EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN CANADA WHO WITHDREW: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	For the purpose of better understanding the reasons of their withdrawal and experiences, this study seeks to elicit the voices of Chinese international students who have withdrawn from doctoral studies in Canada.
Background	This study used Tinto's institutional departure model as a framework. His model illustrates that the experience of individuals in that institution modifies their initial intentions and commitments. The scholarly literature on degree completion of graduate students and existing studies on experiences of international students in the North American context also guided the inquiry of this study.
Methodology	This is a qualitative study with narrative inquiry as a means for investigation and exploration. Four participants were recruited by purposive sampling, and in-depth interview was used as the approach to collect data. Data were collected in Mandarin and were transcribed into texts. Two rounds of analysis were applied and then the findings were translated into English.
Contribution	This study added information to the literature on international doctoral students' experiences and explained how socio-cultural factors could impact doctoral students' decision-making.
Findings	The themes included: experiences with doctoral supervisors; partnership and the perception of gender roles; family of origin and the importance of education; and educational differences between China and Canada.
Recommendations for Practitioners	At a practice level, universities could consider delivering series of workshops to help international graduate students start their journey. Departmental administrative bodies could consider building community for doctoral students and tracking their study paths to better assist students. Given the increased number of international students on campuses, it is time for university staff and faculties to become more aware of what a more diverse student population means.

	Professional development workshops would help to develop professors' cultural awareness.
Recommendations for Researchers	My research is an example of addressing translation issues in cross-language and cross-cultural settings. Qualitative research is considered valid when the distance between the meanings as experienced by the participants and the meanings as interpreted in the findings is as close as possible. Therefore, I would recommend in the condition that if the researcher and the participant(s) share the same language, the best practice would be to transcribe and analyze data in the original language to shorten the distance from the meanings that are made by participants and the meanings that are interpreted by the researcher(s). Language meanings do lose during the translation process; as researchers, we should try our best to present our participants as truly as possible.
Impact on Society	The number of international students who choose to conduct doctoral studies is increasing every year. They are making contributions to the host countries in various ways such as contribution to the enrichment of higher education, the development of research, the promotion of global understanding etc. However, their study status and overall well-being may not be getting enough attention from both the scholarly research and in real practice. Thus, the experiences shared by my research participants who used to be doctoral students and left their studies halfway could add value and knowledge to the understanding of this group of students and to better assist the internationalization of higher education institutions.
Future Research	Future studies could probe more on other ethnicities and cultures. Also, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors; however, the incompatibility between doctoral students and their supervisors and coping strategies in that situation is still an area that needs more investigation.
Keywords	doctoral students, withdrawal, cultural differences, Chinese international students

INTRODUCTION

Mobility and migration are features of this global era. Thus, higher education has become a world-wide phenomenon and countries in North America have enlarged their quotas for international students. The most recent statistics show that students from China represent the number one source for international students in both the US and Canada. In the literature, the high scores of Chinese students in math, reading and science on international tests such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) stimulated hot debate about learning styles and model Chinese learners among scholars (Dronkers, 2015; Phillips, 2013; V. Strauss, 2014). However, despite their reputation as "model students", Chinese learners have also been criticized by some Western scholars as not complying with learning standards that are valued in Western traditions such as critical thinking and creativity. It has been argued that Confucian Heritage Culture has impeded the interaction of Chinese international students with their teachers and restricted collaboration with peers; thereby, actually limiting educational achievement in Western settings.

Chinese students make great efforts to come to the host country and study as international students; however, some of them do not encounter success when they undertake graduate studies in the West. What prompts those "model students" to withdraw from their studies before completion? Is this because of cultural differences on education between the West and the East?

Since student voices have been neglected in the vast literature probing the experiences of international graduate students, this study elicited the voices of Chinese international doctoral students who have withdrawn from their studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature on withdrawal in higher education is vast. By 1970, retention had become an increasingly common topic within and among college and university campuses in North America (Berger & Lyon, 2005). For instance, using large-scale data, Astin (1977) concluded that involvement was the key to retention: the more physical and psychological energy a student invests in college studying, the more likely this student was to complete a degree. In Bean's studies (1980, 1983) he investigated the correlation between organizational attributes and reward structures with student satisfaction and dropout. He found that men and women had different reasons for dropout, and among the variables he tested, institutional commitment, students' performance, campus organizations, practical value (of programs), and opportunity to transfer were the top five factors that affected student dropout.

In the late 1970s, Vincent Tinto started to develop his theory on college student early departure. Tinto's theory has become the dominant conceptual framework for persistence studies for the past three decades (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2004), and the present study used his model as a framework. Compare to other models, Tinto's model puts students' experiences into consideration and investigates the interaction between the students and the institutions. His model argues that the early departure of individuals from institutions is "a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social system of the institution" (Tinto, 1987, p. 113). The experience of individuals in that institution modifies their initial intentions and commitments.

