Why Did You Withdraw? Experiences of Chinese International Doctoral Students in Canada

By

Yan Gao

B.A., Beijing Normal University, China, 2008
M.Ed., University of Buffalo, United States, 2011

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

Mobility and migration are features of this global era. Thus, most higher education institutions are increasingly recruiting international students. Host institutions and countries benefit in many different ways from this recruitment; however, the experiences of international students are still under-researched. Although studies examining the linguistic and cultural challenges that are encountered by international students have started to emerge, little attention has been given to those who did not complete their studies, particularly doctoral students. This study sheds light on four Chinese international doctoral students and explores the reasons for their withdrawal from their studies in a Canadian context. Using a narrative methodological approach, data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews in the participants’ native language: Mandarin. Four themes and two sub-themes emerged from the interview data. The themes included: academic interactions and integration; partnership and the perception of gender roles; family of origin and the importance of education; and educational differences between China and Canada. Participants’ experiences during their doctoral studies did influence their decisions to withdraw. Specifically, the incompatibility with supervisors was one factor that directly led to the withdrawal of some research participants. However, other factors played key roles as well.
The participants’ intentions and willingness to fulfil their gender roles and family obligations impacted their decisions in various ways. In addition, their past experiences in China and certain aspects of Chinese culture seem to have shaped their expectations about education and the supervisory relationship.
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Acknowledgements

This Ph.D. has taken 5 years to complete. It has been a wonderful journey full of discoveries, growth and gain. This dissertation is the product of my pursuit and endeavours during these years; however, it could not have been realized without immeasurable support and encouragement from my teachers, family members and friends.

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Five years ago, being a Ph.D. was only an elusive dream and starting doctoral study was not an easy decision; however, my parents’ support and understanding made it come true. They cultivated my curiosity and courage; they taught me the basic bottom line of life; and made me a self-disciplined person. I could not have done this without their unconditional love and encouragement.

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Dedications

This motto alters me to avoid being opportunistic, superfluous, arrogant and inattentive for my scholarly work and my entire life.
Chapter One

Introduction

Mobility and migration are features of this global era. Thus, higher education has become a worldwide phenomenon, and countries have enlarged their quotas for international students. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, by the year 2016, there were over 412,101 international students studying in Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2018). Among them more than 85% were from non-English speaking Asian countries. In the United States, the number of international students in 2017 was 1,078,822, (Institute of International Education, 2018). The increasing number of international students has become an important phenomenon not only in the field of education but also for host countries in general. Recruiting international students is advantageous for host countries (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2008). The outcomes of hosting international students are beneficial for all parties involved because international students “contribute to the enrichment of higher education, to the strengthening of relations with various countries in world trade, and to the promotion of global understanding” (Chapdelaine & Alexitch 2004, p. 167). In Chellaraj,
Maskus and Mattoo’s (2008) study about the role that foreign graduate students play in expanding US innovation, they found that a 10% increase of foreign graduate students raises patent applications by 4.5%, university patents by 6.8%, and non-university patent grants by 5%. They concluded that the presence of foreign graduate students has a significant and positive influence on future patent applications and awards. However, while studying in a foreign country, international students encounter challenges and difficulties that could hinder their study progress and degree obtainment (Huang & Klinger, 2004; Kim, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Roy, 2013; Zhang & Zhou, 2010).

In modern society, education credentials are crucial for individuals who aim at securing prestigious employment positions in order to achieve social mobility. For some occupations—for instance, medicine, law, teaching, among others—a Bachelor’s degree or higher is a prerequisite for obtaining a placement in those fields. However, the phenomenon of students leaving higher education prior to degree completion is not new. As the organizations that provide post-secondary education and service to students, higher education institutions are diminished in that students’ dropout wastes time and resources, and causes monetary loss (Tinto, 1987). Some
scholars even consider withdrawal at higher education to be a failure of the entire educational system (Golde, 2005). Since they invest socially, psychologically and financially in higher education, withdrawal is costly for both domestic and international students. No matter one’s perspective on why students leave prior to degree completion, finding out the reasons for their departure and enhancing student retention are meaningful tasks for scholars and administrators in higher education.

**Problem Statement**

The problems addressed by this research are both practical and theoretical. The most recent statistics show that students from China represent the number one source for international students in both the U.S. and Canada. In the literature, issues pertaining to teaching Chinese learners have generated scholarly debate and garnered conflicting scholarly discourse. Ever since Shanghai participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2009, Shanghai ranked number one in academic achievement among cities in 65 countries and regions worldwide for three consecutive years (BBC News, 2015; OECD, 2016). The high scores of Chinese students in math,
reading and science stimulated hot debate about learning styles and “model” Chinese learners among scholars (Dronkers, 2015; Phillips, 2013; Strauss, 2014). In the North American context, Chinese students have been considered “model students” or “a model minority” for a long time (Chua, 2011). Researchers have conducted studies to find out why Chinese students outperform their peers, especially in math (Stanley & Sumie, 1990; Wang & Lin, 2005; Zhao & Singh, 2011).

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. Cross and Hitchcock (2007) summarized their critiques of Chinese learners from the research literature:

Learners from what are referred to as Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) (e.g. PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan) have sometimes been characterized, in Western educational settings, as passive, at times displaying a marked reluctance to speak and express their opinions in class; respectful of and expecting structure and hierarchy in the classroom environment; heavily reliant on rote memorization; lacking creative and critical thinking skills: teacher-centered, accepting, largely unquestioningly, the knowledge and
authority of the teacher, rather than self-directed in learning. (p. 2)

Hodkinson and Poropat (2014) have noted that Chinese students are afraid of “losing face”\(^1\); thus, it has been argued, Confucian Heritage Culture (hereafter CHC) has impeded the interaction of Chinese international students with their teachers and restricted collaboration with peers; thereby, actually limiting educational achievement in western settings. This characterization of Chinese students studying abroad conflicts with the “model student” narrative.

“Model students” or “problematic learners”: Which one is more accurate?

As a Chinese person, I know Chinese society attaches a high importance to education, and both parents and school teachers expect students to be diligent and perseverant in their studies.

As an international student, I know that in order to be able to study at a university in Canada, United States or other English speaking countries, we need to pass English proficiency tests, apply for a visa, and fly there alone. Chinese students make great efforts to come to the host country and study as international students, but some of them do not encounter success when they undertake graduate studies in the West. What prompts Chinese students to withdraw from their studies before completion?

---

\(^1\) Being embarrassed or humiliated.
The research literature on withdrawal in higher education is vast and began in the 1960s in the North American context (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Early studies attempted to understand student departure from a psychological lens, and students’ personalities were analyzed as the reasons leading to dropout (Spady, 1970). In the late 1970s, Vincent Tinto started to develop his theory on college student departure from a sociological perspective. Tinto’s theory has become the dominant conceptual framework for persistence studies for the past three decades (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2004). The basic premise of Tinto’s model is that social and academic integration are essential to student retention. The model claims that whether a student persists or drops out is strongly predicted by the degree of his/her academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Unfortunately, neither Tinto’s model nor the research that followed it considered the role of culture or ethnicity in students’ decisions to leave their studies prior to obtaining a degree. It is only recently, that research on students’ persistence has begun to examine specific ethnic, racial and cultural subgroups, and acknowledge that culture might be a factor in students’ withdrawal from post-secondary studies (Liao & Wei, 2014). The role of students’ cultural background in the scholarship that examines student persistence has been
under-studied and under-theorized. Also, previous studies examining doctoral students’ withdrawal mostly adopted quantitative research methods and investigated students’ early departure from institutions’ perspectives. Although the costs of doctoral students’ withdrawal to society, universities, departments, and faculty are substantial, Lovitts (2001) argues that the greatest concern should be reserved for the individual students themselves, who suffer personally, professionally, and financially when they leave without a degree. Therefore, this dissertation aims to begin to fill the gaps in the scholarship on international doctoral student persistence and withdrawal from post-secondary studies.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The pursuit of doctoral studies is a major decision in one’s life. Golde (2000) described doctoral students as “the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system” (p. 199). If that is so, why do some doctoral students stop their pursuit half-way through their program? Is it because of some incidents that happened during their studies? What did they experience during their studies that made them withdraw? Does their previous experience play a
role in their decision-making? If so, how? Does Chinese culture somehow influence their
decision? These questions motivated me to conduct this research. In particular, I seek to elicit the
voices of Chinese international students who have withdrawn from doctoral studies, since they
have been neglected in the vast literature probing the experiences of graduate students. I formed
three main research questions:

1. What do Chinese international doctoral students experience during their pursuit of doctoral
   studies that shaped their decisions to withdraw?

2. Did their previous experiences prior to undertaking doctoral studies in the host country
   influence their decision? If so, how, and if not, why not?

3. Do Chinese doctoral students who withdraw from studies believe that Chinese culture
   impacted their decision to withdraw? If so, how, and if not, why not?

Research Process

In order to answer these questions, I adopted narrative inquiry as a means for investigation
and exploration. Narrative inquiry is a process through which informants tell stories of their
lives to the researchers, and narrative researchers collect these stories as data, interpret and
re-tell the stories, and write narratives of the experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience, and at the same time, it includes an investigation of social, cultural, and historical contexts within which individuals’ experiences were constructed (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). For this narrative study, I successfully recruited four participants by purposive sampling, and in-depth interview was used as the approach to collect data. From each participant, I collected approximately three to four hours of interview data. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is the native language of both the researcher and all the participants, and then I transcribed them into texts and applied two rounds of analysis to the data and then I translated the findings into English.

After analyzing the data, I found that my research participants’ experiences during their doctoral studies did seem to influence their decisions to withdraw. During their study period, incompatibility with supervisors was one factor that led to the withdrawal of some of my participants, but not all of them. Second, the intention and willingness to fulfil their gender roles and family roles impacted the decision-making of all research participants in different ways. Third, their past experiences in China seem to have shaped their expectations about education,
which required an adjustment of my participants to fit into Canadian campuses. Finally, I also found that certain aspects of Chinese culture seemed to shape their beliefs, perceptions and values: for example, their perceptions of and ways of dealing with family and supervisory relationships.

**Definition of Terms**

There are several terms I would like to define to clarify my meaning since some of the terms have a broad range of meanings, and I also explain the difficulties that I encountered with terminology used in the literature. The target group of my study is Chinese international doctoral students and I am interested in exploring the reasons for their withdrawal. Therefore, it is important that I clearly define two sets of terms: one set relates to academic withdrawal and the other is related to Chinese international students.

In this study, *withdrawal* refers to a student who leaves an educational program prematurely in higher education. In the literature, “dropout” is the term that is frequently used to describe the behaviour of students leaving educational institutes such as high school, college or university for various reasons (Berger & Lyon, 2005). However, I avoided using “dropout” because of its
negative connotations. The literature also describes the phenomenon of students who withdraw from one institution and transfer to another institution in studies as students’ withdrawal behaviour; however, my study only intended to focus on students who leave a higher education institution permanently. Other than “withdrawal” and “dropout,” my study also mentioned “attrition,” “persistence” and “retention” under this category. Berger and Lyon (2005) defined attrition as a phenomenon where students fail to re-enrol at an institution in consecutive semesters. The usage of “attrition” reflects an institutional perspective rather than the students’ perspective. I take “retention” as the ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation (Seidman, 2012), which is also consistent with the literature. Both terms are from an institutional perspective. For the term “persistence”, in the literature, it refers to a student’s ability to stay within the higher education system from their first (beginning) year through degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Tinto, 1987). This term is frequently used in the literature and some studies called those who were able to stay within the institution as “persisters” (DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003; Tinto, 1987).

In this set of terms, words such as “attrition” and “retention” were frequently used in the
literature, which reflected an institutional perspective; while “dropout,” “quit,” “stop” or “withdraw” did not appear in high frequency in my literature search perhaps because of the negative connotations of those words to describe this phenomenon. However, the scarce use of “dropout,” “quit,” “stop” or “withdraw” might also imply that students’ perspectives on this topic are lacking in the literature since students who leave their studies probably would not call their decisions “attrition”. The terminology use indicates the fact that the scholarly works on students’ withdrawal from higher education were predominantly from institutional perspectives, which further implies that students’ voices are needed to get a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

For the second set, the first term that needs to be defined is “international student”. The definition of “international student” varies in accordance to national education systems in each country. Commonly speaking, students who pursue a degree in a country or region that is not their country of origin and/or need a visa or permit to stay in that country are considered international students. In the context of Canada, the term international students includes both students who come from countries other than Canada, but also includes Canadian citizens who
go to other countries to study (CBIE, 2016). In my study, I use the term “international students” to refer to learners who come to Canada to pursue a degree, specifically those students who come from a country where English is not the official language and where the culture is distinct from Canadian culture. Therefore, “Chinese international students” is the group of ethnically Chinese students whose country of origin is China.

In addition to that, it is necessary to discuss and clarify some distinctions regarding Chinese culture since this is an important concept in this study. Before I compare and contrast terms, I want to discuss the concept of “culture” first.

“Culture” is a broad term. It was defined many ways by numerous scholars. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1966) reviewed the definitions of culture and divided them into groups according to the different emphases on culture presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group name</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Representative scholar(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Enumeration of content</td>
<td>A complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.</td>
<td>Tylor (1871)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>Social heritage or</td>
<td>The sum total and organization of the social heritage which have acquired a social</td>
<td>Park and Burgess (1921)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Reference</td>
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<td>--------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
<td>The general term of these common and accepted ways of thinking and acting;</td>
<td>Young (1934); Bidney (1942)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...consists of the acquired or cultivated behaviour and thoughts of individual</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>within a society.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>The sum of people’s adjustments to their life-conditions; all behaviour</td>
<td>Summer and Keller (1927); Davis (1948);</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>learned by the individual in conformity with a group; constite a major</td>
<td>Murdock (1941)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>portion of the established habits with which each individual enters any</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>social situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>A system of interrelated and interdependent habit patterns of response</td>
<td>Willey (1929)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td>A product of human association; a sum total of human creations.</td>
<td>Groves (1928)</td>
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**Table 1-1. Definitions of culture by Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1966)**

“Culture” covers every aspect of a human being’s social life and it can be approached distinctively with different emphases. In my study, I seldom use the singular concept of “culture”; instead, I use the concept of “Chinese culture” frequently. “Chinese culture” is difficult to define within several sentences. It is a broad concept that could take a book-length essay to discuss. Therefore, I will only state how I perceive this term and how I use it in the present study by making some distinctions with other terms that are sometimes used.

---

2 This term is the interpretation of Park and Burgess (1921) by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1966).
interchangeably. First of all, “Confucianism”. Confucius lived in the period of Spring and Autumn (771-476 BC) (春秋战国时期) in Chinese history. His philosophy was not the only one that was prevalent during Spring and Autumn and Warring States period\(^3\) (475-221 BC): Daoism (道家) that was proposed by Laozi (老子); Mohism (墨家) by Mozi (墨子); and Legalism (法家) by Han Feizi (韩非子) were the three other major schools of thoughts (Feng, 2011). However, scholar Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) proposed to the emperor Wu of Han (157-87 BC) (汉武帝) the idea of rejecting the other schools of thought and respecting only Confucianism (罢黜百家，独尊儒术). Confucianism was then adopted and promoted as the state philosophy and code of ethics for the rest of the empires for more than two thousand years in Chinese history (Feng, 2011; Lewis, 2007). As the orthodox thought, ideas of Confucianism have inevitably influenced every aspect of Chinese society and Chinese people. It manifested itself in decrees and regulations, state organizations and laws, social customs and etiquette, morals, relationships and people’s thoughts (Feng, 2011; Li, 2016).

Secondly, another term that needs to be defined is “Confucianism”. The successors of

\(^3\) The Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period are two separate periods; however, they are usually discussed together in the scholarly work because of the consecutive nature of these two.
Confucius’ thought include numerous famous Chinese thinkers and scholars during history, such as Mengzi (孟子), Xunzi (荀子), Zhuxi (朱熹) etc., therefore, “Confucianism” is a collective term that refers to the philosophy which was raised by Confucius but promoted, extended and supplemented by the thinkers who believed in Confucius’ ideas (Feng, 2011; Li, 2016). Some features of Confucianism will be elaborated more on page 21 to 30.

Thirdly, in the literature that pertains to international students studying in Western countries who come from East Asian and some Southeast Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam there is a concept that was frequently used in those studies—Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). This term mainly refers to the approach to learning and cultural preference adopted by Asian students who come from countries mentioned above with Confucian heritage culture (Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005; Ryan, 2013). Although this term appeared very frequently during my search of the literature, I decided to avoid using it in my study because I found it is not rigorous enough. In my opinion, this term reflects a Western view of examining Asian cultures. Thus, it has the tendency to over-simplify and over-generalize cultures from different countries. While China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and
Vietnam may share some cultural similarities, and students who are from those countries may have the similar approaches to learning; each country has its own unique history and distinctive culture, which cannot be generalized to the whole. Therefore, in my study, this term will be appear only in the parts where I summarize and present previous scholarly works to show the reader how this term—Confucian Heritage Culture—was used in the literature.

In summary, although Chinese culture is not only comprised of Confucianism, it is the mainstream of Chinese culture. Therefore, in my study, “Chinese culture” means the culture in China that was largely influenced by Confucianism. I do not deny the existence and importance of other philosophical (e.g. Daoism) and religious thoughts (e.g. Chan Buddhism) and the internal diversity within the broad rubric of Chinese culture; however, the present study mainly deals with the Chinese culture that is largely represented by Confucianism because it has been the ruling thought of China for thousands of years and it has influenced every aspect of Chinese society more heavily than other thought.

**Background: Chinese International Students**

Prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). During Qing
dynasty (1644-1911), after being defeated in the Opium War and impressed by western weapons, the scholar-general Li Hongzhang (李鸿章) and some of his colleagues repeatedly submitted memorials to the throne\(^4\) emphasizing that China must obtain knowledge of these weapons from the west. Therefore, the Chinese government sent the first group of 120 students aged from 10-16 to the United States to study from 1872 to 1875. The mission for them was to learn “military science, navigation, ship-building, and surveying” (Wang, 1965, p. 42). Eight of this group of students eventually obtained college degrees, and 22 served in the diplomatic corps or somewhere conducting foreign relations between China and the West. Another 21 were associated with the administration of the navy, and 13 others served as railway officials and engineers, while ten worked as executives in banks and telegraph companies (Wang, 1965, p. 84). This study abroad movement forced China to further recognize Western technological superiority in an increasing number of fields (Wang, 1965, p. 92).

After the fall of the Qing Imperial government, the new Republic government—established in 1912—underwent many changes. During this period, the influence of the West increased. In

\(^4\) A memorial to the throne was an official communication essay written by government officials and presented to the emperor about national affairs.
the field of education, “leadership in education passed largely to private educators, most of those trained in the Teachers College of Columbia University” (Wang, 1965, p. 99). From 1912 to 1929, 1268 students were sent by Tsinghua university (清华大学) (formerly Tsinghua College) to the U.S. with support mainly to study Engineering, Science and Medicine (Wang, 1965, p. 111). At the same time, self-supported students from elite families increased (Yan & Berliner, 2011). After this period, the government established increasing control over foreign study. Regulations issued in 1929 contained two main provisions: (a) all self-supporting students studying abroad were required to be at least senior high school graduates or junior high school graduates with two years’ experience in the educational field, and (b) all students going abroad were required to secure certificates from the Ministry of Education in China. Those who failed to do so would become ineligible for scholarships and would not receive official recognition for their diplomas (Li, 1993; Wang, 1965, p. 127). In 1931, the Kuomintang government (国民党政府) set three goals for the movement of study abroad: the first being to create a Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) culture, which is also called “The Three Principles of the People” (三民主义). The

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5 A political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen as part of a philosophy to make China a free, prosperous, and powerful nation. The three principles are often translated into and summarized as nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people.
second goal was to provide for China’s academic needs by producing specialists in various fields and to achieve academic originality. Third, China set out to meet its material needs by producing talent useful for the country’s reconstruction (Wang, 1965, p. 148). The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (July 7, 1937-September 9, 1945) caused the number of students leaving China to dwindle. Between 1937 and 1942, only 665 were permitted to study abroad (Li, 1993; Wang, 1965, p. 127).

**Open Door Policy: Post-1978.** In 1949, the People’s Republic of China was established under the leadership of Mao Tse-Tung (毛泽东), who isolated the nation from the rest of the world for a long time. Foreign studies were extremely restricted especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Since the late 1970s, after years of isolation, “the post-Mao government abandoned the class struggle approach adopted during the Cultural Revolution to development that favored economic growth through scientific knowledge” (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 175). 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. About 55 students were
sent to elite American universities (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 175). In 1980, self-supported students were allowed to study abroad, although with strict reviews of applications (Zheng, 2010, p. 224). Government funded students have gradually been replaced by self-supported students with personal economic and academic motivations. After that, the number of students studying overseas—especially in the U.S.—soared from less than 1000 students in 1981, to 59,939 in 2001, an almost 60-fold increase within twenty years (Institute of International Education, 2018).

Regardless of whether those students are self-supported or government-funded, with such a large student population pursuing knowledge and degrees at Western countries, I believe it is necessary for educators to understand the characteristics of those students in order to achieve better education results. In particular, I wondered whether withdrawal among Chinese graduate students may be linked to the strong influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese values. To understand Chinese values regarding learning, it is critical to understand the ideologies that have shaped them (Li, 2009).

Confucianism. Among all the thinkers and ideological trends, the philosophy of Confucius
has impacted the entire Chinese history and formed today’s Chinese society. Confucius (551–479 BC) is regarded as the “First Teacher” or “Great Sage.” The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy (2008) summarizes his ideas as “aimed at injecting moral principle into the exercise of political power: to substitute government by virtue for government by force” (Blackburn, 2008, p. 73). Ren (仁) is the central idea in Analects, which is a collection of sayings and ideas attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius and his contemporaries. Ren is interpreted as a comprehensive ethical virtue; benevolence, humaneness, and goodness. Ren, as a principle, guides individuals to become genuine, sincere, and humane (Du, 2011). For Confucius, Ren is a self-cultivated, self-disciplined, self-fulfilled process. According to Gao (2015) Confucius’s ideological system “tends to focus on family, clan and societal norms. He elucidated his thoughts on virtue, moral education, and management through the traditional concept of patriarchal kinship, based on the interpersonal relations and real problems of man and society” (p. 28).

Confucius attached high importance to education. However, the literature critiques the learning approaches of students who are under the influence of Confucianism as not fitting to
the Western setting (Cross and Hitchcock, 2007); therefore, it is necessary to understand what is the philosophy of learning in Confucianism. In addition to that, it is evident from the research literature and my pilot study that gender roles influence doctoral study (Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2012; Martinez, Ordu, Sala, & McFarlane, 2013), so on page 28 to 30, gender role in Confucianism will be presented for a better understanding of the present study.

The philosophy of learning in Confucianism. Li (2009) contended that the highest purpose of life in Chinese culture is the pursuit of human self-perfection which includes other beliefs such as social contribution, honouring family, and enhancing social mobility through personal commitment to learning. Individuals need to work hard to achieve that.

In Chinese culture, it is believed that learning demands personal effort, endurance of hardship, perseverance, concentration, and humility. Confucius put a high priority on experiencing hardship in order to achieve Ren. “One who is Ren sees as his first priority the hardship of self-cultivation, and only after thinks about results or rewards. This is what we call Ren” (仁者先难而后获，可谓仁矣。Analects, 6.22). Li (2009) summarized the five characters
of learning in Chinese culture as resolve (奮), the determination of a learner, and the degree to which he or she is prepared to follow through on his or her commitment; diligence (勤), the frequency of studying and the time spent on it; endurance of hardship (刻苦), overcoming the difficulties and obstacles bound to learning; perseverance (恒心), the attitude of a learner toward learning and behavioural tendencies; and concentration (專心), a learning disposition that requires consistent focus and dedication.

In terms of achievement standards, Li (2009) found that depth and breadth and/or mastery of knowledge, the application of knowledge, unity of knowledge and moral character formed a coherent whole. In terms of the ways of achieving self-perfection, respect is a distinct feature that Chinese learners express toward knowledge and teachers. Learning in Confucianism is not limited to academic knowledge, but includes moral and social learning: “respect for knowledge and teachers who ideally embody the self-perfecting process is reasonable and expected” (Li, 2009, p. 56). Respect comes from students’ deep sense of humility. Confucius once said, “when I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers (三人行，必有我師焉)” (Analects, 7.22). In Chinese culture, being humble is a way of learning, and learning is a
lifelong journey. Chinese learners believe one should be humble and respect others in order to achieve self-improvement.

