

## The Auto-ethnographic Inquiry of a Female Chinese Graduate Student in Canada: Challenging, Accepting, and Transforming

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### ABSTRACT

*China remains the top country of citizenship for international students and female students (married and single) comprise part of Chinese international students. However, female international students as a marginalized group face multiple challenges and parental, marital, personal, and cross-cultural situational barriers. Relying on an auto-ethnographic inquiry, this study digs into my experiences and stories as a Chinese female graduate student in Canada to examine and connect with the academic climate and broader communities. Specifically, the gender-based, culture-based, and race-based challenges that I faced during my studies at a Canadian university including my coping strategies are explored. The constructivist paradigm as a theoretical framework is used to delve into my perceptions and understanding of my lived experiences. Data was collected from my journals, memories, and emails written during my study in Canada. Based on my experience, this study unveils motivation, knowledge, and organizational gaps faced by the female group because of gender inequality, and cross-cultural and cross-racial differences.*

**Keywords:** Accepting, auto-ethnography, challenging, Chinese female graduate student, transforming

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the number of international students has tripled from 101,304 in 2018 to reach 318,153 in 2019 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020). Chinese students represent the largest percentage of international students attending universities (Chao, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2020). Chinese women (married and single) have been the significant component of these international students. Gender stereotypes are ingrained in China. For thousands of years, due to the restriction of traditional ethics, Chinese women have been restricted from developing their independent personalities, social statuses, and gaining access to education. That is, they have been marginalized within their own society. In 1978, the policy entitled Domestic Reforms and Opening Up to the World was implemented, serving as the main driving force behind the rapid development of the economy in China. Accompanying policy change, the Chinese government has attached significant importance to the legal protection of female right to education. The 1982 Constitution established the principle of equal right to education for both men and women (Li, n.d.). Moreover, with the expansion of higher education, opportunities for women enrolled in universities have steadily increased. By 2010, the proportion of women attending universities had risen to 45.6% (Zhang, 2017). Historically, men were more likely to go abroad for studies, which is viewed as more culturally appropriate for men. This afforded men greater access to higher education offerings (Ogbonaya, 2010). This practice was not extended to women thereby affording women disparate access to higher education. However, this trend has dramatically changed in recent years.

Although Chinese women received opportunities to pursue higher education and expand academic research fields abroad, they have faced multiple challenges and barriers from gender stereotyping in China. In addition, cross-cultural factors and racial stereotyping in host countries have also contributed to challenges faced by Chinese women. Specifically, Chinese women unconsciously have been socialized by strong gender codes and parental roles in Chinese society. Married female students have had to face stressors related to marital and parental status. Likewise, in Canada, gender-based inequalities were also evident before the mid-1980s. More men were enrolled in post-secondary programs than women. At present, there are no obvious gender differentiations in enrollment patterns, but gender segmentation is still embodied within educational processes (Wotherspoon, 2014). Moreover, Canada recognizes and cherishes its rich cultural and racial diversity but in Canadian higher educational institutions, cross-cultural and cross-racial understandings usually are stressed in the informal curriculum such as the various support services and additional activities and options (online workshops or webinars) organized by universities that are not assessed. In terms of the formal curriculum, the university's curriculum mainly focuses on domestic programs with some cross-cultural and cross-racial contents. Racial and cultural diversity does not receive attention in the formal curriculum (Ge et al., 2019). Female students unavoidably face culture-based and race-based challenges during their academic life.

I am female, Chinese, married, mother of an 11-year-old son and Ph.D. Candidate at a Canadian university. I began my studies towards a Ph.D. in 2016. As a Chinese female graduate student, I ineluctably have been classified into the minority and disadvantaged group in Canada. I have had to face the resistance from social stereotyping due to traditional gender identities for women, seeking to further my education abroad. For example, the "breadwinning men and homemaking women" point of view has become the unalterable truth (Sun, 2005). Married Chinese women attempting to study abroad often suffer resistance from their husbands or parents as they are accused of ignoring family responsibilities. As hooks mentioned (2000), the logic of male domination is intact, whether men are present in the home or not. More importantly, I needed to adjust to a Western educational system, and wrestle with Western cultures (Yang, 2010; Zhao & McDougall, 2008) such as language acquisition, academic research, and cultural and social facets (Ge et al., 2019). Racial stereotyping refers to the judgments of another person based on who he/she is, where he/she is from, or the language he/she speaks without getting to know the individual (Gates, 2017). When these judgments are made, the endeavors and contributions of stereotyped individuals are ignored (Gates, 2017). This racial stereotyping in the academic community caused me personal stress. In addition, since 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted people's studies, jobs, and lives. In Canada, the number of COVID-19 positive cases increased sharply in March (Government of Canada, 2020), and the timing of the infection peak remained uncertain. During the pandemic, irrational racist remarks, and attacks against

