Identity negotiation of Chinese international students in Canada: A study on cosmopolitan post-graduation settlement

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Abstract
This study focuses on analyzing the acculturation of Chinese international students in Canada, emphasizing students’ post-graduation settlement in China, Canada, or in other countries. Chinese international students commonly experience a multilayered acculturative adjustment when they are challenged by a new culture. In this process, they develop an identity negotiation that impacts their settlement into a new country. This study mobilizes four notions of acculturation (e.g., assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation), to evaluate Chinese international students’ identity negotiation after university. This research uses 17 semi-structured interviews to understand how participants’ identities were negotiated through their acculturative adjustment. First, the findings highlight the importance of career factors and family values in participants’ settlement decisions. Second, the balance between Chinese identity and Canadian identity has some impact on student’s migration plans.

Keywords
identity formation, acculturation, settlement, Chinese international students, cosmopolitanism

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Recruitment of international students is one of the strategies of Western nation-states to enhance their global competitiveness, sponsor their education system, and recruit highly skilled workers (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). According to the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, “5,194,900 Chinese students have studied abroad over the last 40 years, and 1,454,100 students are enrolled in overseas higher education institutions” (2018, para. 2). Upon relocating to a new culture, Chinese international students face challenges from the sociocultural transition to psychological distress (Anderson, 1994; Wang et al., 2012). Consequently, international students’ adaptation to the host nation is understood as an acculturative adjustment that involves a process of identity negotiation (Yu, 2018, p. 23).

Most Western universities train their students with a cosmopolitan worldview because their “nation-states would benefit from such multicultural attuned citizens” (Fincher, 2011, p. 911). At the same time, living in an unfamiliar multicultural environment, foreign students would have to adjust their identity towards a cosmopolitan way of life to cope with various layers of stressors (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013, p. 380). This research focuses on factors of acculturation that affect Chinese international students’ post-graduation settlement in Canada, in China, and other Western nations. Post-graduation settlement will be divided into three categories: Category 1 includes Chinese students who have decided to stay in Canada; Category 2 refers to students who returned to China upon graduation; and Category 3 is students who returned to China but relocated to Canada or in the West.

Since identity negotiation is one of the significant factors of international students’ acculturation, to what degree does it impact Chinese international students’ future blueprint, core values, and settlement decisions. This study focuses on answering the following questions:

1) To what extent acculturative experience affects international students’ decision to (a) settle in Canada, (b) settle back in China, or (c) re-immigrate to a different country outside China and Canada?

2) What is the impact of a cosmopolitanism education on their decision to (a) settle in Canada, (b) settle back in China or (c) re-immigrate to a different country outside China and Canada?

Theoretical framework

Many researchers agree that human identity is “rooted in language” and does help to know ‘who is who’ (and hence ‘what is what’) (Yu, 2018, p. 11). As one of the layers that influence one’s identity, “the ideological self” indicates “broader cultural and historical meanings in a particular social situation (e.g., husband and wife)” (Yu, 2018, p. 11). To adapt to the environment of host nations is to negotiate one’s identity between Western cultures and their root culture. Assimilation, the adaptation toward host culture (Yu, 2018, p. 10), is seen as a process of “racial whitening” (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2012, p. 4). During this process, immigrants negotiate their identities through engagement with “material situations such as work, leisure” and so on of local society (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2012, p. 4). The notion of identity negotiation has been well developed in the field of Cultural Studies, including in Asian Cultural Studies (see Zhang, 2017). Its multiple deployments contend that the fixity—or essentialism—of identity is unattainable, theoretically and practically. Indeed, not only that the process of identity is always linked to that of identification, but the concept of identity itself is always an endless negotiation process’s of “changing same” (Hall, 1997; Gilroy, 1993) as well as of negotiation with an external world (Ebanda de B’béri, 2010, Mansouri & Boulou Ébanda de B’béri, 2014). International students are expected to
learn Canadian culture and values through collaboration and leisure engagements with local residents.

Two theoretical models helped define and measure respondents’ acculturation and identity negotiation to answer the research questions. “Model of acculturation” (Wang et al., 2012, p. 425) studies “the role of pre-arrival and post-arrival factors that might affect the adjustment process” of international students. However, this model only focuses on the psychological distress of the international student. For this research, the model of acculturation will be extended with the “process of integration” (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 84), which illustrates the contextual factors that influence the acculturative adjustment outcome. As a result, the updated model of acculturation will evaluate pre-arrival factors, including international students’ understanding of cosmopolitanism and initial goals of their journey in Canada, and post-arrival factors, including “the host community as well as the university setting” (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 84).