It is undeniable that Chinese students are still in strong agreement with these traditional concepts of learning, and that they highly value the traditional teacher role and modes of teaching. Wang’s (2013) survey among Chinese domestic students revealed that Confucianism has had “a lasting and pervasive influence on the development and characteristics of the system of student attitudes within Chinese education” (p. 70). Social-achievement orientation, maintaining diligence, attributing success to effort, learning in a competitive spirit, and believing in that “practice makes perfect” are some of these characteristics. In addition to that, Chinese students also expect teachers to teach without reservation, to suit teaching to students’ abilities, to make entertainment a dimension of teaching and never to be weary of teaching (Wang, 2013).

On the other hand, with regard to the critiques of Chinese learners being “passive…heavily reliant on rote memorization; lacking creative and critical thinking skills…” (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007, p. 2), I believe that it might be true that students from the same cultural background share
some similarities; however, the method of approaching learning tasks varies individually. Some scholars critique these characterizations of Chinese students as stereotypes. Clark and Gieve (2006) argue that all the discourses are based on the “assumption of a single, more or less homogeneous national culture as a taken-for-granted conceptual framework” (p. 55). They criticize this framework as seeing culture in its most typical form as geographically or nationally distinct entities, the entities are fixed and homogeneous and all the systems of rules or norms embedded in those entities substantially determine personal behaviour. Researching and writing about the characteristics of those entities have contributed to “the production and circulation of discourses (such as that of “the Chinese learner”) that offer individual learners a restrictive social identity as a homogenized representative of a national culture” (p. 56). In addition, it leads us to stigmatize, to over-generalize and to make inaccurate predictions about what individuals are like as the alleged representatives of their language and culture, for instance the stereotype of viewing the group of Chinese students as passive learners.

Furthermore, “there are often more differences to be found within cultures than between them” (Clark & Gieve, 2006, p. 41). In Ryan’s (2013) study, she tried to determine the
differences between (and within) Western and Chinese (under Confucianism) academic cultures, and how notions of scholarship and learning are understood. Her team interviewed senior academics in the U.K., U.S., Australia, and across China. She concluded that there are many commonalities between these systems of academic practice, although individual differences also exist. For instance, both Western and Chinese scholars define “good scholarship” as original, innovative, adding value, leading to application and using innovative methodologies. All scholars felt that “effective learning” refers to working independently, challenging authorities, building on what’s known, thinking critically and developing deep and broad knowledge frameworks (Ryan, 2013).

Although both Western and Chinese scholars believe critical thinking is an important aspect of effective learning, Chinese students often are criticized for allegedly lacking critical thinking ability (Clark & Gieve, 2006). Some scholars have argued that Chinese students lack critical analysis abilities due to their experiences with rote learning. In terms of rote learning, Chinese learners use memorization as a path to understanding (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Mathias, Bruce, & Newton, 2013; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Chinese learners can be reluctant to speak because they do
not traditionally believe speaking promotes thinking. Confucius said, “a clever tongue and fine appearance are rarely signs of Ren (巧言令色，鲜矣仁)” (Analects, 1.3). A quick tongue in argument is not considered Ren, because the model man should be humble (Gao, 2015). Regarding the debate about Chinese learners, I agree with Clark and Gieve (2006), who state that, “research devoted to understanding learners from China, especially in study abroad contexts, would do well to get away from explanations and understandings based on reified, abstracted and frozen conception[s] of culture” (p. 69). However, not much has been conducted regarding the multifaceted nature of the experiences of Chinese international students in host countries. Furthermore, the literature has been silent on Chinese graduate students who withdrew—a gap this study seeks to fill.

Confucianism on gender roles and marriage. Among all the social relations, marriage and partnership are major ones that appear to influence graduate students’ decision-making. Doctoral students have reported that marital problems or other family-related obstacles have an impact upon their degree completion (Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013). Since Chinese society has been highly influenced by Confucianism, it is important to consider what Confucius
had to say about gender role and the practice of marriage. In *Analects*, there is little discourse about women. Confucius addressed his standard for men to be virtuous gentlemen (Junzi, 君子) in daily interpersonal practice to maintain an orderly society with ritual and education. It is suggested that a gentleman should value a woman’s moral character over her appearance when choosing a wife (贤贤易色) (*Analects*, 1.7). This sentence also indicates a living standard for women. When being someone’s wife, a virtuous woman should be obedient, manage the household, take good care of her husband and children, and maintain a healthy relationship with parents-in-law. The quotation highlights the dominance of men in relation to women:

> Throughout the history of China, man always occupies a central position in the social domain: he is the source as well as the end of social norms, moral meanings and political order, while women are defined absolutely in their relation to men. (Zhang, 2011, p. 299)

Confucianism has significantly influenced gender roles in Chinese culture. Marriage is a business transaction that is arranged by parents in order to maintain family privilege or achieve social mobility. In the Chinese family system, parents’ foremost obligation was rearing a male heir to carry on the descent line. In elite families, sons were sent to school to study Chinese
classics in order to prepare for the imperial examination and work in government. Bringing honour to the family is closely linked to the fulfillment of role obligation for men, whereas daughters were married by parental arrangement to young men from comparable backgrounds (Liao & Wei, 2014; Mann, 2000).

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the traditional form of polygamy changed. A new marriage law legitimated monogamy based on free choice, and arranged marriages were outlawed. The Open Door Policy in 1978 brought new liberal attitudes toward sexual behaviour and marriage. However, the traditional view of gender roles and marriage is still alive in some people’s hearts (Louie, 2016), which leads to struggle and conflicts among young Chinese people and dynamic gender role practices between Chinese couples.

Significance of the Study

As noted earlier, by investigating Chinese international doctoral students’ stories, my study will add information to the literature on international students’ experiences, which was largely ignored in scholarly fields. More importantly, in the existing theories that explain student withdrawal, socio-cultural factors have not received much attention; thus, an examination into
the cultural background of students would help the field see a more comprehensive picture. In a word, from the macro perspective, this research draws attention to an under-represented group—Chinese international doctoral students—and makes their voices heard. It is hoped that the findings of this research will also provide some insights to policy makers and practitioners in student retention and international student services fields.

From a micro perspective, this research benefits participants in the way that the entire narrative inquiry is a process for them to self-discover, self-reflect, and co-construct knowledge with me. This opportunity also offers my participants a chance to look back, to re-examine the decisions made in life, and to better understand themselves.

**Overview of the Chapters**

My study is devoted to investigating the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students and the reasons for their withdrawal. I have outlined the background and purpose of this study in this chapter. In Chapter Two, I provide a review of the research history of college students, early departure from school, summarize and synthesize the existing literature on dropout in higher education, and explore several existing theories that have framed the majority
of research in this area. In Chapter Three, I discuss the method that I used for this study. In
Chapter Four I present the profiles of my research participants and Chapter Five is the findings
from data analysis. Chapter Six is the discussions of the findings and Chapter Seven is the
summary chapter, where I present the conclusion and suggestions of this study.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

College student retention and the reasons for their attrition are significant to higher education systems around the world. From government perspectives, education has to effectively and efficiently transfer talents to the labour market and be accountable for public investment (Yorke & Longden, 2004). From institutional perspectives, high attrition rates may ruin an institution’s reputation, raise questions as to its mission and commitment, and erode the economic benefits a stable student population can engender (Yorke & Longden, 2004). The importance of degree completion for students is incontestable: they can gain employment, social and cultural capital, and psychological fulfillment (Berge & Lyon, 2005; Tinto, 1987; Yorke & Longden, 2004). In this chapter, I present a brief history of college student attrition and retention in North America, the theories that have been advanced to explain student early departure, empirical studies that have been conducted regarding university student dropout in undergraduate and graduate level study respectively, and the situation of international students.
Historical Background of Student Withdrawal in North America

Colleges have existed in North America for more than 300 years; however, research pertaining to retention in higher education has only been developed in recent decades. In this section, I provide a brief historical look at dropout in the North American context.

The first college—Harvard University—was established in Massachusetts in the United States in the 17th century. Until the mid-nineteenth century, college was an option only for elite families, where they learned skills to maintain their family social status (Berge & Lyon, 2005). During the first 250 years of higher education, the focus of institutions was not on student attrition and retention rates (Berge & Lyon, 2005), since not many people had the privilege to attend college.

In the early 20th century, industrialization and urbanization swept North America. Managers and professionals were needed to run factories and organize workstations. As a consequence, college enrolment increased dramatically during that time. The issue of college student attrition began to emerge along with the rapid growth of college student populations. The first study of college student attrition, which was referred to as “student mortality,” emerged in the 1930s.
This study, conducted by John McNeely on behalf of the United States Department of the Interior and the Office of Education, investigated the extent of attrition, average time to degree completion, the reasons why students transferred to another institution, the percentage of students who returned to college after temporary departure, the rate of attrition among different types of institutions, and the principal causes of students’ leaving (McNeely, 1938). According to Berger and Lyon (2005), this work was remarkable for “the breadth and depth with which it covered the extent and patterns of student attrition” (p. 14) and laid the foundation for more comprehensive studies later.

Starting from the 1950s, higher education became more desirable in an industrial and technologically oriented society. College education became necessary for social mobility; at the same time, community colleges grew as institutions to serve the needs of diverse student populations. The vast number of college students brought attention to student attrition; researchers and scholars began to consider why some students did not finish their degrees (Berger & Lyon, 2005). In the early 1960s, scholars and researchers started to conduct studies on understanding patterns of academic failure through a psychological lens, in which students’
personalities were examined as a factor that contributes to dropout (Spady, 1970). Spady (1970) reviewed the college dropout studies that were conducted during the 1960s and commented that this field lacked “analytical-exploratory” studies, which could synthesize existing empirical-based knowledge and inform the understanding of college student attrition. In his study, he developed his model of dropout—“An exploratory sociological model of the dropout process”—in which he analyzed dropout behaviour from both academic and social support perspectives. He also put students’ behaviour into an interactive environment to consider. His work was revolutionary for the reason that his analysis started from a psychological lens but shifted to sociological factors of dropout behaviour, which laid a foundation for the later work that examined dropout from a sociological perspective.

By 1970, retention had become an increasingly common topic within and among college and university campuses (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Kamens (1971) used multi-institutional data to conclude that college size has a positive correlation to student retention since larger colleges have a stronger “status allocating” capacity because of the connection they have with occupational and economic groups in the larger society (p. 293). 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. During this period, Vincent Tinto started to build his theory on college student early departure based on Spady’s model. Tinto’s theory of student early departure became the most often cited theory relating to student early withdrawal (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Braxton & Hirschy, 2004). The basic form of his theory considered students’ entry characteristics and commitment to the institution as factors that influence student persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1975). After the basic form, he published more comprehensive revisions in 1987 and 1993. Due to the significant influence of Tinto’s theory, I will discuss it in a separate section below.

The studies conducted in the 1970s contributed to the expansion of the research on college student dropout and retention during the 1980s. Bean (1980, 1983) provided a new perspective to analyze dropout and retention. In his study, 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 affect student dropout.

Other than Bean’s (1980, 1983) and Tinto’s (1987) theories, a substantial body of empirical studies arose across a wide range of institutions. Scholars have tested and elaborated on those theories from different perspectives, and retention began to be discussed as an important theme at academic conferences and seminars (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Another phenomenon that needs to be mentioned here is, starting from the 1980s, instead of focusing on college students as a whole, researchers started to consider diversity of student populations: students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000), first generation college students (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002; Lehmann, 2007), and non-traditionally aged students (Litalien, Guay, & Morin, 2015; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

The research of college student retention “had become a dynamic and full-fledged area of study and had become permanently established as an educational priority throughout American higher education” in the 1990s (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p.23). Tinto’s (1987) model was largely used to examine which identifiers affect students’ decisions for dropping out, and what institutions could do to retain students (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton
& Brier, 1989; Braxton & Hirschy, 2005; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). The role of finances began to receive attention since the ability to pay for college affects student persistence. By the twenty-first century, college student retention had become “a well-established professional realm” with retention used as an indicator of the effectiveness of institutions. The field then developed its own academic journal in the year 1999, the Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, which is devoted to research on this topic (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 25).

In summary, over the history of higher education in North America, the research focus had switched from the expansion of student populations to the reasons for student attrition; from psychological characteristics of the individual student who dropped out to the institutional context and broader society; from examining the reasons of students who dropped out as a whole group to students from specific ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, graduate students, gender differences among them and other subgroups. However, dropout and retention in higher education are complex issues that still need more diversified and case-based studies to fill the gaps and to create a more comprehensive picture.
Conceptualizing Withdrawal: Undergraduate Studies

In the U.S., the retention of first-time degree-seeking undergraduates at degree-granting postsecondary institutions was 73.9% in 2013-2014 (Institute of Education Sciences, 2016). Dropout and completion rates are not issues for consideration only in the North American context. College student attrition and retention are issues that are being investigated worldwide.

The annual data of “outflows from South Africa public universities and technikons” showed that from 1999 to 2001 higher education in South Africa had only been able to retain 75% of students, and this number was even lower in historically black universities (Yorke & Longden, 2004). In Australia, the attrition rate for all commencing bachelor students was 18.87% in 2014 (Department of Education and Training, Australian government, 2015) and in the United Kingdom the proportion of entrants who did not continue in higher education beyond their first year in 2013/14 was 6.0% for young full-time first degree entrants and 11.8% for mature entrants (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

As I have mentioned in the last section, among all the models explaining dropout, Tinto’s model of college student early departure is the most influential and widely cited theory; therefore,
in the following section, I will briefly summarize Tinto’s (1987) theory and the empirical studies that have been conducted based on his theory to illustrate the complexities of dropout in higher education.

**Tinto’s model of student early departure.** Tinto (1987) first identified three categories of possible roots of student dropout from post-secondary studies: individual; interactional; and personality, finances, and other possible roots.

At the individual level, he pointed out that two primary roots of early departure are described by the terms *intention* and *commitment*. When determining the role of intentions, the specificity, stability, and clarity of individual intentions also need to be considered. For instance, for some students entering a particular institution is a short-term behaviour, and they may not intend to stay in the first place. They may only need some credits, or their target may be another more superior institution. Commitment refers to motivation, drive or effort, and it consists of two modes: goal commitment and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1987). Goal commitment refers to “a person’s commitment to the educational and occupational goals one holds for oneself. It specifies the person’s willingness to work toward the attainment of those goals,” whereas
institutional commitment means the person commits to the institution in which he/she is enrolled and never intends to transfer to other institutions (Tinto, 1987, p. 45).

With respect to interaction, Tinto (1987) discussed factors that could possibly lead to students leaving institutions. The first one was adjustment. To be specific, adjustment refers to the time when individuals first start college, when they need to adjust themselves both socially and intellectually to the new world. Students may find it is hard to separate from past forms of life—such as the family and neighbourhood where they grew up—and at least partially detach themselves from old friends and peer groups of their local high school. Smooth transition and adjustment for students bring a higher chance for persistence on studies.

The second factor was incongruence. In terms of incongruence, it mirrors how individuals integrate into the social and intellectual life of the institution. In Tinto (1987), dropout reflects the social and intellectual experiences of the individual within the institution. In other words, the less integrative those experiences are, the more likely students are to leave the institution voluntarily before degree completion. The absence of integration first comes from incongruence between the student and the institution in terms of needs, interests and preferences and it refers to
the state that “individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution” (Tinto, 1987, p. 53). If a student perceives himself/herself as not fitted in a particular institution, then departure is predictable.

Other than the formal academic domain, a wide range of informal interactions occurs daily between the student and the institution that can also lead to student dropout. For instance, the incongruence with peers is one important factor that strongly affects students’ feelings of fitting in with the institution. In addition, although finding an ethnic minority community does not ensure persistence, “the absence of compatible student groups does appear to undermine the likelihood of persistence”, and the same conclusion can also be applied to other students who find themselves alone on campus (Tinto, 1987, p. 59). Students who identify themselves as minorities or consider themselves not as a member of mainstream society are more likely to withdraw compared to students who perceive themselves as a member of the mainstream.

The absence of integration also arises from isolation, which was identified as the third factor under the category of interaction in Tinto (1987). Lacking connection with faculty members and peers creates the feeling of isolation for students and those who have difficulty making new
friends tend to withdraw at an earlier stage than those who successfully make the adjustments and endure temporary isolation in the transitional period from high school to college (Tinto, 1987).

The last category Tinto (1987) identified as affecting student persistence was personality, finances, and other possible roots. He stated that financial concerns are an important factor in the process of withdrawal, “but their effect upon departure for most students appears to be largely indirect rather than direct, and long-term as well as short-term in character” (p. 80). For instance, financial consideration may lead students to work part-time while studying, which enhances the chance for them to permanently leave school. However, students who see college experience as rewarding and helpful for their future careers and lives, tend to bear financial burdens in order to complete the degree, while students who think college is irrelevant will be prompted to drop out by even the slightest financial pressure. In terms of other possible roots, Tinto (1987) only simply mentioned some institutional changes such as closing or shrinkage of the program, which could lead to the changes in the character of student bodies, and further lead to the departure of some students.
After elaborating on the causes of student early departure, Tinto (1987) turned to the work of Arnold Van Gennep and his study of the rites of passage in tribal societies in the field of social anthropology to build the foundation of his own model. According to Tinto, Van Gennep saw life as a series of passages that lead an individual from birth to death and from membership or status in one group to another. The process of transmission between groups was defined as three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. “Each served to move individuals from youthful participation to full adult membership in society” (p. 92).

The notion of the rites of passage provided Tinto with a way of thinking about student early departure as a longitudinal process; also, “it further suggests that the process of student departure reflects the difficulties individuals face in seeking to successfully navigate those passages” (Tinto, 1987, p.94). Van Gennep’s work led Tinto to consider students as individuals who separate from the past communities; transition between high school and college; and finally incorporate into the society of the college.

In addition to Van Gennep’s work, Tinto also drew from sociologist Emile Durkheim’s theory. Durkheim tried to understand how social environment or normative attributes could help
to explain the motivation and variations of suicide in ways that other disciplines could not.

Durkheim distinguished four types of suicide: altruistic, anomic, fatalistic, and egotistical.

Altruistic suicide is the form that when the society takes one’s life that is morally desirable (in Tinto, 1987). Anomic suicide happens when the normal bonds and normative constraints of a society loosened; the whole society is normless; and people lack guidelines to conduct their daily lives, so they are left to make difficult moral choices. Opposite to anomic suicide, “excessive normal control” of a society will cause fatalistic suicide (in Tinto, 1987, p. 100). In this situation, suicide is considered the only way out of the blocked society since any other behaviour would be seen as a violation of existing norms. The last form, egotistical suicide happens when “individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society” (Tinto, 1987, p. 101). Tinto used Durkheim’s work as the comparative model to explain the rate of departure among different institutions. For example, the “disruptive forces on campus which undermine the daily operation of the institution and undercut the normal bonds which tie individuals to it” is the analogue of anomic suicide (Tinto, 1987, p. 104). Conversely, institutions that are highly structured and restrictive may lose students. This phenomenon is very
much like fatalistic suicide in society.

Drawing from theorists mentioned above, Tinto proposed his longitudinal model of student departure from higher education institutions. It 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.

Before entering higher education, individuals have different family and community backgrounds, and they also have a variety of personal attributes (e.g., sex, race, and physical disabilities), skills (e.g., intellectual and social), value orientations (e.g., intellectual and political preference), and varying types of precollege educational experiences and achievements (e.g., high school grade point average). Each attribute affects the formation of individual intentions
and commitments regarding future educational activities. Intentions specify “the level and type of education and occupation desired by the individual” and commitments indicate “the degree to which individuals are committed both to the attainment of those goals and to the institution into which they gain entry” (Tinto, 1987, p. 115). Those intentions and commitments, together with the personal attributes and orientations individuals bring with them into the college environment, influence their likelihood to continue schooling. Other than the personal attributes of individuals, the subsequent experiences within the institution—including the interaction between the individual and other members of the college—are centrally related to persistence. The external forces (families, neighbourhoods, peer groups, work settings, etc.) also play a role that influences the change of goals and commitments of individuals. The model posits that, “other things being equal, the lower the degree of one’s social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure. Conversely, the greater one’s integration, the greater the likelihood of persistence” (Tinto, 1987, p. 116).

In his most recent article, Tinto has synthesized existing literature on college student retention and updated his theory by adding more factors and further emphasized the importance
of investigating students’ own experiences. The new factors he incorporated were: self-efficacy, which defined as a student’s belief in their ability to succeed at a specific task; sense of belonging, where he focused on student engagement; and perceptions of curriculum, which means how relevant or rewarding the curriculum is to students’ studies (Tinto, 2015). These new factors placed more attention on students’ experiences.
Figure 2.1. Tinto’s model of institutional departure

Pre-entry identifiers

Institutional experiences

Outcome

Goals & Commitment

Positive/Negative Peer-group Interactions
Extracurricular activities

Social Integration

Academic Integration

Personal/normative Integration

Retention

Departure

Family background GPA Gender
Empirical studies examining undergraduate withdrawal. Figure 2.1 above is a brief summary of Tinto’s longitudinal model of dropout in higher education. Based on his model, other researchers and scholars have conducted empirical studies to test its efficacy and applicability in explaining the dropout behaviour of students in higher education.

Berger and Braxton (1998)’s first study using Tinto’s theory examined how his theory works in a low attrition, private, highly selective, residential research university. The six sets of variables used to test the model were: (1) student background identifiers, which include parental income, high school GPA, gender, race, and political view; (2) initial institutional commitment (whether the institution is the first choice of students etc.); (3) organizational attributes, which include institutional communication, fairness in policy and rule enforcement, participating in decision making; (4) two subscales measuring social integration, which are intra-peer relations and student-faculty relations; (5) subsequent institutional commitment (how well they think the institution fits them), and (6) withdrawal decisions (if they want to re-enrol next fall). They found that among student background identifiers, race was the only one that had a direct effect on students’ intention to persist. No correlation was found between students’ initial institutional
commitment and the intention to stay in the institution. All three organizational attributes directly affected social integration. Institutional communication had a direct positively effect on peer relations, fairness in enforcing policies and rules had positive effects on both intra-peer and student-faculty relations, and participation in decision making positively affected student-faculty relations. Both subscales of social integration positively predicted subsequent institutional commitment, which in turn positively predicted students’ intent to continue their studies.

In the year 2000, Braxton and his colleagues examined reasons for university student dropout using Tinto’s model again. But this time they examined a public, four-year institution. They categorized four sets of variables: (1) student pre-entry identifiers (academic aptitude, high school academic achievement, gender, parent income, race, and parent educational level) (2) initial institutional commitment, (3) separation (support from family and friends and rejection of past attitudes/values), and (4) first semester to second semester persistence. They found that four student entry characteristics: gender, race, parent income, and high school academic achievement positive influenced college attendance. Furthermore, the greater a student’s initial level of institutional commitment (measured by if this institution was the student’s first choice), the more
likely the student was to perceive a need to reject values of past communities. In contrast, the higher a student’s high school academic achievement or the higher the parent income, the less likely is the perceived need to reject past attitudes and values (Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000).

Both of Braxton’s studies broke down Tinto’s model into several categories of identifiers and factors. The findings of these studies provided the empirical evidence to confirm the applicability of Tinto’s model in explaining dropout in higher education. However, both studies only collected data during the students’ first year or first two semesters; what would happen after first year to students was still unknown. Therefore, Braxton and his associates started to collect longitudinal data.

Unlike both Braxton’s studies using only students’ first year or first two semesters’ data, collecting U.S national data of students aged 18-24 matriculating in four-year institutions from August 1989 to June 1994, Ishitani and DesJardins (2002) tested two hypotheses: (1) whether the rate of students’ dropout is constant over time; (2) whether the effect of variables that explain the occurrence and timing of dropout remain constant over time. The results showed that effects of family income, mother’s educational attainment, self-educational aspiration, first-year GPA, and
SAT total scores were all statistically significant. It confirmed prior findings in Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) that the higher level of these variables, the lower rate of dropout. However, this study also identified that some variables were not constant over time. For instance, Asian-American students had lower dropout rates in year one, but not thereafter; mother’s educational attainment was significant in years two and three only; the main effect of educational aspirations occurred only on the early academic years; and educational aspirations affected attrition behaviour in a different way across academic years.

