
Neoliberal Globalization, Higher Education Policies and International Student Flows: An Exploratory Case Study of Chinese Graduate Student Flows to Canada

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Abstract: *With the advent of neoliberal globalization commencing in the 1980s, international student mobility (ISM) has become a significant social and educational phenomenon. Given the increasing magnitude of international student flows from “developing countries” to the “developed” or major member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), this paper explores Chinese graduate student flows to Canada. Chinese graduate student perspectives are also drawn upon to study the phenomenon of Chinese student migrations to Canada in pursuit of higher education. Given the focus on exploration, meanings and understandings, an interpretivist approach and qualitative case study strategy were utilized to examine relative policy positions and to understand the experiences of Chinese graduate students who study at the University of Alberta (U of A). The aim of this paper is to contribute qualitative studies pertaining to the phenomenon of ISM. This paper highlights the emergent themes from the data obtained from the qualitative case study of Chinese graduate student flows to Canada and presents preliminary reflections on neoliberal globalization, higher education policies and ISM.*

1. Introduction

The large numbers of international students who cross borders for the pursuit of higher education in recent years has been addressed and described by many scholars and non-governmental organizations. According to UNESCO (2009: 36),

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In 2007, over 2.8 million students were enrolled in educational institutions outside of their country of origin. This presents 123,400 more students than in 2006, an increase of 4.6%. And the global number of mobile students has grown by 53% since 1999 (with an average annual increase of 5.5%) and by 2.5 times since 1975 with an average annual increase of 11.7% throughout this period.

Studying abroad also has a long history in China. The large scale Chinese student mobility abroad can be traced to the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) (Tian, Xiao and Zhou, 2004). However, as a phenomenon, Chinese student mobility abroad became much more significant in the last ten years. Figures from the British Council (2008: 10) show that “in 2005, over 350,000 Chinese were studying abroad at the tertiary level alone”. Also according to the Ministry of Education of China (2010), the total number of Chinese studying abroad in 2009 was 229,300, 210,100 of whom are self-funded, 12,000 who are supported by the government and 7,200 who are sent by the work unit. This is an increase of 27.5% since just 2008.

The large scale of student mobility abroad is absolutely not purely an educational phenomenon in China. Based on the assumption that international student mobility (ISM) has been influenced by neoliberal globalization, this research focuses on the ISM in the Chinese-Canadian context. Reflecting on Marginson and Sawir’s (2005: 281-282) understanding of ‘flows’:

More than effects of globalization, ‘flows’ are carriers of global effects and creators of global effects that keep on circulating in continuous feedback loops, so that in a sense the flows are globalization and we begin to free ourselves from the notion of an invisible essence.

I regard ISM as a flow because it bears a specific social and educational meaning and has caused some global effects as an increasing number of international students cross borders for higher education every year.

The paper begins with the research questions and methodology. This is followed by a brief introduction to neoliberalism, neoliberal globalization and the influence of neoliberalism-doctrined public institutions, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/ World Trade Organization (WTO)/ General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), on higher education, internationalization of higher education (IHE) and ISM. In particular, the Chinese government and Canadian government's policy and position on the ISM phenomenon are analyzed. Chinese government policies and positions on overseas study are explored in order to investigate the involvement of policy in Chinese students' overseas studies. Emergent themes from Chinese graduate student perspectives on pursuing higher education in Canada are highlighted in this paper. Finally, theoretical considerations of ISM and future research related to ISM are discussed.

2. Research Questions and Research Methodology

From the perspective of neoliberal globalization, the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the social and educational phenomenon of student migrations from China to Canada. In relation to this broad objective, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the perspectives of Chinese graduate students concerning their decisions to pursue higher education in Canada?
- 2) How might Chinese graduate student perspectives regarding their experiences with higher education in Canada inform policy and practice in higher education in Canada and China?
- 3) How might higher education policies in China and Canada be playing a part in influencing ISM between these countries?

As the main purpose of this study is to explore understandings and interpretations of Chinese graduate student flows to Canada and other major OECD countries for higher education, an interpretivist approach was employed. The case study strategy was utilized because the

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main thrust of a case study can be descriptive, exploratory or explanatory (Yin, 2009). Specifically, the methods of data collection were: document analysis, interviews and participant observation. Interviews and participant observations were employed to study student perspectives by focusing on a specific group - Chinese students at the U of A and specific country-related experiences or policies on higher education migrations of Chinese students (China and Canada with extensions to other OECD countries).

