

*The Experiences and Identities of Mainland Chinese  
Undergraduate Students in Ontario Universities*

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**Abstract**

Statistical quantitative analysis and interview method are developed to explore the satisfaction of life and study and identity construction of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in a small number of universities in Ontario, Canada. The research results indicate that Chinese undergraduate students are satisfied with their life and study in Canada. They seek help for study and life problems from people in their social network. Their life and study' satisfaction, with schooling year accumulating, are gradually going down. The study also analyzes the identities, Chinese students are characterized by international person with the boundary of nation-states strongly, which influences and constrains their satisfaction of study and life in Canada. Although they generally indicate a desire for forms of cosmopolitan learning and growth, these aims are less realized than are more pragmatic goals for their international study. The research at last shows how to understand cosmopolitan in the context of Chinese culture and history.

Keywords: Chinese undergraduate Students; Canadian universities; satisfaction; experiences, cosmopolitan learning

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## **Introduction**

The internationalization of Higher Education has become a trend around the world. In China, with the improvement of its comprehensive national strength, more and more students choose to pursue their further study in other countries. The number of overseas students from China has been increasing rapidly and attracts more and more attention. This study describes the academic achievements, living experiences, and their identities of mainland Chinese undergraduate students in Ontario, Canada.

## **Method**

In this study I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative data from survey questionnaires is used to identify mainland Chinese undergraduate students' experience and their perception in Ontario, Canada. Questionnaire profiles the general picture of mainland Chinese undergraduate students on experiences and perceptions. It also answers what mainland Chinese students' experiences and perceptions are.

The study employs open-ended interviews in order to gain insight into the lived experience of Chinese students. I visited some universities, such as the University of Western Ontario, the University of Toronto, York University, and Waterloo University. In these universities, mainland Chinese undergraduate students were investigated and interviewed during the academic year of 2011-2012. A total of 119 questionnaires and 20 face to face interviews were conducted during the academic year.

## **Findings**

### **Satisfaction with study**

The results of this study indicate that the majority of the international students are satisfied with their lives.

The Survey obtained following data:

Availability of learning resources	63.5%
Social and recreational activities on campus	48.4%
Interaction with professors	63.5%
Interaction with fellow students	58.7%
Availability of interesting courses	54.0%
Services for international students	46.7%
Health services	41.3%
Coping with exams	50.8%
Coping with use of English	57.1%
Coping with course workload	54.8%
Opportunities for further learning	53.2%

One of the most important reasons for the higher study satisfaction is that many students are confident in their English; language abilities especially in course or academic paper are helpful for the satisfaction of study. One student made a comment

on it:

*Influent English is necessary for enrolling in a good reputation university in Canada, I practice speaking and writing English quiet often, although I am troubled by my writing, I can feel I am improved fast, because I have gotten better and better scores at paper writings.*

Mainland Chinese undergraduate students with good language abilities facilitate them to attend academic forum and get their paper published. They expressed English challenges can be overcome among their generations.

From the statistics of the survey, Chinese overseas students also list the four following aspects of their study abroad as their most dissatisfied things (the score scale: 1.the most dissatisfied, 2.not very satisfied, 3.satisfied, 4.very satisfied):

Special supports (ex. The language preparation courses) 2.48

The burden from the accommodation 2.49

Whether the course is related to overseas students like me 2.56

The service for overseas students 2.67

From those statistics we know that the three most unsatisfying aspects are: special supports (ex. the language preparation courses), the course is related to overseas students like me, the service for overseas students.

Special supports (ex. the language preparation courses) is the most unsatisfying factor, and the service for international students also let students down. All these show that some countries fail in making complete policies for helping overseas students study and live and fail in considering the culture shock for those students. At the same time, the language preparation courses show that the language barrier is the most daunting task for overseas students.

Students are also unsatisfied on the courses, yet another survey about why students choose Canada to study in, the three most important factors are:

The university affords courses that I want to take 3.67

The reputation of the university 3.56

The reputation of the program/courses 3.53

From it we know that the courses are the priorities for students to make decisions, but in real study experience abroad, courses cannot live up to students' expectations. It also shows that students get information about which country and which school to study in from the error sources. According to the data from a study named "The sources for information to study in Canada", most students get information and advice from: family members, websites, home schools (teachers or the principal). All the three above have highly strong subjectivity and uncertainty. It also shows that seldom students get their information from reliable agencies or office organizations. So there are no reliable organizations providing international Chinese students with correct information. Gaps exist between their expectations and realities.

