

# Journal of Teaching and Learning



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Volume 16, Number 2, 2022

Special Issue: Connecting the Promising Practices for Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students with Student Satisfaction

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092422ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i2.6996>

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Publisher(s)

University of Windsor

ISSN

1492-1154 (print)

1911-8279 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Huang, J., Guo, H. & Zhou, Q. (2022). A Narrative Inquiry of Three Chinese International Students' Academic Adjustment Experiences at Canadian Universities. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 16(2), 107–122.  
<https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i2.6996>

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# A Narrative Inquiry of Three Chinese International Students' Academic Adjustment Experiences at Canadian Universities

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## Abstract

There is an increasing number of Chinese graduate students who study in Canada and have quite different educational backgrounds. Despite a large number of studies attending to the challenges and difficulties they encountered in life and study, not much research narratively explores Chinese international students' academic adjustment experiences in graduate programs in Canada. To fill the gap, this research makes a narrative inquiry into three Chinese international students' academic adjustment in the graduate and doctoral programs of two universities in Ontario, Canada. The three-dimensional framework (Clandinin, 2006) is employed to tell and retell their stories. Their narratives have revealed the importance of their native languages and how their past experiences before they came to Canada influenced their academic adjustment. The Eastern and Western cultures have had a lasting effect on their personal and professional development. In addition, they have played multiple roles as Chinese international students, novice researchers, and future educational practitioners.

## Introduction

According to Statista Research Department (2021), there were 53,054 international students who held a study permit in Canada in 2020. The term “international students” refers to “individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers” (Andrade, 2006, p. 134). Bastien et al. (2018) state that the adjustment of international students has been a trendy research topic with an increasing body of empirical studies. For example, Wan et al. (2013) have reported that international students in higher education were



faced with difficulties in adapting to their new sociocultural environment. Klein et al. (1981) argue that Chinese students' cross-cultural experiences might be challenging, since "the Chinese language, culture, social structure, and political ideology are different from western countries" (as cited in Zhou et al., 2017, p. 211). Xing and Bolden (2018) demonstrate that Chinese international students seem to struggle with academic acculturation due to their limited spoken English. Even though increased studies have reported on international undergraduate students' learning experiences in North America, "little research has been done to study international graduate students on North American campuses" (Zhou et al., 2017, p. 210), and the previous studies seemed to focus more on challenges and difficulties, instead of exploring how students adjusted to the Canadian academic context. What kind of resources or strategies did they employ in different stages? What agency did they show in the process? How did that influence their professional development and research interests? Those questions are rarely answered in prior research.

According to Bastien et al. (2018), academic adjustment not only contains a student's potential to be academically successful but also includes factors such as motivation, achievement, institutional commitment (Gerdes & Mallinkrodt, 1994), and taking action to meet academic demands, experiencing a sense of purpose, and overall satisfaction with the academic life (Baker & Siryk, 1984; Poyrazli et al., 2001). There has been little research on international undergraduate students' experiences of adapting to a foreign educational system from their own stance, especially Asian international students in Canada (Chen, 2006; Guo & Guo, 2017).

To fill the research gap and further explore the academic experiences of Chinese international students in higher education, this research uses narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to tell and retell the stories of three Chinese graduate students in Canada (the three authors). Through living and reliving their academic experiences between Canada and China, the authors present the narratives about classroom participation, plagiarism, cross-cultural communication, language barriers, and other common issues within the three-dimensional framework (Clandinin, 2006). The stories about academic adjustment are expected to provide implications for policymakers, supervisors, teachers, and the service center for international students in Canadian universities, since their academic adjustment experiences relate to their professional landscape, social integration, and whether they would stay in Canada after graduation. As Quan et al. (2016, p. 15) emphasize, universities need to have a better understanding of how international students adjust to new academic contexts and what services can be offered to them.

## Theoretical Framework

As Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2) note, "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world." This paper reflects the three-dimensional nature of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), including the temporality of the past, lived present, and future, with three international students' lived experiences in Canada. According to Xu and Connelly (2009), the "intellectual sources" of narrative inquiry come from Dewey (1938, p. 67), Schwab (1970, 1971, 1973, 1983), and Polanyi (1958). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) define narrative inquiry as "the experiential study of experience" and state that narrative inquiry is both "phenomenon and method" (p. 2).