A student's positive experience reinforces persistence in that they intensify the goal of college completion and heighten the commitment between the individual and the institution; whereas negative experiences weaken the intentions and commitments and lead to a higher chance of leaving.

CONCEPTUALIZING WITHDRAWAL: UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

Based on Tinto's model, other researchers and scholars have conducted empirical studies to test its efficacy and applicability in explaining the dropout behavior of students in higher education. Students' background was broken down to several identifiers, which mainly include parental income, parental education level, high school grade point average (GPA), gender, and race. Along with students' initial institutional commitment (whether the institution is the first choice of students etc.) and social integration in the institution was also tested to examine the correlation with withdrawal decisions (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

From empirical studies, it seems that at the undergraduate level, student entry identifiers influenced initial commitments to the institution; initial commitments to the institution influenced subsequent levels of institutional commitment; that is, academic integration results from sharing institutionally normative perspectives and values. Social integration occurred when the individual develops social ties as a result of daily interactions; both academic integration and social integration positively influenced subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively affected the likelihood of student persistence in college (Berger & Braxton, 1998; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Ma & Frempong, 2013).

CONCEPTUALIZING WITHDRAWAL: GRADUATE STUDIES

However, the situation is different at graduate level studies. Academic pressures, relationships with supervisors, work-school-life balance, financial constraints, and difficulty in fulfilling social roles were main challenges that largely impeded degree completion and the academic success of graduate stu-

dents (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Ours & Ridder, 2003). In terms of degree completion for PhD students, the incompatibility with supervisor and mismatch between the department and faculty were factors that strongly affected persistence of PhD students (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Devos, Boudrenghien, der Linden, Azzi, Frenay, Galand, & Klein, 2017; Earl-Novell, 2006; Golde, 2005; Juniper, Walsh, Richardson, & Morley, 2012; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Other than that, financial constraints were mentioned as another major factor that influenced degree completion for PhD students. In van der Haert, Arias Ortiz, Emplit, Halloin, and Dehon (2014), the result showed that students with no financing support (e.g., scholarship/fellowship) have the highest withdrawal rate, while students with selective research fellowships showed the lowest.

Another aspect that stands out in the literature pertaining to withdrawal from doctoral students was family issues, which included marriage, raising children, caring for an ailing parent or even coping with the death of a close family member (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017; Lubienski, Miller, & Saclarides, 2018; Martinez, Ordu, Sala, & McFarlane, 2013). In Maher, Ford and Thompson (2004), 28% of female doctoral students reported marital problems or other family-related obstacles that hindered their studies. Not only do female students need to balance study, work and home life, but male doctoral students do too. A male PhD student in Martinez et al. (2013) reported that in order to keep up, after spending time with his wife and child, he had to continue working almost every day after his wife and child fell asleep.

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS: CHALLENGES

The studies on challenges and difficulties that international students face in host countries which could possibly lead to withdrawal were also reviewed. Language was the primary challenge faced by international graduate students. English proficiency not only limited internationals' ability to convey thoughts but also impeded task completion (Kim, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Difficulties with learning the value system which language embodies made the situation even worse (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Roy, 2013).

In addition to language, cultural adaptation was another factor that considerably made international graduate students' lives difficult. Baba and Hosoda (2014) summarized four factors that were detrimental in socio-cultural adaptation of international students: lacking closeness and togetherness with their social environment and were unable to participate in social activities; homesickness, which affects students' psychological well-being because of the absence of significant others; discrimination; and culture shock, where international students felt confused about the norms of the new culture.

Immigration was another unique challenge international graduate students. Many international graduate students were interested in obtaining permanent residence status in North America (Trice & Yoo, 2007). Some internationals chose a major that they were not interested in but that they perceived as relatively easy in order to obtain permanent residence (Rice et al., 2009). In addition, while studying, some students started to worry about their future immigration status (Huang & Klinger, 2004). Those problems have caused distractions for graduate study. This distraction becomes amplified in contexts where permanent immigration to the host country was a concurrent end goal.

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The Chinese government first started to send students studying abroad back to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The first group of 120 students was sent to the US from 1872 to 1875. The mission for them was to learn "military science, navigation, ship-building, and surveying" (Wang, 1965, p.42). In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established; however, foreign studies were extremely restricted especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1978, the Chinese government launched the Open Door Policy. Chinese economic policy then shifted to encouraging and supporting foreign trade and investment, and the Open Door Policy laid the foundation for opening to a global world. In 1980s, self-supported students were allowed to study abroad, after that the number

of students studying overseas—especially in the US—soared from less than 1000 students in 1981, to 59,939 in 2001, and 363,341 in 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2018). Today Chinese students are the top source of international students in the US and Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2018; Institute of International Education, 2018).