Data analysis is merged with data collection. Specifically, data was analyzed utilizing the following procedures. In terms of the timing of data analysis, analysis during data collection (conducting some basic analysis in order to guide research in the right direction and cover the research topic effectively), and analysis after data collection (intensifying the analysis with focus on more specific aspects of the research question) were conducted. As for analytical methods, iterative qualitative analysis was adopted and the approach of construction and deconstruction were used. In addition, conversation analysis was taken to analyze the data from interviews.

3. Neoliberalism, Neoliberal Globalization, Internationalization of Higher Education (IHE) and ISM

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism first appeared as a distinctive strand of liberal ideology in the 1940s with a major influence dating from the 1970s (Gamble, 2007). As an ideology, its key principles can be summarized as “free-market individualism, private property, constitutional order, and the minimal state” (Robertson and Scholte, 2007: 865). The scope of neoliberalism is not confined to the economic domain, however, but has been expanded to the political, cultural and ideological spheres. When discussing the rise of neoliberalism, Campbell and Pederson (2001: 1) comment that the period of the last two decades of the 20th century was described as the time of neoliberalism; that is, “a time of market deregulation, state decentralization, and reduced

state intervention into economic affairs in general”. Scholte (2000: 35) pinpoints that “neoliberalism has generally prevailed as the reigning policy framework in contemporary globalization”. Most governments have promoted neoliberal policies towards globalization and multilateral institutions, such as the IMF, the WTO and the OECD, have continually linked globalization with liberalization. Therefore, neoliberalism as a term has become the substitute of globalization in a particular interpretation and indicates a particular set of policies for global governance (Robertson and Scholte, 2007).

Neoliberal Globalization

Globalization has been studied from different angles since the 20th century, though this study regards globalization as a historical process, in which the interconnectedness of nation-states and regions has been strengthened through the international economic, social and cultural intercourse and flows across borders. Robertson (2003: 4), who focused on the historical and social context of globalization distinguished three waves of globalization: “the first, after 1500, centered on the globalization of regional trade; the second, after 1800, gained impetus from industrialization; the third derived from the architecture of a new world order after 1945”. The present study looks at the impact of globalization on higher education policies and international student flows in the third wave of globalization.

The term neoliberal globalization is used because neoliberalism has been embedded in globalization since the 1950s. The propositions of free market and free trade were widely propagated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan after 1980 and this still deeply influences today’s political, economic and cultural systems. Under the guise of globalization, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology and has been embraced by countries all over the world.

Impact of Neoliberal Globalization on Higher Education and ISM

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Bloom (2005) argues that the relationship between higher education and globalization has recently intensified, putting pressure on universities to respond to global integration. Barrow, Didou-Aupetit and Mallea (2003: 13) think “globalization of the world economy, the pursuit of competitive advantage, and the investment policies of international organizations are each promoting the internationalization of higher education in the advanced countries”. The OECD (2004: 19) looks at cross-border education as the “second dimension of internationalization”. As such, some scholars, including myself, believe ISM is but one aspect of IHE.

Neoliberal globalization did not bring about the real free trade or free market among nations as its advocates promised, but has resulted in greater divergence between the “developed countries” and the “developing countries”. For instance, in conjunction with IHE and ISM, the “developed countries”, which dominate in scientific, engineering, and medical fields (Robertson and Sholte, 2007) by way of their advanced technology and modernization attract talented people from all over of the world and are always the greatest beneficiaries when it comes to global human capital flows, while “developing countries” suffer from “brain drain”. As Robertson and Scholte (2007: 104) elaborate, brain drain “combines elements of the global movement of labor and capital (via the flow of highly skilled and talented workers) with investment in human capital”.

The other influence from neoliberal globalization on higher education and ISM is “a vision of students as human capital” (Apple, 2000: 60). This vision of human capital undoubtedly stimulates international student migration from developing countries to developed countries for a better education so that the students can strengthen their skills for participation in the competitive labor market. In addition, the agenda of neoliberal globalization, promoted by multilateral or bilateral agencies, has impacted higher education and ISM. As Torres and Rhoads (2006: 10) argue, the World Bank and the OECD have pushed for more privatization and decentralization of education

include a push toward privatization and decentralization of public forms of education, a

movement toward educational standards, a strong emphasis on testing, and a focus on accountability. Specific to higher education, neoliberal versions of globalization suggest four primary reforms for universities related to efficiency and accountability, accreditation and universalization, international competitiveness, and privatization.