The outcome of respondents’ practices of identity is analyzed by categorizing them into four options of acculturation (Yu, 2018, p. 10). According to this model, sojourners can choose from four different ways of acculturative adjustment: “assimilation,” choosing the host culture over their own culture; “integration,” remaining both cultures; “separation,” maintaining only their heritage culture; and “marginalization,” discarding both cultures (Yu, 2018, p. 10). Since cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism differently promote “openness to new experiences” (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013, p. 383) without abandoning traditional cultural heritage, the notion of integration also represents potential cosmopolitan identity.

To evaluate the status of identity negotiation of participants, the four notions of acculturation will be supported with indicators of Chinese identity and Canadian identities, modern revival of Confucianism values in China and the multiculturalism in Canada (Figures 1 and 2).

**Indicators of Chinese identity**

Confucianism acts as “the main narrator” (Solé-Farràs, 2014, p. 2) of the formation of Chinese culture and identity with its philosophical and ideological discourse. Various scholars argue that the Chinese culture, cultural identity, psychological structure, as well as philosophy and religions have been developed around the ideologies of Confucianism (Han, 2013; Link, 2015; Solé-Farràs, 2014). According to Solé-Farràs (2014), Confucianism is a discursive system for

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**Figure 1.** Participants’ positive and negative experiences in Canada.
the convergence and development of Chinese civilization, which becomes the center of the cultural identity of the Chinese state. First of all, citizens are required to “pay loyalty and duty to the sovereign” (Fan et al., 2017, p. 133), usually the elder in the family or the authority. Confucianism advocates hierarchical disciplines within a family, which constitutes the basic unit of the Chinese social hierarchy system (Fan et al., 2017). The vision of building a harmonious socialist society (社 会 主 义 和 谐 社 会) and president Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream” both show similarity with Confucianism (Fraiberg et al., 2017; Link, 2015). In addition to the shared emphasis on “harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world” (Fraiberg et al., 2017), the Chinese dream emphasizes the national pride and the love of not only China but also the Communist Party, showing similarities with the Confucian value of loyalty and patriotism (Link, 2015).

Indicators of Canadian identity

Multiculturalism in Canada functions as a national policy, a “demographic fact” and an ideology to maintain the diversity of the country (Berry, 2013, p. 664). As Canada absorbs immigrants from various countries and cultivates a diversified cultural and ethnic environment, Canadian identity is also constituted with the emphasis of “cultural freedom and one’s own individual identity” (Mann, 2012, p. 491). As a result, according to Golić, Vujadinović, and Šabić, “Canada has one of the world’s most admired models of a multicultural society” (2016, p. 284). While the increasingly diversified Canadian citizens are living in “relative harmony,” multiculturalism is considered as being accepted by 84% of Canadians (Golić et al., 2016, p. 284). Currently, 6.2 million Canadians, which constitutes 20% of the population gross, are immigrants from 200 countries and speaking 95 different languages (Berry, 2013, p. 663). To put it in another way, multiculturalism has been largely favored by most Canadians and supported by the diversified environment as the unique identity of Canada.

Methodology

To answer the research questions, the researcher adopts a qualitative research method. Participants were categorized as Category 1, students who stayed in Canada, Category 2, students who returned to China after graduation, and Category 3, students who relocated to another country after a post-graduation settlement to China. With a sample of 17 participants, this research would be more
likely to reflect four types of acculturation choices: marginalization, integration, separation, and assimilation. Since the research objective requires collecting empirical experiences of Chinese international students, qualitative research and interviews are suitable methods adopted for this thesis.

Along with a qualitative methodology, the researcher also adopted a cohort analysis to observe and analyze Chinese international students who studied abroad after 2008. By carefully designed exhibition of the combination between the “modern and cutting-edge” society and the “ancient cultural center” (Gottwald & Duggan, 2008, p. 348), the 2008 Summer Olympic Games can be seen as a “political spectacle” to rebrand China as the “superpower in the making” (Gottwald & Duggan, 2008, p. 351). In 2009, the increasing rate of Chinese international students reached 27.53%, the highest record in around a decade (Zhongguo jiaoyu zaixian, n.d., para. 3). Therefore, this study mainly analyzes Chinese international students who studied in Canada after the 2008 Olympic Games.

In order to find suitable interviewees that fit with the three post-graduation settlement statuses, a digital recruitment poster was disseminated on the researcher’s social media. The snowball sampling method is commonly used to help researchers locate and access people from marginalized social groups (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 426). In this case, the participants would be Chinese international students who graduated from a Canadian university. Researchers use online networks and connections via a poster on their social media to recruit participants. Participants and researcher’s friend would share the recruitment poster on WeChat, Weibo, and other Chinese social media platforms. This snowball sampling method borrows the personal social networks of research, his friends, and the participants to recruit Chinese graduates from Canadian universities. Overall, 17 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with former Chinese international students were conducted. The 17 interviewees demonstrate four different types of acculturations and four choices of post-graduation settlement at the center of this research. All interviewees were recruited via WeChat, despite researchers’ efforts in posting recruitment messages on other platforms.