Asians (Kandil, 2020; Schwartz, 2020) and restricted research environment have contributed to more serious challenges to my study and my experience abroad.

Based on a retroactive inquiry of my personal experiences, stories, and self-reflection, I aim to visualize myself and unpack the challenges that I have been facing in Canada and share the coping strategies I have used. My experiences and stories can be viewed as a snapshot in the lives of female Chinese graduate students, to give voice to this female group and to lend the group more attention within the existing social structure. I am hopeful that my findings might impact educational and social policies and practices, as well as university protocols in considering the complexities of female group identities (while avoiding the impingement of minority groups).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions to be answered by this study are:

1. How do I perceive and interpret my lived experience as a Chinese female graduate student?
2. What are the gender-based, culture-based, and race-based challenges and adjustment barriers experienced by me during my study from academic research, socializing, life, and employment aspects?
3. What coping strategies do I use to handle my challenges for the persistence and sustainability of my study in Canada?
4. What implications does this auto-ethnography have for the higher education institutions of Canada and relevant authorities?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review is located in studies addressing international female students' social and academic experiences in U.S. higher education and at Canadian universities. I aimed to provide a holistic view of the present study and identify gaps and deficits in the existing literature in the field. Numerous studies have focused on Chinese female international students in the higher education sector in the United States, but few of them discuss the female group in Canadian universities (Li, 2018). The existing research focusing on Chinese female students in Canadian universities displays the similarities with the situation of Chinese international students in the U.S.

### **Challenges faced by Female International Students in North America**

In the existing literature, many researchers specifically identified and examined challenges confronting female international students in North America (e.g., identity positions involving academics, gender, religion, race, culture, socialization, and housing and finances). For instance, Dutta (2012) presented what was called the “liminal” status, as faced by female international students in an engineering program, (p.xi). The scholar stressed that for international women, the “liminal” period permanently manifested itself. That is, female international students enrolled in an engineering program suffer from invisibility and vulnerability. Studies focus on how female international students must meet challenging conditions (e.g., inherent perceptions of family and social roles) in sustaining workable public identities (Le et al., 2016; Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017). Aidoo (2012), claimed gender factors impacted the relationship formed between international and local students. Arguably, female international students tend to be more discouraged, anxious, and stressed than their male counterparts (Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Beaver & Tuck, 1998). Specifically, female students enrolled in doctoral programs were apt to feel marginalized due to a lack of peer support and struggles with study-family balance in Canada (Ge et al., 2019; Nwokedi, 2020).

Popadink (2008) explored the difficulties that heterosexual female international students encountered in their personal relationships. Bonazzo and Wong (2007) examined four Japanese female students who suffered from discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes. Some studies focus on how female international students retain and change their native cultures as values, norms, and language in Canada (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Davis et al., 1993). Galloway and Jenkins (2005) identified English

proficiency, marital status, and country of origin as barriers for international female students in the adaptation to study in private and religious-affiliated universities. Hsieh (2006) pointed out that female international students had difficulty shaping a positive social identity because the dominant society was intended to view them as submissive and incompetent. Moreover, Chinese female students were inclined to submit to the passive and yielding female role of the Confucian philosophy. Besides, (Calder et al., 2016) reported international students no matter gender and the programs enrolled had difficulty in finding affordable, adequate, and suitable housing due to limited financial support, the dearth of employment opportunities, and currency fluctuations. During the COVID 19 pandemic, international female graduate students were especially vulnerable financially because many of them do not meet the criteria for federal benefits (Jenei et al., 2020).