## **Satisfaction with life**

The survey shows the satisfaction of the students with the life experiences in Canada: they are satisfied with "Canada's health service", "safe environment", "tolerance to different ethnic/religious differences", "the local people very friendly", these satisfactions reach more than 95%. In addition, the students are also satisfied with "easy to travel in Canada and around the country", "easy to find a social group to share my hobbies," and "easy to integrate into Canadian society", satisfactions reach up to 60% -80%.

Compared to mainland China, the scarce resource in China difficult to be obtained is relatively easy to obtain in Canada, satisfaction is high in this case, such as environmental safety, health, high degree of integration, and so on. But for the difference in food, cultural environment, and lifestyle, many people are not suited to the Canadian situation, which resulted in unsatisfactory conditions, such as cold diet, cold and wet weather, the high cost of living, and so on.

Generally, students are satisfied with their living experience in Canada, reporting it was easy to mix in Canadian society and it was a safe environment, and they experienced tolerance towards ethnic differences. Public transportation was available, it was an exciting lifestyle in Canada with many things to see and do. Travelling in Canada and the USA was easy, and quality of official administration services in Canada was good, especially Chinese students feel Canadian people very nice.

## **Social life in Canada**

Students feel satisfied with their stay, partly because they stay with Chinese, especially when they meet difficulties, they would like to ask Chinese origin. Mainland undergraduate Chinese students make more than 60% of closest friends from China during the abroad study in Canada, followed by making Canadian friends, around 30%, and rarely make friends from other countries, less than 10%. In addition, 60%-80% of mainland undergraduate Chinese students' friend are made in the universities, their social circles are limited to the universities or colleges.

Mainland Chinese students like to participate in various activities, such as learning, having dinner, celebrating birthdays etc.; more than 80% of activities they took part in are with friends from China too, followed by from Canada. Students participate less in religious activities, mainly because most students have no religion, even if a few students participated in the religious activities, mostly with Canadian friends. One student explained that the point of getting good academic results is to turn to Chinese students and friends, if he cannot grasp academic research. It shows the relation between high satisfaction and Chinese social circle.

*I like to stay with Chinese students, if I cannot understand academic things, I can ask Chinese students, and some people will clearly explain it in Chinese comparing my poor English understating abilities. I am satisfied with my experiences here, which helps me recognize that I am Chinese origin, no matter where I go, my life gets easier and happier when I identify myself Chinese.*

Their study and life circles basically are with Chinese, which made them have no many obstacles in Canada. This means they are not really emerged into Canadian life, the satisfaction is limited.

### Relation between life and study satisfaction and overseas study period

The research sorts the 119 students, according to their study period in Canada, into five groups: the one-year, the two-year, the three-year, the four-year and the five-year whose proportion are 8.5%, 42.4%, 28.8%, 13.6% and 6.8%. Research questionnaire categorizes the marks of overseas life and study satisfaction into 4: 1 for most dissatisfied, 2 for dissatisfied, 3 for satisfied, 4 for most satisfied. Based on the valid questionnaires, we have counted the satisfaction average and variance of the five groups' overseas students(see Table1-2).

<b>Study satisfaction</b>	The one-year group	The two-year group	The three-year group	The four-year group	The five-year group
Average	2.9433	2.8256	2.8938	2.6910	3.0667
Variance	0.066622	0.297048	0.374389	0.1224444	0.006667

Table 1: Study satisfaction of mainland undergraduate Chinese students

<b>Life satisfaction</b>	The one-year group	The two-year group	The three-year group	The four-year group	The five-year group
Average	2.7121	2.9286	2.8594	2.7837	3.1429
Variance	0.040208	0.248571	0.253568	0.268559	0.012755

Table 2: Life satisfaction of mainland undergraduate Chinese students

Fit average satisfaction of the five groups(see Figure1):

Quartic function will be perfect for the fitting average of study satisfaction (red in the figure) while cubic function for the life satisfaction (blue in the figure).

