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Chapter 9 International students in China: The Need for Us All to Unlearn

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In this chapter, the authors argue that researching the learning of international students in China requires first and foremost unlearning the ways we discuss and examine this issue. As such they are critical of the fact that scholars, educators and decision-makers tend to speak about the study abroad experience in China the same way they would speak about this experience in the West and other parts of the world, using theories, concepts and methods devised for other contexts of study. To the authors this poses both a scientific and an ethical problem. This is why they provide readers with a list of principles that could guide them to rethink this experience by unlearning imaginaries and representations about learning, travel and China, the Chinese and Chinese education. Finally, the authors support a shift from what to think to rethinking how to think. They urge scholars and educators to accept uncertainty, flexibility and the need to entertain many ways of examining an issue that is believed to be “business as usual” in the internationalization of higher education.

INTERNATIONALISATION IS HERE TO STAY

Like all other countries, China has been actively internationalising its higher education over the past decade. And there is no turning back. The facts talk for themselves as have demonstrated the different chapters of this volume. International students now choose China as a destination beyond the historical reason for studying the Chinese language and culture. International non-language degrees such as agriculture, science, and even education, are on the rise. Students also flock to China under different schemes: short-term mobility, degree studies, student internships, summer schools, etc.

Cities beyond Beijing and Shanghai are now hosting students from different parts of the world. Efforts are being made throughout the country to “welcome” international students and to support them while studying in China, and beyond. Like all other contexts of internationalisation, there is still, however, a lot to do to make it even more *international* - or “truly international” as many slogans have it.

While we were finalising this conclusion, the 31st Annual Conference of the European Association for International Education (EAIE) was taking place in Helsinki (Finland), with the following theme: “Encompassing all voices”. The topic was summarised as follows:

“How carefully and legitimately is ‘inclusion’ embedded in the work we undertake each day? Who is invited into the conversations that matter at our institutions and who is not? Whose norms and priorities are reflected in the agendas and strategies that guide us toward the future – whether we operate at the level of programmes, institutions, national governments or elsewhere – and whose norms and priorities are missing? Who is served, underserved, injured, or forgotten in the teaching we offer or the services we provide? Whose voices ring out around us, and whose remain faint or unheard?” (EAIE, 2019: 1).

These questions put the finger on an essential issue: if one internationalises, one also needs to make sure that the keyword of inclusion is systematically taken seriously in one’s discussions and actions. Although the EAIE is very much focused on supporting institutions and practitioners to make the experience of studying abroad more “international” (and in a sense profitable), we feel that many more voices are needed to describe, problematize and “rethink” students’ learning experience in different contexts, beyond a somewhat “McDonaldised” and simplistic model of explaining and understanding. Working on the specific context of China thus also requires including the voices of (Chinese and foreign) researchers, (Chinese and foreign) practitioners and (Chinese and foreign) decision-makers, and supporting them in their endeavours.

HOW TO DESCRIBE THE “CHINESE EXPERIENCE”?

What the chapters of the book show is that there is a need to rethink the way internationalisation of higher education is “done”, understood and researched within the Chinese context. Many preconceived and “ready-to-think” ways of examining this phenomenon can be counter-productive when one deals with China. Here is a simple example from an article published in *Times Higher Education* in September 2016 (title of the piece: *Five reasons why you should study in China*). In the article, an international student in China is quoted as having said:

“There is a saying that my friends who went to university together share, which is; if you survive living in China, you can survive and be prepared to face anything in the world (...) [The experience] allows you to be an open-minded person, ready to adapt and be flexible, which at the end of the day is what every employer is looking for. Studying in China gives you experience about how things work in this part of the world and helps you to become more independent.”

This student uses what we consider to be typical, somewhat uncritical discourses about the benefits of studying abroad, which s/he generalises to the “China experience”: *becoming open-minded, adaptable and flexible, and more independent*. These somewhat fuzzy and difficult to define characteristics have been used, overused and abused by most voices reporting back on the study abroad experience (researchers included) for the past 50 years. However, we feel that it is time we abandoned such parlance and looked for alternative evidence of learning, that the “China experience” can offer and produce. Speaking about the study abroad experience in China the same way one speaks about this experience in the West and other parts of the world, using theories, concepts and methods devised for other contexts of study, poses both a scientific and an ethical problem.

UNLEARNING PROBLEMATIC WAYS OF EXAMINING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

We propose that all the voices involved in organising, managing and researching students' learning in Chinese higher education unlearn such problematic ways of looking into the learning experience. Following Claude Bernard (Cotard, 1944, p. 102), we could argue that “It’s what we think we know that keeps us from learning” – *we* referring here to scholars too. Or as Mark Twain (2016, p. 47) put it: “Education consists mainly of what we have unlearned”. Approaching Chinese higher education and the intricacies of its internationalisation might thus require first and foremost unlearning our ideological perspectives.

As such research on learning in study abroad has emerged from the so-called Western/ North American context in the 1950s, and it remains still very much influenced by it. Many of the ideas produced by this research rely in fact on ideologies and imaginaries about self, the other, travel and national border-crossing – again: somewhat ready-made assertions. Here we define imaginaries as “clutch of phrases, images and beliefs which make up the commonly held understanding we have of a group and a community (...) and which dictates the way we perceive it or them” (Lee, 2018, p. 3). Härkönen & Dervin (2016) provide a list of such fabricated ideologies: study abroad allows people to find their “real” identity; study abroad opens up students’ minds; study abroad makes students more tolerant; study abroad is an adventure, etc. These beautified, yet hard/impossible to prove, slogans have been used to decorate the study abroad industry for over 50 years already.

