choose such theories to frame their research. This finding around the relationship between theories used and research foci illustrates how theories frame research questions and focus, just as research questions and focus lend themselves to particular ways of looking at the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002).

DISCUSSION

I urge that as researchers, we weigh and explicate the place of theory in our work, and, in cases where theory is not made explicit, be candid about the limitations of our research. Indeed, this review of literature is limited in these ways: First, the review of studies around Chinese international students is nonexhaustive and a search in discipline-specific journals may yield research with different theoretical engagement. Hence, findings from this study may not be transferable outside the higher education context within which this literature review is situated. Second, the review is scoped around Chinese international students' research, and caution will be needed in considering its relevance to other international students. Third, this literature review is limited to qualitative studies. While the expansion of the literature review to comprise all international students and the inclusion of quantitative research would have deepened this discussion, space limit in a journal article and resource constraints render this a separate project. Finally, the article is premised on the assumption that absolute objectivity is elusive in qualitative research. Yet, to achieve theoretical pluralism, I acknowledge that there may be ways of approaching research through other lenses that reflect, arguably, absolute objectivity; this affords an area for future exploration by scholars.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned limitations, this literature review found interesting patterns in current research on Chinese international students' experiences. Twenty-eight percent of the articles on Chinese international students' experiences were atheoretical in nature, suggesting a departure from Tight's (2004) and Abdullah et al.'s (2014) findings that 58% and 66% of articles they reviewed, respectively, were atheoretical. Thirty-nine percent of articles in this study saw explicit use of theories, presenting an increase from Tight's 26% (no data available from Abdullah et al.'s study). These patterns of departure could be due to, among other reasons, different interpretations of theoretical explicitness, the incorporation of more recent research that sees growing theoretical awareness, or a keener appreciation of theory among researchers working on Chinese international students. After all, Tight's (2004) research only examined articles in the year 2000, and the field might have developed rapidly since.

Yet, that only 39% of articles around Chinese international students explicitly used theories to frame their studies or engaged in extended discussion around theories and theory generation warrants concern about the continued limited role theory plays. The limited role of theory can also affect research design. For instance, undergraduates and graduates were often examined as a group, revealing assumptions that their experiences are interchangeable. However, scholars have proven otherwise, citing differing maturity, motivations, and length of study between the two groups (Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Likewise, given that theory was rarely generated, it is unclear how insights from such research can move beyond its contextual boundaries. Related questions to ask around this include: How should we interpret findings of Chinese international students bounded by a single location of study? What assumptions are we making when most studies around Chinese international students reside in a single location and comparative cases are rare? Further, why does the highest percent of studies reside in the United Kingdom (26%) and not the United States (16%), even though cumulative total Chinese student population between 2005 and 2017 in the United Kingdom was only one-third (693,351) that in the United States (2,017,124; UIS, 2019)? One could argue that perhaps it is because, in relative terms, international students comprise a higher percent of total student population in the United Kingdom (2017–2018: 19.6% in the United Kingdom compared to 5.5% in the United States; Institute for International Education, 2018; Universities UK International, 2019), making them more keenly felt and, thus, researched in the United Kingdom than the United States. On the other hand, one could also question if this might reflect something about U.K. versus U.S. scholars' assumptions of and interests in Chinese international students. Other questions around the limited role of theory worth considering are: To what extent might the low use of journals and reflections in research (4%) reflect our attitudes that Chinese international students are a group to be researched on and not researched with (Heng, 2018)? How might the incorporation of different research paradigms or theoretical framework, e.g., participatory research or feminist lens, affect research design and, eventually, perspectives about international students?