Also ISM across borders has been highly influenced by GATT, WTO and GATS, which propagate the removal of barriers and promote the liberalization of international trade. As institutional mechanisms, GATT, WTO and GATS play a key role in making the impact of neoliberal globalization on higher education possible, and the marketization of education has been put on the agenda.

Though GATS stresses that members of the WTO are not obliged to open the whole universe of services sectors, the influence of GATS is so pervasive and profound that national governments have to confront international pressures in certain fields, such as education, in the hopes of gaining economic benefits.

4. Student Migration from China to Canada

In *the Report Foreign Students in Canada 1980-2001*, Iturralde and Calvert (2003: 3) point out that:

Canada has experienced unprecedented growth in the number of foreign students in recent years. At the end of 2001, there were over 130,000 foreign students in Canada, rising from almost 57,000 in 1990 and 37,000 in 1980.

Countries like South Korea, China and Japan in East Asia have become the major source countries of foreign students. "In 2001, these countries accounted for 43 percent of foreign students studying in Canada" (Iturralde and Calvert, 2003: 3). Canada receives the most of its foreign students from China. In view of such a significant student migration from China to Canada, China's policies towards overseas studies

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together with Canada's policy pertaining to recruiting international students are explored in the following sections.

A Brief Historical Review of China's Policy towards Overseas Studies

Before the Establishment of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.)

During the early Qing period, western missionaries sent Chinese students to European countries to study religion and western culture. The government did not establish any educational policies or regulations on studying abroad. In the late Qing period (1840-1912), the emperors implemented a "closed-door policy", which meant cutting off the country from the outside world. This caused a sharp decrease in the diplomatic, cultural, scientific and technological communication between China and foreign countries, which made China an easy target for Western invaders. China's door was opened by western force in the late part of the 19th century. In light of the Opium Wars, some patriotic officials and scholars proclaimed "*Shi Yi Chang Ji Yi Zhi Yi*" (learning from foreigners to compete with them). The Qing government was pressured into dispatching students to Western countries to study their advanced technologies in order to revitalize the nation.

These students shouldered an important responsibility to change the status quo of the society and revitalize the country. Those who came back to China after World War II became either proficient scientists or engineers in modern technology and played an important role in the formation of China's science systems and industrial foundations.

After the Establishment of the P.R.C.

Students who had studied abroad and returned after the P.R.C. was formed in 1949 played a significant role in constructing the economy of the country and supporting its technological development (Li, 2004). Thus, overseas studies were given great consideration by the new communist government before the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This, however, was seriously affected by the Cultural

Revolution, when overseas studies came mostly to a standstill (Tian, Xiao and Zhou, 2004).

In 1976, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, some specific regulations were made in terms of overseas studies, such as *Guan Yu 1977 Nian Xuan Pai Chu Guo Liu Xue Sheng De Tong Zhi* (Notice of the Selection of Chinese Student for Overseas Studies in 1977), reflecting the leaders' positive opinion towards international studies. In 1980, studying abroad at a student's own expense was allowed, though with strict reviews of applications, initially. The policy towards self-supported overseas studies became stricter because without the binds of the government's support, self-supported overseas students tend to stay abroad after they graduate, causing China's "brain drain" (Chan, 1990).

Since the 1990s, the adoption of a socialist market economy has improved China's economic situation, thus the number of students studying abroad at their own expense has risen rapidly. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education simplified the review process of applications for self-supported overseas studies in 2002. Since November 1, 2002, no higher education cultivation fee is paid by students who wish to study abroad. And the process of reviewing applicant's qualification was cancelled. In addition, China's government enacted new regulations to provide positive assistance to those who want to study abroad. Specifically, the Foreign Information Guardian Network of Ministry of Education has become the exclusive website to announce all kinds of foreign educational activities.

Canada's Policy towards International Students

In Canada, there isn't a singular national policy on higher education and "[i]nternationalization at Canadian universities has traditionally been institutionally driven and taken a bottom-up approach" (OECD, 2004: 47). However, the current economic situation has impacted the recruitment of international students. With the influence of the global recession of 2009 on the Canadian post-secondary education, Usher and Dunn (2009) show that the most immediate challenges facing the system are, for example, the decrease of institutional revenues and the increase of institutional costs. They further suggest that one of the measures taken by governments to help institutions survive

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the worst of the crisis could be increasing income from commercialization of activities: “By far the more lucrative pot to chase is international students” (2009: 28). Economic pressure may result in the government adjusting its policy on the higher education export services by recruiting more international students.