DesJardins, Kim and Rzonca (2003), focused on three stages of progression to graduation: (1) dropout vs. persistence in the first year, (2) graduation vs. failure to graduate for first-year persisters, and (3) graduation in four years or less vs. graduation in five years or more. They tracked students at the University of Iowa for eight years and found out that in freshmen year, GPA and credit earned are negatively related to dropout. Females and non-residents (students who do not live on campus) had higher dropout rates than males and residents. For first year persisters, if Iowa was their first choice of institution, they were more likely to stay. Students who had prior college credits earned in high school and/or who performed at a higher academic
level tended to graduate in a timely manner. On the contrary, students who had a lower GPA, were taking remedial courses, and/or had fewer credits were more likely to withdraw.

Using longitudinal data of 18 to 20 years old youths from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), Ma and Frempong (2013) analyzed Canadian postsecondary education dropouts based on Tinto’s theoretical framework. They found dropouts tended to be males, who set low postsecondary education goals, had a history of dropping out and drug abuse in high school, avoided volunteering on campus, and lacked of personal connections on campus.

From the empirical studies above, it seems that student entry identifiers influence initial commitments to the institution; initial commitments to the institution influence subsequent levels of institutional commitment; academic integration results from sharing institutionally normative perspectives and values. Social integration occurs when the individual develops social ties as a result of daily interactions; both academic integration and social integration positively influence subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively affects the likelihood of student persistence in college. In short, these findings have validated Tinto’s model.

Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin, and Bracken (2000) also measured the dropout intentions among
first year university students. After analyzing their data, they contended that Tinto’s model could not explain all their data. They criticized Tinto’s model for allegedly being based on subjective conceptualizations of students’ pre-entry identifiers and students’ experiences in institutions. They argued that findings are likely to differ with researcher’s different conceptualizations of the model. For example, some researchers may believe students’ family income should be considered an important pre-entry identifier (Berger & Braxton, 1998); while others may think mother’s educational attainment is more important (Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002). In addition to that, after scrutinizing previous research, they claimed that most research on Tinto’s model only focused on certain parts instead of the whole model. Tierney (1992) also claimed that Tinto misinterpreted the notion of ritual when he borrowed the idea of “rite of passage” from anthropology. Since ritual is governed by the culture, “rite of passage” is a concept that is used to describe intra-cultural activities not personal behaviour. Furthermore, Tinto’s theory mainly addressed the sociological and some psychological perspectives of dropout; however, in some cases students’ decisions are influenced by factors that might appear more readily in other disciplines such as the economic context of the society (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Kerby (2015)
also stated that the empirical research applying Tinto’s model to predict persistence has failed to examine the experiences that take place within the institutional context. She claimed that it is essential to consider social influence, change, and norms are inherent in institutions, for instance size/rank and mission of the institution, scholarships, faculty/student ratio, student support etc.

Above is the summary of how researchers have been conceptualizing dropout and testing Tinto’s model at the undergraduate level. Given the fact that the nature of graduate study is different from undergraduate study, and my focus for this present study is on graduate students, thus I turned my attention to dropout at graduate level study.

**Conceptualizing Withdrawal: Graduate Studies**

**Graduate students in general.** Pursuing a graduate degree is a major decision in one’s professional life. According to Statistics Canada, in 2007/2008, 165,789 graduate students were enrolled in Canadian universities. This number represents an average annual increase of 5% since 2000/2001, and a faster rate of growth than at the undergraduate level (3.1% per annum) (Statistics Canada, 2009). Statistics Canada also reports that earnings rise with each education level, and master’s and doctoral students are more likely than undergraduates to report that their
job matches their education (Statistics Canada, 2014). With the obvious benefits of gaining education credentials, people return to school to seek master’s or doctoral degrees. Graduate studies can be rewarding but also challenging for students. Occasionally the challenges exceed students’ skill level or other abilities to remain in graduate school.

Educational research has shown that graduate students confront unique problems and challenges that impede their academic performance and degree completion. Apart from educational aspiration and commitment to educational goals, due to the different nature and teaching style of most graduate programs, graduate students encounter special academic difficulties and research barriers. El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh and Bufka (2012) conducted a survey of 387 psychology graduate students’ stress levels and they found that four problems were reported by more than half the sample: academic responsibilities or pressures (68.1%), finances or debt (63.9%), anxiety (60.7%), and poor work/school-life balance (58.7%). In addition to asking about their stressors, the researchers also asked respondents to choose items that are at least moderate impediments to engaging in wellness activities. One barrier that stood out is lack of time (70.6%). The second most frequent barrier reported was financial
cost/constraints (46.5%). Grady, Touche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers and Simacek (2014) investigated how social position caused stress for graduate students and found that due to the fact that graduate students shoulder different social roles such as husband/wife, father/mother, teaching assistant/research assistant etc., they may experience role overload when they have a finite amount of time to divide between research, teaching, and service while completing their own coursework. They also found that participants heavily emphasized the need for strong student-mentor relationships due to social isolation and low levels of funding.

In graduate study, supervisors are expected to provide the expertise, time and support for their candidate to obtain the skills and attitudes of research, and to ensure the production of a thesis of acceptable standard (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013). The factor most commonly mentioned in the literature as impeding the success of graduate study is supervisor incompatibility: which includes but is not limited to supervisors’ attitudes toward students; their availability and commitment; and even supervisors’ own academic active level can affect graduate students’ degree completion, with students who are supervised by active researchers tending to have a lower attrition rate (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Khozaei, Naidu, Khozaei, &
According to the demographics of a large research based university at the west coast of Canada, the average age for their master’s students in 2015 was 34.6; for doctoral students it was 38.4 (UBC Graduate School, 2016). Given the fact that the majority of graduate students are mature adults, they seek future career development while balancing the demands of family/social commitments, and so face multiple social roles and shoulder various responsibilities. Therefore, prior studies have also looked for how social relations affect stress levels of graduate students and further influence degree completion. In Calicchia & Graham (2006), 56 graduate students with a mean age of 33.9 reported a greater number of physical health concerns and also reported experiencing significantly higher stress from home/neighborhood, work, children, and negative life events than undergraduates. Social support and stress levels negatively correlated among respondents. Students who reported lower stress levels experienced greater success in graduate school. When it comes to social relations, there is another challenge that has troubled graduate students: school-work-life balance. The interaction of school, work and life can lead graduate students to change their educational aspirations or even drop out. This load has especially
challenged female graduate students. In Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson, and Koro-Ljungberg (2012) and Martinez, Ordu, Sala, and McFarlane (2013), female graduate students who were also the main caregivers in their families reported the dilemma of balancing study and family. They reported that they had “a lot of internal battles” in terms of managing priorities concerning personal and academic components in life.

Financial constraint is also a factor that could impede graduate students’ degree completion (Belasco, Trivette, & Webber; 2014; Earl-Novell, 2006; Kuhl, Reiser, Eickhoff, & Petty, 2014; Mendoza, Villarreal, & Gunderson, 2014; van der Haert, Arias Ortiz, Emplit, Halloin, & Dehon, 2014). Using National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data in the U.S., Belasco, Trivette, and Webber (2014) yielded the result that among students who relied on loans to finance their graduate education, the average graduate student borrowed more than $40,000 American dollars, which is nearly double the average amount that the student borrows during his/her undergraduate career. In the survey that conducted by Kuhl et al. (2014) over half (63%; n=256/408) of the participants reported that loans were extremely important in their ability to attend their genetic counselling training program and 83% (n=282/342) of participants with student debt reported
feeling burdened by their debt.

In sum, academic pressures, the relationship with supervisors, work-school-life balance, financial constraints, and difficulty in fulfilling social roles are challenges that largely impede degree completion and the academic success of graduate students (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Ours & Ridder, 2003). Difficulties graduate students encounter during their studies could lead to dropout; however, this is not always the case. Some students may decide to depart from the institution; some may overcome the difficulties and successfully gain the degree; some may need a longer time to complete their studies. Challenges and stress do not necessarily lead to dropout. However, the literature that has directly investigated graduate students’ dropout rates and the reasons for dropout is limited.

**Doctoral students.** The word “graduate student” is a collective term: it refers to a student who continues study after graduation from college or university, and pursues master’s and/or doctoral degrees. The doctorate (PhD or equivalent i.e. EdD, DMA, ThD, etc.) is a more advanced degree than the master’s, and it takes more time. Depending on the program, a PhD could take 4-8 years to complete. Typically a PhD in North American programs entails 2-3 years
of coursework, a candidacy examination and a dissertation, which is an independent research project designed to uncover new knowledge in his/her field and be of publishable quality. PhD studies are different and more challenging than those at the master’s level; therefore, it is necessary to investigate doctoral students as a separate group and to look for reasons for their withdrawal. Golde (2005) contended that the reasons for conducting research on doctoral students’ attrition are as follows: (1) the attrition rate at the doctoral level is double—even triple—the rate among undergraduates, but this phenomenon is poorly understood; (2) constantly high levels of attrition may signal underlying problems of a department, university or even a discipline, which affects not only leavers but also persisters; (3) economically, attrition wastes money and resources, and also causes social and emotional cost both to students and the institution.

In 1993, Tinto presented his theory on graduate communities and doctoral persistence. He stated that, “graduate persistence is also shaped by the personal and intellectual interactions that occur within and between students and faculty and the various communities that make up the academic and social systems of the institution” (Tinto, 1993, p. 231). However, due to the
distinct nature of doctoral study and undergraduate study, there are some differences between the processes of persistence of those two groups. First of all, compared to undergraduates, doctoral students are more likely aligned with the norms of the specific field of study than with the broader university. Which is to say, the normative orientation and tradition, structural character, and the accepted performance standards in a specific field affect both the academic and social integration of doctoral students. Secondly, for doctoral students, the social interaction with one’s peers and faculty is closely linked to one’s academic development, which means that social and academic integration are tied more closely than is the case with undergraduates. Thirdly, the persistence of doctoral students, especially in the later stage of studies will be more likely tied to a particular faculty member or a group of faculty members, such as one’s supervisor or committee members. Lastly, the persistence of doctoral students is also influenced by the interaction with external communities, such as family, to which the student belongs (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) also divided the whole of doctoral study into three different stages, which are: transition stage (from master’s study to doctoral study), attaining candidacy, and completing the
research project. In his view, doctoral persistence is marked by these three stages. In the transition stage, the persistence process will be shaped by both social and academic interaction, formal and informal, and individual commitments to the goal of doctoral completion and specific career goals also can impact persistence. Whereas in the second stage (candidacy), “the development of recognized competencies, rather than community membership per se, is the critical issue during this period” (Tinto, 1993, p. 236). For the final stage (project completion), the interaction between the student and the faculty varies according to the individuals involved, thus persistence at this stage may be highly idiosyncratic.

**Empirical studies examining doctoral level withdrawal.** In terms of degree completion for PhD students, studies have examined the various factors that influence the success of doctoral study and research progress. Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) have concluded that students’ commitment (namely, setting goals, time and planning) has a positive effect on study progress. Making and following a study plan ensures advancement in doctoral coursework, while devoting time on doctoral studies ensures advancement in research. Malone, Nelson and Nelson (2004) found that the factors that served to predict doctoral degree completion in an educational
administration program were in order from greatest to least influential: the undergraduate institution, followed by undergraduate GPA, GRE verbal score, and master’s GPA. Ampaw and Jaeger (2012) divided the whole doctoral study process into three stages: transition (enrolment into the program and beginning to take classes); development (completion of coursework, and candidacy), and research (dissertation and defence). They found that over 50% of the dropouts occurred at the development stage. Once students passed the candidacy examination, 81% completed the degree. Lott, Gardner and Powers (2009) utilized discrete-time event history analysis to model doctoral attrition for 10,088 PhD students, in 56 STEM departments, at one research-extensive institution. Results showed that attrition was the greatest in the first year. Additionally, the attrition rate was greater for females and Asians. The attrition rate was lower for married students and for those who have higher GRE scores than their peers in the same program.

Other than academic ability, financial factors and fields of study are mentioned as two major factors that influence degree completion for PhD students. van der Haert et al. (2014) tried to find out the correlation between financial support, field of research and dropout. The study
showed that students with no financing support (scholarship/fellowship etc.) have the highest withdrawal rate, while students with selective research fellowships showed the lowest. Also there were no significant differences in dropout and degree completion between fields of study, except for unfinanced students. In terms of the types of financial support, studies showed that fellowships facilitate persistence but teaching assistantship sometimes dilutes PhD study by taking away time on task, which impeded persistence to a certain extent (Earl-Novell, 2006; van der Haert et al., 2014). However, Mendoza, Villarreal, and Gunderson (2014) employed the 2007–2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study and the National Research Center’s survey data in the U.S. to investigate the effects of teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and fellowships on retention among Ph.D. students. Results indicated that both teaching assistantships and fellowships have a significant and positive effect on retention, but teaching assistantships had an additional benefit because they helped students socialize with faculty and peers. This study also showed that the patterns associated with gender, race/ethnicity, and immigration status vary dramatically by field of study.

Contrary to this, the interview conducted by Golde (1998) examined first-year doctoral
attrition. Students in different fields have distinct perceptions of drop out. In her study, Golde (1998) divided students into science and humanities groups and found that department, job market and advisor mismatches are factors mentioned by science students as reasons for departure. Intellectual reasons, the practice of the discipline not meeting expectations and reality of life within a faculty not meeting expectations were factors that arose among students in the humanities.

The incompatibility with supervisor and mismatch between the department and faculty were also factors that strongly affected persistence of PhD students (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Devos, Boudreghien, der Linden, Azzi, Frenay, Galand, & Klein, 2017; Earl-Novell, 2006; Golde, 2005; Juniper, Walsh, Richardson, & Morley, 2012; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Cockrell and Shelley’s survey (2010) concluded that program structures promote doctoral student satisfaction. Also, students who experienced formal academic support systems (e.g., cohorts, mentors, or graduate student organizations) had more knowledge about the academic field, university, and departmental resources, requirements, expectations, and customs than those not associated with a formal academic support system. Heath’s (2002) study yielded findings on
some of the key aspects of supervision, as viewed by both completed and unsuccessful doctoral candidates at the end of their candidature. The results showed that doctoral candidates who had effective and frequent meetings with their supervisor reported higher satisfaction rates overall. Pyhältö, Vekkaila and Keskinen (2015) also supported this finding, and they further concluded that a joint understanding of supervision—between student and supervisor—was important. Among other factors, the fit between the students’ and supervisors’ perceptions of the supervisory activities in different faculties was related to students’ satisfaction with their studies and the supervisory relationship (Litalien & Guay, 2015; Pyhältö, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2015).

Another aspect that stands out in the literature pertaining to drop out from doctoral students is family issues, which included marriage, raising children, caring for an ailing parent or even coping with the death of a close family member. Among all the social relations, marriage and partnership are major ones that could influence the decision-making of those students. In Maher, Ford and Thompson (2004), 28% of female doctoral students reported marital problems or other family-related obstacles that hindered their studies. In the recent study, Lubienski, Miller and Saclarides (2018) investigated the publication rate among male and female PhD students in a
research university and found that men have been found to publish more than women. Women were more likely than men to report that family obligations hindered their studies. Not only do female students need to balance study, work and home life, but male PhDs do too. In a survey conducted in 56 Spanish universities, doctoral students reported difficulties in achieving a balance between work, personal life and studies as the major challenge, followed by socialization and integration and motivation (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017). 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 everyday after his wife and child fell asleep.

The studies cited above indicate the situation for graduate students. Starting in the next section, I will focus on my target group: international graduate students.

**International Graduate Students: Challenges and Difficulties**

When studying in a foreign country, international students encounter challenges and difficulties that affect their academic performance and even their personal lives. Especially when students come from a country where the languages and cultures are significantly different from
the host county, they need to adjust themselves to fit in the culture of the host country.

**Language.** Language is the primary challenge faced by international graduate students. In the North American context, English is the language through which “society, educational institutions, and peers sit in judgment of newcomers and assess their progress” (Popadiuk & Marshall, 2011, p. 223). A substantial proportion of international graduate students do not speak English as their first language. English proficiency not only limits internationals’ ability to convey thoughts but also impedes task completion (Kim, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Zhang & Zhou, 2010). In Zhang and Beck (2014), some Chinese international students had to stay in English training programs for years to pass English proficiency tests for university admission. Although international students have to pass a standardized English proficiency test for admission, often they are still considered by the instructors and professors to be unprepared for the rigorous demands of academia (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999). For instance, the majority of international graduate students have difficulty in academic writing overall, and in particular discipline-specific reading and writing. The fact that they are held to the same stringent standard as their domestic counterparts places them at a severe disadvantage.
Difficulties with learning the value system which language embodies make the situation even worse (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Roy, 2013). Not only do English reading and writing present a primary challenge, listening and speaking as significant language components also bring difficulties for international graduate students. Professors’ rapid pace of speech; their use of long and complex sentences and colloquial and slang expressions are all factors can bring extra challenges for international students to understand (Huang, 2004).

Furthermore, language is not only a tool to be mastered but is also “a relational act in its communicative role” (Popadiuk & Marshall, 2011, p. 233). As I have discussed in the previous section, effective communication with one’s supervisor influences the study process and degree completion of all graduate students. Due to the added language barrier, international graduate students often find themselves uncertain about communicating with their supervisor appropriately, feeling lost in a supervisory/student power relationship, and worried about not being fully understood by their supervisor (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013; Huang & Klinger, 2004; Khozaei et al., 2015; McClure, 2007; Rice, et al., 2009).

**Socio-cultural adaptation.** In addition to language, cultural adaptation is another factor that
considerably makes international graduate students’ lives difficult even if they have realistic expectations of adjustment. Socio-cultural adaptation refers to “the ability to acquire and perform culturally appropriate social skills and behavioural competence to fit in the host culture” (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 423).

Socio-cultural adaptation manifests in several ways in international graduate students’ lives. Baba and Hosoda (2014) examined factors that are detrimental in socio-cultural adaptation of international students and found four. These were social disconnectedness, where international students lack closeness and togetherness with their social environment and are unable to participate in social activities; homesickness, which affects students’ psychological well-being because of the absence of significant others, familiar surroundings and desire for belonging; discrimination; and culture shock, where international students feel confused about the norms of the new culture. In Chapdelaine and Alexitch’s (2004) study, the relationship between culture shock and social integration among male graduate international students indicated that higher degrees of culture shock were associated with higher degrees of overall difficulty in the interaction with host nationals.
Using Tinto’s (1987) theory, Andrade (2006) interviewed diverse international students in a religious university and concluded that students made changes related to becoming a college student in the transitional period, and changes related to the religious environment of that university. Those changes were necessary for the students to integrate into the host country. Huang and Klinger (2004) attributed cultural difference and culture shock to the fact that students coming from East Asia—such as China—bring a different cultural perspective to their learning. Different modes of thinking from East to West forced internationals to adjust their approaches to learning. In real school settings, international graduate students reported that because they did not share the beliefs of some classroom practices, they had to disengage from the classroom community and they struggled with the negotiation of their identity in the school community, which included taking an English name in order for professors and classmates to remember (Kim, 2011). Whereas teacher-centered teaching styles are most common in Asian countries, student-centered teaching in North American universities created problems for international graduate students, who felt it was hard to contribute to the key points of classes that were focused around discussions rather than lectures (Huang & Klinger, 2004; Lin & Scherz
Immigration status. Another challenge that is unique for international graduate students is immigration. Many international graduate students are interested in obtaining permanent residence status in North America (Trice & Yoo, 2007). In Canada, international students are allowed to work for three years after graduation (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). However, immigration policy assigns greater priority to students who study certain majors (such as STEM program), a policy which has generated two problems. Some internationals chose a major that they are not interested in but that they perceive as relatively easy in order to obtain permanent residence (Rice et al., 2009). In addition, while studying, some students start to worry about their future immigration status (Huang & Klinger, 2004). Consequently, international students face “a critical career decision about transitioning from their temporary immigration status to pursuing employment in Canada and permanent residency” (Arthur & Flynn, 2011, p. 223). Those problems have caused distractions for graduate study. This distraction becomes amplified in contexts where permanent immigration to Canada is a concurrent end goal. Some international graduate students have reported that the reason for studying abroad is because they
want to immigrate to the host county. In Arthur and Flynn (2011), one student said, “my parents would like me to stay in Canada, they say ‘if you don’t want to stay, why did you go abroad in the first place?’” (p. 228). Therefore, they were under pressure to prepare to stay in the host country while still being a graduate student. In addition to that, due to the language barrier and cultural differences, they had fears of not getting a job or losing a job, and they found that application and networking processes were ambiguous and difficult.

**International doctoral students.** Among all the groups of students that I have discussed from the literature, international doctoral students constitute a unique group for the reason that those students confront all the challenges met by domestic graduate students in general as well as international students in particular. Similar to domestic doctoral students, they have to deal with the relationship with their supervisor and other faculty, financial constraints, and school-life balance (Cotterall, 2015; Khozaei et al., 2015; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; Wang & Li, 2011). At the same time, they also encounter additional language barriers, socio-cultural adaptation and immigration/status issues (Chang & Kanno, 2010; Crede & Borrego, 2014; Soong, Thi Tran, & Hoa Hiep, 2015; Zhou, 2015).
International student mobility is seen as a phenomenon in which individuals seek to “gain competitive advantage over others and increase their own attractiveness to employers engaged in a “War for Talent” (Brooks, 2015, p. 195). Brooks (2015) viewed educational migration as the pursuit to enhance the overall status of a family, and to reproduce the social status of the family. Among the international students that she interviewed (mainly married PhDs), she concluded that transnational migration engages different household members in different ways. It was usually males who had initially instigated a move overseas, with their spouses following them after. She also found that the migratory decisions of female PhD students are often a consideration involving other family members. During the study process, many men are deterred from returning to study once they have entered employment that helped them construct their role as a breadwinner, and paid work consolidates their central and highly valued position in their family (Brooks, 2015, p. 203). In terms of parenting practice, after entering higher education, women still were explicitly expected by society in general and their husbands in particular to retain main responsibilities for caring for their children.

After family migration to a host country, spousal support is necessary for the adjustment of
international students. Slightly different from Brooks (2015), Goff and Carolan (2013) concluded that spouses provided support to each other by being flexible in their gender roles among Chinese international student couples. When the wife had to take courses and was busy with study, the husband devoted time to taking care of children. Students realized the importance of flexibility in sharing household and childrearing responsibilities after moving to a foreign country. This flexibility was especially important when both spouses were graduate students.

Upon finishing the degree, marriage and partnership also influence the decision about staying in the host country or returning to one’s own home country. Kim (2015) states that social relationships play an important role in terms of the development of individual attitudes and desires regarding future plans, and being married is a key factor influencing international mobility. He found that the intentions to remain in the USA after graduation for both master’s and doctoral students were significantly different between single and married students. For married students, spousal support helped them to be satisfied with their living experience in a foreign environment, which led to a strong intention to stay. The motivation for married students to either leave or stay is mainly affected by the interests of their nuclear family. Kim concluded
that when people are single, their major social roles are generally as daughter/son, sister/brother, friend, worker/students etc. With single status, self-interest is the most important factor influencing decisions; while for married persons, the transition from self-interest to family-orientation renders marriage as the factor that makes huge changes in behaviour for individuals. However, the power of the nuclear family in steering motivation on how gender roles shape learners’ academic intention and decisions also needs research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed the brief history of research on college student persistence and retention in the North American context, the most influential theory in this area (Tinto’s longitudinal model of college student departure), and the empirical studies that have been conducted to examine student withdrawal at the undergraduate level, graduate level in general, and doctoral level, more specifically. By reviewing this part of the literature, I found the focus of research has shifted from withdrawal behaviour in higher education as a whole to specific subgroups: for instance doctoral students’ withdrawal and minority students’ withdrawal. However, the studies that directly investigate withdrawal of international students as a subgroup
are rare. Therefore, I reviewed the challenges and difficulties that international students face in host countries, which could possibly lead to withdrawal. I found that in the existing literature, language, socio-cultural adaptation, and immigration status are three major categories of challenge for them. I also paid special attention to the challenges international doctoral students face, I found other than those three major challenges, gender role and marriage/family also contribute to their decision-making. However, none of the studies mentioned above in this chapter directly investigated the reasons for international doctoral students’ withdrawal in depth, which leads me to think about other gaps I found in the literature.

Gaps in the Literature

After reviewing the literature, some unanswered questions became apparent. Tinto’s model appears to be a comprehensive framework in explaining student withdrawal but it does not seem to apply to all withdrawal behaviours. Several issues still need to be considered. First, it is controversial if students indeed need to reject their past community and past attitudes in order to be accepted by the new community when entering college. For students who come from certain cultural backgrounds, for example, possibly the belief and support from their past community
could provide faith for them to continue their studies. Indeed, some studies have found that the Asian value of family recognition through academic achievement positively impacted academic performance. Therefore, it is questionable whether Tinto’s model fully explains the experiences of culturally diverse students (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Liao & Wei, 2014).