In the scholarly literature, the learning approaches of Chinese international students who are under the influence of Confucianism was critiqued by some Western scholars as not fitting to the Western setting (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). They are criticized as "passive…heavily reliant on rote memorization; lacking creative and critical thinking skills…" (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007, p.2). At the same time, Chinese international students were reported having both academic difficulties and life stresses in the host country and needed adjustment (Huang, 2017; Yan, 2017). In Yan's survey, results indicated that job opportunities, visa, immigration concerns, academic pressure, language barriers, and culture shock rank the highest stressors, followed by dating or marriage pressure and financial concern.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

After reviewing the literature, some gaps in current research became apparent. First, although Tinto's model acknowledges that lacking community support on campus as a drawback for minority students due to the fact that they may have their own cultures that are different from the mainstream culture, Tinto did not develop this component deeply. That is, it is unclear how students' cultural understandings affect their decisions to withdraw. Secondly, this model as a whole over-represents the institutional perspective. The voice of students is largely ignored. Third, Tinto's model has been broken down to various factors that could impact students' withdrawal and tested in different disciplines. However, it seems most studies have used quantitative approaches, which do not allow students to go "in depth" to explain their experiences from their points of view. Lastly, since gender is constructed by practices in a society (Connell, 2002), another question that remains unaddressed in the literature is how different cultures' and societies' ideas about gender identity might impact those international doctoral students who leave university early.

These unanswered questions have prompted me to examine the experiences of international doctoral students who have abandoned their studies. Specifically, in this study, participants' experiences will be examined through the following research question: what are common experiences of Chinese doctoral students seeking degrees in Canada that impacted their decisions to withdraw from their studies?

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I adopted narrative inquiry as a means for investigation and exploration. Narrative inquiry is the process through which people tell stories of their lives, while narrative researchers collect them as data, interpret and re-tell those stories, and write narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). My research questions aimed at looking for the continuity of my participants' experiences; that is, how their previous experiences impacted their withdrawal decisions and how those decisions would influence their future lives. This continuity characterizes the nature of narrative inquiry. Using narrative inquiry as a means to explore my research questions also provided me opportunities to collaborate with participants to co-construct meaning in the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 1993).

DATA COLLECTION

This study used a purposive sampling method to recruit research participants who met both of the following criteria: (1) Chinese international students, who were born and raised in China and came to Canada to pursue a doctoral degree; and (2) who enrolled and began work in a doctoral program but withdrew before degree completion. After receiving ethics approval, request was sent to University of Victoria Graduate Students' Society for recruiting participants. At the same time, advertisement

was also posted through WeChat (an instant message cellphone app that is used among Chinese communities) in order to reach the Chinese community.

Every research context is unique, and sampling decisions will need to be made within the parameters of a specific context (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The small sample size in qualitative research in narrative inquiry is to "collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied…and to elucidate the particular, the specific" (Creswell, 2013, p.157). For the present study, my hope was to find three to six participants for this study and this projected number was based on the amount of data that was collected from my pilot study, in which I interviewed one participant who withdrew from her doctoral studies after two semesters and collected data from a one-hour length semi-structured interview. Two themes emerged after analyzing data. Therefore, for the present study, I estimated the number of participants and total interview hours based on the amount of data that was generated during that one-hour interview in my pilot study.

Less than one week after the posting, four participants contacted me through WeChat and agreed to participate to my study. They were enrolled in doctoral programs at different universities in Canada and all of them fit my recruiting criteria. Table 1 is a summary of research participants.

Table 1. Brief Information about Research Participants

Pseudonyms	Fish	Isaiah	Jingwei	Zhuangzhou
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Age	36	36	30	31
Program enrolled	Social science	Social science	Science	Science
Marital status (when enrolled)	Married; one child	Married	Single	In a relationship
Funding source	Self-funded	Self-funded	Program-funded	Program-funded
Length in the program/stage of the program	Two semesters/before the candidacy exam	Three semesters/before the candidacy exam	Six semesters/during the candidacy exam	Twelve semesters/after the candidacy exam

Semi-structured, in-depth interview was used as the primary approach to collect data. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is the native language of both the researcher and all the participants. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Canada except interviews with Fish, who had already gone back to China. Therefore, WeChat voice calls were made to collect data with her. All the interviews were audio-recorded using both an iPhone and an iPad. Journals, blog entries and photos they wrote or took while they were conducting their doctoral studies were also requested from research participants before the first interview session started. However, only one participant provided his WeChat timeline post that he wrote right after he decided to withdraw. This part of data were analyzed together with other interview transcripts but marked as "supplemental material". Table 2 shows a summary of interview timeline.