This research does not aim to generalize all the Chinese international students' academic adjustment in Canada but to provide a deep description of three individuals' experiences. The three authors are more interested in "life and living" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 478) and trust each other when sharing personal stories and feelings. As Lan (the first author), Shuyao (the second

author), and Jiaqi (the third author) reflected on their learning stories before, during, and after their stay in Canada, they felt their experiences were coherent with the three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). There were several reasons. First, the temporality, sociality, and place in the three-dimensional framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) can present their stories between Canada and China during different time periods in a clear and meaningful way. For temporality, Lan and Jiaqi had respectively graduated from the PhD program and graduate program in 2017 and 2021 while Shuyao was doing her PhD at the time this paper was written. Sociality refers to the “milieu and conditions under which people’s experiences and events are unfolding” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 4). In their doctoral and graduate programs, the three students interacted with their supervisors, classmates, other Chinese international students in Canada, and the surrounding world. Place refers to “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). There was a transfer of place from China to Canada and from Canada to China, which presented a transnational space. Using this framework, Lan, Shuyao, and Jiaqi reconstructed three Chinese international students’ academic adjustments to the Canadian context in a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. To sum up, narrative inquiry as “a way of thinking about experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477) was appropriate to tell the three authors’ academic adjustment experiences in Canada.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Three participants were the three authors. Lan was born in the 1980s in southern China. After being a teacher educator in a Chinese university focusing on teacher education, Lan applied for a doctoral program in Education in 2011 and graduated in 2017 from a medium-size university in Ontario, Canada. Shuyao majored in English for her undergraduate program and has five years of working experience as a part-time English teacher at educational institutions in Beijing. She applied for the same doctoral program and got the offer in 2019. They were instructed by the same supervisor in the program, so the supervisor introduced Lan to Shuyao. They met in Beijing when Lan attended a national conference in March 2019. In the fall of 2019, Lan went to a Canadian university as a post-doctoral researcher and audited graduate courses at the university. Lan met Jiaqi at the Language Policy course. Jiaqi was a first-year graduate student in the Master of Education program at that time. She got her bachelor’s degree in History from a northeast Chinese university before she came to Canada. During the course, Lan and Jiaqi became good friends, and they both voluntarily work for the Youth China Center (YCC for short), which is a non-profit association for promoting Chinese international students’ socialization and adaptation to Canadian society. Introduced by Lan, Shuyao joined YCC and got to know Jiaqi. Both Shuyao and Jiaqi were born in the 1990s and were called the “Post-90s Generation”.

Then, Lan, Shuyao, and Jiaqi took part in the online workshops or lectures organized by YCC. Through the platform, Shuyao and Jiaqi shared their academic experiences at two Canadian universities in Ontario. The three authors have been staying connected and supporting each other since they met in 2019, so their storytelling at different time periods flew into a river where the themes, threads, emotions, and narratives gathered and unfolded a larger landscape of Chinese international students’ academic adjustment in Canada.

### **Data collection and analysis**

In narrative inquiry research, the field texts can be stories, autobiographical accounts, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos, and life experiences, which help researchers to understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The three authors met online for one to two hours each month to share stories about their academic adjustment and social lives in China and Canada from September 2019 to August 2021. They chatted about their classes in Canada and their experiences in accomplishing their coursework. Shuyao recorded the conversation with the permission of Lan and Jiaqi. Their chat was all in Chinese, except for some English terms such as the name of courses. All the real names of people and institutions were replaced with pseudonyms out of ethical considerations. After peer check, the transcripts became part of the field texts. The three authors also wrote self-reflective journals based on these notes.

To derive research texts from field texts, they constructed a “chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). Specifically, they uploaded the field texts to OneDrive so that they could edit them online at the same time. Then, they sorted field texts, which included sets of transcribed interviews, transcripts of online meetings, reflections, WeChat messages, and email communication in chronological order for each participant. They recorded the dates, topics involved, and contexts for each of these field texts. After that, they had online meetings or WeChat phone calls to discuss the analysis and compare their academic adjustment experiences. Searching for common threads within the narrative, they created the research text and checked back and forth to make sure that they continued to “honour the ‘being’ of the ‘other’” (Stewart-Harawira, 2005, p. 156).

In the process of analyzing data, the authors first shared the stories that stood out to them during the academic adjustment. The challenges and difficulties they encountered, the strategies they used, and the influence of the academic experiences on their personal and professional development were all discussed. Then they transcribed their talk and began to analyze the themes that emerged from the transcriptions. The authors followed the timeline of their narratives and categorized their stories of adjustment into several stages. During each stage, they had different challenges and experiences. There were their conversations in the field texts which showed how they shared experiences, co-construct, and reconstructed meaning together. The next section will present their stories in three stages and explain when and where their conversations happened at the beginning of each stage.