Although 15 out of 17 participants align with the research targets, Chinese international students who studied in Canada after 2008, two of the participants do not meet the description. Despite the initial goal of this research to target Chinese international students who studied in Canada after 2008, one of the participants came to Canada in 2007. This participant assumed that she came to Canada in 2014 until the researcher asked more questions about her experience in Canada. Furthermore, one of the participants found out about her permanent residency in Canada when she arrived, but she grew up in China and was consequently not aware of her change of residential status. She was considered a Chinese international student because of her lack of knowledge about her immigration status in Canada.

With the approach of thematic analysis, the researcher was able to “make sense of” and “locate meaning” in the data (Guest et al., 2012, p. 2). Identified themes, which are “units of meanings” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 3) the researcher observed in the data, could reflect “textual data” (Shen, 2011, p. 46) and contribute to answering the research questions. In this research, the researcher followed the thematic analysis to analyze the data and analyzed the data in four steps. In the first stage, the researcher carefully read through the interview transcripts in order to familiarize himself with the data. After highlighting the most important and repeated features from the transcripts, the researcher coded the highlighted content into specific categories and subcategories for the third stage. Finally, the researcher reviewed all the transcripts and created a map of themes and codes in order to layout their interrelations. Direct quotations and keywords were chosen from the transcripts to reflect participants’ opinions and experiences (as cited in Shen, 2011, p. 47). The researcher conducted the interviews, coding procedure and reviewed all themes and codes to ensure rigor in the creation of a codebook.
Result
Out of the 17 former Chinese international students who graduated from Canadian universities, more than half studied in Greater Vancouver or the Great Toronto area, and 5 of them studied in other cities. Five of the participants were male, and 12 were female. The majority of them arrived in Canada after high school, 4 of them studied in high schools with a non-Chinese curriculum, and 4 of them studied in Canada after they obtained their university degrees in China.

During the interviews, researchers learnt that post-graduation settlement is more complicated than their expectations because participants’ decisions change according to their post-graduation experiences. Among all interviewees, only two chose to go back to China as their initial post-graduation settlement; nine interviewees stayed in Canada, and the other six participants either went to another country for a temporary stay or chose to travel between China and Canada. During the interviews, 9 out of 17 participants live in Canada, and 8 of them live in China. However, since Participant 2 has already confirmed a job position in China, although she is still studying in Canada for her Master’s degree, China would be her intended settlement decision. On the contrary, Participant 12 studied in Canada and then Australia, and she is living in China temporarily until her application for Canadian permanent residency is processed. Therefore, Participant 12’s settlement location would be Canada. Therefore, rather than continuing with the initial categorization, participants were labeled into three groups: long-term settlement plan in China, in Canada, or both Canada and China. Moreover, Participant 15 moved back to Canada after her initial post-graduation settlement in China. This participant represents a particular case of settlement in Canada (see Appendix 2 for the result of identity negotiation and post-graduation settlement of participants, p. 41).

Cross-cultural experiences
One of the most discussed factors about the Canadian experience was the comparatively slow and underdeveloped urban lifestyle. Second, nine participants argued that they enjoy the diversified and less stressful Canadian education, despite some adjustment issues. The language was one of the significant issues for eight participants, while the sense of community at school is another setback for seven participants. For 10 out of 17 participants, Canada is a diversified, inclusive, and friendly country. Nonetheless, seven participants pointed out the subtle or overt discriminations and cultural shocks in their adaptation process. At the same time, three participants disagree with Canadian society’s sense of social responsibility, and they strongly oppose the refugee policy. In terms of finding a job in Canada, four participants had difficulties in job hunting and eight participants were working at positions irrelevant to what they studied in universities. When it comes to friendship, although four participants claimed they have close friends from different cultural backgrounds, 14 participants felt distanced from locals and preferred friends from a Chinese background over other cultures because of the linguistic, cultural, and ideological differences.

Identification
Even though one participant had a Canadian passport, she still noticed the difference between herself and native Canadians. Six participants were either permanent residents of Canada or in the application procedure. Even though they wanted to stay in Canada, they had no intention to become Canadian citizens. Last but not least, participants 2 and 4 were very proud of their Chinese
identity. These participants chose to go back to China without applying for permanent residency or simply value their citizenship.

During the interviews, participants’ discussion demonstrated a high level of influence from the cosmopolitan education system in Canada. The impacts indicated in the data are on several aspects of participants’ lifestyles and ideologies, including enhanced levels of intercultural capacity, inclusiveness to diversity, global awareness, critical thinking, freedom, social responsibility, and life-long learning. Even though at least 13 participants admit that they encountered reverse cultural shocks as they returned to China, five participants still did not see themselves as global citizens.