Table 2. Interview Timeline

	First interview	Second interview	Third interview	Total interview hours
Fish	June 18, 2017	June 20, 2017	June 27, 2017	3.5
Isaiah	June 19, 2017	July, 17. 2017	August 15, 2017	3
Jingwei	June 12, 2017	June 26, 2017	July 11, 2017	4.5
Zhuangzhou	July 4, 2017	July 5, 2017	July 6, 2017	3.5

For the interviews, I adopted "the three interview series" as an interview technique described by Seidman (2006). The first interview established the context of the participants' experience. The sec-

ond round allowed participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the last one encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, from each participant, three rounds of interviews were conducted and approximately three to four hours of interview data were collected. Below is a chart of the interview timeline.

DATA ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION

Due to the fact that interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is the native language of both the researcher and the participants, transcription was also conducted in Mandarin. Qualitative research is considered valid when the distance between the meanings as experienced by the participants and the meanings as interpreted in the findings is as close as possible (Polkinghorne, 2007). For the present study, I took the suggestion raised by Twinn (1998) that where possible, analysis of transcripts should be undertaken in the language of the interview to ensure validity. Although the reference and guiding books I followed were all written in English, I did not encounter difficulties in terms of cross-use of the approaches into the Chinese language.

After data collection, the interview audios were first transcribed verbatim by hand in Mandarin. To improve validity, Polkinghorne (2007) suggested returning to participants to gain clarification and further exploration of interpretative questions and give back to the participant the generated texts and ask them to check. I returned the transcripts to my participants and asked them to check if I recorded everything in the interviews. After pilot testing several pages of the transcript, I decided to apply a hybrid of *In Vivo* coding and *Initial coding* as my first cycle coding methods. *In Vivo* refers to a word or short phrase "used by [participants] themselves" (A. L. Strauss, 1987, p.33). *In Vivo* coding is appropriate particularly for studies that "prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (Saldana, 2013, p.91). Coding with participants' actual words can enhance and deepen the researcher's understanding of participants' cultures and worldview (Saldana, 2013). However, one drawback of *In Vivo* coding is that it can "limit your ability to transcend to more conceptual and theoretical levels of analysis and insight" (Saldana, 2013, p.95). Therefore, *Initial coding* was also used in the data. *Initial coding* "breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences" (Saldana, 2013, p.100). The advantage of *Initial coding* is that it allows the researcher to remain open to all possible directions indicated by the data (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013), which could minimize the drawback of *In Vivo* coding.

For the second cycle, I applied *Axial coding*, which extends the analytic work from *Initial coding* with the goal being to strategically reassemble data using an axis—a category (Saldana, 2013). The coding process was conducted by hand. From the coding, categorizing and reflecting, four major themes emerged from the data.

I employed translation at the themes and categories levels. I considered content equivalence in translation as a priority while maintaining semantic equivalence, since the difficult part of translation is finding the cultural value of languages (Al-Amer et al., 2015; Temple & Young, 2004). I also subsequently discussed word choice and context meaning with the participant to make sure my representation of them was as close as possible, especially for the ones that I directly quoted (Polkinghorne, 2007).

MY "INSIDER" ROLE

An insider is "someone whose biography (e.g., gender, race, class, and sexual orientation) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched" (Griffith, 1998, p. 361). As a researcher, some features of my identity, such as being Chinese, international doctoral student, and female were unchanging during the research time, which provided me this insider position. It will undoubtedly assisted me to have a better initial understanding of the participants and the subtle and diffuse links between situations and events (Griffith, 1998; Mercer, 2007), especially when we talked about their experiences

in China; however, being an "insider" sometimes does not guarantee a "thicker description or greater verisimilitude" of the researched (Mercer, 2007, p.6). Greater familiarity with the research participants or research sites might make insiders take things for granted and assume their own perspective is widespread enough (Griffith, 1998; Mercer, 2007). In order to take benefit from my "insider" role and at the same time further minimize the drawback that could affect my data collection, during the interview I developed some strategies: First, I listened with a smile. Sometimes narrators would think you understand them as an insider, so they abbreviate some parts of their stories. Listening with a smile and curious eyes encouraged them to continue and helped me get a fuller story. Secondly, I asked why. I kept telling myself to not take any participants' statements for granted, especially when the participants talked about their experiences in China or when the participants also studied Social Science as a major like I did. My strategy was asking "why" or for some details after the narrators finished their stories. Thirdly, I simplified the power relation during the interview. I reminded myself to carefully treat the distance between the participant and me. I usually conducted several casual conversations before the interview to "warm-up" my participants. Last, I listened to the audio recording and conducted reflexive thinking after each interview and kept researcher memos.

FINDINGS

After analyzing the data, four themes emerged from the interview data. In order to better answer the research questions and to avoid excessive overlap, findings are presented here by themes not by participants. Although it is not a necessary condition for all studies, for this study, with only four participants, a topic was considered to be a theme if it was mentioned by all participants. Table 3 provides a summary of four themes that were generated from the data.