## **Findings**

### ***Confusion, academic shock, foreignness, and survival in Stage One***

In the fall of 2011, Lan went to Canada from China as a doctorate student. Before coming to the diverse multicultural society in Canada, Lan visited Canada twice as a sojourner and a guide teacher for an exchange program. Lan reflected on her first academic experiences in Canada when she met Shuyao in October 2019. Lan shared with Shuyao as follows:

My first contact with my Canadian classmates soon led me to realize the differences between us. They were White, Indigenous, or Black, except a Canadian-born Chinese lady and me. I told myself “I am the only foreigner in my class!” I met Grace in class, who was a white, middle-class, young woman. In the group discussion, Grace asked me, “Do you

know Neo-liberalism?" I said, "No." "Do you know the new curriculum reform in China?" Grace said "no" without any other words. The silence between us reoccurred in my mind many times after the course ended. Even though I had been a language teacher in China for more than five years, I was overwhelmed by a mass of Western concepts and terms, which were seldom mentioned in the Chinese university where I worked. I also felt lonely since my classmates' research topics were new to me, and I never heard about them when I was in China. (Lan, personal communication, October 5, 2019)

Lan mentioned that she was not accustomed to the topics in class and the way of teaching. She was a university teacher before she began the program in Canada, but she still felt that it was not easy to adjust to the course. When Lan shared her experience with Shuyao, she had just finished her first doctoral course in August 2019. Lan's sharing resonated with Shuyao. Before she came to Canada, she was an English major and had a master's degree in Applied Linguistics. However, it was still hard for her to comprehend what the Canadian classmates and instructors were talking about in class. In the casual chat with Lan, Shuyao shared her experiences in the first doctoral course.

The first course of my program began in July 2019, and it was intensive, particularly challenging and demanding, even for local students. A big challenge for me is the different pedagogy. Two instructors taught the course, but they did not speak much in class. Most of the time, they organized group discussions or whole-class discussions. (Shuyao, personal communication, October 5, 2019)

Shuyao had a similar challenge as Lan because they were not familiar with the theorists, concepts, and context in North America. Meanwhile, they were faced with new teaching and learning styles. In the first course, Shuyao was also amazed by the teacher-student relationship in that course.

I once curiously asked the Canadian teacher "How do you know your teaching will be useful to your students in the future?" The teacher said, "Honestly, I do not know." She was honest, and I really admire that. One time after the class, the teacher taught me two terms: epistemology and ontology. I had never heard of them before the course, and my way of looking at the world was transformed. I realized that the teacher's patient explanation and my reflection journals were also ways of knowing and students could explore more ways of knowing. I realized that I should get more responsible for my own learning, and I can adjust the speed or content of learning. It sounds relaxing and gives students a sense of freedom, but in fact, it is an "unbearable lightness of being" because students need to take responsibility and accept the results of their decisions. My mindset has been transformed through my reflection, but I am still exploring the way of learning. There is no ending to the exploration, as there is no "one and only" truth hiding somewhere and waiting for me to find it. (Shuyao, personal communication, October 5, 2019)

Shuyao got to know educational philosophy and her way of looking at the world changed after the course. She understood that students needed to take the agency and actively reached out. Lan responded to Shuyao's sharing and talked more about the teacher's role and inquiry-based instruction.

It is a complicated process, and you would not make a conclusion by saying, "I have totally adjusted to the academic context here." As you mentioned, I was amazed by how outspoken

Canadians are. Canadian professors expect students to work out their own answers. As a teacher, I even had that doubt: Is it much easier to be a teacher in North America? It seems that 80% of the teacher's work is to prepare the syllabus and then leave most things to students. Teachers do not need to provide standard answers. Unlike the Chinese teachers I know, or even myself, we would not ask a question if we do not know the answer. In the beginning, I did not understand why the Canadian teachers did not conclude or evaluate students' opinions. Then, I realized there is no definite answer in education. They created a safe and free classroom for students to discuss. It is the inquiry process that matters, rather than gaining "the only answer." (Lan, personal communication, October 5, 2019)

Lan's words revealed the dissimilar roles that Chinese and Canadian teachers play in class and the different ways of teaching in the two countries. At first, she thought teaching was easy in Canada, but her understanding of teachers' responsibility and workload changed with more reading and in-class discussion in the course. More importantly, Lan understood learning began with embracing uncertainty and having the courage to challenge. Unlike Shuyao and Lan's confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety in the first stage, Jiaqi had a positive academic experience at the beginning of her exchange program. She participated in an exchange program at a university in B.C. when she was an undergraduate student. In the courses of Applied Linguistics and English Teaching, she fell in love with the atmosphere of an open classroom immediately, and she actively participated in class and did group work.