Reverse cultural shock refers to the feeling of not fitting in when international students return to their home country. Although 13 discussions on the reverse cultural shock for overseas returnees focus on the career aspect (e.g., the lack of specialized positions in small Chinese cities), re-adaptation issues regarding civility, family, and lifestyle appeared in seven interviews, four interviews and seven interviews correspondingly. Participants reflect difficulties in adjusting to the pressure in the Chinese workplace, different ideologies with family members, the public incivility, and the fast-paced urban lifestyle.

**Post-graduation settlement**

In Canada. When asked about the reasons to settle in Canada, career, family, and permanent residency were mentioned, respectively, by 13 participants, eight participants, and five participants, while culture was also discussed in one interview. Among the discussion about the career in Canada, interviewees mainly value better working conditions and job opportunities in a Canadian workplace. Although not all work permit holders or permanent residents plan to stay in Canada, five participants stayed after graduation because of the work permit or permanent residency. Moreover, family factors that motivated participants to stay in Canada involve their new family in Canada, family support in Canada, and the lack of individual space in China.

In China. Among the participants, career and family were two significant reasons for their settlement in China, while lifestyle and immigration policies were discussed in three interviews and four interviews, respectively. Reunion with family members, especially parents, was the most discussed reason for participants’ settlement in China. Then, 11 participants stated that China has more job opportunities and a more promising future for career development. At the same time, participants chose China over Canada because of their preferences towards the fast-paced urban lifestyle and rich entertainment options in China. In addition, four participants decided to move back to China due to the complicated and changing requirements of immigration policy in Canada.

Settlement in other countries. Universities’ fame and influence on personal profiles are the main reasons participants study in another country after graduation from a Canadian university. None of the interviewees in this research stayed or planned to stay in another country for the future.

Mobile settlement. Among 17 participants in this research, one participant moved back to Canada despite of her initial plan to settle in China. Her area of specialty was not needed in her hometown and her salary at an entry-level position was not promising for her future in China. Additionally, three interviewees chose a mobile settlement, which means they would be traveling between China and Canada. These participants claim that staying in Canada or China is the same for them as a result of multiculturalism in Canada. Participant 16 mentioned that his life in Canada feels like living in “another city in China.” The specific settlement plans vary for each participant. The
mobile status of settlement is linked with a strong attachment to Chinese culture and family members in China, but it is also enabled by the dynamic Chinese communities in Canada.

Data analysis

Cross-cultural experience and post-graduation settlement

Regarding cross-cultural experiences, the most discussed factors that influenced participants’ post-graduation settlement include career options and conditions, social connections, cultural adaptations, and psychological and academic experiences. This research result agrees with some of the existing theories, but it has outlined some discrepancies.

Several studies demonstrate the impact of career factors on international students’ willingness to stay or return. According to Zhu,

[There are] four important factors that impacted their willingness to return, namely: the occupational situation for Chinese talents in science and technology; the talent-absorbing power of the USA; the international economic situation; and China’s economic, science, and technology development (2016, p. 75).

Eleven participants chose to return to China because of the limited opportunities in Canada and the more advanced technology and finance industries in China. Participant 8 suggested that: “The reason I chose to return to China at the time was that I felt that it is difficult to be promoted to a high position or high-level job.” Meanwhile, Participant 11 and Participant 14, who graduated from Business and Design programs, returned to China due to the increasing demand for talents and space for promotion in China. Participant 14 claimed that cities such as Vancouver only had developed education and tourism industries, whereas the IT-related industries were so underdeveloped that it was hard for international students to find jobs relevant to their degree.

Furthermore, Lu et al. (2009, p. 288) also argue that “professional factors,” which include salaries, working conditions, and opportunities for future development, are one of the three types of factors that influenced international students’ post-graduation settlement. Even though 11 participants valued China as a suitable job market for career-driven young people, Canada attracted Participant 13 and Participant 15 with better working conditions and better salaries. Participant 15 returned to Canada after working in China for several years because she preferred the work–life balance in Canada to enjoy her life after work. The competition and pressure in the Chinese job market drive away participants who pursue a work–life balance.

Personal connections in Canada are argued to be another factor that influences students’ post-graduation settlement. Personal connection is usually “exemplified by family structure and friendship networks” (Lu et al., 2009, p. 288). Building a stable friendship with Canadians and participating in social activities are seen as methods “clearly facilitate adaptation into Canadian society” (Lu et al., 2009, p. 288). Participant 15 argued that she felt respected when she was supported by her local friends during her adaptation to Canada. On the contrary, “insufficient contacts” (Chen, 2017, p. 88) with locals could lead to isolation in Canada, which could affect international students’ willingness to stay after graduation. After returning to China for a few months, Participant 11 argued that he prefers the Chinese lifestyle over the Canadian one because he was bored in Canada, and he had only a few friends in Canada.