Table 3. Summary of Themes

Themes
Experiences with doctoral supervisors
Partnership and the perception of gender roles
Family of origin and the importance of education
Education Differences between China and Canada

EXPERIENCES WITH DOCTORAL SUPERVISORS

All of my research participants talked about their supervisory relationship as a major component of their doctoral study in academic settings. Among four participants, Fish and Jingwei had positive experiences with their supervisors where they were guided by their supervisors and had regular meetings with their supervisors. For example, Fish's supervisor not only guided her to choose courses but also suggested that she contact the Chinese community in her city. When Jingwei first started her program, her supervisor assigned her some relevant research studies to read. Still in the stage of figuring out the learning culture in a new country, she did not know how to communicate with her supervisor, but her supervisor broke the ice and asked her about the reading assignment:

> [When asked how long her supervisor contacted her after he assigned the reading assignment]…about two weeks? Three maybe? He contacted me asking 'How are you doing? You didn't contact me.'…After, he told me 'Once you have questions, contact me. Don't stuff your head.'…maybe he sensed I had problems? But I didn't dare to contact him. And he set up a regular meeting time with me after that. (Jingwei, recording 5, p. 6)

However, both Isaiah and Zhuangzhou were not able to maintain a positive relationship with their supervisors. For Isaiah, his relationship with his supervisor was awkward ever since he wanted to change supervisors. Isaiah was concerned about the practicality of his study area, so after one semes-

ter he decided to change to a more practical research area. He expressed his willingness to change supervisors to his current supervisor. Meanwhile, he contacted other professors, but not a single one responded. Soon after, the graduate student advisor intervened. He was blamed by the graduate student advisor as "stirred up the trouble" (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 6). Even though Isaiah continued his study for the second semester, the relationship between him and his supervisor became sour. When talking about this experience to me, Isaiah expressed his understanding of the situation as one of power dynamics, and he admitted that: "actually, that episode indeed influenced me [on my decision-making]" (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4).

For Zhuangzhou, having an internationally recognized scholar as a supervisor was not necessarily beneficial. By the time Zhuangzhou enrolled, his supervisor started a cooperative project with a university in the US. Zhuangzhou described it as "the worst timing" to start his program (Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 6). When his supervisor was in the US, he did not contact Zhuangzhou very often. He only came back to Canada one or two times per year: "…the first two years my boss was not there, and my research basically had…nothing…I had no publication, I didn't even officially start…" (Zhuangzhou, recording 2, p. 4). Zhuangzhou kept mentioning that he is the type of person that needs to be rewarded to continue doing something; however, for him, his supervisor's absence itself was a negative feedback to him. He said:

> I understand his situation, his career needed to soar, the professor who worked together with him was like a rocket booster…but that indeed caused some trouble for me and his other students…when you contacted him, his response was really slow, you would feel he didn't have time for you… (Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 7)

The communication gap became bigger and the waiting time became longer, and when Zhuangzhou expressed that he wanted to stop his program, his supervisor accepted it without surprise. "I think he foresaw this [his withdrawal]" Zhuangzhou said (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 4).

PARTNERSHIP AND THE PERCEPTION OF GENDER ROLES

All of my participants were in their 30s, and they are at the age of starting and caring for families, settling down, and raising children. Thus, marriage and partnership were important aspects that affected their life trajectories.

One of the motivations for Fish to apply to a doctoral program in Canada was her family and consideration for her child. She wanted to immigrate to Canada because she believed this country could provide her child with a better education; therefore, she left her husband and daughter in China and sought doctoral studies alone in Canada. As a wife and a mother, Fish admitted the perception of life had changed because of marriage: "…once you get married, you think as a family, from a family's perspective, not from your own perspective, especially when you make decisions" (Fish, recording 3, p. 6). From our interview, I could feel the role of a wife and a mother was deeply embedded in her mind. She talked about her roles as:

> …when you don't have children, you do cleaning, cooking…when you have children, you have the heavy responsibility to raise your children. You have to assist [with] your children's study, send them to school in the morning and get them back in the afternoon…as a female, you do spend more time at home, taking care of your family members…(Fish, recording 3, p. 6)

When Fish was studying in her doctoral program, Fish and her husband became alienated from each other. "We seldom called each other; only some communication sporadically" (Fish, recording 1, p. 6). According to Fish, the situation was complicated by the intervention of her mother-in-law. Fish's husband supported her decision to come to Canada at the very beginning when she first received an

offer, but he changed his mind because his mother was worried that Fish might take her son to Canada. As her mother-in-law was a single mother, she did not want to be left out as a lonely elder, so she kept complaining to Fish's husband. "Gradually, he started to object [to my doctoral study] too" (Fish, recording 3, p. 2). Facing this conflict, Fish finally decided to abandon her studies and go back home. "Otherwise my family would be broken," she said (Fish, recording 1, p. 10).