Second, in terms of culture, although Tinto’s model acknowledges that lacking community support on campus is a drawback for minority students due to the fact that they may have their own cultures that are different from the mainstream culture or the institutional culture, Tinto did not develop this component deeply. That is, it is unclear how minority students’ cultural understandings affect their decisions to withdraw. In addition to that, Tinto did consider family background as one of the factors that could impact students’ early departure; however, what he meant by family background was more focused on parental education level and social status instead of students’ cultural backgrounds.

Third, the analogy between withdrawal and suicide that Tinto draws is problematic. The dropout behaviour for some students may not necessarily be a failure or loss; it may yield beneficial outcomes for students. They may find a career that is more promising than staying in
school. Loss for the institution is not necessarily equal to loss for the students. This leads to a fourth concern. This model as a whole over-represents the institutional perspective. The voice of students is largely ignored. As individuals, everyone has unique thoughts, personalities and experiences that impact decision-making in life. I believe that this is the reason why the phenomenon of student withdrawal is still a puzzle that is unsolved. Institutional perspectives alone do not provide the whole picture.

Lastly, Tinto’s model has been broken down to various factors that could impact students’ withdrawal and tested in different disciplines such as education, psychology and sociology. 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. The concerns mentioned above triggered my curiosity: how has international student withdrawal been taken up by scholars? What are the experiences of international doctoral students who stopped pursuing a degree? Does culture play a role in doctoral students’ attrition and retention? 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—in depth through qualitative approaches—the experiences of international graduate students who have abandoned their studies.
Chapter Three

Methodology and Research Design

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from studies in the Canadian context. The literature review chapter identified that previous studies examining students’ early departure from university have under-investigated the experiences of doctoral students who study at the host country as international students.

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology of this study and the rationale for using narrative inquiry as the research method to undertake it. I also discuss my epistemological orientation and its relation to narrative inquiry. After that, I explain the criteria for recruiting participants and the principles that guided me during the interview and data analysis processes. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the ethical considerations for this study, which examines the researcher’s role, the trustworthiness of the study, as well as methodological challenges that impacted the overall study design.
My Philosophical Stance and its Relation to Inquiry

Creswell (2013) notes that “a close tie does exist between the philosophy that one brings to the research act and how one proceeds to use a framework to shroud his or her inquiry” (p. 56). A researcher’s philosophical orientation shapes how they form research questions, how they seek information to answer them, and in which way they want their questions to be explored.

From the moment I became curious about Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from their doctoral studies, I wanted to know more about their experiences. I believe that past experience influences each individual’s decision-making, and that what we are currently experiencing impacts our future. Experience is personal in the way that each individual’s experience is unique and non-reproducible, and it exists in a specific time and space for that person. At the same time, experience is also social, which means experience exists in a given social context; it cannot be peeled off from the social context to stand alone. For the present study, I am interested in what Chinese international doctoral students have experienced that cause them to decide to withdraw and also the social contexts of those experiences. Therefore, I found that John Dewey’s interpretation of experience grounded me well for my inquiry.
For Dewey (1997), experience has two principles. The first is continuity, or what he called the “experiential continuum” (p. 33). The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience grows out of previous experiences, and modifies the ones that come after. Previous experiences modify further experiences by setting up certain preferences and aversions. The second principle is that all experience is ultimately social (Dewey, 1997). Dewey believes we live in a world of accumulation of past experience from previous human activities. Therefore, every experience does not go on simply inside a person, but it involves contact and communication with others (Dewey, 1997). The two principles—continuity and interaction—are not separate from each other, since they are the longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience, and both the personal and social are always present (Dewey, 1997, p. 51).

Dewey’s view on experience was revolutionary. Early views of experience thought of it as a private event, which were only known to their possessor (Blackburn, 2008). Dewey’s work made thinking about experience objectively accessible and knowable. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) interpreted Dewey’s conception of experience as this: every experience is constituted by interaction between “subject” and “object”, between a self and its world. This implies that the
A regulative ideal for inquiry is not to “generate an exclusively faithful representation of a reality independent of the knower,” but rather it is to “generate a new relation between a human being and her environment” (p. 39).

Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) further explained that this ontology of experience relates to empirical inquiry in three ways. Firstly, it emphasizes the temporality of knowledge generation. Experience is always more than we can know. What we try to depict and represent involves our selective emphasis of our experience. Therefore, empirical inquiry is a series of choices, which “inspired by purposes that are shaped by past experience, undertaken through time, and will trace the consequences of these choices in the whole of an individual or community's lived experience” (p. 40). Thus, the knowledge that is generated by empirical method is immediate knowledge, because the inquiry is “a series of choices” purposefully selected by the inquirer.

Secondly, the idea that experience grows out of other experiences and then leads to further experiences relates to its significance for empirical inquiry. It reinforces the idea that inquiry is “an act within a stream of experience that generates new relations that then become a part of future experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 41).
Thirdly, Dewey’s idea on experience emphasizes the social dimension of our inquiries and understanding. For Dewey, experience and reality are separable (Dewey, 1977); thus the product of the inquiry is only epiphenomenal: that is linked to social realities but not social realities themselves. Our experience is the result of the confluence of social influences on our inner self and on our environment. It is a changing stream that is characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

It is due to Dewey’s views on experience that I decided to probe the in-depth experiences of doctoral students who terminated their studies prior to completion.

**Research Approach**

**Narrative inquiry.** A widely accepted definition of narrative inquiry comes from Connelly and Clandinin (1990). It 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. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) view narratives as the most appropriate form to use when thinking about inquiry undertaken within a pragmatic ontology of experience for the reason that: first and foremost, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. Telling
stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity (Riessman, 1993). In narrative research, researcher and participants work together, over time, in a specific place (or places), and dig into the stories of the experiences that constitute people’s lives. This process is continuous.

Secondly, narrative inquiry is not only an exploration of individuals’ experiences, but also includes “social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 40), which echoes Dewey’s second principle that all experience is ultimately social (Dewey, 1997).

Creswell (2012) summarized major characteristics of narrative inquiry: (a) it investigates the experience of an individual; (b) it gathers the life stories and re-tells them from the field texts with the collaboration between the researcher and participants; (c) it codes the field texts for themes and categories and incorporates the context or place into the story. As I have indicated, there are gaps in the current body of literature about students’ withdrawal in higher education, in that, the primary focus has generally been using large-scale studies with surveys and questionnaires with pre-designed variables and factors. Since the variables and factors were set by the researchers according to the previous studies, it limited the room for students to speak in
their own voices, and students’ own stories were largely ignored. Using narrative inquiry as a means to explore my research questions provided me opportunities to collect the episodes of participants’ experiences that happened before they made the decision to leave their programs, and to find out what had happened in their lives that may have influenced their decisions to stop studying. For example, from my pilot study that examined the experiences of one Chinese female’s choice to stop her studies, I learned that she was deeply embedded in Chinese culture, which was one of the reasons that led her to quit studying. Riessman (1993) mentioned that studying narrative is “additionally useful” for those sociologically oriented investigators, since narratives reveal social life—culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story (p. 5).

Narrators may take for granted racial oppressions, cultural preference, and power practices, but investigators can probe these terms with narrators from a cultural and historical perspective (Riessman, 1993). By using narrative inquiry in this current study as a research method, I was able to not only investigate the personal experiences of my participants, but also to explore social and cultural factors that shaped their experiences.
Another appealing aspect to using narrative inquiry is the collaboration between researcher and participant in the research process. The meaning-making process in narrative inquiry is co-constructed as a two-way process by the researcher and the participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 1993). As a Chinese international doctoral student, this research provides the opportunity for me to create a new experience with my participants, to discover myself, to achieve what Dewey called “growth” (Dewey, 1997). However, like all methods, no single approach suffices for all questions. Riessman (1993) summarized the circumstances when researchers should consider not using narrative. For example, narrative is not useful for large numbers of nameless, faceless subjects, because it requires the researchers to pay attention to subtlety, such as the nuances of speech, organization of a response, local contexts of production, and social discourses. Also, narrative requires the researcher to collect extensive information about the participant, keep a keen eye to identify the particular stories in the source material and be familiar with the context of the individual’s life (Creswell, 2013).
**Narrative inquiry in relation to similar methodologies.** In educational research, the features that are described by Riessman (1993) above also can be ascribed to other methods that have points of contact with narrative inquiry. Creswell (2013) categorized the research studies that are conducted using a narrative form into four major types: biographical study, autoethnography, life history and oral history. A biographical study is “a form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person’s life”—that is, it usually focused on one individual (Creswell, 2013, p. 72). Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to “produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 277). The data collection and analysis uses the researcher’s own experience of a particular life phenomenon that can be extended to understand the larger social and cultural meanings. (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). Life history portrays an entire life experience of a person and
oral history gathers personal reflections of events to inform a specific broader historical
contextual focus (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

My purpose in this study is to explore the experiences of several Chinese international
doctoral students who withdrew from their programs, rather than focus on the life story of only
one participant, whether myself (autoethnography) or another (biography) (Creswell, 2012).
Among the additional approaches, oral history interviews are historical in intent (Shopes, 2011),
and it emphasizes the historical context of the inquiry. Compared to oral history, life history
interviews aim at recording everyday life within a particular setting and addressing topics
ranging from family life, education and work experiences, social, political or religious
involvement (Shopes, 2011). Given the similarities between life history and narrative inquiry, I
will discuss life history method in more details below.

Life history is a research method that originated from anthropology in the form of
autobiographies (Goodson, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In life history, researchers collect an
individual’s full life stories with the intent to understand life patterns of the participant in the
context of social relations, interactions and constructions. According to Hatch and Wisniewski’s
(1995) survey, most scholars believe that both life history and narrative inquiry focus on the individual; they share the personal nature of the research process, and they are practical in orientation and emphasize subjectivity.

Within the scope of a participant’s entire life, life history treats life as the case or bounded system. Life is investigated in depth within the real-world context (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012). Therefore, life history researchers examine the major branching points in the life course, such as family, major life work, spiritual life, values etc. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), what differentiates life history from other narrative forms is that:

Life history goes beyond the individual or the personal and places narrative accounts and interpretations within a broader context. Lives are lived within the influence and contexts as far ranging as cultural, political, familial, educational, and religious spheres. Whereas narrative research focuses on making meaning of individual’s experiences, life history research draws on individuals’ experiences to make broader contextual meaning. (p. 20)

On the other hand, narrative inquiry treats human experiences as episodically ordered. It
emphasizes the personal, temporal and contextual nature of the connections and relationships that make the complexities of a life (Cole and Knowles, 2001). Therefore, for this particular study, narrative inquiry is a better fit than life history because I believe that experience consists of episodes. My research questions focus on “withdrawal” as the focal point and they excavate into the episodically ordered experiences that relate to the focal point with the hope of finding the connections between my participants as individuals and the context of those specific experiential episodes. In addition to that, my research questions aim 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 and distinguishes this study from generic qualitative research.

**Research participants.** Creswell (2013) suggests that intentionally sampling a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem is part of the recruitment process in qualitative research. Therefore, my 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 degree; and (2) who enrolled and began work in a doctoral program but withdrew before degree completion.

Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or experiences of a single individual or the lives of a relatively small number of individuals (Creswell, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The purpose of a small sample size in qualitative research in general is to “collect extensive detail about each site or individual studied…and to elucidate the particular, the specific” (Creswell, 2013, p. 157). 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. For my pilot study, I interviewed one participant who withdrew from her doctoral studies after two semesters. I collected data from a one-hour length semi-structured interview that was conducted in Mandarin. Two themes emerged after analyzing data: “escape” and “return”. Therefore, for the present study, I estimated the number of participants, number of interviews and total interview hours based on the amount of data that was generated during that one-hour interview in my pilot study.
After receiving approval from the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board for conducting interviews, I requested help from University of Victoria Graduate Students’ Society for recruiting participants. They agreed to send out my recruitment advertisement on their bi-weekly electronic bulletin. However, no one responded to my advertisement. At the same time, I drafted another advertisement in which I explained in Chinese my motivation to conduct this study, my research questions and the criteria for participant recruitment. I posted this advertisement followed by my email address and WeChat ID on my personal official account on WeChat, where I have approximately two hundred subscribers. I asked my subscribers and friends to help me forward this post on their personal WeChat timeline or to someone they thought might have access to my potential participants. Less than one week later, my post was viewed around six hundred times. I received three respondents who contacted me on WeChat. I had brief conversations with them after they added me as a friend on WeChat. All of them met my recruiting criteria. While waiting for more respondents, I contacted the informant with whom

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6 An instant message cellphone app that is used in China.
7 WeChat supports users who want to register an official account, which enables them to push feeds to subscribers, interact with subscribers and provide them with services.
I conducted my pilot study, and I explained how I developed the pilot study into my dissertation and asked if she would like to share with me more about her experiences. She agreed.

In this way, I successfully recruited four participants: Fish, Isaiah, Jingwei and Zhuangzhou (pseudonyms). All of them were born in the 1980s in China. Among them, Fish and Jingwei are women, and Isaiah and Zhuangzhou are men. Two of them—Fish and Isaiah—were studying in the Social Sciences domain, while Jingwei and Zhuangzhou were in Sciences with funding from their supervisors. At the time of their enrolment, Fish was married with a child, Isaiah was also in a marriage, Jingwei was single and Zhuangzhou was in a committed relationship. I emailed the certificate I received from the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board and the consent form, which was in English, to my participants. After they reviewed these and agreed to the articles on the consent form, I scheduled interview times with each of the participants.

Below is a chart where I list brief information about my participants. In educational research, confidentiality is an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the participants’ identities (Berg & Lune, 2012). In the present research, all the names
are pseudonyms, which were chosen by research participants themselves. Also, I only listed their age range and a broad range of their majors to protect confidentiality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Fish</th>
<th>Isaiah</th>
<th>Jingwei</th>
<th>Zhuangzhou</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>30-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program enrolled</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status (when enrolled)</td>
<td>Married; one child</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>In a relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding source</td>
<td>Self-funded</td>
<td>Self-funded</td>
<td>Program-funded</td>
<td>Program-funded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-1. Brief information about research participants

**Data Collection**

**Narrative interview.** Narrative inquiry seeks to collect data that represent the experiences and stories of participants. Thus, the technique of data collecting includes but is not limited to interviews, texts, documents, artefacts, images, and stories about the participant from family members or friends (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2012). I used interview as the primary approach to collect data. At the same time, I also requested journals, blog entries and photos from my participants as supplementary material.
Interviews may be defined as a conversation with a purpose (Berg & Lune, 2012). The differences among basic types of interviews rest on the degree of rigidity with regard to presentational structure (Berg & Lune, 2012). I used semi-structured interviews to collect data.

In a semi-structured interview, questions are asked in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewer also has freedom to allow the participant to direct the conversation. The interviewer is also expected to probe beyond the answers to their prepared questions (Berg & Lune, 2012). In this way, I was able to ask my participants the major questions that I had developed for my study, while at the same time, I could pursue areas spontaneously when initiated by the participants.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture any episodes that may have influenced their past decisions.

However, when narrative researchers gather data through interviews, the transformation from interviewer-interviewee relationship to narrator-listener relationship requires a shift from asking participants to discuss their experiences to inviting the narrator’s specific stories. In other words, in narrative interviews, the conventional practice of interview structure has to be treated
flexibly since the narrator may or may not follow the interview protocol when telling their stories (Chase, 2011).

Riessman (1993) suggests that in narrative research, “it is necessary to provide a facilitating context in the research interview…certain kinds of open-ended questions are more likely than others to encourage narrativization” (p. 54). She also suggests her graduate students develop an interview guide when conducting narrative research, “5 to 7 broad questions about the topic of inquiry, supplemented by probe questions in case the respondent has trouble getting started” (Riessman, 1993, p. 55). Following her suggestions for my interviews, the majority of the prompt questions were not targeting discrete information; instead, I asked questions that opened up topics and allowed participants to construct their answers. For example, for my first round of interviews, I started by asking them to describe their experiences in their doctoral studies using some adjectives, then I probed the reasons for them to choose that particular adjective to describe their doctoral studies.

**Interview process.** For my study, the interviews were structured as one-on-one and in-depth for three times with each participant. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is
the native language of all the participants and myself. I was able to conduct face-to-face
interviews with three participants, but Fish had already gone back to China. For Fish, the data
were collected through a WeChat voice call. The first interview took place in June 2017.
Interviews were recorded using the recording function of an iPhone and an iPad together to avoid
any glitches that might happen on electronic devices. The average length of each interview was
longer than one hour but within one and a half hours because usually they would request breaks
during the interview. Also, I did not restrict to the one-hour time frame because I would prefer
my participants finish their stories without interruptions.

Below is a chart of the interview timeline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First interview</th>
<th>Second interview</th>
<th>Third interview</th>
<th>Total interview hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>June 18, 2017</td>
<td>June 20, 2017</td>
<td>June 27, 2017</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>June 19, 2017</td>
<td>July 17, 2017</td>
<td>August 15, 2017</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhuangzhou</td>
<td>July 4, 2017</td>
<td>July 5, 2017</td>
<td>July 6, 2017</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-2. Interview timeline

Interview questions were sent to participants prior to the first interview with the purpose of
letting them get a general idea of what we would be talking about in the interviews and to ease
any prior apprehension they might have about participating, and the same set of questions were asked of all participants. Seventeen semi-structured open-ended questions were listed on the interview protocol (Appendix E). Riessman (1993) suggested researchers ask open-ended questions in narrative research; however, Seidman (2006) stated that some informants may find it difficult to tolerate open-ended questions because they are unused to talking at length spontaneously, articulately, or coherently, or because they are uncomfortable in an unstructured situation. In my study, I was aware of that. Therefore, before each interview, I would think about some sub-questions under each main open-ended question, just in case the participant did not know where to start. Before the interview, I let the participant choose the time and place they wanted to be interviewed. Some of them chose a public place such as a coffee shop and some of them chose a private place such as an office. Each interview began with a short question and answer session about the consent form and a reminder to participants that the interview would be recorded and that they could request to stop the interview at any time.

For my own interviews, I adopted “the three interview series” described by Seidman (2006) as an interview technique. For Seidman, the first interview establishes the context of the
participants’ experience. The second round allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the last one encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. I adopted Seidman’s (2006) structure; however, I made some minor adaptations only to ensure that the social context of their experiences registered, but also that it demonstrated the continuity of their experiences, where the current experience grows out of the past experience and influences the future ones (Dewey, 1997).

For my first round, I focused on their experiences during their studies in the doctoral program. I started by asking them to use one or two adjectives to describe their experiences in the doctoral program, and then I asked the reason why they described their experiences in that way. While answering this question, they were able to recall their memories of the doctoral program they were once enrolled in. Then the questions led into the relationships that they had with their supervisors, peers and other faculty members. After that, I asked about the relationships between them and their families/partners during their study of period. The last part of the interview focused on their thoughts when they decided to quit their studies. We finished
the interview by talking about their motivation to apply for Ph.D. studies overseas. This concluding question led them to recall their experiences before they came to Canada. After we completed the first round, I listened to the oral recordings of each participant and took memos and reflections. The purpose of the first round of interview was eliciting research participants’ experiences during their doctoral studies. The interview questions were mainly designed according to the factors that previous research studies yielded could impact doctoral students’ degree completion.

For the second round, I started by asking about the experiences they had before they entered the doctoral program, which focused mainly on their lives in China since I believe past experience could shape current experience and influence the decision-making of human beings. The interview questions guided them to talk about their hometown, their family background, their education experiences and working experiences. Then we switched the topic to their views on marriage/intimate relationships. As a novice researcher, I realized while listening to the recordings after the interviews that I missed opportunities during some interviews where I could dig deeper. For example when my participants talked about their educational experiences in
China, since I have the similar experience, I took some details for granted and failed to ask more questions regarding those topics. From the interview process, I realized that narrative interviewing requires emotional maturity, sensitivity, and life experience (Chase, 2011).

As I listened to and transcribed the recordings, follow-up questions arose for further probes. Therefore, with these new questions added to the protocol, I conducted the third round of interviews. The third round was a reflection for both the participants and me as a researcher. The first half of the final interview focused on their current lives and how they view their withdrawal in the current situation, and the second half varied according to different follow-up questions that I had developed for each participant based on their previous interviews.

**My “insider” role.** As an ethical and sensitive researcher, I understand it could be anxiety-provoking or even embarrassing for the participants to speak about their doctoral student experiences. They could feel vulnerable or exposed by narrative work (Chase, 2011). To build relationships before the interview or during the break, I shared my own experience as a Chinese international doctoral student landing in Canada for the first time, the difficulties I encountered and the feelings I had, and my family background, which usually took within five minutes. I
treated the information about me as a warm-up activity before the interview and also a way to show my sincere, sensitive and generous attitude towards my participants. The length of this warm-up activity varies among different participants; for example, some of them would ask me some personal questions and some of them did not show any curiosity towards me. I realized the fact that I am a Chinese international doctoral student, in the similar age range with my participants offered me an “insider” status for this study.

An insider is “someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched”; whereas an outsider is “a researcher who does not have any intimate knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group” (Griffith, 1998, p. 361). However, scholars have argued that the insider/outsider relationship is a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The boundaries between the two are “highly unstable” (Mullings, 1999, p. 338). As individuals, we have multiple identities that are relative, contingent and situational, and we do not share exactly the same perceptions even within a group, therefore we are swimming back and forth as both the insider and outsider (Mercer, 2007).
As a researcher, some features of my identity, such as being Chinese, international student, doctoral student, and female are unchanging during the research time, which provided me this insider position. However, these features only comprised one dimension of the insider/outsider continuum; other dimensions are provided by the time and place of the research, the power relationship between me and the participant, the personality of me and specific participants, and even the precise topic under discussion (Mercer, 2007). During the interview process, I indeed perceived that the moments where each participant views of me as either an insider or outsider varied according to different topics and power relations. For example, the two male participants were talking conservatively at the very beginning of our conversation. I assumed they felt a little embarrassed talking about their withdrawal experience in front of a female Ph.D. student who is younger than them and who was conducting interviews for her dissertation, so they were tight-lipped at the very beginning of our interviews because they may have wanted to maintain a particular representation of their masculinity. One female participant thought asking about her family background was offensive unless I told her my family background to “exchange” the information. Apparently, they all viewed me as an “outsider” in those situations. However, when
they talked about China and Chinese culture, all of them said the phrase “you should know that” very frequently and had the tendency to skip some details. I reminded myself to be aware of this phrase and probe more if I felt more explanation was needed.

With regard to the issue of my “insider” role, it 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, “greater familiarity can make insiders more likely to take things for granted, [and] develop myopia…the vital significance [of the researched] might not be noticed, shared prior experiences might not be explained…and data might become thinner as a result” (Mercer, 2007, p. 6).

However, there are also some disadvantages of being an “insider.” 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). Also, from the participants’ perspective, they may not share
certain information with an insider for fear of being judged (Griffith, 1998; Mercer, 2007; Mullings, 1999).

These disadvantages indeed appeared in the present research. It might have been because they did not want to be judged; I did notice some of my participants tended to skip some details during the interviews. For example, Zhuangzhou and his wife were separated during our interview time. He had the tendency of avoiding any discussion about their relationship at the beginning. But as soon as he found out I was not being judgmental, gradually he shared with me more during the successive interviews. Also, the familiarity with Chinese international students’ community, Chinese culture, and Chinese society caused me to ignore some details that needed more explanation and description without consciousness. For example, during the second round of interviews, my participants shared with me their educational experiences in China. One thing they all shared was that while preparing for the National College Entry Exam their performances were all ranked according to the ranking system that was implemented in their schools. I did not ask any questions during the interviews because I experienced the same situation myself in high school; I simply showed understanding. But during reflection after the interviews, I realized I
took what they shared for granted without noticing the fact that student ranking by scores is not implemented everywhere in other countries and I could have asked some questions there. In other words, a researcher unfamiliar with this system would likely have asked more questions on that point. Therefore, I re-recognized the importance of reflection after interviews.

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 of all, listen 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, ask why. I kept telling myself not to 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 do. My strategy was asking “why” or for some details after the narrators finished their stories.
Thirdly, simplify 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.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis can begin anytime in the process of inquiry. Sometimes, it begins during the negotiation with participants, or there is a need for researchers to go back and collect or clarify more stories during the process of data analysis (Goodson, 2013). I realized that in my own study, data analysis is an ongoing process.