Some scholars believe that international students who adjusted to the language and host culture are more likely to be satisfied with their education experience in the host country, and consequently, they would prefer to “stay and work in the host country after graduation” (Ugwu, 2014, p. 84). During their initial adaptation to Canada, six participants considered language as an obstacle
for their education, 16 participants had different levels of communication issues with local students, and seven participants mostly lived in the Chinese community in Canada. Participant 16, as an example, lived and worked in Richmond, BC, which has the largest Chinese Canadian population by percentage. He suggested that “I could live a good life here without the ability to speak in English.” Hence, in contrast to the literature, language ability is not a premier motivation for post-graduation settlement in this research.

The security of obtaining a stable identity status in the host country is proposed by Dervin (2015) as one of the motivations for migration. According to Dervin,

A tension exists between the desire for mobility (international or transnational) and the desire for security. Since the 1990s, many studies have observed a ‘wait and see’ strategy among overseas Chinese students. Instead of a definite return to the country of origin, students seek secured status in the host country (2015, p. 110).

Similarly, Participant 9 returned to China because she was seeking a stable lifestyle. Because of her experiences in Canada, Participant 9 was tired of moving and the drifting status of international students. “Even if I go and study in Hong Kong, I still have to rent a place and relocate everything, then I have to sell them all when I leave, I just don’t like this,” said Participant 9.

Likewise, four participants mentioned the uncertainty of immigration policy in Canada during the interviews. According to Participant 6, before Justin Trudeau changed the immigration policies to recruit more international students, her friends left Canada because of difficulty obtaining permanent residency. Participant 11 also mentioned that the immigration requirement constantly changes and becomes too strict for international students to stay. On the contrary, Participant 16 wanted to stay in Canada and secure his permanent residency to have more options to choose from when it comes to his country of residence. “When China is more comfortable to live in, I would voluntarily give up my right in Canada and it would be my choice. If I directly return home now, I won’t have any other choices”, argued Participant 16.

Based on the study on the international doctoral students’ post-graduation settlement, Zhu (2016) suggests that the academic environment is a critical factor for Chinese students to consider after graduation. Some doctoral students stayed in the USA after graduation because “those students regarded the academic environment in China as much worse than that found in the USA” (Zhu, 2016, p. 75). Participant 10 showed agreement to the argument, and he suggested that the educational environment in Canada would be a better option for his children. As for further education experience for oneself, three participants relocated to another country for their Master’s degrees, while one of them moved back to China because of the difficulty in admission to Canadian Master’s programs. After graduation, Participant 1 and Participant 12 went to Australia for their Master’s degrees. Participant 1 suggested that due to the competition in the Chinese job market and the growing population of Chinese overseas returnees, she needs a Master’s degree to build a more appealing profile. Therefore, the data shows that the academic environment motivates participants with children to stay, whereas three participants prioritize personal education as a motivation for temporary migration.

**Cosmopolitan education and post-graduation settlement**

As a result of the cosmopolitan education in Canada, participants in this research all displayed the critical qualities of cosmopolitans at different levels. Scholars have connected three outcomes of cosmopolitan education, the interculturality, mobility, and global awareness, with international students’ potential of “a cosmopolitan identity” (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013, p. 383), their tendency to settle in countries other than their home country. In this research, intercultural
communication skills, mobile identity, lifelong learning, global awareness, and critical thinking are considered the outcomes of cosmopolitan education (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013; Wu & Wilkes, 2017). The result of this study shows some alignments with these existing theories, as 7 out 17 participants showed more than 3 qualities of cosmopolitan education.

As a potential outcome of international students’ education in Western countries, the “intercultural capital” (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013, p. 383) is an “expanded consciousness about political, cultural, and economic issues” across national boundaries, leading to inclusiveness towards “new experiences, people, and places.” Likewise, Poteet and Gomez argue that the traditional identity created by the boundary between states is challenged by “increasing mobility and global interconnectedness” (2015, p. 89). As a result, “over time many participants broadened their sense of belonging by their association with other students and through new experiences in the Canadian context” (Poteet & Gomez, 2015, p. 97). Intermingling between different cultures could help international students adapt to the host country and recognize the cosmopolitan future in different directions (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013).

Seven participants argued that they gained local friends and adapted to different cultures and a new way of self-identification because of their intercultural communication with Canadians and other international students. Participant 5 not only had a good friend who is a local Canadian, but she also recognized her openness towards people from various backgrounds. However, she returned to China a few years after graduation for medical reasons despite her initial intention to stay in Canada. Meanwhile, Participant 13 explained the changes in her values because of her communication with Canadian-born-Chinese.