For Isaiah, the idea of immigrating to Canada was initiated by his wife's family. Although he quit his job in China and came to Canada mainly because of his wife, during Isaiah's doctoral study, the relationship between this couple was not going well: "I didn't fully focus on family… she would complain…I felt bad myself too. Materially, I made no contribution…" (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 2-3). In terms of gender role, he said: "According to Chinese culture, a man must have his career…career overrides family…material contribution…in Chinese culture, a guy staying at home and raising children is considered to be a loss of face (means suffering from embarrassment, feeling shame in Chinese culture)…" (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 3). At that time, his wife's family supported them to open a business. He soon found himself busy helping with the business, so he wrote an email to his supervisor and his department to terminate his studies.

Several months after he withdrew from study, he wrote:

> I just want to say fighting for one's dream has to be based on reality. The only thing I know is: as a son, a husband, I have to earn money, I have to shoulder those responsibilities. Otherwise, facing those who support me, my parents, my wife, I would be the most irresponsible and selfish person. (Isaiah, supplemental material)

Unlike Fish and Isaiah, Jingwei was single while enrolled in her doctoral program. However, she admitted to me that the focus of her life switched to building up a relationship with her current husband since they started dating in the second semester of her studies. She described her life before she met him as "gloomy and cold", "painful", and "lonely" (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 1). They moved in together several months after they started dating and ever since that, her life was changed. At the same time, her parents started to kindly urge her to get married because they had been living together. "From a Chinese traditional perspective, you [Jingwei and her husband] had been living together…parents will stop worrying once you get married and make it official" (Jingwei, recording 9, p. 2).

During that summer when Jingwei should have been preparing for her candidacy examinations, her husband's parents visited them. Even knowing the examination was around the corner, Jingwei spent most of her time accompanying them sightseeing. As a consequence, she was not able to pass her candidacy examination; therefore, her supervisor suggested that she transfer to a master's program, and she knew a master's degree would not affect her relationship and immigration, so she agreed.

Zhuangzhou got married during his doctoral study. Two years later after he started his doctoral study, his wife successfully received an offer from a Canadian university and started her Ph.D. While his research was stagnant, but her studies were going well, this fact affected his view of his masculinity. He also shared with me a critical incident, where he cried when they were having a meal:

> I'm a person who never cries. One time while we were eating, my wife suddenly said something, that sentence had no problem, but her attitude stabbed me, it hit somewhere soft in my heart, and I cried. At that time, I was so fragile. The balance in a family and relationship was broken…I felt that kind of…from the opposite sex, she looked down upon me… which was deeply from her heart… the relationship was not ok. It affected our relationship." (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 2)

Facing the situation with his supervisor and his wife, Zhuangzhou finally chose to withdraw from his study.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

This theme emerged when participants were talking about their lives before they came to Canada. Although research participants were born in different parts of China, and from different types of families, their families of origin all put high importance on education. They were all urged by their parents to make an effort to study. All the parents signed them up for extracurricular classes, financed their education all the way to university, and some parents were even willing to move from city to city in order to get them a good school. For example, Zhuangzhou's parents moved to city X because they wanted to enter the best school there. However, that school did not accept him even with extra "school selection fee (students who choose to study at a school that is not in their neighborhood need to pay extra money to the school)" offered by his parents. The city they first moved to was not a success, so they tried the neighboring city. He was able to get in the best school there with some extra "school selection fee". Zhuangzhou commented during our interview: "it reveals no matter how, they [parents] need you to be in a better place [school], they were really insisted on that" (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3).

For Isaiah, he believes "the more education you receive, the more outlets you will get in the future" (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 1). Growing up, his mother arranged everything for him. In his high school time, as soon as his mother found Isaiah was not good at academics, she put Isaiah in an art extracurricular training class. "Better be the head of a chicken than the tail of a phoenix" his mother said to him (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 2). Following the path designed by his mother, Isaiah was able to get into a good university. "That was her strategy. She was very strategic" (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 2).

Fish's parents believed acquiring a skill was important for living. When she was little, her father realized that learning a second language was beneficial for her future. So he sent Fish to learn Japanese. Fish recalled: "he would send me by bike to the training school every week no matter if it was windy or rainy…I didn't like Japanese, but he forced me to learn… he said: 'you will use it when you grow up, it will be your capital'" (Fish, recording 2, p. 3).