As an immigrant country, there is always a domestic demand for human resources. In recent years, the Canadian government realized that international students could be an excellent resource. By taking new measures like adjusting immigration policy and introducing off-campus work permits, the Canadian government intends to attract more international students who will stay in and contribute to Canada after they complete their studies. I think the new off-campus work permit is Canada’s countermeasure to increasing tuition costs, in the hopes of maintain a certain number of international students in Canada.

Since September 2008, certain temporary foreign workers and students have been able to apply for permanent residence under the Canadian Experience Class. As a new policy, foreign students who graduated from a Canadian higher institution are considered to have the qualities to make a successful transition from temporary to permanent residence.

Chinese-Canadian Context of International Student Mobility

There are several reasons why studying in Canada has recently become an ideal choice for Chinese students. First, the large and beautiful, yet sparsely populated natural environment attract Chinese students who are from a populous country and care much about life quality. Besides, the multi-cultural and primarily English environments fascinate Chinese students who want to experience a different culture and improve their English.

Another reason is the lower costs and good quality of higher education in Canada. Normally, tuition fees of Canadian universities are about half of that of American universities. Thus Canada provides Chinese students who are not from a wealthy family with a chance to study further

in North America. Also in Canada, “[m]ost of the universities are established through provincial legislation and are therefore public and ‘recognized’. The term ‘recognized’ indicates that they meet governmental requirements and standards” (OECD, 2004: 42). Hence Canada’s public education system has a good image in China. Also, there are many awards and scholarships available for international students, particularly in the sciences. Besides, the off-campus work permit and Canadian experience class immigration policy attract Chinese students who want to live and work in the country.

The third reason is 9/11. Before 9/11, studying abroad with the financial support from the universities in the United States was number one choice for undergraduates in China. However, after 9/11, the American government adjusted the visa application policy, which led a number of excellent Chinese students fail to obtain a visa. These students went to Canada first and then could choose to later look for other chances to study in the United States.

Implications from Canada and China’s Policy towards Higher Education and ISM

Social-cultural and academic rationales of recruiting international students can be observed in ISM from China to Canada. China’s position on ISM from China to Canada has been shaped by the impact of neoliberal globalization on Chinese society. Some scholars like Harvey (2005) use neoliberalism with “Chinese characteristics” in discussion with the implementation of the open-up policy, the introduction of markets and related economic reforms, as well as China’s entry into the WTO. Also, political demands for liberalization in China began to emerge. Though the crackdown of Tiananmen Square signified that “neoliberalization in the economy was not to be accompanied by any progress in the fields of human, civil, or democratic rights [in China]” (Harvey, 2005: 123), thousands of students fled China to study abroad (Welch, 2002a).

The current Chinese policy on overseas studies supports “students to study abroad, encouraging them to return after they have finished, and allowing them to come and go of their own accord” (Li, 1993). Still, studying abroad and

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serving the country are closely related. Even now, the government still encourages overseas students to return and join the construction of the country, which demonstrates China's emphasis on national solidarity and nationalism. This is a theme that appeared in the present study.

5. Emergent Themes from Chinese Graduate Student Perspectives on Pursuing Higher Education in Canada

As the subject of ISM, international students should be studied to further examine the influence of policy on ISM and to explore the reasons of their choice of overseas studies. However, it is impossible to include all international students in this research. It will be more significant to ground this study in a concrete context. Hence, the Chinese graduate students' perspectives on pursuing higher education at the U of A are specifically investigated in order to understand and explain the phenomenon of ISM. This can explain in detail their motivations for pursuing overseas studies, and further shed light on the policy and practice in higher education in both China and Canada. Data were collected from one focus group interview, eleven semi-structured individual interviews, one key informant interview and two participant observations. There were sample questions for interviewing, but the order and the content of questions could be changed or adjusted as the dialogue developed. The major research participants were the interviewees of the focus group and individual interviews. They are Chinese students who obtained a bachelor's degree from a university in China and have been in a graduate program at the U of A under study permit for one year or more. The attached form in the appendix shows the main identifiers of the participants of interviews. The real names of all participants are replaced with Student plus serial number, such as Student 1.

In the following sections, I present data that emerged in relation to the research questions.