Based on the literature on learning in study abroad experiences in the “West” and beyond, we would argue that there is a need for *all those* involved (from students to researchers) to question and unlearn at least three elements. We believe that these would enrich and differentiate research on internationalisation from a Chinese perspective:

1. Unlearn imaginaries and representations about learning during study abroad (*what are the different voices' expectations in terms of learning? Do they match and /or clash? What do these expectations mean interculturally and interlinguistically? Can they really be achieved? Is there anything particular about the "China experience" that might produce different kinds of learning?*);
2. Unlearn imaginaries and representations about travel (*what does travel mean today? What overly positive images of travel are being constructed? Is travel in the etymological sense of the word from the French travailler (to work) still make sense? What does the "China experience" do to the way travel has been perceived by students?*)
3. Unlearn imaginaries and representations about China, the Chinese and Chinese education (*what image(s) of China, the Chinese and Chinese education do international students have before, during and after their stay in China? Where do these images come from? How about those who send them and those who welcome them? What about researchers who might have certain stereotypes about China? Have these images changed over the past 20 years?*).

THE RESEARCHER AS A MAJOR SOURCE OF UNLEARNING

We would now like to reflect on the work of the researcher examining the context of the internationalisation of Chinese higher education. Unlearning for researchers could mean: be critical of one's theoretical and methodological perspectives (*what is our starting point? Where was it developed and by who? Is it too Westerncentric? Might it have an influence on how we analyse data and present/construct our results?*); adapt and/or enrich vocabulary, notions and concepts when dealing with the Chinese contexts (*identity, culture, cultural difference, community, intercultural competence, etc. which can be ambiguous to the Chinese*); be aware and critical of one's ideologies and beliefs (*is study abroad/travel always a good thing? Is there a point in spreading the questionable ideologies of culture shock, adaptation and tolerance (amongst others) to the Chinese context, where*

such ideologies might have different meanings? Does contact with others always means openness?); be mindful of how data is collected, in what language(s) and by whom in China (Do research participants react the same to Western white scholars and Chinese scholars when interviewed? Does the use of English as a lingua franca limit participants' possibilities to express themselves the ways they would wish to?).

Three examples are presented to illustrate these important issues in relation to research work. In several interviews that we did of European students based in China, we noticed that they tended to divide white Western students and Asian students into different categories, labelling the former “international students” and the latter merely “Asian students” when discussing with a white male scholar. Had they not been also interviewed by Chinese colleagues later, for whom this dichotomy was not used, we would have drawn a problematic conclusion about their racialisation of foreign students in China.

Our second example relates to an omnipresent concept in research on learning in study abroad: *tolerance*. Although it seems that the word is becoming accepted in its positivising sense in English and many other languages, it is important to remember that in other languages it can be polysemic (Habib, 2019). This is the case of the Chinese language where tolerance can be translated into at least three words, with different connotations: 容忍, 宽容, 忍受. So, when one does research for example on intercultural learning in China, which meaning(s) do we give to the word, and how do our research participants understand it if we happen to converse in English?

Our final example relates to biases that many Western scholars have used to examine learning within the Chinese context, which they often label the “Chinese-style teacher-student relationship”, the “Chinese learner”, the “Confucian way of education”, etc. Although these are also used by many

Chinese scholars themselves to describe Chinese education, it is important to say that such essentialist and culturalist ways of talking about it deserve to be questioned as they are counter-productive (Holliday, 2010). Chinese education is complex and includes different kinds of institutions, educators who were also trained outside China and who use hybrid forms of teaching. Furthermore, the use of the “Confucian education argument”, which often means (wrongly) *respecting teachers, not questioning them, mere rote-learning and harmony over self*, is itself a fallacy. As such, Puett and Gross-Loh (2016) provide us with a convincing critique of how Confucianism has been misunderstood and misused by the West. A close reading of different translations of e.g. the Analects by Confucius (n.d.) shows that the Teacher himself did not support such “techniques” (see Dervin, 2019). It is also important to note that Confucians actually opposed the society in which they lived, calling for everybody to have equal opportunity for growth. For example, Confucius did not encourage conformity and submissiveness toward authority; he believed that everyone is complex and changes constantly (no single, unified being) and that every encounter and experience offers a chance to actively create a new and better world. Creel (1960, p. 1) explains that “Tradition paints [Confucius] as a strict pedant, laying down precise rules for men to follow in their conduct and their thinking. The truth is that he carefully avoided laying down rules because he believed that no creed formulated by another person could excuse any man from the duty of thinking for himself”.

In summary we could easily argue that the researcher, like the other voices involved in devising, managing and examining learning in study abroad, rely on political, sociological, personal, glocal ideologemes (bits and pieces of ideology) (amongst others) that are passed onto them by the “tribe(s)” they belong to, the paradigms they follow, but also by the media, politics, decision-makers, glocal agendas, etc. The role of the scholar is to become aware of these elements, to question them and to move forward in his/her understanding/explaining of the international student’s learning experience.

Marcel Proust (1932, p. 67) asserted: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”. If we are to enrich our research on internationalisation from a Chinese perspective and / or about the Chinese context, it is essential to have “new eyes” to look at the multifaceted complexities of what is happening (and will happen) in the Middle Kingdom. These “new eyes” only can help us move away and question our pet theories (often developed in the West) and our ideologies and imaginaries about what the study abroad experience entails. Unlearning for researchers is thus not relying on *what to think* but *rethinking how to think* and to accept uncertainty, flexibility and the need to entertain many ways of examining an issue that we have believed to be “business as usual” in the internationalisation of higher education. The chapters in this book lay the cornerstone of a renewed way of thinking about internationalisation.

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