In the course, most of the students were from Asia and even the lecturer was from Nepal. In such a case, I was brave enough to speak in English. Besides, for our group work, my classmates and I analyzed several report news covering the same event from different media, and we surprisingly found various reports that demonstrated different perspectives of the event out of different intentions. The concept of media literacy expands a new world to me and that means that everyone can reasonably challenge the point of view. Such learning experience was different from the lecture-based courses in the Chinese university that I attended. When I was in China, I did not speak in class because I was afraid my opinion would be wrong. This transformative learning experience in Canada made me decide to pursue a master's degree in Canada after getting the bachelor's degree. (Jiaqi, personal communication, November 11, 2019)

The positive academic experiences were eye-opening for Jiaqi, and she was lucky to participate in the program when she was an undergraduate student. That experience directly influenced her decision to pursue a master's degree in Canada. However, things were not as smooth as she thought. Jiaqi told us about her adjustment after she started her graduate study in Canada.

My classmates and teachers spoke perfect English, and I became the former me who was silent in class. To change that, I forced myself to speak in each class and prepared for my speech before class. It was more like a performance rather than a natural conversation in class. At the beginning of the class, I did not know much about the syllabus and the coursework. The first assignment was to write a critique on a journal, which I have never done before. I was extremely nervous back then. Luckily, my undergraduate education helped me because I studied history in China. Therefore, I am sensitive to the logic and historical backgrounds of academic articles. My Canadian teacher liked my points when I spoke in class, and he encouraged me a lot. Moreover, I also attended many workshops and webinars to improve my reading and writing skills. The writing center's guidance was useful because it let me realize the difference between Eastern and Western academic paradigms. (Jiaqi, personal communication, November 11, 2019)

Jiaqi's academic experience in the graduate program was different from her experience in the exchange program. Luckily, she showed her agency in preparing for class, and her past learning experiences in China enabled her to have a clear logic in academic writing. She also got positive feedback from her Canadian teacher, which motivated her to continue to employ academic resources that the Canadian university offered.

Stories in the first stage contained the authors' initial academic experiences in Canada. Lan felt she was the only foreigner in class, and she was unfamiliar with the topics and theories discussed in class. It was the same for Shuyao, who had to spend much time reading and "digesting" the theories. Both encountered cultural shock in academia and tried hard to survive in the first stage. Compared with their nervousness and anxiety, Jiaqi had a pleasant and relaxing experience in the exchange program in Canada as she enjoyed the atmosphere of open discussion and enhanced critical thinking. After Jiaqi began her graduate program in Canada, she also needed to adjust to the demanding courses and use the resources provided by the university.

### ***Adjustment to the Canadian academic context through language and culture in Stage Two***

In the summer of 2020, Shuyao came to a major Canadian metropolitan area after she finished a course about quantitative research and mixed-method design. Jiaqi and Lan met her in Jiaqi's apartment. They chatted about their learning experiences in Canada. Shuyao mentioned how important her native language was in helping her survive the first doctoral course.

As Lan experienced in her first course, the course covered Indigenous education, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, power theory, and many other theories that are popular in North America. However, I never heard of them before I started the course. Even though I read the required literature ahead of time, I still needed to turn to my native language for help. During the course, I had to repetitively read the required materials and search for the corresponding terms and theories in Chinese to make sure my understanding was right. My first language was a great resource and lifesaver for me. I also turned to Chinese when I learned the quantitative research methodology. There were so many technical terms and statistics. I had learned some in China when I was a graduate student, but everything changed into the English version in the Canadian course. Therefore, I had to check the Chinese handbook about quantitative study and reviewed what I had learned before. (Shuyao, personal communication, August 20, 2020)

Shuyao emphasized the importance of her native language in two doctoral courses. Jiaqi's academic experience also resonated with that, and she shared the role that the Chinese language played in her essay writing in the master's program.