Jingwei's parents also moved their home from one district to another for her education. She had learned piano, calligraphy, and painting in extracurricular classes and encouraged by her parents to read classical literature books at home. She said:

> …my parents had lots of books at home. From my childhood, the reason they were not allowing me to go out was because I didn't finish reading those books…such as The Red and the Black, Pride and Prejudice, and later the history of Europe, Rome … I actually couldn't understand every word, but I had to sit there and read…I wanted to go out to play, but my parents would say 'Did you finish reading?'…
> (Jingwei, recording 1, p.5)

EDUCATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINA AND CANADA

Being international students, research participants noticed and experienced differences in education between China and Canada. Some of them noticed the differences in teaching methods and teachers' expectations while others talked about the different mindsets of students, and school environments. As Chinese students, participants admitted that the Chinese way of learning brought some benefits. For example, for Jingwei, she mentioned she was really good at taking notes and after the class she analyzed her notes, which made her remember the knowledge points more easily. Compared to her Canadian peers, she remembered more formulas, so every time when they needed formulas, she was the one who responded the quickest.

However, all of them needed some adjustments to fit into the Canadian campus. Some participants noticed Canadian classrooms feature a lot of discussions and less formal lecturing, which required high English proficiency and it could be intense for international students. Also, some of them complained the doctoral courses were not practical enough. As doctoral students, the major aspect my

participants talked about was the autonomy they were provided during their studies. Jingwei admitted she did not know how to study in the Canadian way:

> …because I had been a student in the Chinese education system for many years so I didn't know how to study in Canada. My supervisor said: 'you need to do some research on that.' What should I do? How do I research that? I didn't know…and my supervisor didn't urge me, he was waiting for me to contact him. But in China, every time there is a deadline… teachers would say: 'today we do this and that.' Very specific… (Jingwei, recording 2, p. 1)

Zhuangzhou also echoed this saying:

> … The Chinese way of education cuts your time into small pieces and tells you what to do within each small time piece…now when I get a large time frame and I have to allocate the tasks within the time frame by myself, I just don't know how to do it. I noticed in the North American system, kids are trained to do projects, to cultivate their own small system to do things … so, for me, when I get a big chunk of time, which I can allocate freely … what should I do? (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 5)

For them, how to allocate the autonomous time was a big challenge:

> We don't have the idea of 'study on one's own.' It was always like teachers and parents urge you to study. They gave you exam questions and let you answer [in China], but here [in Canada] it's like they ask you to think about exam questions yourself. It was hard. (Jingwei, recording 2, p. 1)

DISCUSSION

Due to the nature of doctoral study, scholars have identified interaction with one's supervisor as the most significant factor that could impact students' study and persistence (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Devos et al., 2017; Earl-Novell, 2006; Golde, 2005; Heath, 2002; Juniper et al., 2012; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Tinto, 1993). The relationship with supervisors was mentioned as the biggest component of my research participants' academic life. In the literature, scholars have found that supervisors' level of academic activity affects graduate students' degree completion. That is, students who are supervised by active researchers tend to have a lower attrition rate and a higher completion rate (Ours & Ridder, 2003). However, the data from this study may indicate some contradictions with the literature. Students who are supervised by active researchers could be at risk of not getting enough time and attention from their busy supervisors. The findings from this study suggest that no matter how active or famous the supervisor was as a researcher, for the students, the most basic and important element of the supervisory relationship was the availability and commitment of the supervisor to the student.

Among all the social relations, marriage and partnership are major ones that influence the decision-making of doctoral students (Brooks, 2015; Kim, 2015; Martinez et al., 2013). The topic of gender played a significant role in my participants' narratives. Historically, Chinese society has been structured as a patriarchy. Women did not have their own personal rights. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese government launched policies to promote gender equality. However, despite the new discourse on gender equality in China, women are still by their admission influenced by male desires and preferences, especially in love and marriage choices, and girls who are not married after certain age feel incomplete, being called "leftovers" (Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017). At the same time, the vast majority of educated, new generation women, suffered from a double burden of unpaid domestic work due to the traditional ideas of house work distribution, but at the same time expected their husbands to assist them with childcare and domestic work. All of the above af-

fected the perception of gender roles and partnership of my female participants, which in turn influenced their withdrawal decision. In terms of Chinese men, after the Open Door policy in 1978, market reforms became more intense in recent decades. The reforms brought wealth to millions of men who believed that "a high income represents the essence of masculinity: the higher the income, the more superior his manliness" (Hinsch, 2013, p. 163). Making some contribution to the family, especially financially, was important for maintaining my male participants' masculinity and their status in the relationship with their wives. Their withdrawal decisions were partially because of the willingness to maintain their masculinity.