Motivations for Studying Abroad

The perspectives of Chinese graduate students concerning their decisions to pursue higher education in Canada are investigated through a couple of interview questions. During individual interviews, in response to the research question “what made you decide to come to Canada to pursue higher studies?” the respondents gave various answers about their motivations for studying abroad. Two types of motivations are classified. First, there are individual motivations that derived from cultural influence and personal worldviews, individual academic interest in North American higher institutions, and the pursuit of educational equity. For instance, S9 said, “[g]oing to the origins of western educational theories to learn theorists like Dewey is meaningful to me” (interview, December 22, 2008). As S7 stated: “My decision of going abroad is really influenced by my worldview, disposition and philosophy....As an old Chinese saying conveyed, ‘read ten thousand books, travel ten thousand miles’” (interview, December 22, 2008). S4 articulated, “I personally think the quality of postgraduate education in North America is generally higher than that in China and want to receive the best education in my research area there” (interview, March 12, 2009). S6 thought that her studying further abroad was motivated by the pursuit of educational equity. She recounts her experience:

I first attended the national selective examination for graduate students in China and got a high rank, but I was run out in the interviews, which followed the examination. ...Someone in power manipulated the admission process. Suffering from such unfairness, I rethought my motivation for further study and found I still wanted to do it. ... I chose to study education itself. I want to contribute to social justice and education for all because of my own bad experience in China. (interview, December 22, 2008)

The second type of motivation relates to employment pressures, the occupational demand for academic degree level and parental expectations For example, S4 said:

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The job market in China is getting increasingly competitive and tight. ...The situation in China is different from that in Canada. Students prefer to pursue a higher [academic] degree rather than look for a job [with the hope of being more competitive in the job market in the long run]. Then people with an overseas education background seem to have a brighter future. The reputation of the U of A is better than that of Chinese Universities. It is better for young men to study abroad and get more career chances abroad. I want a brighter future. (interview, January 21, 2009)

S9 further talked of this motivation for his studies abroad: “I was working in the university, but I only had a master’s degree. Other colleagues have Ph.D degrees and the university needs professors to have Ph.Ds, so I feel great pressure” (interview, December 22, 2008).

The Main Factors Facilitating the Success of Overseas Studies

Looking back on their own decisions of pursuing further study abroad, research participants considered the factors that facilitate their success of overseas studies. Data from individual interviews and key informant interview show that the main factors facilitating the success of overseas studies are economic reasons and the assistance of the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA).

Studying abroad is not a simple personal choice as it involves a big investment. All participants came to Canada with the financial support from the U of A in the form of doing research assistant (RA) or teaching assistant (TA) work except one public-funded participant with the financial support from both the U of A and the Chinese government. In answer to the interview question “do you think the socio-economic status of your parents/family has anything to do with your ability to come to Canada to pursue higher education?”, although the data varied from person to person, certain relationships exist between the participants’ socio-economic status and their overseas studies. S3 confirmed

the family influence on his studying abroad: “Good family education background will let parents understand why kids are willing to study abroad and they will support the kids with all their resources” (interview, January 21, 2009). S1 thought the economic status of his parents might help him to a certain degree. As he narrated, “I took important exams including TOFEL and GRE and with great marks got accepted and funded by the current department....I tried very hard to get here, but my parents did help me pay the fee for those tests” (interview, September 28, 2008).

Though S4 expressed there was not too much influence from his parents because he received scholarship for his studies, he still thought that family background would affect the personal decision to study abroad because “after all you have to pay application fee, test fees, and so forth” (interview, March 12, 2009). S10 also believed there was certain impact from his parents’ social and economic status since “If I cannot get scholarship but still want to study in Canada, the Canadian Embassy will require me to show them the financial evidence to certify that I have enough money to study and live in Canada... Normally this financial support is from students’ parents” (interview, September 9, 2009).

The second key factor facilitating Chinese student study abroad is the existence of the Chinese Student and Scholar Association (CSSA), which provides useful information to prospective students. It is an organization of overseas Chinese students and scholars in foreign higher institutions. During the key informant interview, the chairman of the CSSA (2004-2005 and 2008-2009) at the U of A considered that the organization of CSSA at the U of A was not set up by students and scholars spontaneously, but kept close contact with the Consulate General of the People’s Republic of China in Calgary. Every year, the CSSA at the U of A can get around CA\$5,000 from the Consulate. And the Consulate’s purpose of providing funding to the CSSA, according to the chairman, is “to bring Chinese students and scholars together and keep their ties with the motherland” (key informant interview, November 12, 2008). In this sense, the establishment of CSSA creates a sense of belonging for Chinese students abroad. Also the organization shoulders

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the communicative mission between overseas Chinese students and the home country.