Many [Chinese] people who grew up here may have their own ways of self-identification. They either identify themselves as Canadians or feel that they are not differentiated based on their skin colours. Their cultural awareness and identity identify them.

The intercultural communication between Participant 13 and Chinese Canadians caused her some confusion, but she ended up seeing it as an “opportunity to think about my own identity.” As a result, Participant 13 chose to stay in Canada and started to see herself as a “stateless person,” which relates to the mobility of graduates from a cosmopolitan education system.

Moreover, mobility describes the status of no longer belonging to a specific location due to an individual’s relocation to foreign countries and negotiated identities (Wu & Wilkes, 2017; Dervin, 2015). Hence, to the mobile international students, “home and where home (is) may still be an unknown” (Wu & Wilkes, 2017, p. 126). Participant 13 shared that she refused to be labeled as Chinese because that identity would limit her. She questioned the capacity of “Chinese” in representing one’s complex experiences. She suggested, “I’m not like them. Others have lived here for 10 years, and they may not learn the domestic culture at all. We are all different. I think it’s hard to define myself with a label”.

International students could develop to see their identity as a flexible entity, so they would exploit that identity to “accumulate capital and power, seeking to maximize personal gains in particular political and economic climates” (Dervin, 2015, p. 102). In Dervin’s study (2015), students who lack the view of flexible citizenship are those who returned to China. Similarly, Participant 10, Participant 16, and Participant 17 all chose to stay in Canada and apply for permanent residency as their initial settlement choice. They suggested that they would be looking for opportunities in both China and Canada. Participant 10 also admitted that he accepts both Canadian and Chinese identities and sees no conflicts between them. The data indicates the impact of participants’ mobile identity on their choices of not settling in China.

Because of the exposure to cosmopolitan vision in education and “international contexts” (Wu & Wilkes, 2017, p. 126), international students could be more likely to pursue their careers on the
global market. Likewise, according to Piwoni (2018, p. 2), international students might adopt the idea of global responsibility, and consequently, look for an identity in a “global/transnational domain” for their future careers. When asked to discuss the influence of Canadian education on their values, Participant 2 and Participant 10 stated that they developed a sense of responsibility for international affairs, or they would be more aware of their responsibility in life. Participant 7 also mentioned that her ideal was to travel to different countries and be exposed to various cultures instead of staying in one place. However, they all returned to China for reasons other than the notion of global awareness.

On the other hand, Participant 6, Participant 12, and Participant 17 used the word “self-righteous responsibility (sheng mu xin 圣母心)” to describe the refugee policy of Canada and Australia. Despite their settlement in Canada, they still showed resistance to the concept of global responsibility. In this research, participants did not prioritize the notion of global awareness as a significant factor for post-graduation settlement.

Identity negotiation and post-graduation settlement

According to the participants’ answers, the researcher categorized them into four stages of identity negotiation based on their acceptance of Canadian and Chinese identities. The values of multiculturalism and Confucianism were correspondingly chosen as the primary indicator of Canadian and Chinese identities (Berry, 2013; Han, 2013; Link, 2015; Solé-Farrás, 2014). Ten out of 17 participants showed the existence of both identities, and four participants were considered separated because they had limited awareness of Canadian values. One participant was categorized as marginalized for her resistance to Confucianism values. Another participant was labeled as “perpetual negotiation” because she critiqued both countries’ values and partially accepted both identities. According to In’s study on Korean international students in the U.S., “students with high levels of acculturation to the U.S. reported U.S.-oriented post-graduation residency plans whereas students with high levels of engagement with Korean culture reported Korea-oriented residency plans” (2014, p. 92). Likewise, 10 integrated participants in this research show similar tendencies.

Following Yu’s (2018) model of acculturation, people who are integrated would accept both Canadian and Chinese values. As one of the core values in Confucianism and Chinese identity, familial care and responsibility are the main reasons for 12 participants’ return to China. Even though Participant 11 and Participant 14 demonstrate their acceptance of multiculturalism in Canada, they both returned to China for their families. Participant 14 shared that he enjoyed his friendship with people from Japan, Mexico, and other countries when he studied in Canada. However, according to Chen, “the data also shows that most of the only child respondents would choose to return to China to take care of their parents if necessary” (2017, p. 85). As well, Participant 7 was asked by her parents to go back to China because she is the only child. Following the Confucian ideology, children are also supposed to repay parents for their nourish by taking care of them and “fulfilling the responsibility to parents” (Chen, 2017, p. 6). Participant 14 explained that he returned to China because his parents were aging, and helping their business was part of the reasons for his relocation.