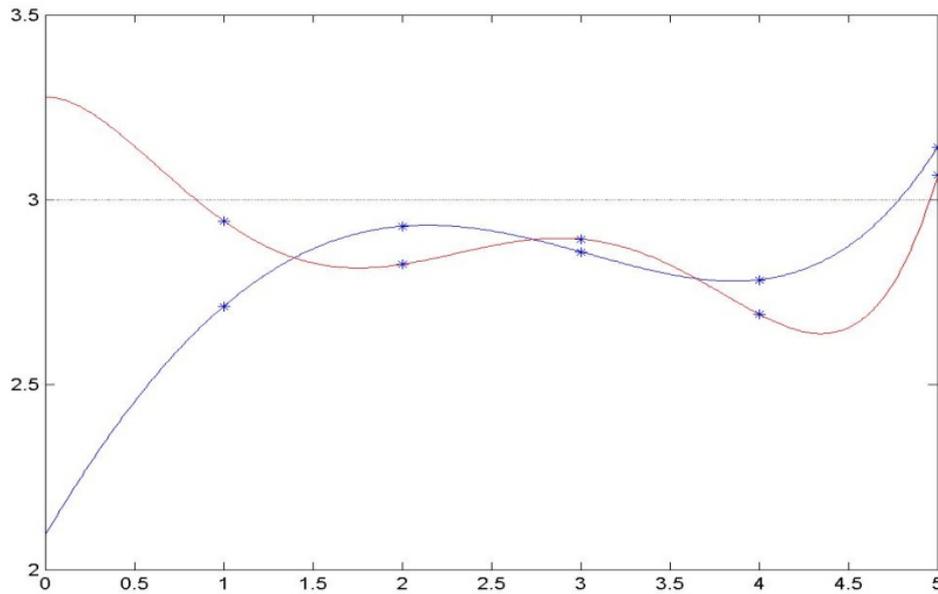


Figure 1: Study and life satisfaction

- From the figure1 we can see the students' groups from one year to four years are commonly below 3 and the statistics of five-year group whose sample is relatively small can be ignored. As a result, we can conclude that undergraduate Chinese students are satisfied yet most satisfied with their life and study in Canada
- Life and study satisfaction take wavelike changes with time going by. Except the five-year group, we get an overall average as follows, with life aspect taking 50% and study aspect 50%(see Table3).

Overall satisfaction	The one-year group	The two-year group	The three-year group	The four-year group
	2.8277	2.8771	2.8766	2.7373

Table 3: Overall satisfaction of mainland undergraduate Chinese students

We can see from the statistics that Chinese students' feeling about their school life in Canada changes slightly, staying at a level of 2.8 or so as time goes by.

- Ignoring the five-year group but the other four groups, the students' study satisfaction decreases with time changing, and the fitting linear function being  $y = -0.068853x + 3.0106$ (see Figure2).

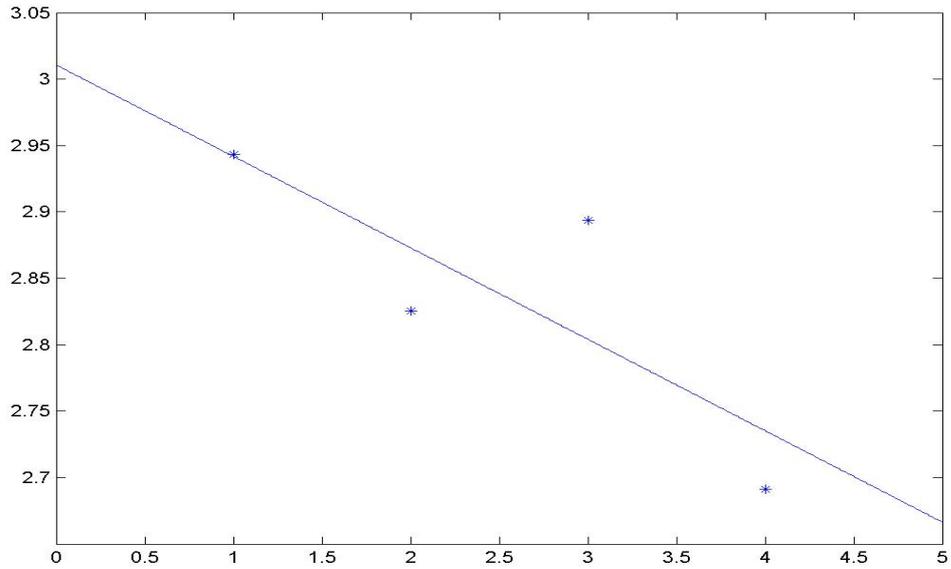


Figure 2: Study satisfaction decreases with time changing

4. Ignoring the five-year group but the four groups, the students' life satisfaction changes in a curve shape, the fitting being  $y = -0.07306x^2 + 0.37985x + 2.4193$  (see Figure 3).