### **Strategies Employed by Female International Students in North America**

A series of studies focused on the exploration of successful coping strategies for female international students. These strategies include adjustment strategies based on social support, family support, and mentorship (Ogbonaya, 2011). Other coping and adaptive measures include positive supervisory relationships (Chapman & Sork, 2001). This refers to team-based support groups such as counseling and psychological guidance (Ku et al., 2008) and institutional support systems such as curriculum design and faculty members' cultural training (Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006).

### **Research on Female Chinese International Graduate Students in North America**

Few studies focused specifically on female Chinese international graduate students as research subjects in North America. Ge et al. (2019) examined the challenges that female Chinese graduate students faced in a Canadian university. In their study, female participants reported that they were deeply affected by traditional patriarchal viewpoints. Married female scholars had to balance their studies with the needs of their children and husbands. In addition, female participants felt that gender discrimination was an issue. Kutting (2012) explored the advising experiences of mainland female Chinese students and the negative effect upon doctoral programs. Included are the barriers and challenges that influence everyday existence, as well as concerns and individual perceptions carried through programs. Ogbonaya (2010) researched female international graduate students' experiences at an American university. One of the participants selected was from China. The scholar reported the challenges faced by these participants in academic intention, knowledge, and organization.

In the aforementioned research, the researchers were attempting to be passive observers reporting and analyzing the participants' experiences. They took the approach that the researchers' views, reflections, and voices should be minimal or diametrically bracketed out. With the present study, I use my own experiences to examine and anatomize the interactions among self, the academic environment, and the wider community. From the angle of an insider, I dig into the cultural experience of this female group to understand how the experience is linked closely to social context. Therefore, this research can play a role in extending the research field specifying female Chinese international students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The researcher's theoretical formulation as developed offers a focus that drives the research methods and determine the data collection process (Egbert & Sanden, 2014). In this study, constructivism is utilized to guide and influence my research design, data statistics, and making sense of findings. Constructivism stresses that people construct their own realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). That is, their reality is based on the experiences of the participant (Raskin, 2002). Therefore, instead of developing research around a theory, constructivists find meanings from the personal experiences of the participants. In the present study, I attempted to analyze my experiences, social location, and identities to help improve the experiences of female Chinese women in academia.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The methodological choice is specifically directed to an auto-ethnographic inquiry. Auto-ethnographic approaches combine the writing style of autobiography and the research method of

ethnography. Auto-ethnographic researchers generally link their experiences to their social and cultural contexts to unveil social and cultural issues. By the nature of auto-ethnography, these researchers usually have a unique story to tell. Therefore, they belong to a marginalized group or disadvantaged class. They aim to influence power and practice through narrating their own stories and experiences through such methods as dialogue, personal thoughts, reflections, and emotions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). That is, this approach is subversive to conventional ways of doing research representing others. As a female Chinese graduate student in Canada, I have been facing triple pressures: cross-cultural adjustments, gender-based stereotypes from China and Canada, and racial stereotyping. Auto-ethnography allows me to explore my experiences and to unravel the underlying and hidden meanings of my cultural experience.

### **Reliability and Credibility in Auto-ethnographic Inquiries**

In a qualitative inquiry, reliability refers to the consistency of the research processes and results. Silverman (2009) identified five approaches to enhance reliability: “Refutational analysis, constant data comparison, comprehensive data use, inclusive of the deviant case and use of tables” (Leung, 2015, p.326). Credibility can be measured by considering if the research findings interpret accurately the participants’ meaning (Wittemore et al., 2011). Auto-ethnography as an innovative qualitative approach follows the primary criteria of reliability and credibility. However, as stated, auto-ethnographic researchers rely upon their own experiences as the only source of data and interpret their narratives and stories as a member of a culture (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Consequently, the academic rigor of auto-ethnographic has been questioned. As known, sometimes, memory is not accurate. Recalling memory in the language would not represent how those events were lived (Owen et al., 2009). Therefore, in an auto-ethnographic study, reliability also refers to the auto-ethnographic researchers’ credibility. Auto-ethnographers should ask themselves if they have had the experiences described with factual evidence available and if this is authentically what happened to them (Bochner, 2002, p.86). For example, an adoptive mother used auto-ethnography as a methodology to add her voice to the various bodies of literature on international adoption to extend social understanding (Wall, 2008). She employed her headnotes and her memories as she said, “I remember many things . . . [and] I am certain that they are correct and not a fantasy” (Ottenberg, 1990, p.144).