On the other hand, as multiculturalism is seen as a critical characteristic that defines Canadian identity (Berry, 2013), some integrated participants chose to stay in a diversified environment. During the interviews, Participant 12 stated that she learnt to respect other cultures and minorities, such as the LGBTQ community, so she preferred to stay in Canada. At the same time, she appreciates that Canadians usually cherish friendship as an essential part of their lives, while she still believes that parents are the ones who care for her the most.
Previous studies believe that the balance between the primary identity built in their home country and the identity developed in the host country constructs the “multi-faceted identities” of international students (Fincher, 2011, p. 916). As shown in the research result, due to the co-existence of two cultural identities, integrated participants agree to both notions of multiculturalism and Confucian family values, so their choices of post-graduation settlement depend on how much they weigh each identity. In other words, in this research, participants in the integration category demonstrate possible post-graduation settlement plans in Canada, China, or a mobile residence in both China and Canada.

Participants in the status of separation in Canada are usually isolated from the Canadian community; hence, they only remain their Chinese identity and have issues adapting to the host country (Yu, 2018). In Chen’s research (2017, p. 88), some respondents construct their connections within their cultural community, so they distance themselves from contacts with other ethnic groups. Similarly, Participant 16 and Participant 17 built their social network in Chinese communities during their lives in Canada. Participant 16 chose to follow his mother’s words after graduation: he stayed in Canada and worked in his relative’s company for immigration applications. He suggested that “my parents spent a lot of money so I could study abroad, they sacrifice their right to be themselves for me. I can’t convince myself to be myself and not consider their interests, so I would agree to their arrangement.” Likewise, Participant 17 also stated that he had limited contact with locals, so the Canadian culture remains strange to him. As a result, both participants intended to travel between Canada and China after obtaining their permanent residency.

Meanwhile, Participant 9’s experiences align with Chen’s description of “insularity” (2017, p. 88) in the host country. She stated that she was isolated in Canada because of the “material society” and reciprocal relationship between people, so she preferred to return to the Chinese society built upon human relations. The experience of Participant 9 indicates her preference for the collectivism-oriented society and interdependence of Confucianism (Fan et al., 2017). Separated participants in this research tend not to stay in Canada as their long-term post-graduate settlement plan.

Participant 15 shows the tendency of marginalization as she displays her resistance to both Chinese and Canadian values. According to Chen, international students exposed to Western culture could have “a tendency toward weakening the idea of responsibility for the family and as the idea of individualism grows” (2017, p. 88). Participant 15 initially returned to China for her ill family member but then moved back to Canada because of the pressure at home. After she noticed a struggle between her freedom in Canada and a family reunion in China, she still chose to live in Canada. However, Participant 15 chose to live in Canada but maintained her “own pace of life.” Her relocation to Canada was due to the work–life balance. Indeed, the Canadian workplace and her demand for an independent space were much important than her appreciation of multiculturalism. Even though she had been living in Canada, her ideological conflicts distance her from others.

Participant 15, Participant 13 chose to stay in Canada because of the freedom to be herself and the tolerance of variety. However, her answers during the interview demonstrate a continuous negotiation of identity along with her partial agreement to specific values of both Chinese and Canadian cultures. When asked about her identity in Canada, Participant 13 argued that “I don’t like people saying that I have to give up my original things before I can adapt. I think it’s unfair for me. I am still in a self-adjustment and I want to balance them”. At the same time, she recognized her responsibility following the family values of Confucianism (Fan et al., 2017, p. 133), but she preferred to maintain her personal space distanced from her family. Moreover, she suggested that her values are different from her family and the trending ideologies in China. “I just feel like I can’t belong to any group right now. Whether it’s based on culture, or language, or skin color, I think it’s
too difficult to find someone who can relate to it”, said Participant 13. Then, she chose to live in Canada because her independence and freedom are tolerated. Compared to Yu’s theoretical framework (2018), this participant is different from any of the four statuses of acculturation, including assimilation, integration, marginalization and separation. Hence, Participant 13, currently living in Canada, is categorized as perpetual negotiation indicating her differences from the other participants and the literature.

Conclusion

In this research, participants’ long-term settlement plans in Canada were mainly under the influence of cross-cultural experiences, including professional work environments, personal connections in Canada, and education resources. Some integrated participants and a participant with an ongoing negotiation of identity chose to stay in Canada. Despite cosmopolitan education opening new perspectives for participants to identify themselves in the global market, in this research, it is not a prioritized factor for participants’ settlement in Canada.

Moreover, the participant who moved from China to Canada represents a particular case of marginalization due to the identity negotiation in Canada. Besides her demand for a better career environment, her migration plan is an example of the pursuit of the work-life balance that encourages Chinese international students to stay in Canada.