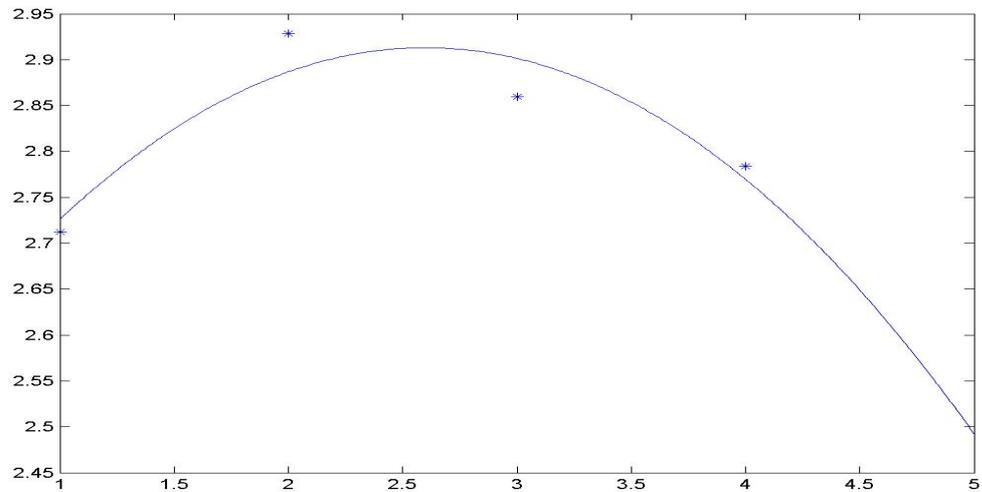


Figure 3: Students' life satisfaction changes

Relatively, the one-year group students are less satisfied with their life there. It may be because that they reach a new unfamiliar environment yet adapt to it. If we analyze the figures beginning with the two-year group, we can see their life satisfaction, with schooling year accumulating, is gradually going down.

### Chinese National and Cultural Identity

The Research has showed mainland Chinese students are comfortable to talk in Chinese, to do some activities such as studying or going out for dinner with other diaspora Chinese people, and they seldom have Canadian friends of non-Chinese

origin. One big reason is “Chinese identity” in their mind; this Chinese identity is distinguished by language, not face, as the following quotes illustrate:

*Most of my friends are Chinese. I'm diversified into half of them speak Mandarin and half speak Cantonese. There are some CBCs (Canadian born Chinese) but it's really not that big, I'm not in that deep of a relation with them because they are more comfortable with English and I'm more comfortable with Chinese.*

*I accept high school education here, my English can be like domestic students. However, my friends are from China, we talk in Chinese when we are together, my Chinese identity made me feel easy and happy while studying and socializing.*

Birth place and family identity and attitude to Chinese culture played an important role on students' identity. There are two Chinese students' associations in one university that I visited, one is mandarin association, the other is Cantonese one, even students from Guangdong whose dialect is Cantonese, still attend mandarin, they group their identities is very close to their birth society. It really depends on the family's attitude here, one student told me. No matter where they live, they have a faith their root in china, which is they are Chinese.

This Chinese identity is formed from family and traditional Chinese cultural on the one side; it is shaped by domestic people on the other side. The desire for greater social interaction, cultural exchanges and understanding is often thwarted by local students (Matthews& Sidhu, 2005) .

*Some local students want to know more about international students, but not all. The topic that we cared is not the same. Give you a example, they like to talk about their family and pet, but for our international students, we want to know Canadian society, and want to find a same subject such as how to think about Japanese nuclear leak, but Canadian students don't care too much. Japan and Canada are not close in geography, but Japan is china's neighbor, I care Japanese things much more than pets'. When I talked about nuclear leak with local students, they keep silent, and then they are together again to talk their pets. The topic of family and pets usually happens among close people. From the topic, I know I am not like their domestic students, even Canadian white students think I am Chinese, no matter whether I have been immigrant or Canadian citizenship.*

That local students are not interested in the topic that Chinese students wanted to talk reminds international Chinese students are “the others”, “outsiders” in Canadian society. When Chinese students turn to the same race, they find they have the sense of “home” and are “insiders ”in Canada, This situation emphasized Chinese identity.

However, international Chinese students also accept political view and culture from Canada; they like to go to social clubs or attend hobby groups with Canadian domestic students too. A student explained how she goes to sports in order to understand how to use English words in certain context.