Speaking of academic writing, I still depended on my Chinese. When I was drafting the essays, I sometimes organized my thoughts and ideas in Chinese. Then, I translated them into English and revised the grammar or vocabulary choice. I get accustomed to thinking in Chinese because it is faster for me to organize ideas. But I know I should walk out of my comfort zone. (Jiaqi, personal communication, August 20, 2020)

Lan was surprised that Jiaqi wrote the assignment in Chinese first and translated it into English. She continued with the dialogue.

I used to do that, but there was a mismatch between the original meaning and Chinese translation. Thus, I sometimes felt lost in translation. An example comes from the second course I took, which was an unsynchronized online course. One time, I wrote a response to the instructor's discussion, and I used concepts of multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural interchangeably. In Chinese, cross-cultural, intercultural or transcultural all mean kuawenhua (跨文化). One of my Canadian classmates commented on my post that "intercultural" focuses on "inter-", which indicates more assimilation, while "multicultural" is describing the co-existence of diverse cultures. She gave Quebec as an example. The mainstream in Quebec of French culture is "intercultural" rather than "multicultural" or "cross-cultural" due to fact that the government wants to promote and integrate people into French culture. Her comment reminded me of the specific context of terms in which they were created. (Lan, personal communication, August 20, 2020)

Although both Jiaqi and Shuyao emphasized the role that their native language played in their academic adjustment, Lan still reminded them that the Chinese translation of some Western concepts might not be accurate and that would influence students' comprehension of the original English terms. International students need to check the definition of different English terms and make it clear in which contexts they are used. That is why many Canadian professors suggest students read first-hand information instead of a translated version. Lan gave an example of her understanding of critical thinking.

One time I told a professor that I was trying to challenge others in class because I needed to show my critical thinking. She explained to me that critical thinking did not mean challenging or criticizing others. She reminded me that the Chinese translation of critical thinking might not be exactly accurate. I had better understand it in English. (Lan, personal communication, August 20, 2020)

Both Shuyao and Jiaqi rely on their native language to read and write. The first language plays the role of mediation, and it makes international students feel safe. It is a way of knowing and being. Although it helps Chinese international students to gain knowledge in an alternative way, there are also disadvantages, as Lan reminds us, such as the inaccurate translation that will impede the understanding of Western concepts. International students may stay in their comfort zone by reading and writing in Chinese, which may influence their improvement of English reading and writing. After all, English competence is essential for an international student to engage in the Western academy. The second story uncovers how they adapted to the academic context through language and culture, especially their native language. Instead of ignoring their past learning experiences, the authors saw their cognitive and linguistic repertoire as resources. In the meantime, they also had the metacognitive awareness to realize the negative impacts of using too much of their first language in their academic adjustment. With that awareness and those practices, they continued to explore Canadian academic society and hoped to let their voices be heard.

### ***Developing Chinese voices in the English-dominated academic context in Stage Three***

After the three authors survived the beginning stage, they became more familiar with the Canadian academic context and paradigms in academic writing and reading later. Meanwhile, they were more interested in self-exploration and kept making an inquiry into situating themselves in the academic context. As Lan mentioned in her sharing of the first doctoral course, there was

silence between her and the Canadian classmate when they were discussing the Chinese education reform and neo-liberalism. In the third stage, the participants were still thinking about these questions: “Who may care about my stories? How should I tell Chinese stories in English? How to engage in academic dialogues with Canadians?” In the fall of 2020, Shuyao attended her last online course, which was designed to teach students how to draft their doctoral thesis proposals. One of the course expectations was to actively engage online and contribute to the discussion at the forum on the course website. She shared with Lan and Jiaqi her adjustment after the course ended:

As I mentioned in my first course, my classmates were good at carrying on with class discussions. Before they gave their statement, they would have an opening-up sentence such as “I really like what … has mentioned about the issue of …” or “That resonates with me because …” It shows they were actively listening to others and finding connections with others. Such small hints made the discussion a continuous flow, and everyone could contribute to the class topic. In the past, I just quickly “poured” what I wanted to say when it was my turn to speak because I wanted to save more time for others. But now, I have been imitating the techniques that my Canadian classmates used when it is my turn to speak, and I tell myself to slow down. Moreover, I noticed that most of my classmates were very polite and careful when commenting on others’ statements. For example, one of my Canadian classmates said this before he commented on my weekly post on the course website, “Remember I am not an expert in this area so bear with me if I am wrong or ask a stupid question.” At the end of his comment, he would emphasize again by saying, “Again, these are just my opinions and hope they will be helpful for your research.” I am glad to learn how to politely get my voice heard in the cross-cultural experiences. (Shuyao, personal communication, December 12, 2020)

Shuyao had an educational background in Applied Linguistics, so she was sensitive to people’s language use in the discourses. She learned from her classmates about how to join the in-class discussion from a linguistic perspective. Lan was interested in the word “voice” in Shuyao’s sharing, since her doctoral thesis aimed to get Chinese teachers’ voices heard. Her supervisor encouraged Lan to tell stories about Chinese education and teachers in a professional way.