Experience with Higher Education at the University of Alberta

To elicit Chinese graduate student perspectives on their experiences with higher education in Canada and to explore the implications from student experiences related to policy and practice in higher education in Canada and China, the following question was asked during individual interviews: How would you describe your experience with higher education in Canada up until now? Positive feedback on the academic environment was given, yet some difficulties were mentioned as well. S2 reflected on the differences in higher education between Canada and China:

In Canada, the academic environment is quite good. There are many academic conferences, meetings, workshops and algebra courses. Compared to China...if you want to get a PhD, you must have at least one publication in one top journal... In Canada, you are given a TA or RA. In China, you do not have that kind of thing. Here you can support yourself and can gain many teaching experiences. (interview, October 1, 2008)

S10 realized that his way of thinking has been changed through further studies at the U of A. As he stated, "The academic environment is very rigorous here.... I formed a rigorous way of thinking as well, which is a big gain to me" (interview, September 9, 2009).

All participants appreciated the rigorous academic environment at the U of A except S3 and S7. S3 thought the curriculum is too Euro-centric and US-centric in his department. He argued that perspectives from other countries should also be incorporated. S7 held a distinctive perspective based on his own experience and considered that there is not a big difference in academia between Canada and China. He stated that:

There is also dark side here.... The way of seeking the truth is so different between the East and the West. In

the East, we believe the authority and respect what the authority says. While in the West, people challenge the authority and would like to seek the truth from their individual experience. From my personal experience in seeking the truth, there is no bad or no good in either way. If we can perceive the two ways of thinking, that will be good. Actually here also has academic corruption. And some professors do not publish a lot after they get tenure. (interview, December 22, 2008)

Difficulties and problems in overseas studies were mentioned in the interviews. The difficulties that respondents talked of concentrate on language and cultural communication, scholarship applications and job hunting. Fewer mentioned problems in academic studies. Such as one participant said,

There is no problem with my academic English. I can discuss with my classmates by accurately using technical terms in my major in class, but the embarrassing thing is that I later found I could not communicate with native speakers smoothly in my daily life, such as talking to kids. I just could not understand jokes and idioms. (Observation, June 23, 2009)

Two participants in the focus group interviewing (December 22, 2008) talked of their problems as well. S8 felt “very frustrated when I tried to talk to some local students because they said several times ‘pardon me’”. S9 commented on how

culture and language are the biggest barriers in foreign students’ studies. They generate a pressure, which is invisible.... For example, when we join a discussion with a group of local students, we will find our speaking chance is very little... but we need friends in life and study, in particular in study, but it is very difficult to find a native partner. A sense of being isolated exists when you are in a group of local students.

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During the observation, several students mentioned the difficulties in applying for scholarships in Canada. For example, one stressed that he “cannot apply for those big awards, because of my international student status. Those big awards are only open to Canadian students or permanent residents” (Observation, June 23, 2009). Also one respondent shared his experience in looking for a job in Canada. He said, “though it is not my research area, I have some knowledge in computer science. When I tried to look for a job here, I found it is really hard for me to find a job in my real research area” (Observation, September 11, 2008).

Chinese Graduate Student Perspectives on Policy towards ISM and Consideration of International Student Flows

The role of higher education policies in China and Canada in influencing ISM was also investigated through individual interviews with the questions: What specific higher education policies/official supports (Canadian and Chinese) played a part in making it possible for you to come here? Do you have any other suggestions to make in this regard? Participants wish the governments of the two countries could invest more in support of international students. They hope the communication between the governments and universities of the two countries could be strengthened. Generally, as S3 expected, “Governments should provide information to everyone. Through supportive programs like exchange programs, they can encourage students to explore the outside world. In addition, I consider visa application is an essential thing. It is more about two countries’ regulations [negotiations]” (interview, January 21, 2009). Specifically, S1 held the idea that, “the Chinese government should... increase people’s income and solve poverty... [the] Canadian government should consider improving the policy towards international students, such as making it easier to get a visa to come here” (interview, September 28, 2008). S2 said that the Canadian government should “increase the number of scholarships and make their universities more popular and diverse” (interview, October 1, 2008).

With respect to the participants' views on student flows from China to Canada, most agreed that it was not a bad thing for China, though some of them realized the problem of talent loss for China (see section below on "brain drain"). In relation to the increasing trend of Chinese students pursuing higher education in countries like Canada, most students thought the tendency might be good for China, or at least the benefits would exceed the losses. S8 thought, "generally, it is beneficial to China... [People's] ideas and mind will become more open. This will contribute to the nation-state's development... more overseas students choose to come back to China after their graduation" (interview, December 22, 2008).