In the present study, I reinforced reliability and credibility by: (a) constantly verifying the authenticity of my journals, dialogues on WeChat, emails, and my informal essays, (b) reading the relevant literature and comparing the experiences, concepts, and research findings to my own experiences, (c) and frequently asking myself if I was representing myself in it and presenting an authentic self and if my narratives were contributing to social life. That is, did this text embody a real sense of my lived experience?

### **Data Collection**

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) stated that data collection in auto-ethnography involved “chronicling the past, undertaking the inventory of the self, using approaches that enable visualizing the self, undertaking self-observation, and collecting self-reflective data.” (p.201). During my study abroad, I have faithfully kept a diary and written essays to express my feelings and experiences. Therefore, I undertook self-inventory, reviewed my journals, dialogues on WeChat, emails, and my essays as my primary source of data. I listed significant self-inventory questions relating to my studying abroad since 2016 from my value, gender identity, standpoints, strengths, weaknesses, barriers, challenges, gains, losses, interpersonal relationships, and socializing. I responded to each one by going through my past journals, relevant WeChat dialogues, emails, and papers written in graduate classes. This process allowed my memories to surface.

### **Data Analysis**

As prescribed by Lichtman (2008), I carefully read self-inventory questions and answers several times for initial coding. The second step involved revisiting the initial coding. In this step, I identified what words and/or phrases were related to my lived experience. This also included the culling of some off-topic aspects (Cohen, 1987). In Step three and four, I continued to organize the text within relational graphs helping identify patterns that arose from my narratives. This process carried on until I identified and labelled

the substantial themes relating to my lived experience. By reading the data, I went on to find emergent categories until no new categories unfolded. For Step six, I re-read the data to corroborate the identified themes.

## FINDINGS

### Gender-based Challenges

Challenges emerging during my overseas study experience, the resistances of studying abroad, and the challenges in the host country caused by my gender are persistent.

**Early resistances to studying abroad.** A strong gender divide between the cultural treatment of men and women exists in China. Men are valued more than women, and women traditionally play the role of reproducing and nurturing a stable family environment (He, 2001). Consequently, I inescapably met gender-based resistance from my parents, husband, and friends before going abroad. I met a lot of resistance from my family members before leaving for Canada. My parents and husband complained that as a woman, I should have derived my joy from my husband and family instead of striving for a difficult advancement. Against this resistance, I persevered and faced an unknown future. I thought I held the power to achieve anything if I worked hard although I held the reality that I was just a woman.

Before studying for my doctorate and undertaking social research, I was a government worker with a stable income. However, I yearned to try something new and innovative. I thought studying abroad could make me enter a new and life-changing phase and I did not want to lock into a path too early. I strongly believed that I would find new surprises and unique opportunities. As a mother, I felt more obligated to the education and growth of my child. My son's healthy growth and development are my priority. Therefore, I hoped that the international experiences would enrich the development of my son as well. Through my study in Canada, he accessed a new and different educational environment and avoided being subjected to a highly competitive rote-based academic culture in China.

With the advancement of Chinese women, female intellectuals kept with their emancipatory inclination and longed for broadening their horizons, instead of merely stepping into their expected traditional roles, and I am no exception. In general, compared with men, it is harder for women to get a promotion in the workplace even when women work harder and have superior abilities. Therefore, I was forced to strive to elevate myself by seeking to study abroad. However, you can't have your cake and eat it too! That is, if choosing to study overseas, I would have to give up my current employment position. Hence, when I decided to pursue my degree, I had to resign from my excellent government position and lost significant financial resources.

Along the way, I met a lot of resistance from my family members before leaving for Canada. My parents and husband complained that as a woman, I should have derived my joy from my husband and family instead of striving for a difficult advancement. Against this resistance, I persevered and faced an unknown future. I thought I held the power to achieve anything if I worked hard although I held the reality that I was just a woman.