When talking about the participants' educational experiences before coming to Canada for doctoral study, all of my participants recalled their memories of how their parents supervised and urged them to put great effort into studying. China is a country that has traditionally attached high importance to education and also has developed a learning culture. From the imperial examination system to the current National College Entry Examinations (NCEE), Chinese students view score on the NCEE as the passport for them to secure higher education opportunities, and no other qualifications or certificates are valid in this selection process (Bai, 2010; Tan, 2012). Amid this background, students are test-orientated, because the symbolic meaning of NCEE is not only a test; it represents their social status in the future (Bai, 2010). Their families of origin and the whole society attach high importance to education and schooling, which, in turn, influenced my participants' perceptions of education. From the data of this study, participants' perceptions did not have a direct correlation with their decisions to withdraw from their studies prior to graduating. However, it explains their inner driving force for applying for doctoral programs in the first place.

In the literature, language barrier was discussed as one of the major challenges faced by international students. In the present study, all the research participants possessed an English proficiency level that was sufficient for them to conduct their coursework. However, what hindered their communication was not language itself but the cultural differences (Kim, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). Compared to students in Western cultures, Chinese students tend to see the teacher and the texts as highly authoritative sources of knowledge; they are more likely to operate in a recipient mode in the process of learning rather than challenging and questioning (Gu, 2001; Guo, 2015; Tan, 2012). For example, Jingwei mentioned she did not dare to contact her supervisor (recording 5, P.6). This recipient mode leads to the criticism of Chinese students as lacking self-direction and individual study skills. It has been argued that when Chinese students are provided with much freedom and autonomy, they lose direction and they experience difficulty finding the meaning of their daily tasks (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007; Gu, 2001; Guo, 2015; Tan 2012). This was the case for all my participants. Another point that is worth discussing is how they valued the meaning of education. Some of my participants complained that their courses are not practical enough, which consist of too much theoretical content. Participants hardly related those content to their lives. Guo (2015) explained that given the emphasis of a pragmatic outcomes in Confucian cultures, it is not surprising to learn that learners in Asian contexts may show more curiosity toward practical issues rather than theoretical issues. They generally believe that education should provide them with prestigious jobs and high social status. Therefore, the discrepancies between their perception of education and the reality they were facing partially impacted their withdrawal decisions.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, this study contributes insight into how cultural understandings affect Chinese international doctoral students' decisions to withdraw and provides an avenue for them to make their voice heard. Specifically, as it stated in Tinto's model, participants' experiences during their doctoral studies did influence their decisions to withdraw. Specifically, incompatibility with supervisors was one factor that directly led to the withdrawal of some research participants. However, other factors contributed as well. The participants' intentions and willingness to fulfill their gender roles and family obligations impacted their decisions in various ways. In addition, their past experiences in China and certain as-

pects of Chinese culture seem to have shaped their expectations about education, their learning preferences. Elements of Chinese culture were not direct and salient factors that led to the withdrawal of my participants; however, those embedded beliefs and values that were shaped by Chinese culture were hidden forces that impacted their decisions.

This study is based on data from four participants from the same cultural background and the entire study was conducted by only one researcher; therefore, the conclusions are preliminary and tentative at this point. Using multiple researchers would increase the trustworthiness of future studies. Therefore, caution should be used in generalizing these findings to larger populations.

In terms of implications of this study, in the existing theories that explain student withdrawal, sociocultural factors have not received much attention; thus, an examination into the cultural background of students would help paint a more comprehensive picture of doctoral student withdrawal. My study only focused on Chinese students, thus future studies could also probe more on other ethnicities and cultures. Also, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors; however, the incompatibility between doctoral students and their supervisors and coping strategies in that situation is still an area which needs more investigation.

At a methodological level, my research is an example of addressing translation issues in cross-language and cross-cultural settings. Qualitative research is considered valid when the distance between the meanings as experienced by the participants and the meanings as interpreted in the findings is as close as possible. Therefore, I would recommend in the condition that if the researcher and the participant(s) share the same language, the best practice would be to transcribe and analyze data in the original language to shorten the distance from the meanings that are made by participants and the meanings that are interpreted by the researcher(s). Language meanings do lose during the translation process; as researchers, we should try our best to present our participants as truly as possible.

At a practice level, universities (through the Faculty of Graduate studies or specific departments) could consider delivering series of workshops to help international graduate students start their journey. Departmental administrative bodies could consider building community for doctoral students and tracking their study path to better assist students. Given the increased number of international students on campuses, it is time for university staff and faculties to become more aware of what a more diverse student population means. Professional training or professional development workshops would help to raise professors' cultural awareness.

The number of international students who choose to conduct doctoral studies is increasing every year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2018). They are making contributions to the host countries in various ways. However, their study status and overall well-being may not be getting enough attention from both the scholarly research and in real practice. Therefore, the experiences shared by my research participants who used to be doctoral students and left their studies halfway could add value and knowledge to understand this group of students. Also, international students who have intentions to apply for a doctorate abroad could benefit from this study and be better prepared for their own doctoral journey.

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BIOGRAPHY

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