Research around Chinese international students' experiences tended to focus on students' problems or challenges (60%), rather than the changes or agency (40%) they exhibit. That articles around problems or challenges outnumbered those around changes or agency points to the concerns and narratives the higher education research community is engaged in. There appears to be a predominance of "complaints and troubles talk" (Haugh, 2016)—focusing on struggles and problems of Chinese international students mirroring scholars' observations (Abdullah et al., 2014; Ryan, 2011). Further, 62% of the articles focused on problems did not explain or adequately contextualize why these problems exist, echoing Zhang-Wu's (2018) observation about flawed understanding of Chinese international students when limited contextualization takes place. The lack of explicit articulation of theory and researcher's assumptions or paradigms, as well as the low level of engagement in theorizing is disquieting, as it hides and legitimizes researchers' bias. As I had raised in my research (Heng, 2019), without explicating their theoretical assumptions, researchers' use of surface learning approaches to explain second year Chinese international students' drop in academic performance ends up painting a poor view

of Chinese international students' learning. In contrast, my research found that Chinese international students placed less emphasis on academics in their second year as they had other priorities (e.g., extracurriculars, job searching). Omitting explicit references to theory and relying on "tentative theories" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 33) is risky as research may perpetuate an impression that Chinese international students are inherently problematic and needy. Likewise, ignoring changes and agency in international students may ossify our deficit perspectives of them. These findings support scholars' observations that international students are poorly understood and higher education institutions culpable (Abdullah et al., 2014; Marginson et al., 2010; Ryan, 2011).

Downplaying assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theoretical frameworks may heighten bias in research and findings, just as unbalanced use of particular theories may tilt findings and omit alternative perspectives. As illustrated above, acculturation theories tend to focus on struggles Chinese international students face. To begin, acculturation theories assume implicitly that adaptation is ideal. The outcomes of the minority group (international students) are seen through the lens of the majority group and problematized when the former fails to adapt. In contrast, sociocultural theories tend to assume the relativity of cultural norms and surface how and why students are different and unveil findings around student agency. These findings foreground the impact of theories on narratives, particularly when certain theories dominate, and generate further questions: What might be the repercussion of a domination of acculturation theories in Chinese international student research where international students' adaptation success is held to the standards of the destination context? What are the implications around how we understand and support Chinese international students in light of such assumptions? Should international students be held to the standards of the destination contexts and bear all the responsibility of adjustment? I further illustrate the implications of theoretical framing on findings using Zhao and Bourne's (2011) research as an example. They combined Kim's (2001) acculturation model with Jin and Cortazzi's (1993) cultural synergy model to create a two-way intercultural learning and adaptation model that framed their investigation of both Chinese students' and British lecturers' adaptations to each other. In adopting such a theoretical framing, the assumptions are that both students and lecturers need to adapt to each other, yielding findings around the adaptation processes of both lecturers and students, and, consequently, implications around how both need to be supported in the internationalization process. Given the intimate relationship between theoretical framing, research design, and findings, I further question: How might the incorporation of different research paradigms or theoretical frameworks—e.g., participatory research or a feminist lens—affect research design and, eventually, perspectives about international students?

To be clear, I am neither arguing that some theories are better than others, nor presuming that the insights around Chinese international students' research is transferrable to all international students. Rather, I ask the questions: What are the repercussions of using different types of theories and not explicitly articulating or generating theories in studies on international students? As a nascent but growing subfield, in what directions might we support the growth of future Chinese (or other) international student research? Extending previous scholars' findings (Abdullah et

al., 2014; Andreotti et al., 2011; Marginson et al., 2010; Ryan, 2011; Stein, 2017; Tight, 2018), I urge the research community to consider how might we engage more explicitly and meaningfully with theories in research and expand theoretical pluralism. As Alford (1998) averred,

> Being aware of how your theoretical and empirical choices fall into one or another paradigm of inquiry does not help answer your substantive theoretical and empirical questions, but it may sensitize you to a wider range of choices, regardless of the content of the research question…. help you reformulate your research questions, self-consciously locating them within foreground or background paradigms of inquiry. (p. 52)

Pluralizing theoretical frames can afford us diverse ways of knowing, guarding against narrow views. Perhaps one way of moving beyond "generic qualitative research studies" (Caelli et al., 2003, p.1) that add limited insights to collective knowledge because of repeating analyses and contextual limitation (Abdullah, 2014; Tight, 2018) is to consider more theoretical engagement and diversification. Increased collaborations across institutions and countries, as well as leveraging cross-disciplinary teams might likewise elevate research and help (Chinese) international student research mature.

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