As for participants who chose to go back to China, aside from the traditional family values originating from Confucianism ideologies, professional opportunities and the potential of future development are vital characters that motivated participants. Meanwhile, participants in the separation category mainly chose to settle in China, indicating their strong dependence on Chinese identity. Some integrated participants, who adapted to the Canadian ideology of multiculturalism/cosmopolitanism and remained Chinese family values, also chose to return, so participants’ settlement plans depend on how much they value each identity.

The mobile opportunity for traveling between Canada and China is another settlement option for three participants. As a result of cosmopolitan education, the developed fluid and mobile identity allows participants to create new options for post-graduation settlement. At the same time, family and career are two key factors impacting their decisions. In this research, participants with a mobile plan also have either integrated or separate identities.

We acknowledge that the size of this sample, budget constraints, labor, and time limit the conclusions of this research. Nonetheless, this research indicates some new trends in Chinese international students’ cross-cultural experience in Canada. We were able to confirm current phenomena discussed by other scholars and highlight discrepancies with the existing literature. This research can also be considered as a pilot study whose results can be the starting point for future studies or future scholarships.

Due to the limitations in this research, based on the broad spectrum of topics discussed in this study, several topics deserve more attention from future scholars. Although people who lived in Chinese metropolises, such as Beijing or Shanghai, could grow up with a more urbanized and cosmopolitan lifestyle, people from smaller cities could have slightly different experiences. The differences between students’ hometown might have some influences on their ideologies, language ability, post-arrival adaptation in Canada, post-graduation settlement choices, and re-adaptation experiences in China. The impact of international students’ origins and pre-arrival factors on their acculturative experiences and post-graduate settlement plans need to be explored.
Appendix 1

Figure A1. The increase and rate of increase of international students studying in another country. Adapted from “Zhongguo xuesheng chuguo liuxue fazhan queshi baogao [Report on the trend of the development of Chinese international students],” by Zhongguo jiaoyu zaixian [China Education Online], n.d. Retrieved June 28, 2019 from https://www.eol.cn/html/lx/report2017/yi.shtml

Appendix 2

Statutes of participants.

| Participant | Settlement | Canadian identity | Chinese identity | Negotiation |
|-------------|------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 1           | China      | Only blend into the Chinese community in Canada | Home (parents) is in China | Separation |
| 2           | China      | Respect and value cultural diversity | Proud Chinese citizen; Patriotic | Integration |
| 3           | Canada     | Global vision + respect for diversity | Family values | Integration |
| 4           | Canada     | Dating a Caucasian; Recognize the acceptance of Canadian society towards Asians; | Still Chinese descent | Integration |
| 5           | China      | Close local friend; Adapted to local society/job | Family support | Integration |
| 6           | Canada     | Married Caucasian; support the local diversity (against her Chinese relatives) | Mostly Chinese friends; against the refugee policy—Confucianism | Integration |

(continued)
Table (continued)

| Participant | Settlement     | Canadian identity                                                                 | Chinese identity                                                                 | Negotiation |
|------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| 7          | China          | Tried to make friends with people from other cultures;                            | More open to Chinese friends; Back to China because of parents                  | Integration |
|            |                | Prefer the values (morality) of Canada                                            |                                                                                 |             |
| 8          | China          | Prefer Canadian inclusive culture; Canadian citizen; Refer to Canadian as "us"    | Parents in China                                                                | Integration |
| 9          | China          | No local friends in Canada Did not feel have a home in Canada (life of a drifter)| Enjoy the networking society; Obligation to parents—Chinese culture             | Separation  |
| 10         | Canada/China   | Had close Canadian friends                                                        | Going back to China so his parents can help take care of the babies              | Integration |
| 11         | China          | We are different because of skin colors; prefer Chinese friends                  | Home is in China                                                                | Separation  |
| 12         | Canada         | Friends > families; Respect to other cultures and LGBTQ                          | Only child—responsibilities for parents                                         | Integration |
| 13         | Canada         | RePLYING on Vancouver’s tolerance of her; open to different cultures and differences; cannot belong to either Canada or China | Distanced and escaped from parents; Against the unitary values of public pursuit | Perpetual negotiation |
| 14         | China          | Enjoy intercultural communication; friends with foreigners                        | Support parents’ business                                                        | Integration |
| 15         | From China to Canada | Not blend in the local society                                                  | Freedom > parents; Returned home before for parents                             | Marginalization |
| 16         | Canada/China   | Living, working, and socializing in the Chinese community in Canada;             | Values the Chinese parents to child relationship                                 | Separation  |
| 17         | Canada/China   | Only live in the Chinese community in Canada                                     | Home is in China                                                                | Separation  |

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Note

1. The bar chart represents the increased number of international students, and the line chart shows the increased ratio of international students for each year.
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