**Native language and translation.** As I have mentioned before, all the interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Research suggests that language ability may affect the way people can present themselves to the researchers (Temple, 2005; Temple 2008; Twinn, 1998). All of my participants were born and raised in China and Chinese language is first language in which they can fully express themselves. To “maximize the quality of data” (Twinn, 1998, p. 660), I used Mandarin during the interviews.
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, with participants and me speaking the same language, no language differences are presented in the data collecting and transcribing processes. 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.

However, moving across languages has epistemological and methodological consequences since the “researchers certainly have the responsibilities to participants regarding the way they represent them in writing” (Temple, 2008, p. 362). By reviewing the literature of translation practice in cross-cultural research, in order to ensure I represent my participants as fully as possible, I decided to apply the following principles for my study:

First of all, I initially analyzed the data in Mandarin and then employed translation at the themes and categories levels to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Al-Amer, Ramjan, Glew, Darwish, & Salamonson 2015; Twinn, 1998). Therefore, the structure of the themes and categories remained intact during the translation.
Secondly, 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). For example, both ni (你) and nin (您) can be translated as “you” in English; however, in Mandarin, nin (您) shows respect and a humble attitude held by the speaker. Therefore, in my interviews, I could sense my interviewees’ attitude according to the slight word switch between ni (你) and nin (您).

Thirdly, I subsequently discussed word choice and context meaning with the participant to make sure my representation of them was as close as possible (Polkinghorne, 2007).

Transcribing data. Transcribing in qualitative research is a representation (Riessman, 1993). Due to the fact that interviews were conducted in Mandarin, which is my native language, my transcription was also conducted in Mandarin to maximize validity. To begin the data analysis process, each digitally recorded interview was transcribed. Twelve in-depth interviews were transcribed, which produced 212 pages of single spaced transcripts. Although the transcribing was extremely time-consuming, I was able to further familiarize myself with the
data. I listened repeatedly to all of the interview recordings in order to become familiar with each of the interviews.

Coding process. Saldana (2013) defines a code in qualitative research as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). For my study, the data analysis process was all conducted manually in Mandarin. 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.

I started to pre-code the data while transcribing the interviews (Saldana, 2013). I highlighted participants’ quotations that struck me as important to informing the research questions, and jotted down memos on the back of the page to record the reasons for highlighting the quotations. Then I started the first round of coding.

The foundational principle of choosing a coding method(s) and any analytic approach should be based on the unique need and purpose of the study (Flick, 2009; Saldana, 2013). As Saldana (2013) suggested, I started my coding process with a combination of “generic” coding methods
but at the same time remained open to change in case the methods I had chosen did not generate substantive discoveries.

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” (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). *In Vivo* coding is appropriate particularly for beginning qualitative researchers to use when learning how to code data, and 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). One purpose of my study is to make my participants’ voices heard and to reveal their experiences, so *In Vivo* coding was applied for the consideration of being consistent with my purpose. 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 was also called *Open* coding in some coding books. *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.

When undertaking the initial coding process, Charmaz (2006) recommends asking the following questions during the coding process: What is the data a study of? What does the data suggest? From whose point of view? And Saldana (2013) suggested researchers think about: What surprised me? What intrigued me? What disturbed me? With these questions in mind, I began line-by-line coding. The difficulties soon arose; specifically, it was not always possible to generate codes for each line. Sometimes I got stuck with segments that I did not know how to put a label on. So instead, I identified meaningful chunks of sentences comprising an incident or an idea, some of which covered more than one line. After finishing the first interview of the first participant, I sorted out all the codes and wrote them in a codebook. I did find that as the coding continued, I did less code generation and much more code application from the list of existing codes. I reached 215 codes from the first participant’s three interview transcripts, and then I
moved on to the second, third and fourth participants. The initial coding process provided a close
and intimate familiarity with the data and thus led to emerging ideas for categories.

After first cycle coding, I then moved on to the second cycle. 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). In *Axial coding*,

synonyms in the codes are combined, redundant codes are removed and the best representative
codes are selected (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013). This method “relates categories to

subcategories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). During the Axial coding process, I was able to narrow
down a large list of initial codes into categories. In the analysis process, certain codes did not fit

into the emerging conceptual categories and thus were removed from the analysis. For example,
among the four participants, only Jingwei talked about her experience going to a big city from

her small hometown. Some codes generated from the description of her impressions of that city

and her feelings during that time could not be fit under any categories.

During this process, I found it challenging to create broad, solid concepts to present the

nature of the phenomenon. I revisited the data to seek evidence for the factors that I felt were
underpinning students’ experiences. I kept my intention to maintain the voices of my participants in mind and memos helped me to stay focused on my research questions. The purpose of analytic memo is to help the researcher document and reflect on the coding process and code choice; the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes and concepts (Saldana, 2013). I started writing analytic memos when I was preparing the interviews. During the analysis process, writing memos allowed me to document a record of my thinking as I mentally processed data and constructed answers to the research questions.

From the coding, categorizing and reflecting, four major themes emerged from the data, among them, only one broad theme included two sub-themes. All the themes apply to all research participants. As I have stated before, I employed translation at the themes and categories levels to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Al-Amer et al., 2015; Twinn, 1998). The major four themes and sub-themes were translated in English while writing the final report.

**Ethical Considerations and Reflexive Thinking**

As an emerging scholar, I am fully aware that I have ethical obligations to my colleagues, my study population and the larger society. My research followed the policies and procedures of
the University of Victoria’s Board of Governors (BOG) Research Policy (policy RH8100) and BOG University Regulations for Research Involving Humans (policy RH 8105) established in accordance with Canadian federal research ethics policy: *Tri-council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Besides that, there are several key concerns with respect to ethics and my research study that I will discuss below.

First of all, the confidentiality of my participants is important. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and identifying information such as school name and location were removed. Some other information such as the specific major they have studied was replaced by a broader term to protect them from potential identification.

Second, during the process of working with my participants, I constantly reminded myself about my role as a researcher and was aware of the power relation between me and my participants. Since “dropout” is sometimes considered as a failure in people’s common repertoire, I was cautious not to approach my participants while presenting myself as a “victor” who is able to continue their doctoral study, and so throughout I was careful to use humble language and show my respect to every one.
Third, given my own background as a Chinese international doctoral student in Canada, my identity brings some natural biases. I attempted to become aware of how my own identity, my experience and my worldview would affect my research. I reminded myself to be reflexive during the whole research process. Keeping research memos and discussing this topic with my supervisor and colleagues are two major ways for me to be reflexive.

Last but not least, to avoid myself guiding the interview in a specific direction or only selecting some data that caters to my desire, which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have called the “Hollywood plot,” I seldom intervened while my participants talked during interview. Also, I made a reflexive summary after each interview.

Validity and Methodological Inherent Challenges

“A statement’s validity rests on a consensus within a community of speakers” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). In the community of narrative inquiry, the purpose of the validation process is to convince readers that the researcher’s claims are plausible, credible and trustworthy (Polkinghorne, 2007). Specifically, it is the concern of what the storied text is intended to represent.
In narrative research, the primary aim is not to discover whether narrators’ accounts are accurate reflections of actual events, but to understand the meanings people attach to those events (Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 2007). The validity threats therefore arise when there is disjunction between a person’s actual experienced meaning and his or her storied description.

According to Polkinghorne (2007), the disjunction comes from four sources: (1) the limit of language to capture the complexity and depth of experienced meaning; (2) the limits of reflection to bring notice to the layers of meaning that are present outside of awareness; (3) the resistance of people because of the perceived social desirability of their responses to reveal fully the entire complexities of the felt meanings of which they are aware; and (4) the complexity caused by the fact that texts are often a co-creation of the interviewer and participant.

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. Also, I contacted them for clarification
of certain words or meanings and the appropriate translation for certain Chinese expressions, especially for the ones that I directly quoted.

Overall, “the task of narrative researchers is to produce articulations that lessen the distance between what is said by participants about their experienced meaning and the experienced meaning itself” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 482).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the research design for the present study, which includes my epistemological stance and methodological approach, data collection and data analysis, and ethical considerations. In addition to that, I also reflected on my role and its impact on the research, my awareness of the issues that may arise in this cross-cultural setting, and how to improve validity. In the next chapter, I provide the profile of each of my four participants, in the form of constructed stories.
Chapter Four

Participants

The purpose of the present study is to understand Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from graduate study in the North American context. In particular, I sought to elicit the voices of Chinese students who had withdrawn from their studies since they have been neglected in the vast literature probing the experiences of graduate students. Therefore, I formed three main research questions:

What do Chinese international doctoral students experience during their pursuit of doctoral studies that shaped their decisions to withdraw?

Did their previous experiences prior to undertaking doctoral studies in the host country influence their decision? If so, how, and if not, why not?

Do Chinese doctoral students who withdraw from studies believe that Chinese culture impacted their decision to withdraw? If so, how, and if not, why not?

I adopted narrative inquiry as my research method. As I have discussed in the methodology chapter narrative inquiry is the process whereby researchers collect stories of informants as data,
interpret and re-tell those stories, and write narratives of experience. Unlike life history, which treats a participant’s life as a bounded system, one of the important characteristics of narrative inquiry is that it treats the experiences of participants as episodically ordered (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Therefore, in this chapter, I draw profiles of each participant to unfold their stories. I focus on their experiences during doctoral study first, and then move to their previous experiences prior to undertaking doctoral study in order to keep alignment with the sequence of research questions and to embody the episodic characteristic of narrative inquiry. Also, as I have stated in the methodology chapter, I asked my participants to name themselves, thus the second level headings in this chapter consist of the pseudonyms and short explanations of the names which were the meanings that each of my participants attached to their pseudonyms.

**Fish: Yearning for a Colourful Refreshing Life**

Fish is from the South part of China. She enrolled in a doctoral program in Social Sciences. She started her program as a Ph.D. student for one semester and transferred to a master’s program at the beginning of the second semester and then terminated her study by the end of the second semester. She described her doctoral study experience as “a treasure” (Fish, recording 1,
p. 2), which she viewed as her dream and ultimate life goal. However, she eventually found out that this “Ph.D.” was not suitable for her and she moved towards a more suitable direction for the rest of her life.

The longing for studying abroad started from her undergraduate study, where she majored in English language and literature and soon became an English teacher in a college after graduation. As an English teacher, she felt not having overseas experience was the main drawback of her teaching. The English language she taught to her students from textbooks seemed “unreal” (Fish, recording 1, p. 2), so going abroad to an English-speaking country was a dream. In addition to that, as a wife and a mother, she wanted to help the whole family immigrate to Canada, a place that she perceived a better education system than China for her daughter.

Soon after she began her classes, she encountered language difficulties. Studying in a social science program, all of her classes were discussion-based. Students were asked to read papers before class time, participate in discussion during class meetings and write papers afterwards. The intensity and depth of English use overwhelmed her, which affected her overall academic performance. Other than language, she also had a hard time adjusting to Western writing styles

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*8 I asked all my participants to name themselves, so each heading is each participants’ name chosen by themselves.*
and professors’ teaching styles.

During the study period, she was able to maintain a good relationship with her supervisor. Her supervisor provided guidance and advice on her program planning, course selection and daily life. However, she failed one course during the first semester, and was accused by the course instructor of plagiarism, which she considered a “heavy hit” on her mental state as well as her academic career. (Fish, recording 1, p. 6). She also made a complaint to her department that the international student organizations did not provide many opportunities for Ph.D. students to get to know and support each other, so she felt lonely.

The relationship between Fish and her husband deteriorated during that time. Her husband was against the idea of Fish completing her doctoral studies overseas but she insisted on studying abroad, which created mental distances and misunderstandings between the couple. The two major reasons for her husband to reject studying abroad were the disapproval from his own mother (Fish’s mother-in-law) and the huge consumption of money, which caused him to believe this degree was not cost efficient and “useless” (Fish, recording 1, p. 7).

With the hope of paving a road for herself and her family, Fish started to search for
information on the job market while taking the Ph.D. courses. She found that immigration and settling down in Canada is “very hard” (Fish, recording 1, p. 8). She also observed the local Chinese immigrant community. From her observation, she summarized several features that characterized the Chinese immigrants: “living conditions that are not optimistic; low social status; a poor sense of belonging; and limited social networks” (Fish, recording 1, p. 8). In order to graduate sooner and explore more job opportunities, after the first semester, she requested to transfer to a master’s program. She wanted to become a teacher but the teaching certificate she had in China is not recognized as equivalent by the provincial government. Furthermore, only Canadian citizens or permanent residents are allowed to take certificate courses. While exploring some options in Canada, she also thought about her life in China; she weighed both sides and came to a conclusion: life in China is better in many ways. Thus, by the end of the second semester, she requested to terminate her program and then went back to her hometown in China.

**Background.** Her hometown is a second-tier\(^9\), prefecture city in China. She was born in a working class family, both of her parents were labourers before retirement, and she is the only

\(^9\) This is a ranking system that was introduced in the 1980s to facilitate the staged rollout of infrastructure and urban development throughout China. Cities were ranked by tier according to the government's development priorities.
child. Her parents started to work right after the Cultural Revolution and Down to the Countryside Movement\(^\text{10}\), the social disorder and instability during that time made them believe that grasping a skill is essential to survive in any kind of society, so one of them chose to be a lathe worker and the other became a bench worker. Although the social-economic status of her family was low, her parents attached importance to her education. Other than school studies, her father sent her to learn keyboard, dance and Japanese language.

She attended a local elementary and junior high school. For her high school, she was able to enrol in a provincial-level key high school by taking high school entry exams. Her high school was very competitive, and she described it as “non-humane” (Fish, recording 2, p. 4): the homework load was very heavy; she did not get enough sleep every day; and life was filled by quizzes, exams, and rankings. But fortunately, all the hard work paid off, and her score on the National College Entry Exam was adequate enough to get her into a good university in her province.

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\(^{10}\) A policy instituted in the late 1960s and early 1970s in China. During the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao declared certain privileged urban youth would be sent to mountainous areas or farming villages to learn from the workers and farmers there.
Fish described university life as “setting the birds free from the cage” (Fish, recording 2, p. 5). She had a “relaxing and lazy” time there (Fish, recording 2, p. 5). Before graduation, she tried two internships for a short period of time and applied to a college teaching job, she finally decided to become a college teacher.

The provincial Education Department was recruiting teaching volunteers to teach in Thailand; after five years of teaching in the college, Fish signed up to be a volunteer. She was amazed by the advancement of education and teaching ideas and she saw many possibilities for her own career. “I did not want to come back [to China]…but I was not young, I needed to get married…I came back to get married” (Fish, recording 2, p. 5). Her mother introduced a man to her and they started dating. The following year, she married that man and soon conceived a baby.

Inspired by her experience in Thailand, she felt it was necessary for her to improve her skills and knowledge, so she applied to a master’s program, and began to take courses right after she gave birth to her daughter. She was very satisfied with what she learned in that program, because “it combined theory and practice…very useful” (Fish, recording 3, p. 1). Right after completing her master’s degree, she discovered a college-funded program that helped potential applicants
pursue their doctoral studies overseas with the prerequisite that applicants need to get an admission from a university. She decided to try. She went through the application process for both the fellowship and the doctoral program, and received admission from a Canadian university but was unsuccessful in the fellowship competition. Without funding, this admission became “a chicken’s rib” (Fish, recording 3, p. 2)—something not good enough to get excited over, but not bad enough to forego without regret. She struggled for a while, and made up her mind. She sold the condominium she purchased and saved the money as funding for her doctoral study in Canada.

Isaiah: God is my Protector

Isaiah was in a Social Science doctoral program for one year. He responded to me with a deep sigh when I asked him to describe his doctoral experience.

The motivation for Isaiah to come to Canada was his wife. His wife and her family suggested they immigrate to Canada, so by the time he arrived, he was not only a student who had an international background but also a new immigrant who first landed in Canada. Isaiah used to work in the field of Arts in a university in a big city. Terminating his employment in
China, Isaiah realized he needed to do something as a new comer, so before he arrived, he applied to a doctoral program and received admission. For Isaiah, undertaking doctoral study was “to continue [his] profession” and he believes “in a Chinese context, the more you are educated, the brighter your future will be” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 1).

Not long after he arrived in Canada, his wife also came. They settled in a place that required four to five hour’s commute from Isaiah’s university, so he rented a room near the campus and lived there alone. Since his Master’s degree was in English, he did not encounter major problems in terms of language proficiency during study; however, the difficulties arose when he tried to comprehend the readings that were assigned by course instructors. He explained to me that difficulty arose due to the mismatch between his professional background and the domain of his doctoral program. “I had to spend lots of time on the content…I could handle it, but it was hard” (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 1). He also commented that the articles he was required to read and discuss during class time were not practical, “too abstract, not interesting” he said (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 1).

In addition, his supervisor suggested to him that he should practice his English accent: “she

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11 Isaiah said “God is my protector” was the reason for him to name himself.
asked me to correct my accent…accent is actually hard to correct…I went to the language centre seeking help, but they were always busy” (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 1). When thinking about the academic difficulties he encountered all together, he felt “annoyed” (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 1).

After several weeks of study, he started to think about his future. Initially, his plan was after receiving the Ph.D. degree, he wanted to seek a faculty position in North America, so he did a statistical analysis using online resources with the purpose of examining faculty positions that were held by Chinese scholars. He found within Social Science and Humanities domains, only East Asian studies, Linguistics and Education have employed Chinese professors or instructors, but the number was far less than in STEM\textsuperscript{12} disciplines. The results disappointed him. He then started casual conversations with his Canadian peers and classmates. He discovered that all of his Canadian peers had related working experiences, most of them even kept a part-time job or a position while studying, and all of them had some source of income. He was the only self-funded student without any employment position. Furthermore, compared to others, he did not have a research direction. At the same time, when he talked to experienced Chinese immigrants and observed the Chinese communities, he found the majority of immigrants were doing service jobs
or were in the service market. He said, “racism is definitely there…it is hard to get a decent job here” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4). He started to get worried about his future.

After all the observations and analyses, he had a talk with his supervisor and expressed his concerns. His supervisor encouraged him, but that was not enough to comfort him. After talking to another professor in the department, he received information that changing a supervisor might be a solution, so he decided to switch his research focus to a more practical area. He expressed his request to the department to change to a new supervisor and contacted potential supervisors without discussing it in advance with his own supervisor, which triggered a complex situation. As a result of the episode, the relationship between Isaiah and his supervisor became sour.

During the Ph.D. study period, his relationship with his wife was troublesome. Newly immigrated to a new country, his wife needed his support but he could not be around. He also felt bad about himself because “as a man, I had nothing to contribute to my family, to my wife and my parents” (Isaiah, WeChat post; supplemental material). At the same time, his mother frequently complained to him, because she was not willing to let her only son go abroad and be far away from her. “My parents did not understand, and even objected to my immigration

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12 Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
decision” (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 4).

After the first semester, his wife opened a small business. Isaiah went home more frequently in the second semester to help with the business. Gradually, his focus switched to managing the business and maintaining the family relationship. After the second semester, he officially terminated his doctoral studies.

**Background.** Isaiah was born and raised in a town next to a big city in China. His father had a management role in a factory and his mother worked in a school as a staff member. Growing up, his mother was very strict on him. She planned out a path toward success for Isaiah. Education was a big part.

Isaiah was educated by his mother to be diligent and hardworking. But when he was in school, his academic ranking was not outstanding, so his mother changed his focus to non-academic activities; such as Fine Arts. Her philosophy was “better be the head of a chicken than the tail of a phoenix (宁做鸡头不做凤尾)” (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 2). Not like other Chinese students who focus on academic work, Isaiah started to earn some money and do some social work even before he entered university. Following the path designed by his mother, Isaiah
was able to get in a university.

After four years in university, he gave up the opportunity to enroll in a graduate program without examination. He chose to study abroad in an English-speaking country. His first overseas study was quite “determined” (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 4). Although he was hit by language barriers, cultural differences, and loneliness, he was able to finish his program smoothly and even received a decent job offer after finishing his degree. Practical as Isaiah was, he soon found out he would have more options and earn more money if he went back to China, so he went back to a big city, secured a job, paid off his student loan and purchased his own property.

Soon after he settled down in that city, his mother pressured him to get married. He was dating a girl whom his mother did not approve of it. “My mom is controlling” Isaiah admitted (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 5). Then he met his current wife, received approval from both sides of parents, and got married. Not long after the wedding, his wife suggested for them to apply for immigration to Canada. In order to maintain the relationship, Isaiah agreed to this plan.
Jingwei: I’m not Willing to Submit

Jingwei was in a science program. She described her doctoral study experience as “painful” and she felt “ashamed” (Jingwei, recording 1, p. 1). She underestimated the difficulty of doctoral studies, but overestimated her own ability. She also felt ashamed facing her supervisor who offered full funding for her doctoral study.

She started her program smoothly with full funding and care from her supervisor. Since there was not an appropriate course to register in during the first semester, her supervisor assigned her a reading list and asked her to read the literature in their field and think about research ideas or questions. By reading the articles, she familiarized herself with the research field, which was slightly different from her master’s study area; however, she did not come up with her own research direction for a possible project.

The second semester she was busy with three courses and a teaching assistant position, which overwhelmed her. She felt her English was deficient for being a TA, and undergraduate laboratories and tutorials are also different from university teaching and learning in China. She spent quite a lot of time on preparing teaching. At the same time, two seminars and one lecture
course made her feel “I’m not myself, I was not doing well at all” (Jingwei, recording 8, p. 4).

She could not fully understand the weekly readings assigned by the instructors, she recalled:

For one seminar, we did not need to hand in any homework or other assignments, the only thing we had to do was read and attend class. For most cases, while the speaker was talking, my mind was out somewhere else, for two hours every week. (Jingwei, recording 8, p. 4)

She adapted to the lecture course well, because the teaching approach was “traditional” (Jingwei, recording 8, p. 5). But the other seminar was a disaster:

There were only four of us. Every week, we received two articles from the professor, and he assigned us into two groups. One group had to present the articles, the other group had to write a reflection, and take turns the next week. It was extremely intense and tiring. (Jingwei, recording 8, p. 5)

She received a B minus grade for that course, which caused her overall GPA to be lower than the benchmark for full funding, so the Faculty of Graduate Studies decreased her funding. In order to keep alignment with the amount of money on her admission offer, her supervisor paid her extra funding.
By the time she was about to begin her second semester, she started to date her current husband. His presence made her life “not miserable any more” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 1). In her memory, her Ph.D. life before they met was “colorless” and “lonely” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 1). They soon moved in together, and she felt “my academics stayed the same, no progression, but my life was different” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 2). Not long after they moved in together, his parents paid them a visit from China and stayed at their place for one month, which was just before her candidacy exam. Since that was the first time for his parents to visit the city, they were enthusiastic to visit attractions and travel around the area. At the time she felt disappointed and lost motivation for her doctoral study because she was with them “having fun” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 3).

It was time to take the candidacy exam, but she could not come up with her proposal. In her major, doctoral students are required to conduct three projects independently, and those projects have to be connected by a theory or a method. The Candidacy exam is when they submit to the research committee their proposal for the three projects and defend the proposal. However, she only finished a small portion of her first project, and had no idea what to do for the second and
the third. Her supervisor offered to prolong the time to another month, but Jingwei knew she could not complete. “I already gave up before that…I expected this to be happening” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 5). After discussion with her supervisor, they decided she should quit the doctoral program and transfer to a master’s program. “I immediately accepted this decision, I knew I didn’t write the proposal and there was no way for me to finish writing it” (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 5).

**Background.** When I asked her what her motivation to study in Canada was, Jingwei shared her experience in China. Jingwei was born and raised in a small city. The desire of living in a metropolitan city motivated her to apply to a university in a big city and successfully got in. She had a fun and relaxing university time there until she was about to finish her degree and faced the reality. Apparently, she wanted to continue staying in that city; however, without any capital, she found it was hard for a small city girl to live a decent life there. So she made great effort to pass the exam for graduate school, secured a supervisor and successfully stayed there for another three years.