### Barriers Based on Gender during Studying Abroad

During my academic life, I felt that systemic gender discrimination existed buried in the standard curriculum and was evident in general school discourses. For example, as mentioned in my previous research (Ge et al., 2019), the textbooks, course content/readings, and journal articles were primarily written from a male perspective. That is, instructors were imperceptibly encouraging sexism in discursive practices. This became a hindrance for me when arguing from feminist and critical perspectives. Moreover, my social status (a married Chinese woman) affected my academic skills and performance. As a mother, I am concerned first about my child, which means I would suspend my studies when he was sick or during other emergencies. I am exhausted after balancing my studies and family. I missed opportunities to participate in academic conferences that involved travel because I could not leave my son behind. Such a situation has remarkably impacted on extending my research experiences and peer networking.

Socializing is difficult for me due to gender commitments. I have few friends because I must attend my courses in the evening and then rush back to take care of my son. This includes checking his homework

while completing housework for the next day. Sometimes, I must spend extra money hiring a babysitter when the demands of studying become intensive. Therefore, I must bear overwhelming psychological pressure. I have had very few opportunities to talk about and share my emotional experiences with others. The free counseling services at the university did not effectively help me to ease my tension. (Most counselors did not have a cross-cultural experience and training sessions yet). Besides, it is more than professional help but the interpersonal connections through close friends and family that I miss so dearly. Quite simply, I am lonely.

### **Cultural-based Challenges (Language Barriers and Adjustment Gaps)**

As the existing literature identified, English proficiency was an unquestionably overarching barrier for me, particularly at the early stages of my studies in Canada. From my early journal entries, I felt so frustrated and depressed in English learning on speech, writing, reading, accents, critical thinking, and pronunciation. Moreover, it seemed to be harder for me to meet the criteria of English proficiency than single female students due to my age and family responsibilities. Often, women at my age suffer from sleep difficulties and memory lapses. Therefore, I had to spend more time learning English. Even so, sometimes, I was unable to speak out and participate in class discussions; I experienced a hard time understanding the instructors' lessons and was not clear on the assignments.

I am willing to actively socialize and integrate into the local communities. I have strived to find an effective way to participate and make cultural adjustments to reduce stress from "cultural shock." For example, I encouraged my son to communicate and make friends with local students. I volunteered in some public activities to immerse myself in the local culture. However, when my attempts were underway to adapt to local communities, my son experienced cultural shock or even racial discrimination in many aspects of Canadian and school life. This upset me and led to mild depression.

A few years ago, a phone call from my son's elementary school focused on my son's so-called "violent language." I did not believe them and attempted to explain that he was joking, or it was a misunderstanding. But the school authorities did not listen to what I was saying. They said subjectively and opinionatedly: "Your son is very smart, so he knew what he was doing." When the event occurred, the school authorities did not phone me and just called the security office. They bossily said "...we already gave a phone call to the police, and they are going to your place for an investigation tomorrow..." At that time, they did not have written transcripts and dependent upon the teacher's accusations. As it turned out, my son was just playing in the yard with some friends and picked up a special rock. I felt that the teacher overreacted at that time. Now, I am willing to view this experience as cultural shock instead of outright racial discrimination; however, this experience was traumatizing for me and my son.

### **Race-based Challenges**

As a graduate student in the discipline of education, it will be beneficial for me to study and participate in direct teaching practices. This knowledge and experience will advance my educational research and future employment opportunities. However, as a Chinese woman, I am disadvantaged to get a teaching position in Canada. I found that many part-time or full-time jobs were targeted at local people. As employers, they were not interested in the experiences of international employees. Moreover, the university's curriculum has focussed on domestic programs instead of international and intercultural content. Currently, my research scope has to be constrained to Chinese issues and cannot be expanded to a more global perspective. That is, the breadth and depth of my understanding cannot be expanded to the global community. Since winter 2020, COVID-19 has swept across the world. As all nations, Canada has to face the pandemic and its implications. However, it has been accompanied by an outbreak of racism and discrimination against Asians (viral diseases are often associated with the region or place where the outbreak first occurred). In these tough times, I have had negative emotions and a tendency towards slight depression because I worry about latent racial discrimination and persistent loneliness and anxiety. In Canada, in response to the aggravation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the travel ban has been implemented for non-citizens and non-permanent residents since March 18 (Government of Canada, 2020). In consequence, my research focusing on Chinese issues has had to be postponed and changed to remote research methods, which undoubtedly makes my social research much harder and complicated than before.