One day, my supervisor pointed out some problems in my writing where I quoted but did not cross-reference. She told me that if six words together are the same as other published work, it is plagiarism. I really appreciated she had told me the rules before I got any penalty. I need to learn how to acknowledge others and how to refer to the statement that has been cited in a published paper. As she reminded, “You need to know that the professor who is going to read your proposal won’t excuse you for your Chinglish.” On the other hand, she always encourages me to keep my Chinese voice in my writing. (Lan, personal communication, December 12, 2020)

Jiaqi agreed with that and commented, “Your supervisor highlights standard academic writing, and she hopes you can keep your ‘voice’ in your writing” (Jiaqi, personal communication, March 20, 2021). Then Jiaqi shared a story about academic plagiarism after she listened to Ju’s sharing. She knew a graduate student who got a bachelor’s degree from a university in China. The student studied in a Canadian university, but he failed a course because he had plagiarism in the final essay. Jiaqi felt confused when she first heard about this story because, in traditional Chinese literature, it is acceptable to quote someone’s poem directly without citation. There is even a literary device called “*jiju*” (集句), which means a poet can directly quote the poems of different

poets and recombine them into a new poem. Jiaqi majored in Chinese History and Literature in her undergraduate study, so she saw the technique very often. Through attending a series of academic workshops and seminars, she began to understand that it was not acceptable to do this in Canadian universities. Thus, she was cautious when drafting her English essays (Jiaqi, personal communication, December 12, 2020). She shared her changes by full use of academic resources in the university in Canada.

I found a big difference between Chinese and Canadian universities. In the Chinese university where I got my bachelor's degree, there were some large-size workshops or lectures given by experts. Students were asked to attend these lectures in some cases. Due to that, I did not have the habit of accessing different resources by myself. Things changed after I came to the Canadian university because there were a variety of resources such as workshops and writing programs in different centers. I read very slowly in the first month of the master's program, so I attended the workshop which aimed at improving students' reading strategies. It was the first time that I figured out different reading strategies should be applied to different genres and topics of reading. I also got to know other activities from the student center, such as resume writing and one-on-one guidance on career planning. I attended these activities at least three times per week. (Jiaqi, personal communication, December 12, 2020).

Stories in the third stage talked about how the authors tried to develop their voices by learning from Canadians and following the academic paradigms and rules in Canada. Lan kept thinking about how to make a voice in the Canadian academic context since the first course. She mentioned the educational reform in China during that course, but no one knew about it. She wondered if anyone in Canadian academy was interested in her research on Chinese pre-service teachers' cross-cultural learning. Luckily, her supervisor encouraged her to tell Chinese teachers' stories with their own words. By giving herself a voice in academic writing, the past self, present self, and future self are intermingled into an inquiry. Shuyao's way of developing her voices began with imitating how her Canadian classmates carried on with class discussions in a polite and respectful way, while Jiaqi utilized various resources on campus and knew more about the consequences of plagiarism. She compared the Eastern and Western writing paradigms and kept reminding herself of standard academic writing in English. They all made progress and adjusted to the Canadian academy in different ways.

### ***Story forwarding: Where are they going and what is the next goal?***

At the time of the drafting of this paper, Lan has returned to China to resume her work at a Chinese university after one year of post-doctoral work in Canada in 2021. Shuyao has passed her Research Ethics Review for her doctoral research and has been collecting research data. Jiaqi has completed her graduate study in the spring of 2021 and hopes to do something for education in China. She joined the largest National Educational Foundation in China and developed the training materials for K–12 teachers with her colleagues. With more working experience, Jiaqi plans to pursue a PhD degree in teacher education in Canada in the future. Their stories are as flowers nurtured by past academic experiences and will continue to grow and bloom in the Chinese and Canadian contexts.