At the second year of her master’s study, her supervisor introduced her to an internship
opportunity at a government-run institute. She was surprised by the bureaucratic environment and strict hierarchical style of work. She recalled that her work supervisor assigned her a heavy workload while browsing random webpages, and she worked hard while her supervisor did little. The interns who had “guanxi”\textsuperscript{13} were treated better with a lighter workload and more opportunities. “This is unfair!” she thought, “this city is either heaven, for those who succeed, or hell, for people who are like me” (Jingwei, recording 2, p. 6). Therefore, after that internship, she began to take English proficiency tests and prepare application materials. She made up her mind to leave that city and leave the country. “If I want to stay here, I have to work very hard, I’d rather work hard in a more fair environment” (Jingwei, recording 2, p. 3). The effort she made for applying to universities overseas finally paid off, and she received an offer with full funding for her doctoral study. At that time, she told herself “I would never come back, this city makes me sick!” (Jingwei, recording 2, p. 6).

Experience in that city changed her life trajectory afterwards. However, before she went to that city, she lived a happy life in her hometown. Her hometown is a third tier city in China. Both

\textsuperscript{13} Guanxi is a central idea in Chinese society. It describes the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence, which means the relationships individuals cultivate with other individuals.
of her parents are teachers. They were living together with her grandparents on her paternal side.

Her mother had some issues with her grandmother during that time. When she was in elementary school, her mother realized that the neighborhood was not a good environment for her upbringing and along with family issues between her mother and her grandma, so her parents made the decision to move to a neighborhood next to a university.

The compulsory education was competitive in her city. One class held around eighty students in one classroom. Education resources were not evenly distributed. Students who had “guanxi” could get access to better classes in better schools. She was able to get into a good junior-high school because her mother worked in the educational field. For high school, students were ranked by their test scores. Jingwei was chosen by the second top high school at her hometown. Other than school education, her mother also arranged some extracurricular classes for her according to her interests, such as piano, pen calligraphy, and painting.

During high school, she once had an opportunity to visit that big city with her aunt. She was amazed by the modernization and advancement of that city. “This is another world!” She sighed (Jingwei, recording 1, p. 6). For the first time, she saw McDonald’s restaurant, grand hotels and
large mansions. “This place is so impressive! I have to come here, I definitely will come here!”

(Jingwei, recording 1, p. 6). After the trip, she had made her decision to go to that city, so by the
time she finished the National College Entry Exam she chose a university in that big city without
any hesitation. “I really really wanted to go” (Jingwei, recording 1, p. 7).

**Zhuangzhou: A Dreamer**

Zhuangzhou was in a successive postgraduate and doctoral program in science for four years.

He described his doctoral study as “romantic” and “painful” (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 6-p. 7).

He viewed the relationship between his major and himself as a romantic but painful one, where
he started from love and longing but ended up feeling disappointed and regretful.

The motivation for him to apply to that program was quite pure: the interest in that subject
itself. During our interview, he spent quite a lot of time talking about how amazing and advanced
that subject is, how it answers the fundamental curiosities of human beings and how it challenges
the extreme of human intelligence. I could sense his passion towards it. After receiving his
bachelor’s degree, he applied to graduate studies right away even without thinking about it. “I
had no doubt that I would become a scientist…there was not a second option in my head”
(Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 7). By the time he was applying, the development of his study field between China and North America was significant. He applied to several universities in the U.S. and Canada respectively and finally decided to take the offer from a Canadian university because of his supervisor. His supervisor was a star scholar in that field. “He was the best student of a very famous scholar in our field; he is shiny”. However, his supervisor had begun to cooperate with an institute in the U.S. by the time Zhuangzhou arrived, and so for the following two years, he spent most of his time in the U.S., which Zhuangzhou described as “the worst timing I could imagine for me to start my program” (Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 6). Therefore, Zhuangzhou started his Ph.D. journey with a remote supervisor.

At the very beginning, he did not encounter many difficulties. Language barriers did exist; however his major does not require high English proficiency “as long as you get the terminology and formulas correct” (Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 7). Unlike other international students who experience loneliness and culture shock, Zhuangzhou admitted to me that he did not experience cultural shock and had no difficulty adapting to his new surroundings.

While his supervisor was away, he finished all the course work. Like Jingwei, Zhuangzhou
was also assigned by his supervisor some literature-reading tasks; however, since Zhuangzhou’s supervisor seldom came back to Canada during Zhuangzhou’s first year, all the reading tasks ended up without feedback and discussion because of this absence. Zhuangzhou also admitted that he had never asked his supervisor for a discussion over phone or Skype, because he knew that his supervisor was busy. “I didn’t want to bother him…He was super busy, and it took days to get his response” (Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 6).

The second year was the time for Zhuangzhou to take his Ph.D. candidacy exam. He was provided with a set of questions that needed to be solved within two hours and then presented to his committee members. He passed the exam but his research was still stagnant. During the post-candidacy time while his supervisor was absent, Zhuangzhou spent a lot of time on his hobbies, such as music and sports. He said, “I could spend my whole day playing” (Zhuangzhou, recording 10, p. 2).

During the summer that year, his supervisor asked him to visit his institute in the U.S., so Zhuangzhou spent his entire summer there. He watched how the famous scholars conducted research and how they formed research ideas which ultimately led to solutions; however, he did
not get the chance to participate. "I guess I was not qualified" he said (Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 4).

The institute he was enrolled in was located outside the university. Therefore, Zhuangzhou was somewhat in an isolated situation. "Everyone was busy with their own business, I was more on the isolated side" (Zhuangzhou, recording 2, p. 1). The university department organized seminars and presentations quite often, and he attended those activities when he first started his program but gradually lost interest.

During his doctoral study period, he married his current wife. They started from a long distance relationship where he was in Canada and she was in China. Two years after he came to Canada, she managed to receive an offer for graduate study in a Canadian university. Soon after she started her program, they decided to get married. However, they were still living in different cities. Zhuangzhou visited his wife on weekends or sometimes she came to visit him. Their relationship was stable and he admitted that she was being supportive for his studies. But as his research had barely any progression, he gradually felt some power imbalance between his wife and himself. "I felt that kind of... from the opposite sex... I felt like I was being looked down
upon, which was deeply from her heart…” (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 2).

Four years after Zhuangzhou came to Canada for his Ph.D., he made the final decision to quit. He felt that his research was not rewarding. He constantly compared himself with his supervisor and other famous scholars and felt hopeless. His dream of becoming a scientist finally came to an end.

**Background.** Growing up, Zhuangzhou was an intelligent child. He was born in a middle class family in a second tier city in China. His mother was strict on him. She seldom praised him but scolded and even beat him using slippers that were made from hard plastic. In our casual conversation, Zhuangzhou shared one episode that his mother beat him using the slippers and the pattern of the slipper sole imprinted on his face. He felt so embarrassed and did not dare to go out. However, his mother invested a lot of money in her son’s education:

My mom thought differently than others. Not every kid around me was put into those after-class, extracurricular trainings and activities by their parents. But I attended a lot of classes, such as painting, violin, chess, calligraphy etc. I learned almost everything she could afford me to. (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3)
In order for Zhuangzhou to receive a good education, the entire family moved to another city that had better middle schools. Since they were not residents in that city, his parents paid a special “School Selection Fee” to successfully get him in. Zhuangzhou enjoyed his high school time mostly because he encountered a good teacher. He kept telling me that that teacher, who taught Chinese language and literacy was one of the most important persons in his life simply because he received much “reward” from her. That teacher’s positive feedback and praise was the motivation for Zhuangzhou to keep trying and working hard. The interaction between that teacher was an ideal model—something that he did not get from his mother but worked effectively to motivate him to study.

After graduating from high school as a successful student, he successfully enrolled in a top university. Along the “good student path”, he registered in classes across disciplines and tried to learn as much as possible. He deeply loved his major and always held that dream to become a scientist. After four years in university, he applied to a graduate program overseas without hesitation.
Conclusion

Above are the stories of my four research participants. In this chapter I outlined profiles of each participant and provided context of their experiences in the hope to give readers the background information of each participant. As I explained earlier in this chapter, the stories were structured as a circle, which started with their experiences in the doctoral program and moved to their prior experiences in China and ended at the point in time which their doctoral studies began. These profiles not only attempt to connect the readers with the stories of the participants but also to help bring their words to light as the findings. In the following chapter, the findings from the data will be presented.
Chapter Five

Summary of Emergent Themes

In the previous chapter I presented the stories of each individual participant. This chapter presents findings that are organized by themes, which emerged from the data analysis process that was described in chapter three. 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. Codes were first grouped after first cycle coding, and then synonyms and related concepts were compared, synthesized, reconsidered and some were recoded during second cycle coding. Four major themes were determined in this way.

The four major themes are:

- Academic interactions and integration
- Relationship with the supervisor
- Departmental interactions and integration
- Partnership and the perception of gender role
- Family of origin and the importance of education
- Education differences between China and Canada

Table 5-1. Summary of themes

Among them, the theme “academic interactions and integration” has two subthemes: relationship with the supervisor and departmental interactions and integration. In the remainder of this
chapter, each theme will be presented in details mainly using participants’ words.

**Academic Interactions and Integration**

All the participants talked at length about their experiences that happened in academic settings during their doctoral studies. From the data, two sub-themes emerged under this major theme, which are: their relationship with the supervisor and departmental interactions and integration.

**Relationship with the supervisor.** 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). All of my research participants talked about their supervisory relationship as a major component of their doctoral study. Whereas some of them expressed positive emotions toward their supervisors, such as admiration, not all of them were able to maintain an effective and positive relationship with their supervisors, which impacted their studies negatively.

Jingwei described her supervisor as “a charming and humorous guy” (Jingwei, recording 6,
p. 1). “He and his wife would invite us [students] for a Christmas lunch at a pub every year before Christmas and a dinner at his home every summer” (Jingwei, recording 6, p.1). Both Jingwei and Zhuangzhou viewed their supervisors as role models:

This person is very…when he is not on the research mode, he has a good sense of humour and enthusiasm of enjoying life, but when he switches to research mode, he is scrupulous about details and very strict and rigorous. So I wish I could be a person like him, I probably would finish my Ph.D. if I were like that. (Jingwei, recording 6, p. 1)

Zhuangzhou expressed a similar feeling toward his supervisor: “My feeling toward my supervisor is complicated. I really liked him as a person. He is extremely focused on his research. I wanted to become him. He was nice to me, and he didn’t give up on me” (Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 7). He mentioned several times during our interviews how he admired his supervisor:

I can’t help but compare myself with him. My fantasy toward [his major] is I could come up with something, something that could make me happy…at least do something as my
supervisor does would make me happy. But I’m not like him, I wish I could become someone like him, I really do. (Zhuangzhou, recording 2, p. 5)

Fish did not express any admiration toward her supervisor, but she mentioned appreciation:

My supervisor was nice, and I really want to thank him. Because I was hesitant when I first got my offer…I had a family, child, and stable work…but he [her supervisor] encouraged me. He was approachable. He told me where Chinatown is, local areas where Chinese people were more prevalent…he provided me much guidance, and he helped me to plan my study. (Fish, recording 1, p. 5)

Isaiah also said his supervisor encouraged him and “provided specific guidance” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4). However, 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 semester he decided to change to a more practical research area. He talked to a professor with some authority in the department. That professor encouraged him by saying “you totally can do it…this is a free country…and that [changing supervisor] is your right” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4). So he expressed his willingness to change supervisors to his own supervisor.
Meanwhile, he contacted other professors, but not a single one responded. At the same time, the professor who encouraged him also “kept some distance intentionally” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 6).

Soon after, the graduate student advisor intervened. “The graduate advisor’s words were harsh…‘what’s your plan for the next term? Now you stirred up this trouble…you could continue, but we don’t know if your supervisor would accept you or not, or you could choose to quit’…it was direct, not many language modifiers” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 6).

When talking about this experience to me, Isaiah expressed his understanding of the situation as one of power dynamics: “Some misunderstandings were there…that graduate advisor was correct, you will have to secure a supervisor before you leave this one…you see professors are practical too, power was there. Actually, that episode indeed influenced me” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4). “That experience…you could see class, hierarchy between different classes…” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 4).

After “stirring up trouble,” Isaiah wrote an apology card to his supervisor and expressed his willingness to continue studying with her. He was able to continue for another term with his original supervisor. He officially left his studies after the second term, and he sent an email to his
supervisor to explain and apologize again, but did not receive a response.

For Zhuangzhou, having a star scholar as a supervisor was not always beneficial:

…he is one of the founders of this research area. By the time I arrived, he just started a cooperative project with [X] University [in the United States]. For the following two years, he didn’t spend much time in Canada. This fact caused some issues…At the early stage of their project, their circle [scholars who were in that project] was very small…it was hard for me and other students to join in. So the group consisted of him [his supervisor], one professor from [X] university and his two students, that’s it. They were very close.

(Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 6)

Zhuangzhou described it as “the worst timing” to start his program (Zhuangzhou, recording 1, p. 6). When his supervisor was in the U.S., he did not contact Zhuangzhou very often, and seldom contacted him when he was in Canada (Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 6). He 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…and after two years, my boss spent more time
here compared to before and I went to his office more often, then I kind of knew how to do it

[research]…(Zhuangzhou, recording 2, p. 4)

In the second year of his study, his supervisor invited him to visit [X] University in the U.S. But he did not participate in the project discussion. When I asked for the reason, Zhuangzhou said:

“probably because we [he and other peers] were not qualified…and if we participated, they’d have to add our names [on the paper that would be published later]…(Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 4).

During our interview, I was curious about why Zhuangzhou did not change to another supervisor who was based at his university, and he told me: “I didn’t think this way…and from a utilitarian perspective, my boss is the founder of this [research] area. He has high status…”

(Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 5).

Zhuangzhou kept mentioning that he is the type of person that needs to be rewarded to continue doing something, so I asked what kind of negative feedback his supervisor provided to him. He said:

His absence itself was negative feedback. The most severe one…and a base…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, recording 5, p. 4).

As the only student that was provided full funding by her supervisor in that academic year, Jingwei and her supervisor maintained a smooth relationship. When she first started her program, her supervisor assigned her some reading. Still in the stage of figuring out the learning culture in a new country, Jingwei did not know how to communicate with her supervisor, but her supervisor broke the ice. He set due dates:

…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)

Jingwei attributed the good relationship partially to her Chinese background:

…we say ‘Zun Shi Zhong Jiao (尊师重教)”14 in China, so I know, I shouldn’t aggressively challenge his [her supervisor’s] ideas, although I might feel his ideas were not understandable, I wouldn’t challenge him… after all, it’s your supervisor, your teacher, he asked you to do it… teachers are always correct… so I would try his ideas, and it was always fantastic… (Jingwei, recording 11, p. 3)

When Jingwei decided to give up, her supervisor suggested that she change to a master’s program and said it in a euphemistic way. He said:

… ‘I know you already have a Master degree, are you interested in getting another one?

Your first project is almost done. Do you want to make something out of it? That should be enough for a master’s degree.’ And I agreed. (Jingwei, recording 7, p. 5)

Therefore, when I asked her to use words to describe her experience in that doctoral program, she told me “painful” and “shameful” (Jingwei, recording 6, p. 1). She felt ashamed when thinking about her supervisor.
For Fish, the relationship with her supervisor was smooth as well. When she decided to leave the program, she went to see her supervisor:

…I felt sorry, and my supervisor felt disappointed. But he understood me and supported my decision. I told him my reasons; he agreed with me. And he said finding a job in [their city] is not easy, very competitive. He also said as a foreigner, I would have to make more effort when competing with the locals for the same work position. (Fish, recording 1, p. 10)

**Departmental interactions and integration.** For doctoral students, social interaction with one’s peers and faculty is closely linked to one’s academic development (Cockrell & Shelley, 2010; Tinto, 1993). Among my participants, not everyone experienced a friendly, supportive departmental environment. Fish complained to me that: “…nobody came to welcome me as a new student…not many peers…my supervisor had a couple of students, but the age difference was huge between me and them. There was really nothing to talk about…not much warmth” (Fish, recording 1, p. 6).

For Isaiah, he was able to make some friends with his classmates: “I had communication with some international students, and also chatted with some local mature students” (Isaiah,
recording 1, p. 6). He also attended some workshops and exhibitions that were held on campus, but for most of the time, he would rush home after classes to accompany his wife.

Different from Fish and Isaiah, the department environments for Jingwei and Zhuangzhou were engaging and supportive. Jingwei felt her department created a warm atmosphere for students. She mentioned the personnel:

...you know our secretary, she’s awesome! We had more than one hundred graduate students in our department, she knew everybody’s name! ...She’s very nice too. Every time when you have something, some questions, she would solve it... ‘Just leave it there, I’ll do the rest’ she said...She really supported you from a non-academic perspective. (Jingwei, recording 6, p. 3)

Speaking of the academic environment, Jingwei indicated that his department had seminars every Tuesday. The department would invite scholars from different places to present their research. They also have what they called “curriculum” every two weeks for graduate students to present their own research.

...this [the Curriculum] was an opportunity to practice [presenting]. And for others, they got
to open their horizons, to see what kind of research other people were doing. It may inspire you…and provide feedback to the presenter…this is the academic support our department provided to us. (Jingwei, recording 6, p. 3)

In addition to that, the department also offered other types of activities to promote communication between students and faculties:

Every Tuesday morning, we would have this coffee time…around one hour…Our department provided coffee, and people could talk about whatever they wanted …you didn’t need to talk about academic stuff every time when you met people…and Fridays, we had “Pizza Friday.” We would go to buy pizza and share for lunch…and “Friday beer” too.

Graduate students would go to [an on-campus restaurant] and have dinner together…and [there was] “Bike Walk week,” where everybody rides bicycles or walks to school and records the distance. (Jingwei, recording 6, p. 3)

For Zhuangzhou, he also mentioned seminars that were held by his department. He used “extremely large” and “endless” to describe the number of seminars (Zhuangzhou, recording 10, p. 1). In their department, they also had “Curriculum” every week, and “weekly seminar” for
graduate students. He attended some of them during the first two years of his study.

From the interview, I could tell some participants enjoyed and appreciated the activities that were held by their departments while others complained about being left out.

**Partnership and the Perception of Gender Role**

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). All of my participants were born in the 1980s, 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:

The most important aspect of this [Ph.D.] degree actually was immigration for me. Because they [the Canadian government] had a policy: once you get your Ph.D. degree, you are eligible to apply for citizenship directly. At that time I thought it was important to get this
degree, immigrate to Canada. Because education there is good for my child…(Fish, recording 1, p. 2)

She mentioned the reason for her to transfer her doctoral study to a master’s program was also immigration: “In order to get a job sooner…because I figured out [with] a master’s degree [an international student] is also eligible to apply for citizenship, and it only takes two years to finish [master’s study]…” (Fish, recording 1, p. 9).

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,
She also emphasized she paid more attention to her daughter’s education than her husband: “I paid attention to the development of her intelligence; I tried different ways to trigger her interest in studying… I’m the mother” (Fish, recording 3, p. 7).

Fish’s marriage was arranged by her mother. She thought her husband and she were “Men Dang Hu Dui (門當戶對)\textsuperscript{15}, so she married him. 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 on WeChat, sporadically” (Fish, recording 1, p. 6). According to Fish, that complicated situation was caused by the intervention of her mother-in-law. Her husband supported her decision to come to Canada at the very beginning when she first received an offer, but he changed his mind because of his mother:

He [her husband] told our relatives and friends that I was going to study abroad, and his mother was outraged… because if I left, my daughter had to be taken care of by her… and the most important aspect was she didn’t want to become a lonely elder… she was furious and

\textsuperscript{15} This phrase is used to describe a marriage between families of equal social rank and social status.
kept complaining to my husband…Gradually, he started to object too. (Fish, recording 3, p. 2)

2) Fish explained to me: “His mother was worried that I might take her son to Canada…as a single mother, she didn’t want to be left out…” (Fish, recording 1, p.7). “My husband and his mother bonded together tightly. She really spoils my husband” (Fish, recording 1, p. 1).

After Fish went back to China, her mother-in-law passed away. After she died, the relationship between Fish and her husband became better: “…she [her mother-in-law] passed away, which means his [her husband’s] focus was all switched to our small family, so all the issues were solved…our own family became tight and united…” (Fish, recording 1, p. 1).

However, while Fish was in Canada, her mother-in-law was responsible for taking care of her husband and her daughter. Facing this conflict, Fish finally decided to abandon her studies and go back home. “Otherwise [if Fish continued] 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: “…[came to Canada] because of relationship…because she [his wife] wanted to stay overseas…” (Isaiah,
recording 5, p. 2). 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:

“…[relationship with his wife] actually [was] not very good…it was just not good…because …

[I] didn’t fully focus on family…for example, she would complain…I felt bad myself too.

Materially, I made no contribution…” (Isaiah, recording 2, p. 2-3).

As a newly wed couple, Isaiah and his wife had not formed their own nuclear family yet, in the adaptation process, the intervention from their original families made things even more complicated: “The issue with my wife, her family and me was, I think we got married, formed a new family. You could communicate, talk over, something, but not everything. Some things shouldn’t be discussed with parents…” (Isaiah, recording 6, p. 7). “My wife and my mother certainly would have issues too. Separating oneself from his/her original family would certainly cause problems” (Isaiah, recording 6, p. 7). He further explained:

…it was my wife’s family who wanted us to [come to Canada]. My parents couldn’t understand. I personally understand my parents. I had a decent job, had some extra income, it was all good, high annual income…they [his parents] rejected [his plan to stay in
Canada]…plus I’m their son, you know Chinese parents, the only son, far away from home…(Isaiah, recording 2, p. 4)

He continued:

Specifically speaking, my mother is contradictory. My father is relatively open-minded. On one hand, my mother supports me…she thinks because I’m a married man, and I should live a good life with my wife. On the other hand, she suffers, inside her heart she couldn’t bear it. She comes to me and complains: ‘why did you go so far?’…My wife knows that too…(Isaiah, recording 3, p. 1)

It’s important to note that Isaiah’s mother “approved” of his current wife. He had a girlfriend before who was originally from another part of China and his mother strongly objected. She wanted a local girl to be her daughter-in-law. So Isaiah set some standards for choosing a wife, which included that the girl had to be local, from a similar family background, and had to be “Men Dang Hu Dui (门当户对)” (of equal status) with him. Other than the affection, Isaiah and his wife’s marriage also fit his standards. 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\textsuperscript{16}…(Isaiah, recording 2, p. 3)

While Isaiah was suffering from the gap between his wife and his mother, he also had to deal with the intervention of his mother-in-law. At that time, his wife’s family supported them to open a business. He soon found himself busy helping with the business. So Isaiah wrote an email to his supervisor and his department to terminate his studies.

On one WeChat post Isaiah wrote several months after he withdrew from study, he said:

I’m not going back to China. I just want to say fighting for one’s dream has to be based on reality…maybe I’m getting old, not fearless anymore, maybe I want to focus more on family…the only thing I know is: as a son, a husband, I have to earn money, I have to shoulder those responsibilities. Dreams should be based on the reality. 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

\textsuperscript{16} In Chinese culture, “loss of face” means suffering from embarrassment, feeling shame, or humiliation.
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 changed:

…lots of fun between us. For example, if I cook something, there is another person that appreciates it, so I don’t have to eat alone. I have someone to talk to…we went to some restaurants that I’ve always wanted to try…or some places I didn’t dare to go myself. I was afraid of getting lost, but now we go everywhere together…(Jingwei, recording 7, p. 2)

During that summer when Jingwei should have been preparing for her candidacy examinations, her husband’s parents visited them. Jingwei spent most of her time accompanying them sightseeing.

At the same time, her parents started to kindly urge her to get married because they had been living together. To explain why her parents urged her to get married she said: “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). “You will
have to get married, sooner or later…I’d rather do it sooner to clear my ear [from getting urged],
to make my parents stop nagging…” (Jingwei, recording 9, p. 2). But she had her own scruples.

Her husband’s family’s social status is better than hers. She thought her husband was dating her
because of the fact that she was a Ph.D. student: “When we first started dating, I was a doctoral
student. So what if the main reason for him to date me was this Ph.D. title?” (Jingwei, recording
3, p. 4-5). She soon figured out two facts: one was her husband confirmed he did not care about
the Ph.D. title; the other one was that the Canadian government changed its immigration policy,
which meant that “special immigration stream” Ph.D. candidates could no longer apply for
permanent residency. At this time, 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.

After withdrawing from her doctoral studies, her boyfriend’s parents were happy about that
decision, because she could have more time to take care of their son, and they thought the
relationship between Jingwei and her boyfriend would be more stable. Her own parents also
thought that was the time for them to get married:
My parents knew it was not easy for me to be here myself, and they knew I had life difficulties…so they only kindly mentioned [the need to get married]. So I spoke to [my boyfriend] and said we would get married anyway. We are not those people who don’t want to get married, is that right? If so, let’s get married. (Jingwei, recording 9, p. 2)

So they got married after she left her doctoral studies.