## **Coping Strategies**

Despite the aforementioned challenges and adversity, these experiences triggered my resilience process. I tried to use diverse coping strategies including cultivating internal coping skills, self-efficacy, emotional control, self-acceptance, and external support such as mentoring, parental support, and peer support. I strived to obtain positive outcomes notwithstanding adversity (gender, culture, and race barriers). I accepted these challenges and resolved to work through them. Every day, I ensure healthy eating and sleeping, and participate in meditation and yoga. I have a video call with my parents every day to share my life and feelings to release the daily pressures. My friends in China often chat with me via WeChat and care about me, offering advice on mental wellbeing. Their friendships help me to relieve my loneliness and worries to some extent. Moreover, my mentor gave me enormous encouragement and support academically and personally. When I get stuck to go forward in my research studies, he always offers ideas and guides me on the various options. His words always come to my mind, “no worries! Please never let few setbacks get to you. Keep going!” and I become much stronger and braver to move through adversity.

## **DISCUSSION**

I am a female Chinese international graduate student. By anatomizing my experience and stories as an epitome, it is clear that Chinese female international students are being placed in paradoxical gender identity. We are trapped in traditionally female identity and feminist standpoints in a changing social context. Therefore, when striving to balance the two sides, we have to face multiple barriers from gender stereotyping, cross-cultural adjustment, and racial stereotyping. However, as Rutter (1987) identified, stressors can play a role in activating the resilience process to overcome the disruptions in the homeostasis of individuals, families, groups, or communities. The gender-based, cultural-based, and race-based barriers as stressors can facilitate our resilience processes through interaction with the special external environment context.

### **Paradoxical Gender Identities**

From the obstacles of studying abroad and the gender-based challenges faced by me in the host country, I feel that there has been an improvement in the female student’s experience. As more Chinese females seek to further their education abroad in diverse fields, they are breaking down some of these barriers and bringing change to the institution. Already, more women enter male-dominated fields such as engineering and applied science (Frenette & Coulombe, 2007). For me, I tried to step outside my comfort zone and joined a new and challenging field to realize my dream of becoming a successful social researcher.

On the other hand, Confucianism is the root of the development of China's patriarchal society, emphasizing gender differences and the different roles women and men play in family life (Tamney & Chiang, 2002). Most of the Chinese women have been socialized by parents and society to accept sexist norms (Wotherspoon, 2014). Hence, they have to overcome significant resistance from families and society before studying abroad. Meanwhile, married women think automatically that they must be the primary caregiver to their children. Accordingly, I chose to take my children with me to Canada. As such, I often struggle with balancing study and family.

Furthermore, patriarchy seems to be present in most cultures and is associated with a set of ideas and discursive practices contributing to the differences between men and women (Henslin, 2001). Hence, it is inevitable that more emphasis is placed on male perspectives in higher education. In addition, with a study conducted by the American Psychological Association (2011), about 25% of women feel that they are not doing enough in managing stress; only 17 % of men feel so. One can conclude that women are at greater risk of mental health issues. Therefore, unavoidably, I suffered from persistent psychological pressures due to my gender identity.

### **Cultural Shock**

Culture shock can be defined as an experience when one moves to an alien cultural environment and reacts with stress to the differences in the new culture. I believe that all international students, no matter men or women, have to experience some degree of culture shock. Macionis et al. (2010) described four transitioning phases, i.e., enjoyment, entanglement, adjustment, and transformation. Language acquisition is the top concern in cultural shock (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). For example, traditional educational



philosophy contributes to cultural adaptation in Chinese international students and scholars. Chinese traditional education is teacher-based and centralized lecture and rote memorization (Gu, 2006). We often have trouble in speaking out and pushing our ideas in the classroom and conference settings (Yang, 2010; Zhao & McDougall, 2008). Chinese culture emphasizes humility and pushing one's ideas, especially in front of an elder (professor), is deemed abhorrent and disrespectful. This cultural expectation also places us at a disadvantage in the competitive self-promoting Western society.

In addition, married international students simultaneously have to be more concerned with their children's cultural adaptation including public school protocols and school cultural environment. Conflict is unavoidable and solutions are only found if both the education system and the family find ways to adapt and accept one another with all its limitations. If actions are not taken to address the child's cultural shock, its accompanying pain as what happened to me, and my child will be more deeply felt and will take longer to alleviate (Akarowhe, 2018).