## **Discussion**

The three international students' stories continue to flow with their experiences, and they kept asking and thinking about these questions: what kind of academic adjustment experiences have they gone through? What is the influence on their academic, research, and teaching careers in the future? How do they transform their experiences through their cultural exploration in a different landscape? To answer the questions, the three authors tried to find the similarities and differences among their stories and summarized the themes in each story and the stage of their adjustment. Since they use the three-dimensional inquiry space as the framework, the themes discussed below are arranged by the time order so that readers can follow with the three stages and threads to experience their academic adjustment, which is full of struggling, agency, adjustment, and support from each other. As Anderson (1994) states, "many of the students themselves felt that they were on a slow loop" (as cited in Lewthwaite, 1996, p. 182). Next, the three Chinese international students' academic adjustment experiences will be discussed in three stages.

### ***Chinese international students' academic adjustment in three stages***

With only having 2–4 years for post-graduate study, it is important that the sojourners adapt to the new culture rapidly to function effectively (Lewthwaite, 1996). When the three authors first entered the Canadian academic context, Shuyao and Lan encountered the academic shock which came with frustration, anxiety, puzzle, and excitement. In contrast, Jiaqi enjoyed her exchange program in the B.C. since it was an eye-opening experience for her and directly influenced her decision of pursing a master's degree in Canada. From the different responses in their stories, the authors found that Chinese international students are not a homogeneous group. Although they all come from China and got their bachelor's degrees in Chinese universities, they differ in educational background, language proficiency, interest, learning style and personality. Therefore, it would be appropriate to get rid of the stereotypes for Chinese international students, which often describe them as obedient and lacking critical thinking. On the other hand, academic experiences are dynamic and complex, so it cannot be concluded with an absolute statement or judgment that the adjustment is tough, negative, or positive.

In the second stage of adjustment, they all relied on their native language to cope with the challenges they met such as using Chinese to help with comprehension of concepts in the course. In that sense, the first language was a cognitive resource for international students, and it helped them to survive in the academic context. International students used all their experience, knowledge, and linguistic resources to survive the demanding courses. The three authors all depended on their native language to help them adjust to the Canadian academic context. For example, Jiaqi's logical thinking training in her undergraduate program enabled her to analyze the statement and logic in academic papers, which further contributed to her participation in the whole-class discussion in Canada. Cultural background and the first language are always important in Jiaqi's academic experiences. The stories in the second stage discussed the role that the first language plays in the academic adjustment, such as helping to make sense of the learning content. But the three authors could see the negative sides of using their native language such as the inaccurate translation that leads to misunderstanding between Chinese and English concepts. It is not a question of totally relying on the native language or completely abandoning it.

In the third stage, Jiaqi and Shuyao were learning how to engage in classroom discussion and avoid plagiarism in academic writing, while Lan started to think about how to tell Chinese teachers' stories in her dissertation. As Chinese students, they hoped to get their voices heard in the Western academy and tell their stories by using localized words or concepts. They were exploring and making efforts to achieve that goal. In fact, increasingly international students are

contributing to the culturally diverse environment in higher education, and the campus must be opener and more tolerant. An internationalized curriculum demands that educators view international students not only as knowledge consumers but also as knowledge producers (Guo & Guo, 2017). Within an open and democratic context, international students from all over the world will be more willing to share their stories and express their needs.

Apart from discussing the stories in the time frame, the three plotlines of academic adjustment are also interrelated from the personal/social and place dimensions. The personal dimension incorporates students' educational background, interpersonal communication, and engagement in social activities. Due to varying personal backgrounds, each participant's academic adjustment story has its unique theme and plotline. Shuyao's academic adjustment was intertwined with classroom participation, sensitivity to language use in cross-cultural communication and her exploration of interesting research topics. Lan's academic adjustment was centered on teacher education and its contextualization in China. Jiaqi's academic adjustment happened during her active participation in workshops and lectures that the Canadian university offered. Meanwhile, the professional landscape, which acts as a collective backdrop, also had an impact on their academic adjustment. The professional landscape includes Canadian educational philosophy, the multiple roles the students played, and the university as well as the local community. They aimed at applying what they had learned from the East to educational practices in Canada and China. Overall, their understanding Chinese culture, their experiences as students and teachers in China and abroad, and their classroom experiences are all interwoven with all other aspects of the flux of change in their landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