Zhuangzhou was reluctant to talk about his marriage because by the time we conducted the interviews he and his wife had been separated for quite some time. For the most part, he analyzed the reasons for the separation. He first denied the relationship with his wife was an important part in his life: “My relationship never occupied much of my life…it’s just complicated…” (Zhuangzhou, recording 3, p. 2). They were university schoolmates and started dating while studying in university in China. By the time of graduation, Zhuangzhou decided to pursue his dream to become a scientist, so he applied to universities in North America without considering the relationship with his wife who was his girlfriend back then:

…I always wanted to be a scientist starting from my childhood, and I’ve never thought about that carefully but I’ve never doubted that…I didn’t think much about that [relationship], I
thought she probably would go abroad too…she didn’t say she would apply, but we said we would continue this dating relationship…(Zhuangzhou, recording 3, p. 3)

Two years later after he started his doctoral study, she successfully received an offer from a Canadian university and started her Ph.D. Soon after she settled down in Canada, they decided to get married. Zhuangzhou admitted that he “didn’t think much” about getting married back then (Zhuangzhou, recording 3, p. 4). Their marriage received approval from their parents, although at first Zhuangzhou’s mother did not support this decision because somehow she did not like his fiancé.

Their relationship model was relatively independent with both of them working on their own studies in different cities. They would visit each other during weekends. Contrary to what Zhuangzhou defined as an “independent” relationship (Zhuangzhou, recording 4, p. 4), several episodes he described during our interviews revealed his real thoughts and feelings. For instance, his wife was first enrolled in an exchange program at his university, but she applied to a doctoral program in another university in another city. When talking to me about this episode, Zhuangzhou said: “actually I had some emotions and was being moody [because she chose
another city], and I had to calm myself down…” (Zhuangzhou, recording 4, p. 4).

In addition to that, while his research was stagnant, but her studies were going well, this fact affected his view of his masculinity:

…it broke the balance, the balance we had before. So I felt that imbalance, and our relationship started to change…what I want to express is, just, I experienced those changes…which means, I didn’t receive perfect, flawless support [from her], which is impossible [to receive perfect support]. (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 3)

He also shared with me a critical incident that I mentioned in the last chapter, 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. 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…a man [meaning himself] at that time thought extremely…I couldn’t stop thinking that way…I felt that kind of…from the opposite sex…that kind of …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)

I continued asking how it affected his relationship, and Zhuangzhou told me: “The image she had had of me had changed. I felt like I was a patient, lying in bed for a couple years, and at the beginning, she took care of me…but day by day, she got annoyed, impatient…” (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 2).

Zhuangzhou finally withdrew from his doctoral studies. He reflected on his relationship during our interview and said: “Not everything was caused by that Ph.D., but actually, it started from there…I had my own problems, but that Ph.D. thing probably has shaken our relationship… the relationship evolved on its own, so I think the rest [leading to their separation] was its evolution” (Zhuangzhou, recording 5, p. 4).

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.

For Fish, both of her parents were labourers. They were working for state-owned factories
before the State Owned Enterprises reform. During the period when China changed from a planned economy to a market economy, profits gradually decreased in those state-owned factories; therefore, her parents applied to be “laid-off workers” and started to work part-time for privately-owned hotels and other places. By doing part-time labour jobs, her parents afforded education for Fish until she graduated from university. She told me:

My dad paid high attention to my studies from my childhood. Even though they are labourers, but their thinking was advanced. When I was little, they sent me to learn keyboard, dance…when I was in grade 5 or 6, my dad’s friend introduced him to a part-time job in a travel agency. My dad found that learning a second language is important…he thought it was too late for him to learn a second language, so he sent me to learn Japanese…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.’

(Fish, recording 2, p. 3)

What her father said turned out to be partially correct. Fish did not continue her Japanese learning but instead chose another second language—English—as her university major and
received a certificate to be a tour guide before she was about to graduate.

When she returned from Thailand, where she had undertaken volunteer teaching, she decided to continue her education and applied to a master’s program; however, she got pregnant before that program began. She delivered her daughter one month before school started. At that time, her parents fully supported her by taking care of her baby girl and let her focus on studying. When she decided to apply for doctoral study overseas, her husband and her mother-in-law all showed disapproval, but her own parents still supported her pursuing education. “The more education you receive, the higher social status you can achieve, and also more options for you for sure,” she said to me (Fish, recording 1, p. 3).

Isaiah also believes “the more education you receive, the more outlets you will get in the future” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 1). Growing up, his mother was strict on him: “My mother was strict on me, she had specific plans for me. She asked me to do this, learn that…” (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 1). When I asked what kind of plans she had for him, and Isaiah further explained: “…nothing special, but work hard on study, make great effort…” (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 1). But his mother soon found her son was not good at academics. Born in a small town, Isaiah recalled
there were seldom places for extracurricular training; education resources were distributed unevenly. However, Isaiah still went to a training class for an extracurricular activity:

I was interested in learning that… and another aspect is, when I was in high school, she [his mother] thought my academic score was not good enough. At that time, in China, people think when your academic performance is just average, you could go for practicing arts or sports to get in a good university. ‘Better be the head of a chicken than the tail of a phoenix (宁做鸡头不做凤尾)’. That was her strategy. She was very strategic. (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 2)

Following the path designed by his mother, Isaiah was able to get into a good university. When Isaiah was in university, his mother asked him to join the Communist Party, and apply to be one of the student cadres and apply for a scholarship:

…when I was in university, [she] planned out everything for me step by step, such as joining the Party… she was right… and I also became a student cadre… got a postgraduate recommendation\(^\text{17}\), got a position within the university directly after graduation. I really appreciate my mother’s strategy. (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 2)
However, Isaiah gave up the opportunity to be directly enrolled in graduate school and held down the job when he chose to study for a master’s overseas. “I was being an idealist, I just wanted to go out and see the world” (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 4). His parents fully supported him, and borrowed some money for his expenses:

I had some savings. But the major part [of money] was from my parents. They borrowed the money from others. Because the expense was big, my saving was only [amount of money], my parents borrowed [three times his saving]. In this way, I went out to study abroad. (Isaiah, recording 4, p. 4)

For Jingwei, starting from elementary school, she was sent to extracurricular classes based on her interests. She had learned piano, calligraphy, and painting. When she was born, her family lived in a neighbourhood that her mother thought was “not good for Jingwei’s development” (Jingwei, recording 1, p. 2).

…that was like “Meng’s Mother Moved Three Times (孟母三迁).” That place was my grandpa’s [on her father’s side]…the neighbourhood was full of those laid-off workers,

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17 Students who have postgraduate recommendation could directly get into graduate school without any examination.
18 Mencius' mother moved her home three times to better her son's education.
railway workers...those people lived by their parents’ pensions...those people couldn’t educate kids well. My mom thought that hanging out with those kids everyday was not good.

That environment was not good for me...(Jingwei, recording 1, p. 2)

So her parents borrowed money from their relatives and moved to a neighbourhood where university teachers and staff lived.

When Jingwei was in the last year of her junior high school, her school decided to re-organize all the classes in their grade because of a shortage of teachers. When her mother heard this news, she contacted the vice-principal of that school, who was her college classmate. She tried to arrange for Jingwei to enter a class with good teachers and better students. So Jingwei was able to get into a relatively good class for the last year of her junior high school and it was time to prepare for the high school entry exam.

Every parent knows high school is important because it directly links to university. Usually, students go to the high school that is near the place they live. The place Jingwei and her family lived belonged to school district X; however, her mother thought schools in the district Y were better. Luckily, her mother worked as a teacher in district Y, so she made an effort to move
Jingwei from district X to Y because of a preferential policy for teachers. However, she could not get Jingwei into the top high school, so Jingwei entered the second best school in that city.

Growing up, Jingwei was not allowed to go out to play before finishing reading:

…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)

When Jingwei finished taking the National College Entry Exams, the whole family sat together discussing the pros and cons of each major that she was interested in, considering she really wanted to go to that big city, “my parents made the final decision for me” she said (Jingwei, recording 1, p. 7). Thus, Jingwei successfully went to that big city for her university study and her parents paid for her.

Similar to Jingwei, Zhuangzhou also had a “Meng’s Mother Moved Three Times (孟母三迁)” experience. He told me:
My parents really put high importance on education. That’s why we moved to X [name of a city]... we wanted to enter the best school there, but that school was really challenging to get in... [school] wouldn’t accept me even with [extra] money [offered by his parents]... unless you have guanxi, or you know somebody, but we knew nobody... (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3)

The city they first moved to was not a success, so they tried the neighbouring city:

... the city next to [name] had a really good school, junior high school and high school together ... they let me in with some extra money...and I went there...I was there until I finished my high school...(Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3)

He further added: “It reveals no matter how, they need you to be in a better place [school], they were really insisted on that” (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3).

Zhuangzhou enjoyed and appreciated the way he was educated:

...my early education, my mom, the way she thought about my education was different from people around me...I attended a lot of extracurricular classes, learned a lot of things. I learned drawing, I learned violin, chess, and calligraphy...it was like, I basically learned
everything that was available there... so when I grew up, compared to other kids who are also from small cities... I know more, I'm more knowledgeable... (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3)

When I asked him “did you hate being forced to move around?” He answered: “No, I really like studying” (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 3). He confirmed he enjoyed being able to learn more, going to a better school, having the opportunity to climb to the top.

**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. I will present these differences together under this theme here.

Majoring in social science, Fish told me Canadian classrooms feature a lot of discussions and not much lecturing, which requires high English proficiency and she felt it was too intense. In addition to that, the requirement for writing is also different:

… the Chinese way of writing papers is completely different from the Canadian way… the
way of thinking and approaching [the topic]...the Chinese way is basically syllogism, you raise a question at the beginning, and then write your support and give a conclusion at the end, that’s it...(Fish, recording 1, p. 4)

She continued on with the Canadian way:

... [Canadian] writing is different. It emphasizes you need to have a theory for every part of your writing from the very beginning. We don’t really need that in Chinese writing...that thing [Canadian way] I think, you need a theory and then your opinions have to be based on that theory...you need references...(Fish, recording 1, p. 4)

Fish admitted writing was a huge part in her doctoral program and it was not easy for her to adapt to Canadian writing expectations: “You only need to state your own ideas in the Chinese way, but you need references and theory to support you step by step in the Canadian way” she concluded (Fish, recording 1, p. 4).

Also, she mentioned her classes focused on philosophy, especially Western philosophy. She was confused because “in China, we only talk about Marxism-Leninism, we don’t learn Western philosophy ... I studied Western philosophy for one year [of her doctoral program], it was
One of Fish’s motivations to apply to doctoral study in Canada was immigration. In her mind, education in Canada was “better” than in China because the Chinese way of teaching and learning failed to help students understand the joy of learning new knowledge. She described Chinese education as a “Duck-stuffing” type of teaching (Fish, recording 2, p. 4). The purpose of education was training students to become “screws,” which could work for the construction of Socialism (Fish, recording 3, p. 2). Being a mother, she wanted her daughter to receive a happy education. However, after experiencing and observing Canadian education, she changed her views. She felt Western style education was overly promoted in China. She commented: “…those [Canadian] kids, can’t bear hardship or stand hard work, lack self-discipline … on the contrary, Chinese students, those who grew up in the Chinese educational system, they are more likely willing to bear suffering. So those [Chinese] kids will be more successful” (Fish, recording 3, p. 3). “Exam-orientated education [in China] is not necessarily bad…it shapes you…compared to happy education [in Canada] without purpose…it trains you to stand suffering and hard work (Fish, recording 3, p. 4).
Isaiah also noticed differences but from other perspectives. He shared with me that he had noticed that in his program, students who were Canadians, or local students, were usually older than international Chinese students:

…they [local students] are older, and more practical … they only come back to school when they feel they need to continue studying … they all have work experiences …on the contrary, Chinese students go directly from Bachelor’s to Master’s to Ph.D., not practical…they [local students] will not do this [doctoral study] without funding…only our Chinese, do it like this [without jobs or having to depend on parents]…(Isaiah, recording 1, p. 7)

He felt Canadian education provides students with more options and cultivated students’ multiple interests; therefore, after high school study, students have other options. On the contrary, the Chinese way of education only emphasizes schooling: “basically, every one goes to university—the only path” (Isaiah, recording 8, p. 7). “…[in Canada] social work is also a type of education, and you could drop out from college to do other things, that is also a type of education…however in China, dropout is certainly not good…”(Isaiah, recording 8, p. 7).

He also mentioned the relationship between students and between students and teachers are
also different, which could also impact education practice.

Like Fish, Isaiah also commented that Chinese people and Chinese students are more persistent: “…one [characteristic of Chinese students] is hard working and the other one is persistent, these are from our culture … in North America, we are the ‘model minority,’ we have really successful learners who have these attributes…” (Isaiah, recording 8, p. 7).

Jingwei talked at length about the differences between education in China and Canada. She first 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 this and that that.’ Very specific…(Jingwei, recording 2, p. 1)

She continued on the topic of study on one’s own:

…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. So different than in China…(Jingwei, recording 2, p. 1)

Echoed by Isaiah, Jingwei also complained Chinese education only provided students with one outlet:

…[Chinese education] only let you see one point: pass the National College Entry Exam and get into colleges…my parents educated me that: ‘you need to go to the college, then you will have a job; if you can’t get into one, you will have to go sell junk.”19 But when you’re grown up, things are not like that… (Jingwei, recording 4, p. 1)

Jingwei enjoyed how teachers design activities to engage students in hands-on, discovery-based approaches to teach students in Canada and she thought:

… if I had learned this class this way in my undergraduate time, I would remember it better, my score would be better … [because] the activities let you feel, use your sensation, and you would discover the theory by yourself; instead of telling you the theory directly and asking

19 In Chinese context, “sell junk” is used to describe people who are in the lowest social status, and they sell junk and garbage for living.
you to remember everything…(Jingwei, recording 8, p. 2)

She summarized the differences as: “Western style education emphasizes the overall logic, it focuses on the reasoning; but Chinese style is more like infusion, it tells you the facts and asks you to remember what the teacher says” (Jingwei, recording 8, p. 2-3).

However, she also admitted that the Chinese way of learning also brought her benefits. For example, she mentioned she was really good at taking notes, and after the class she would analyze her notes, which made her remember the knowledge points more easily. Compared to her Canadian peers, she remembers more formulas, so every time when they needed formulas, she was the one who responded the quickest: “you need longer time to check the formula if you don’t remember, but you don’t always have time to check” (Jingwei, recording 11, p. 2).

For Zhuangzhou, he noticed some differences from his perspective:

One thing I have noticed is that they [Canadian teachers] encourage students to do assignments together, at least in my area. This is impossible in China. When you do homework together in China, you basically copy each other, which is considered cheating. They won’t allow you to do that. This is really interesting! (Zhuangzhou, supplemental
He further made his interpretation:

I think it reveals different teaching mindsets. I think Chinese teachers would think you [students] copy others, because you don’t know how to do it [homework], and it’s all your fault. But Canadian teachers would encourage teamwork and they believe students can learn something from their peers. As long as they eventually know how to do it, I guess it doesn’t really matter whether they learned it from the teacher or from other sources. (Zhuangzhou, supplemental material)

Also, he thought Chinese basic education fails to teach students how to finish a whole project and how to manage time:

…I want to emphasize one point: the Chinese way of education cuts your time into small pieces and tells you what to do within each small time pieces…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’m still learning … 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? … for the past ten years, I didn’t do well on this aspect. (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 5)

He also noticed Canadian classrooms have more interactive activities to engage students compared to Chinese classrooms; however, he thought this phenomenon has its own explanation: the huge population in China and limited educational resources: “… the objective reality constrains education. Think about the educational resources per person, [with a huge population] it is hard for China to achieve [the Canadian interactive education way]” (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 4).

Similar to other research participants, Zhuangzhou also mentioned Chinese students are not aware of other life options compared to Canadian students:

…it [Chinese fundamental education] fails to make students aware that they have options and possibilities other than school study. You [Chinese fundamental education] should let students be aware of that. Not a single part in the whole education system tells you other possibilities. It only accentuates the importance of school study…it makes students feel depressed. (Zhuangzhou, recording 7, p. 4)
By comparison, he thought Canadian education is different:

I think Canadian education is different. I didn’t receive k-12 education in Canada, but in terms of higher education, there are lots of Canadian students switching majors halfway. Other than that, the hierarchy between students is not completely built on academic scores. Specifically, in China, low-score students are discriminated against to some extent no matter why they have low scores. But in Canada, this situation is not commonly seen. Being a club leader or something could make a student become a star student still. (Zhuangzhou, supplemental material)

He also commented that: “…the career guidance that is provided in the education system in Canada is more practical and the implementation is put into the right place. Students have more internship opportunities, and the whole system is more tolerant of the diversity of students” (Zhuangzhou, supplemental material).

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the themes that were emerged during data analysis. Academic interactions and integration, partnership and the perception of gender role, family of origin and
the importance of education and the differences in education between China and Canada were discussed respectively. In the following chapter, the findings presented in this chapter will be discussed within the context of existing academic literature.
Chapter Six

Discussion

The purpose of this study is: to understand Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from graduate study before degree completion. Chinese international doctoral students who had enrolled in Canadian universities but left their studies before degree completion were invited to share their educational experiences prior to and during their stay in Canada as international doctoral students. I was especially interested in exploring the role that Chinese culture might play in their withdrawal decisions. After the first and second cycles of coding, various themes arose in the participants’ narratives. In this chapter, I discuss each of the following themes with reference to the literature: academic interactions and integration; partnership and the perception of gender role; family of origin and the importance of education; and education differences between China and Canada.

Academic Interactions and Integration

The first theme that arose across the participants’ interviews is the interaction between international doctoral students and their supervisors, instructors, peers, and other departmental
staff and the integration to the departmental environment. In particular, the relationship with supervisors was mentioned as the biggest component of the research participants’ academic life in Canada, regardless of whether it was a positive experience or a negative one for them. Two of my participants shared positive experiences indicating that they received support and guidance from their supervisors during the study period.

In graduate study in general, supervisors are expected to provide their expertise, be available to the student, guide the student to obtain skills and attitudes for undertaking research, and to ensure the production of a thesis of acceptable standard (Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013).

Jingwei’s supervisor apparently understood that regular meetings and appropriate guidance are important for the growth of a PhD student, so when Jingwei hesitated to contact him, he set up meetings with her on a regular basis and assigned reading tasks for her to do when she first started the program. Fish’s supervisor was available for her as well. He helped her with course selection and even gave suggestions on her overall well-being. For example, he told her the location of Chinatown and advised her to contact the Chinese community in the city where they lived.
Meanwhile, the other two participants, Isaiah and Zhuangzhou, lacked full support from their supervisors and even had some issues arise with them during their studies. For example, Zhuangzhou’s supervisor was away in the U.S. for two years and Isaiah wanted to change to a different supervisor. His desire to find another supervisor caused problems.

Scholars have found that supervisors’ levels of academic activity affect 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 showed some contradictions with the literature. Zhuangzhou’s supervisor was an active researcher himself, and by the time Zhuangzhou enrolled in that program, his supervisor was on the “upswing” of his career. Zhuangzhou admitted to me that no one really “supervised” him in the first two years of his doctoral study. They lacked regular meetings and the waiting time for responses from his supervisor was long. This is a factor that heavily impacted Zhuangzhou’s study and research progress. Therefore, the conclusion from previous study that students whose supervisors are active researchers tend to have a lower attrition rate needs to be reconsidered, although with four participants, my study does not necessarily show the full...
correspondence with the previous studies that had a larger sample size on this point. Students who are supervised by active researchers can be at risk of not getting enough time and attention from their busy supervisors. No matter how active or famous the supervisor is as a researcher, for the students, the most basic and important element of the supervisory relationship is the availability and commitment of the supervisor to the student.

Another factor that is commonly mentioned in the literature as impacting the success of graduate students is supervisory incompatibility. That is, a supervisor’s attitude toward students and their commitment to supervision are key determinants of student success (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Khozaei et al., 2015; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; McClure, 2007; Ours & Ridder, 2003). Interestingly, the literature seldom discusses the topic of “changing supervisors.” In my study, the one student who wished to change supervisors caused a negative consequence: Isaiah’s attempt to change supervisor created cracks between him and his supervisor, and he sought help from the department but in doing so caused further issues in the department. This episode demotivated Isaiah which contributed to his decision to quit. In doctoral study, it is important that the student and his/her supervisor reach an agreement on the research area of the student. In
a case when a student’s research goals have diverged from their initial direction such that the
supervisor’s expertise is no longer appropriate, the student usually has the right to request a
change of academic supervision. However, this may cause conflict and misunderstanding in
practice, which would negatively impact all the parties involved.

In terms of the environment of the academic department, Jingwei experienced a warm and
welcoming environment; Isaiah and Zhuangzhou’s expressed a neutral attitude towards their
departmental atmosphere; whereas Fish complained that she did not receive any support from her
department. Tinto (1993) concluded that compared to undergraduates, the normative orientation
and tradition, structural character, and the accepted performance standards in a specific field
affect both the academic and social integration of doctoral students. By corollary, for doctoral
students, the social interaction with one’s peers and faculty is closely linked to one’s academic
development. Looking back at my data, all of my participants commented about their
departmental environments; however, according to the participants’ reports, this aspect alone
was not a direct factor that impacted their withdrawal decisions.
Overall, my data reflected Tinto’s theory and other findings in the literature, indicating that due to the distinct nature of doctoral study, the persistence of doctoral students will be more likely tied to a particular faculty member or a group of faculty members, such as one’s supervisor or committee members (Tinto, 1993). However, the relationship with supervisors directly was not identified as a factor that explained all of my participants’ withdrawal behaviors. Two of my participants had good relationships with their supervisors; however, they still decided to stop studying halfway. Although the “change supervisor” episode negatively impacted Isaiah, that was not the only reason he gave for withdrawing before completing his degree. Zhuangzhou was the only one in my study who was largely affected by the unavailability and lack of guidance of his supervisor. Therefore, my data showed that although compatibility with one’s supervisor is an important factor that could influence the development and degree completion of doctoral students, this factor alone could not explain the full picture and cannot be treated as the only reason for withdrawal decisions.

Another distinct feature I noticed among my participants’ transcripts is that when they dealt with their supervisors, their actions were somewhat passive rather than active. Jingwei did not
dare to contact her supervisor until the supervisor contacted her to set up regular meeting times.

When Zhuangzhou felt the communication response time for his supervisor was long, he accepted that as a fact beyond his control and reduced the communication frequency. During the whole “change supervisor” episode, Isaiah was in a passive position among all the parties involved and received all the blame although he was trying to exercise what he believed to be his right. In my opinion, this passive attitude indirectly enlarged the communication gap between student and supervisor.

**Partnership and the Perception of Gender Role**

All of my participants were born in the 1980s. In China, people who were born in the 1980s are called “Post 80” (80后) because it is a special generation who experienced some drastic changes in Chinese society, such as the “Open Door Policy” and the “One Child Policy.”

These societal changes, therefore, inevitably shaped and reshaped individual consciousness as well as social relationships—particularly with respect to gender. Due to the space limitations and

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20 The One Child Policy was a population planning policy of China that allowed families to have only one child.
the topic range of this study, I will only focus on the aspects of post-1980s social change that seemed to influence my participants.

The topic of gender played a big role in my participants’ narratives. In order to discuss the perception of gender role, I looked to the literature on Chinese history on the practice of gender. Historically, Chinese society has been structured as a patriarchy. Women did not have their own personal rights. That is, before marriage, their personal right belonged to their father (and brothers); after marriage, it belonged to their husband; and if the husband died, it belonged to the son (未嫁从父，出嫁从夫，夫死从子).\(^{21}\) Men, on the contrary, were the masters of the household in this system. When a father dies, the mastery of the household passes to the son, even if the son is still a baby (Croll, 1995; Louie, 2016; Wang, 2008). Also, in the household, sons have the responsibility to support elderly parents, which is a Chinese practice called “Raising sons to provide against (for) old age (養儿防老)” because men could provide labour and economic assets to the family. Men, symbolized as heaven, and women, as earth, were traditionally arranged in a series of relationships where men were considered as superior,

\(^{21}\) Also called the “Three forms of obedience”, this rule was originally written in “Mourning Apparel” in the book <Ceremonial etiquette>.
authoritative, and active; whereas women were considered as secondary, obedient and passive (Croll, 1995).