S10 also held an optimistic view and said: "I think it is a good thing. After all, China's continuous rapid development may attract more and more overseas Chinese students to come back" (interview, September 9, 2009). S6 thought "in the long run, it will be good to China in some way. For instance, students who stay abroad and get a faculty job can still contribute to China's academia through all kinds of transnational education activities" (interview, December 22, 2008). S1 observed that there are more positive impacts to the flow of students than negative ones because "China is a developing country. On its way to modernization, it needs more knowledge and skills for development. Also China needs to learn experience from developed countries like Canada... for students who will come back to China, they can contribute a lot in this regard" (interview, September 28, 2008).

S2 thought the number of students flowing from China to overseas higher institutions was not a big problem for China. In his opinion, China is a country with a great population and "many students cannot be admitted to a good university, but they can come to Canada and study in a Canadian university" (interview, October 1, 2008).

Beyond the recognition of the positive aspect of studying abroad, some participants further reflected on the problems in China's higher education and thought of "brain drain". This is discussed below.

Response to "Brain Drain" and Critiques of Un/patriotism

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Chinese graduate student perspectives on pursuing higher education in Canada were further explored with the question: What is your response to those who say that studying further abroad is a negative trend for China (“brain drain” of China to the west) or to those who might suggest that such a decision is unpatriotic? Some thought it narrow-minded to use “brain-drain” to depict the trend of pursuing study abroad. One participant even denied “brain-drain” in China. Specifically, as for “brain drain,” some of the participants thought the Chinese government should take actions to solve this problem and that the Chinese higher education system should be improved in order to retain excellent students. Some critiqued the domestic measures of managing human resources and argued that the government should create more opportunities and provide a sound system and support to the returned overseas Chinese students. Moreover, for the unpatriotic critiques, most participants considered that continuing to study abroad or staying abroad is not unpatriotic; on the contrary, they thought overseas students are very supportive when China is in trouble. They believed they could still contribute to China even they chose to stay abroad after graduation, such as taking advanced foreign management experience and technology back to China through different channels, enhancing China’s influence in the West, deepening the understanding between the West and the East and diminishing misunderstanding in human society.

With respect to “brain drain”, S5 stated, “If someone originally from China goes back to China after he or she has done school, that contributes to the country. If not, it represents the “brain drain”... If the government feels it is a loss, it should think out a way to improve higher education” (interview, July 25, 2009).

S7 thought communication is a good channel for the world to get a better understanding of China. In relation to his own experience, he said:

We can be the mass media to present a real China to the people abroad. Similarly, through us, our family and relatives in China can learn more about Canada. Years later, when we have overseas working experience and come back to China our return would become a

immeasurable wealth to our motherland. Even if we do not come back and more and more Chinese settle down abroad, we will gather and become a strength to support China in foreign countries. (interview, December 22, 2008)

S1 articulated that using “brain drain” to describe the phenomenon of ISM is very narrow-minded because it neglects the advantages that ISM will bring to China. He also comments on the issue of students being critiqued as ‘unpatriotic’: “I do not think students are unpatriotic at all. According to my observation, they are patriotic and quite support the government’s decisions, such as the Olympics” (interview, September 28, 2008).

There are more comments on patriotism and ISM. S4 explained that his studying abroad is not a problem concerning patriotism: “When something happens to China, even though we are here, we will get together and support our country. Lots of things happened this year, such as Olympic Games, and the earthquake in Sichuan province” (interview, March 12, 2009).

S11 thought the phenomenon of “brain drain” in China was valid and criticized the current Chinese government policy towards the returned overseas students:

If patriotism is used as a tactics to force us come back, then we come back. But I do not think China can make the best use of our talented people. In China, promotion by playing politics and power is common, which is unfair to us. The flow of talented people is much freer now. The retaining of talented people is not by using the big cap of patriotism to call on us, but by providing a sound system and good support for us. Then we will be willing to come back. Also I believe an old Chinese saying, “downwards water flows while upwards man goes”. People who chose to go abroad may have not got a good development in China. When they were in China, they were never called talented people. In many places of China only those in power can develop themselves very well. It is ironic that people call those who stay abroad talented people. If they do not go back to

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China, people call this phenomenon “brain drain”.
(interview, September 12, 2009)

6. Discussion

This study explored the social and educational phenomenon of Chinese student mobility for further studies in the west. By using a qualitative case study strategy, Chinese graduate students at the U of A were selected as the research participants in order to address: 1) Chinese student rationales for further study abroad; 2) Chinese graduate student learning experiences at a foreign institution and implications for policy and practice in higher education in Canada and China; and 3) Chinese graduate student perspectives on China’s government policy towards overseas studies and Canadian government policy towards international students.