### **Racial Barriers**

As I stated earlier, racial stereotyping can be explained when an individual forms opinions and judgments on other persons based on how they look or speak (Gates, 2017). As a result, their endeavors and contributions of stereotyped individuals are ignored or neglected (Gates, 2017). In my experiences, stereotyping has restricted employment opportunities in both on-campus and off-campus settings.

The internationalization of higher education is a vital step in the response to globalization. Universities need to enrich their international connections that offer new insights and perspectives (Leask, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to respect and bridge cultural perspectives in curriculum design. Researchers and students can broaden their horizons and become global citizens. Besides, during the pandemic, anti-Asian racist incidents have been taking place in Canada, including some examples of physical violence and verbal harassment (Moir, 2020; Gill, 2020). Chinese international students are inescapably involved in this situation. Moreover, the research environment has been restricted during the pandemic and has resulted in delayed graduations. We ineluctably have a sense of fear and anxiety to continue our studies abroad (Moir, 2020).

### **Resilience Process**

Rutter (1987) concluded that there are six significant predictors of an individual's resilience:

1. Stressors (Challenges) – serve to activate the resilience process.
2. The external environmental context – balances risk and protective factors in a specific environment.
3. Person-environment interactional processes – those in adversity would either passively or positively attempt to understand and overcome demanding environments to make a more protective condition.
4. Internal characteristics – the spiritual, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and emotional strengths.
5. Resilience processes – the short or long-term resilience processes mobilized by individuals through exposure to increasing challenges and stressors.
6. Positive outcomes – successful life adaptations regardless of stresses or trauma.

Based on my snapshot experience, female students have been facing triple barriers in gender, culture, and race. The outbreak of the pandemic has made our situation even more difficult. The intertwining of these stressors has been pushing us into unprecedented adversity. According to Rutter's (1987) resilient predictors, these stressors can work to activate the resilience process. It can motivate our resilience processes by the interaction between ourselves and the special external environmental context.

Overall, as mentioned, an auto-ethnographic approach permits researchers to write first-person accounts and transit them from being an outsider to an insider in a study (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Moreover, as Richards (2008) promoted, "...those being emancipated are representing themselves, instead of being colonized by others and subjected to their agendas or relegated to the role of second-class citizens." (p. 1724) Auto-ethnography enables marginalized groups to narrate their truth as experienced and sensitize to their status quo rather than waiting for others to help them speak out their needs and perceptions to facilitate a change.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Auto-ethnography is strongly personalized. In the present study, research data depended heavily on my view, reflection, and voice. Thereby, it was unavoidable to embed my biases into data analysis. This auto-ethnographic study included the description of periods of my life containing sensitive issues and issues of privacy regarding me and my family members. Due to this situation, special ethical considerations had to be given more attention (Wall, 2008). These included how revealing my experiences might impact my son or my parents.

Based on a constructive paradigm, I attempted to construct knowledge by exploring my personal experience. The data sources included my stories, self-narrative, emails, and causal literacy notes during my study abroad. The data was analyzed and coded, and the organized information was classified into relevant themes. Through constant comparisons, the complete dataset was confirmed, and the findings were corroborated according to the research questions.

Considering my auto-ethnographic inquiry, I recommend that relevant stakeholders promote choices and changes in the formal curriculum to incorporate intercultural dimensions in the learning outcomes, assessment, and teaching methods) (Leask, 2015). They should critically examine their curriculum and seek gender equality. Underlying activist pedagogies should be discussed to show how faculty relates to these students; how the university at large accommodates diversity (e.g., race and gender); and how academic staff can imagine new possibilities regarding the internationalization of curriculum to handle the challenges of these students and bridge divides. They need to examine support services such as counseling to ensure it is culturally sensitive and relevant to the international student. For example, this can include cross-cultural training and developing cross-racial empathy (considering gender and cultural differences). Faculty, staff members, and support workers such as counselors and faculty members can boost a deeper appreciation of the others' experiences and their perspectives (Ogden, 2007). The university has the opportunity to offer these female students a more flexible schedule for learning and create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

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