*I like to go to attend sports to meet local people, to know Canadian society and culture. When I talk with them, I think I am a part of Canada, and I have not been the*

*original Chinese. I benefit from two cultures and societies, I cannot say which one better or not.*

They believe there are advantages and disadvantages between the two countries. Often cannot give a conclusion that one is better. They think they have double identity, international people, a bridge between the East and West: I interviewed the students , they often selected words or viewed themselves as “an international person”.

*I don't like Canada criticized China, or China criticized Canada. Canadian experiences make me international, I grasp Chinese and English well, open-minded.*

Rizvi (2005) used the concept of “cosmopolitan ”and “global citizenship”, and Ong (1999) used flexible citizenship to describe some internationalization phenomena, they did not employed international person to their research object, But from Chinese students’ words, they think they have international identities in the same accord, not global citizenship, their identities are with the boundary of nation-states strongly. When I interviewed Chinese students, no one mentioned they were cosmopolitan, they chose to use the term “international” to describe themselves. Even I mentioned flexible or cosmopolitan, they did not talk these words to me, still insisted they are international people, with national identity.

In one Nadine Dolby’s research (2005), American undergraduate students have a strong American national identity, but Australian students have a relative weak sense to national identity ,more global imagination. China and American are different political and economic system county, one is the center of the world economy, the other is developing fast in recent years. They are similar in understanding the world. Chinese students developed a dual or multiple identity and “love both China and Canada”, to explain their identity.

International mainland Chinese undergraduate students live in the equilibrium of two cultures but are often confused about their identity. Most have a political identity with their adopted western country, and a living and habit identity with traditional Chinese culture. International Chinese students have some similar characteristics with other diaspora Chinese; their country of origin is China, and now lives as part of Canadian society. They are familiar with the characteristics of multiculturalism, but they also have their own view on their identity.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this section the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the term of Cosmopolitan mentioned of the research study will be presented.

At present, many students become cosmopolitan in their outlook. These young people from China, India, Brazil, and the United States are interested in the same music, the same fashion, and they have the same kind of global merging because the food eaten, the music they listen to and so on. But our study finds that China, partly because very fewer westerners learn mandarin; there is not much interplay on foreigners coming in learning mandarin and coming to see China compared with westerners learning Spanish and going to Argentina, México and Peru.

European languages were a more globalizing phenomenon to the Chinese, The Europeans and North American's likely to learn each other's language as a second language, but not the Chinese language. Especially in the old days, twenty years ago, if a Canadian went to school to study language, the usual choices are French, Spanish, and sometimes German. They could have studied Japanese, Korean, and Chinese etc. too, but these languages were rarely considered and teachers were rarely available also.

Only when they went to university with classes teaching Mandarin, Japanese etc. were a few universities Canada implication is that trend should mean in the future with more western learning mandarin, and Chinese becoming more popular and more Chinese becoming more cosmopolitan in outlook too.

Cosmopolitan identity or citizenship is reshaped by new cultural experiences, but identity is first shaped by personal or ethnic or national history, cultural traditions and professional aspiration (Appadurai1996; Rizvi2005). In the eighteen hundreds, Europe and the United States, Japan attacked China, took China aggressively. This has a long memory in China and this was not a good way to build relations with China. Also since then, China separated the world into "China" and "foreign". China did not follow western cultural mode. When the concept of Cosmopolitan citizenship was introduced in the world, it is still seldom talked about in China.

Chinese students coming to western universities were different from Spanish students coming to English-speaking countries or French-speaking countries. Even Japanese students were different from students from China. Many Japanese has English words. Post second World War, the American forces literally governed Japan, the American troops were based there, so the American occupation in Japan resulted in transfer of some American culture. The children in Japan born during this time in 1945 or were five or ten years old, although they had not been in the war exactly, but they grew up with the American soldiers in the towns and experienced American culture in their life. They integrated American words, and they developed different feeling about Americans. At the same time, China became communist. This is good thing for China to become communist, because Mao Zedong and his successors progressed more than they would had they voted for Jiang Jieshi. When Japanese were getting friendly with Americans, the Americans were very hostile to the communist philosophy and in turn, very hostile to China. For many years, people could not go to China or leave China. People could not export products to China. The foreign people who studied mandarin were mostly people who were going to the American military, and were taught the Chinese language.

When communicating with Chinese students on cosmopolitan citizenship, in my opinion, countries must pay attention to Chinese history and culture; insist that different cultures coexist with their own merits and uniqueness.

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