### ***Chinese international students' academic adjustment in a cross-cultural context***

Lastly, the authors would like to discuss the cultural dimension, as this research is contextualized within a cross-cultural context, and it is crucial to combine students' academic needs with their socio-cultural needs (Guo & Chase, 2011). There seems to be a dilemma where Chinese international students struggle between the East and West during their academic adjustment to the Canadian context. On the one hand, they are deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural background and Chinese language. On the other hand, they must follow Western academic paradigms in reading, writing, and participation in class. As Zhang and Xu (2007) mention, Chinese international students have to make a transition from teacher-oriented approaches to a student-oriented approaches when in a Western learning environment. However, from the three authors' stories, they find that they did not fall into this dichotomy, which means it is not an "either-or" question. Their reflection and transformations in the adjustment demonstrate the deconstruction of the Eastern-Western dichotomy. For example, some research claims that international students do not participate in class and lack critical thinking skills (Andrade, 2006; Robertson et al., 2000). However, Jiaqi's story in the first stage shows that some Chinese international students may enjoy the free atmosphere and be willing to improve their critical thinking under the teacher's guidance. The initial positive academic experience influenced her decision to pursue a master's degree at Canada. After graduating from the program, she still hopes to apply for a doctoral program in a Canadian university. The adjustment includes excitement, anxiety, pressure, frustration, and mixed emotions. Even within one person, the adjustment can be complicated, and the reflection on Western and Eastern cultures may change over time. As He (2002) argues, individuals have complex narrative histories, shifting from culture to culture, language to language, and place to place. Eastern and Western academic landscapes were interchangeable and interwoven when the three Chinese international students worked hard to

learn to deal with evolving educational challenges. Their narrative accounts have portrayed their academic lives as flowing between cultures, languages, and places (He, 2002; Hastrup & Olwig, 1997).

## Implications and Conclusions

As Guo and Chase (2011) point out, international graduate students play a significant role in producing knowledge in Canadian universities. The academic challenges that international students encounter during their study-abroad experience often have an impact on their satisfaction, success, and retention (Smith et al., 2020). Despite the increasing number of international students in Canada, few studies have assessed the changes in their adjustment during the transition into the new academic life overseas (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008). Moreover, there is not enough support to assist international students smoothly integrating into Canadian academic contexts (Guo & Guo, 2017). International students' intercultural adjustment is not a linear and passive procedure (Gu et al., 2010). In fact, "it involves the presence of a complex set of shifting associations between language proficiency, social interaction, personal development, and academic outcomes" (Guo & Chase, 2011, p. 316). Therefore, the current study has practical implications. First, this narrative research adds a new synthesized framework to analyzing Chinese students' academic adjustment at Canadian universities. This study provides a dynamic perspective to examine how Chinese international students undertake academic adjustment in different stages. Second, by showing the Chinese students' academic adjustment stories, this research calls for attention from Canadian universities to provide more tailored support to cultivate Chinese students' social identities. In this way, the Chinese students who study in Canadian universities will more adroitly cope with academic adjustment tensions.

The three authors shared their academic experiences in Canada in a safe and comfortable space by using Chinese as their native language. The sharing and support among the authors may provide some implications for policymakers and program development in Canadian universities. As Chen and Zhou (2019) emphasize, the recruitment of international students will not automatically lead to a harmonious multicultural campus because such an outcome needs efforts from all sides to form a friendly and inclusive social and academic environment. It might be useful to organize an online seminar or group in which alumni and the currently registered students can communicate with each other, especially those who come from the same country. For example, Canadian universities can work with organizations such as the Chinese Students and Scholars' Association to hold events or activities for Chinese international students or visiting scholars to meet and share their academic and social experiences in Canada. They can talk in their native language and form a supportive atmosphere in the process.

To conclude, the stories about three Chinese international students' academic adjustment experiences in the cross-cultural context have captured complexity, extensiveness, uncertainty, difficulties, agency, challenges, struggles, and growth. The international students' academic adjustment experiences have been influenced by cultural differences, the native language, past experiences in their motherland, educational backgrounds, and the individual's own agency in overcoming challenges. Temporally, these experiences will influence their personal and professional development. As Brown & Holloway (2008) point out, understanding the adjustment process is an indispensable component of supporting and serving international students. The insights gained from this research are expected to be useful for other international students in Canadian universities.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express sincere gratitude to all the editors and reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions on this paper. We thank Dr. Shijing Xu for her support, encouragement, and guidance along the academic journey of the first and second authors.

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