Major host countries of international students are active in promoting the liberalization of higher education and free ISM in a real sense by marketing and internationalizing their higher educational institutions. They do this by introducing differential fees for international students and adopting an open policy towards work permits and immigration applications. The formation of the global international student market and the higher education export service industry certify that higher education in those host countries has been commoditized. This provides certain opportunities for international students to study abroad. But at the same time, it creates inequity in higher education. From the interviews with Chinese graduate students at the U of A, the socio-economic status of participants weighs heavily on the potential to study abroad. The majority of participants are from the middle-class even though the U of A also funded them. In addition, they confirmed the influence of their families’ socio-economic status on their studies abroad. Thus, higher education in the major OECD countries offers more opportunities to international students from rich families than those from poor families.

Drawing on Chinese graduate students’ experiences and perspectives, some aspects such as the impact of

neoliberalism on students' point of view should be further reflected on. To a certain degree, the ideology of neoliberalism influenced students' perspectives on ISM. Most participants expected a free mobility for pursuing higher education between China and Canada. Some of them did not recognize the phenomenon of "brain drain". Some even denied "brain drain" and thought that using "brain-drain" was too narrow-minded to describe ISM. With the implementation of the "reform and opening-up policy," the concepts like "individuality" and "freedom" in the Western culture have challenged the mainstream of the socialist culture and values in China, and impacted the youth since the 1980s and reinforced the youth's aspiration for an individual freedom. Hence, students expected a freer mobility abroad for higher education. The idea of human capital can also be applied to this flow of people from one country to the next. Most participants expressed their hopes to improve or strengthen themselves through overseas studies in order to enhance their competitiveness in the future labor market. This means they agree with the investment in overseas studies.

The impact of cultural globalization can also be seen from some participants' high recognition of the academic degree from higher institutions in North America. The dominance of North American academic higher education systems and standards influenced most participants' choice of the destination for overseas studies. Also Western culture and values flooded the participants' studies. English as the only communicative language resulted some of the participants having difficulties communicating with the local students. It was also noted by one participant that the curriculum in some departments was very Euro-centric or US-centric.

However, it should be noted that when it came to patriotism, most participants showed great passion for their motherland. They disagreed with the Western tones but presented a strong defensive stance to those problems such as the past Olympics. This position reflected that most participants still adhere to Chinese nationalism and national solidarity, which is also a resistance against Western culture and values.

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Different from the ISM mainly supported by the Chinese government before, contemporary ISM is impacted by neoliberalism and a freer mobility shapes students' pursuit of overseas studies. Also distinguished from the ISM in Western countries, Chinese students' study abroad is influenced by Chinese traditional culture and values and most students (in my study) are still concerned about serving their country.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this qualitative case study focused on Chinese graduate student perspectives on pursuing higher education in Canada within the perspective of neoliberal globalization. The research was primarily descriptive and interpretive. In terms of future research, the following directions need addressing: first, in light of the multi-dimensions of IHE, qualitative research could be expanded to the study of the international movement of academic staff and researchers and internationalization of higher education curricula; second, even though many Chinese students pursue overseas studies every year, there are quite a number of Chinese students who choose to study further in a domestic higher institution whose perspectives could be incorporated in future research as a comparative study; third, it would be relevant to explore the questions: "what knowledge is of most worth...[and] how far can we be sure that the knowledge that is acquired by students in the North is applicable to contexts to which they may return, in the South?" (Welch, 2002b: xi-xii). The number of overseas Chinese students returning to China after their graduation as China has kept a steady economic growth over the recent decade has increased; thus it would also be meaningful to study the phenomenon of the reverse flow of overseas Chinese students to China. Fourth, this research discussed the IHE in one of the major OECD countries; however, every year a number of foreign students from different countries come to China's higher institutions for studies. This could be understood as the start of an internationalization of China's

higher education, which could become a new research topic or area of future study.

Beyond these possible research directions, more critical insights and perspectives on ISM should guide future studies in ISM. For instance, the impact of a culture of credentialing and the economic rationalization imperative for ISM must be considered. Unquestioned economic rationalization should not be the only motivator for overseas academic degrees as the role of education should lie in its contribution to the cultivation of human beings and a society that does not simply exist to serve certain privileged social classes while succumbing to economic reductionism and the blind pursuit of individual freedom.

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II. Social Movement/Action, NGO and Community Contexts of Education