In the year 1949, the Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China and turned China into a socialist country. They also launched Marxist egalitarian policies rewarding gender equality, which created a rhetoric called “Women hold up the half heaven (妇女能顶半边天)” to promote gender equality. Women were said to have stood up and have crossed a threshold. However, many Chinese women have found themselves still strongly bound by inherited rhetorical shackles and by their straddling of old and new. Many Chinese women still live with a Confucian rhetoric that emphasized their subordinate position as daughters, wives, daughter-in-laws, and mothers (Croll, 1995). They felt alienated by the gap between government’s official policy of equality of the sexes and the day-to-day reality, revealed by the following folk sayings: “Finding a good job and working hard is not as good as marrying a good [wealthy] husband (干得好不如嫁得好)”; “When you marry a chicken live with a chicken, when you marry a dog live with a dog (嫁鸡随鸡嫁狗随狗)”; and “Men in charge of the outside world and women in charge of the internal affairs (男主外女主内)” (Croll, 1995; Ji, Wu, Sun, &
He, 2017). However, Chinese women have begun to expand their economic and political roles in society after the establishment of the “New China (新中国)” in 1949 (Croll, 1995; Ji et al., 2017; Louie, 2016).

Along with the Open Door Policy in the late 1970s, China has witnessed unprecedented economic development. It transitioned from a poor, centralized, collectivist socialist state to the world’s second largest economy, along with the underlying ideological transformation—“the waning of Marxist egalitarian ideology and a rejuvenation of Confucianism in conjunction with newly adopted neoliberalism” (Ji et al., 2017, p. 766). The transformation power, brought profitable employment and self-development of young generations, but also collided with traditional values and many long-standing social norms.

In the meantime, the Chinese government launched the One Child Policy, which had far-reaching impact on Chinese society until today. Thanks to the One Child Policy, since the majority of households were only allowed to have one child, girls who are the only children have become important to families and may even have become more important than at any time in the past. In 2009, the Post-80s cohort of Chinese women surpassed men in college enrolment (Ji et al., 2017).
al., 2017). This phenomenon was also revealed in data of two of my participants: Fish and Jingwei are the only children in their families and received full support for education even when their families’ financial situations were not very optimistic.

The Open Door Policy changed the economic structure of China but didn’t challenge traditional gender ideals about family roles nor did it require men to share household labour. At the same time, the vast majority of educated, new generation women, who were often raised as a single child themselves, 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. Fish is one of the women caught in this double bind. On one hand, she believes the traditional saying of “Men in charge of the outside world and women in charge of the internal affairs (男主外女主内).” In her mind, this practice makes the nuclear family more stable; on the other hand, she was disappointed by her husband’s lack of assistance with child raising and attempted to find a way out to escape from endless domestic work, and to fulfill herself. Fish kept mentioning that studying abroad was her dream; however, on the way to realize this dream she encountered conflict that stemmed not only from the reality
where she needed to think about job opportunity and had to take care of her daughter and husband, but indeed from her own perception of her role as a mother, a wife and the expectation of those roles in Chinese society. She was struggling because of the conflict and collision of those contradictions and finally gave family obligations the priority and in the process left her studies unfinished.

In that situation, her relationship with her mother-in-law made things even more complicated. Actually, the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is a common theme that was mentioned by all of my participants when we talked about their families. A Chinese folk saying states that “Nine out of ten pairs of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law do not get along well (十对婆媳九不和).” To explain the reasons for this phenomenon, Wang (2008) argued that in feudal society, the only social role for a married woman is being a wife and a mother. While men have other opportunities to build up romantic relationships with other women such as Geji (歌妓) (singing girls, similar to Japanese Geishas), the only way for women—who are always at home—to express emotions was toward their sons rather than their husbands in most of the times. Given the saying “Men in charge of the outside world and women in charge of the internal
affairs (男主外女主内),” all the aspiration and ambition of traditional Chinese women were realized by men, particularly their sons. In addition to that, Confucian filial piety discourse encouraged and even required a strong connection between mothers and sons. Mothers had every reason to invest in their sons both financially and emotionally and expect or even request pay back when sons grew up. In this value system, daughters-in-law also had responsibilities to be filial to their mothers-in-law and at the same time battle for attention and support from their husbands.

In my data, Fish’s husband supported her decision to study abroad at the very beginning, but when her mother-in-law heard this news she was furious because she had the idea of “Raising sons to provide against (for) old age (养儿防老)” especially being a single mother. Her grumble set Fish’s husband against Fish and caused cracks between them. This also explains why after her mother-in-law passed away, Fish’s nuclear family became more united and harmonious. Isaiah’s mother had the same idea as Fish’s mother-in-law. She complained to Isaiah for being far away from her, so Isaiah was busy comforting both his mother and his wife. As I just
mentioned above, the One Child Policy brought girls more opportunities, at the same time making boys more precious in the family because of being the only son.

However, despite the new rhetoric and 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 feel incomplete, being called “leftovers (剩女)” (Ju et al., 2017). As single, educated women, they were not applauded for their personal achievements and education levels but rather were judged by their marital status—as if the latter were the only standard of success for women (Ju et al., 2017; Louie, 2016). Similar to Fish, Jingwei was also struggling with gender roles. She viewed a Ph.D. degree—or even the status of being a Ph.D. student—as an asset when she thought about her relationship with her boyfriend of the time because her boyfriend’s family had a much higher social status than her family. Worried about the status differential, she kept asking him to confirm he would not leave her if she did not complete her studies. This Ph.D. title brought her some degree of confidence and some social capital. In the meantime, she was influenced by the rhetoric that women should secure a man early and not wait until they become “leftovers.” So when her parents urged her to get married,
when her future parents-in-law came to visit them in Canada, even knowing her candidacy exams were around the corner, she still spent much time accompanying them when they went sightseeing. Clearly, she valued the relationship with her boyfriend and his family more than her doctoral study. In the interview when we talked about her current life after finishing school, she was content and satisfied as a married woman living a regular life.

Compared with Chinese women, the requirement and manifestation of masculinity of Chinese men is relatively consistent. Traditionally, an ideal achievement line for Chinese men was: studying hard, passing the imperial examinations, and being a government official. In the private sphere, they were required to be the master of a household, financially taking care of the family, and showing filial piety to the parents (Li & Jankowiak 2016; Wang, 2008). After the Open Door Policy was implemented in 1978, market reforms became more intense, and the neoliberal idea of a free-market became pervasive. Therefore, ideals of masculinity shifted. 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). At the same time, the traditional requirement is still embedded in Chinese families.
Looking at my data, when Isaiah came to Canada, he first attempted to advance his education and degree. For him, education was the ladder to higher achievement. However, when pursuing education conflicted with his family role—as a husband and a son, and challenged his perceived masculinity, similar to Fish, he also prioritized his family over his studies. Making some contribution to the family, especially financially, was important for maintaining his masculinity and his status in the relationship with his wife.

Zhuangzhou mentioned gender role expectations as well. He kept saying the balance between him and his wife was broken due to his “unsmooth” research. Zhuangzhou’s wife herself was a Ph.D. student and since her studies went smoothly Zhuangzhou’s masculinity was challenged. Both Isaiah and Zhuangzhou viewed making contributions to the family, especially financial contributions as a major part of the responsibility of being a husband. There is another phenomenon to which I want to point out here: the changing of perceived masculinity among my male participants. Although self-development and high achievement were still important when Isaiah and Zhuangzhou viewed their manhood, both of their narratives showed other traits such as softness, caring, spending time with family, focusing on the relationship with partners and
getting involved in child rearing. As Li and Jankowiak (2016) concluded, the new generation of Chinese men make efforts to be “more intimate and affectionate spouses, [which] feeds back into such endeavors by adding greater calmness, patience, expressiveness, and gentility to the ideal masculine repertoire” (p. 193), especially for men who received higher education and in a higher social strata. For both men and women, discourse combining socialism, Confucianism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism, has contextualized changing gender dynamics in post-reform China and challenged the traditional stereotype, and therefore influenced each individual such as my participants.

To summarize the theme of gender as illustrated in my participants’ interviews, Tinto’s (1987, 1993) theory regarding both undergraduate and doctoral students’ pre-graduation departure from their studies all emphasized that the interaction with non-academic communities, such as family, affects students’ persistence, especially at the doctoral level. However, the empirical studies investigating how students’ interaction with families impact the decision to leave their studies early are rare. From my data, interaction with family and prescribed gender norms affected all of my participants. This factor directly led Fish and Isaiah to withdraw from
their doctoral study and indirectly affected both Jingwei’s and Zhuangzhou’s decisions. Chinese culture and the current gender mores definitely influenced their perception regarding their gender roles and family responsibilities and eventually affected their decisions.

**Family of Origin and the Importance of Education**

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. The importance of education was present from the first day when they started elementary school. As I have summarized in chapter one, China is a country that has traditionally attached high importance to education and also has developed a learning culture, summarized by Li (2009) that includes five elements: resolve (奮), diligence (勤), endurance of hardship (刻苦), perseverance (恆心), and concentration (專心). As a country highly influenced by Confucianism, Confucian philosophy towards learning has been inherited by and embedded in Chinese people. In my data, all of my participants mentioned that when they were in grade school, their parents never tired of advising them to “make great effort on study.”

In addition to that, parents themselves also make great effort to provide good learning
environments for their children. Examples include the “Meng’s Mother Moved Three Times (孟母三迁)” episodes that happened to both Jingwei and Zhuangzhou; and financial support for the child such as Isaiah’s parents borrowing money from others to support his tuition, and as “laid-off workers,” Fish’s parents supported her education until she finished university by doing labour work.

The importance of education for upward social mobility was considered as important in traditional Chinese society as it is in modern China. From the Sui dynasty (581-619), China started to implement the imperial examination system (科举制度) to select candidates for the state bureaucracy. Until the last imperial examination in 1905, this system of selecting talent profoundly influenced politics, education, and every aspect of Chinese society (Bai, 2010; Louie, 2016; Zhu & Zhang, 2016). Formal education was gradually constructed around the imperial examination system, which connected wealth and power with the mastery of Confucian classics and literary forms, which served as the content of the examination (Zhu & Zhang, 2016). Therefore, “entering officialdom through education became the motivation for motivated literati to devote their lives to participation in such examinations” (Bai, 2010, p. 108). For example a
poem that was written in the Song dynasty (960-1279) and remains well-known today says: “As long as one studies hard, then he can become an official with high salary; find a house of gold and treasure and a woman with the appearance as beautiful as jade (书中自有千钟粟，书中自有黄金屋，书中自有颜如玉)

Chinese people view government officials as being the highest in terms of social status. The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) folk saying ranked the hierarchy of occupations as: one—government officials; two—state servants; three—monks; four—Taoist priests; five—doctors; six—artisans; seven—craftsmen; eight—prostitutes (一官二吏三僧四道五医六工七匠八娼). In late imperial China, before the abolition of the imperial examination system, this system was the only way for an ordinary man to enter officialdom (Zhu & Zhang, 2016). Furthermore, “this examination system by and large was the driving force that determined the aim and content of formal education” (Bai, p. 108). However, it is worth mentioning that the importance of passing the examination to serve the state sometimes conflicts with family obligations. Chinese people say that “Loyalty (to the state) and filial piety can not be satisfactory to both sides (忠孝难两全)”. As one of the main characters that was emphasized by Confucius, filial piety was considered as a
manifestation of one’s morality (Gao, 2015). Starting from the Han dynasty (206BC-220), the state systematically made unfilial conduct “a punishable crime” (Chan & Tan, 2004, p. 2) and “a decisive criterion” in the process of recommending candidates to official functions\(^2\) (Cheng, 2004, p. 36). Government officials were required to resign and mourn at home for three consecutive years once their parent(s) passed away (Huang, 2007). Under the patronage of the Confucian school, filial piety was given top priority as compared to loyalty at other times in history (Yin, 2004). However, in traditional China, this family obligation mainly referred to one’s parents, not to one’s spouse and children.

The imperial examination system was abolished in the year 1905; however, the idea that passing an exam means a brighter future is still imprinted in Chinese people’s minds. When talking about education in China, my participants mentioned both their parents and themselves believe “The worth of other pursuits is small, the study of books exceeds them all (万般皆下品 唯有读书高)”, which came from a Song dynasty (960-1279) poem. Bai (2010) argued that despite no longer administering the imperial exam system:

\(^2\) At that time, the imperial examination system to select talents for the government had not been established yet.
… the complex of examination-oriented education, including teaching methods and academic assessment, did not completely disappear. The examination system is still the mechanism to test and select talent, and it exerts a powerful impact on today’s school curriculum. (p. 109)

The examination system that Bai (2010) mentioned is known as the National College Entry Examinations, also known as the Gaokao (高考), a large-scale standardized test. The Gaokao, which is viewed as having a symbolic similarity with the imperial examination system, was re-established in 1977 as the main selection criterion for entry to higher education after the Cultural Revolution. “The academic performance on the Gaokao, instead of political affiliation, became the decisive factor in access to higher education” and it “triggered a renaissance of the long tradition of valuing merit and education” (Liu, 2016, p. 90).

Gaokao performance has been demonstrated to be a consistently strong indicator of students’ chances of getting accepted into elite universities (Bai, 2010; Liu, 2016). For the candidates, such as my participants, the score on the Gaokao is the passport for them to secure higher education opportunities, and no other qualifications or certificates are valid in this selection
process. Amid this background, my participants Fish, Jingwei, and Zhuangzhou were urged by their parents to be diligent and hardworking in academic study in order to get a good Gaokao score and secure entry to a good university. For students, the symbolic meaning of Gaokao is not only a test; it also represents their social status in the future. In the Gaokao system, students may get extra points or receive early admission by certain universities if they have talents in other areas such as arts or sports. Therefore, when Isaiah’s mother found his academic score was not competitive enough, she arranged for him to take art training, and eventually Isaiah was able to get into a good university because of his talent in art.

Another point I want to discuss here is school choice in China. Public schools in China are categorized into two major types: regular schools and key schools (Zhang, 2008). The nationwide establishment of the key school system was initiated in 1953, following the release of the document *Suggestions on Running Some Key Middle Schools and Regular Schools* by the Ministry of Education. Later in the same year, with the issuing of the document *Priorities for Running some Key Middle Schools and Regular Schools*, the key school policy was systematically formulated and implemented throughout China (MOE 1953, cited in Zhang and
Zhou 1984). In general, key schools are chosen according to their high rate of successfully transitioning their students to good schools at the next level of schooling or a high acceptance rate at elite universities (Wu, 2012; Zhang, 2008).

Among my four participants, Fish was able to get enrolled in a key high school in her city because of her high score on the entry exam; Isaiah’s mother made the decision to focus on the “special talent” path; Jingwei’s mother used her guanxi to get admission from a key high school for her and Zhuangzhou’s mother was not satisfied with the school quality in her city and moved to another city and paid extra school choice fees to a key high school for Zhuangzhou to get in. Furthermore, their parents arranged for all of them to attend extracurricular classes in order to improve their prospects of getting into good universities. Chinese families have done a lot and try every attempt to secure positional advantage in obtaining a place for their children in key schools. In her survey, Zhang (2008) found that taking extracurricular classes, acquiring educational credentials, hiring tutors, becoming a “special talent student” and making good use of parents’ educational level and guanxi, are among common practices associated with school choice.
All of the participants in my study shared with me extensive information about their education experiences in China, which included but were not limited to information about school life, parents’ attitudes and their feelings. Their families of origin and the whole society attach high importance to education and schooling, which, in turn, influenced my participants’ perceptions of education. It seems from the data, however, that their 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: as the highest degree one can achieve, the Ph.D. degree “exceeds other pursuits”; and they connect climbing the education ladder with social mobility, as Isaiah said: “a brighter future” (Isaiah, recording 1, p. 1). In addition to that, the Chinese educational system is an exam-driven system. For thousands of years, passing exams is almost the ultimate goal of study, which becomes heavily embedded in students’ minds and influences their desires to learn. However, doctoral study in Canada, no matter which discipline, is not an exam-driven pursuit. In the next section, I discuss in details the conflicting systems between China and Canada.
Education Differences between China and Canada

In the literature, students from CHC background have been criticized by some Western scholars as not complying with learning standards that are valued in Western traditions. For instance, they have been allegedly found to be passive; reluctant to speak and express their opinions in class; respectful of and expecting structure and hierarchy in the classroom environment; lacking the skill of self-directed learning; accepting the knowledge and authority of the teacher but not being creative and critical (Cross & Hitchcock, 2007). From my data, some of these characterizations manifested themselves among my participants. The most obvious one is respecting the teacher as the absolute authority and viewing the relationship with their supervisors as hierarchical. For example, none of my participants was able to recall a moment that they challenged their supervisors or expressed complete different opinions on major issues such as research topic and plan etc. Jingwei thought her supervisor was always correct—that was the reason for him to be a supervisor. When Zhuangzhou’s supervisor was away in another country for two years and responded to his email slowly, instead of having a talk with him or
thinking about other solutions, he chose to accept the fact and reduce the frequency of “bothering”
his supervisor (Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 6).

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;
Jian, 2009; Tan 2012). This recipient mode leads to another criticism of Chinese students which is
that they are 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. For example when they
first started their program, they were all assigned reading tasks by their supervisors. Although
they read as their supervisors told them to, they did not clearly understand the goal of doing the
readings and some of them lost motivation during this process.

In terms of teaching method and content, some of my participants expressed their preference
toward Western ways. For example, Jingwei thought the Western way is more logical and
interactive, and felt she could remember the knowledge better if she had been taught by this teaching method in China. However, all of them were affected negatively by the differences in teaching approach between China and Canada regardless of their preferences. Fish and Jingwei were overwhelmed by the intensity of in-class discussion and presentations, since they were used to lecture mode of learning. Fish was even accused of plagiarism by her instructor; however, she did not have the awareness of what was considered as plagiarism and what was supposed to be the “correct” writing form. Tan (2012) concludes that plagiarism is a culturally complex issue.

“The notion of plagiarism is alien to Chinese culture, where there is no individual claim, no ownership over intellectual property, and it is hard for Chinese students to conceptualize the idea… Knowledge is communal, everyone knows who says what and there is no question about the source” (Times Higher Education, April, 2008, p 11 cited by Tan, 2012). This plagiarism incident hit Fish’s confidence causing her to question continuing to pursue her degree.

Another point that is worth discussing is how they valued the meaning of education. Both Isaiah and Fish complained their program was “not practical enough” (Fish, recording 1, p. 4; Isaiah, recording 1, p. 2) and they did not enjoy learning theories—rather than practical
applications. Guo (2015) explained that given the emphasis of a pragmatic outcome 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 pay close attention to the practical implications of education and they generally believe that education should provide them with prestigious jobs and high social status (Bai, 2010; Guo, 2015; Tan, 2012). Therefore, learning is not merely for the sake of learning itself but for obtaining external rewards, which is the exact case for Zhuangzhou. He enjoyed learning new knowledge, but also kept talking about how he needed rewards and that his doctoral study failed to provide him many. Bai (2010) has explained that the reason for this mindset is that a thousand years of an examination system heavily impacted students’ perception of education. Under the modern Gaokao system:

…the examinations by and large still seem to place the emphasis on memorizing what is in the textbooks, and testing the skills and techniques of answering questions in subjects such as mathematics and physics. More importantly, the examination system has been metamorphosed into a system encouraging students, parents and teachers to pursue high
marks, which have become not only the purpose of schooling but also the crucial factor determining students’ future. (Bai, 2010, p. 108)

Every score on every test is not only a reward for the Chinese student, but also a lighthouse that guides them toward a path to the Gaokao, and to a successful future. Therefore, when students get used to constantly receiving such rewards from teachers and also being ranked according to the scores, once they lose the rewards, they also lose motivation and the vision of a path toward the future. On the contrary, the nature of doctoral study in Canada determines that the so-called “reward” is scarce especially when students are at the stage before candidacy (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Doctoral study is a self-learning, self-discovery process with some extent of guidance from the supervisor. Students are required to develop their own research topic, conduct research on their own. Thus, Chinese students who were used to the test-score mode need adjustments to adapt to the western mode of study.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed four themes identified that dominated the data collected through interviews with my participants. These themes were: academic interactions and integration;
partnership and the perception of gender role; family of origin and the importance of education; and education differences between China and Canada. In this chapter, I illustrated how the participants’ decisions to withdraw from their studies were related to the following themes: academic interactions and integration; partnership and the perception of gender role. Although family of origin and the importance of education and education differences between China and Canada were discussed at length, the participants did not signify that they were important factors shaping their decisions to withdraw. The next chapter discusses the research findings in relationship to the original research questions. I also discuss unexpected findings, the limitations of this study, and suggestions for future study.
Chapter Seven

Conclusions and Implications

In this final chapter, I present the conclusions and implications from this study, which include the relationship of the data with the original research questions; some findings that correspond with the literature; some unexpected findings; a discussion of implications; and suggestions for further research, theory development and practice.

My research questions were:

What do Chinese international doctoral students experience during their pursuit of doctoral studies that shaped their decisions to withdraw?

Did their previous experiences prior to undertaking doctoral studies in the host country influence their decision? If so, how, and if not, why not?

Do Chinese doctoral students who withdraw from studies believe that Chinese culture impacted their decision to withdraw? If so, how, and if not, why not?

When considering my research questions, my research participants’ experiences during their doctoral studies did seem to influence their decisions to withdraw. Regarding which part or
aspect of their experiences influenced their decisions, the answer varies for each participant. In
the literature on doctoral degree withdrawal, the relationship with supervisors has been viewed as
the major reason for doctoral students’ late degree completion or outright withdrawal (Ampaw &
Jaeger, 2012; Khozaei et al., 2015; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; McClure, 2007; Ours &
Ridder, 2003). A poor supervisory relationship directly led to Zhuangzhou’s withdrawal and
constituted one of the reasons for Isaiah’s withdrawal. Incompatibility with one’s supervisor,
lack of availability or the perception of lack of a supervisor’s commitment to the student were
attributed by Zhuangzhou and Isaiah as directly related to their stagnant research progress. As
Zhuangzhou said: “His [supervisor’s] unavailability itself was negative feedback for me”
(Zhuangzhou, recording 9, p. 7); “especially when you just start [doctoral study], you need
someone to assign you some tasks and guide you to some extent” (Zhuangzhou, recording 10, p.
1). In the private sphere, the quality of their relationships with family members, especially a
spouse, appeared to be a factor that impacted the decision-making of each research participant.
For female participants, how they perceived their gender role as a woman and their family
responsibilities determined how they valued their life experiences. When doctoral study
conflicted with marriage, a relationship or partner selection, my participants tipped the scale in favor of the marriage or relationship. For male participants, their perceptions about masculinity impacted their decisions. They heavily valued their manhood in the private sphere as a husband and a son and wanted to make contributions to the family, especially financially. Those perceptions, when they conflicted with doctoral studies, seemed to hinder the study process. This finding in my study runs contrary to some previous studies illustrating that family responsibilities helped or even accelerated degree completion for some international doctoral students (Brooks, 2015; Goff & Carolan, 2013; Kim, 2015). However, it seems in those studies, the spouses and partners showed support to the participants’ doctoral studies by taking up more domestic work or being willing to migrate with the participants, among other factors etc. Considering my findings together with the literature, it seems that the perception of gender role and family responsibilities could impact the decision of international doctoral students; however, whether it would be a positive impact or a negative one depends on different situations of the student.

I found that my research participants’ previous experiences in China seemed to influence
their decision-making. Specifically, their experiences prior to undertaking doctoral study firstly motivated them to apply for doctoral studies in Canada. Chinese culture and societal conditions shaped their expectations for doctoral studies, from the perceived practicality of the programs and courses to specific teaching and learning approaches. Some of the participants complained that the program and course were not practical enough; some of them encountered learning difficulties adapting to intensive discussion and presentations in class. In addition to that, their perceptions of relationships, for instance supervisor-student relationship and spouse or partner relationship were constructed by their prior experiences in the Chinese context. They viewed supervisors as absolute authorities and chose to obey those authorities even when conflicts happened. The way they dealt with relationships with their supervisors was passive instead of active.

In another word, certain aspects of Chinese culture seem to have played a role in shaping their perceptions, beliefs and values. For instance: their beliefs about education, the relationship with teachers; their perception of gender role and family responsibilities; their values on the purpose of education etc. 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.

**Findings that Correspond to the Literature**

Tinto (1987) stated that dropout reflects the social and intellectual experiences of the individual within the institution. It mirrors how individuals integrate into the social and intellectual life of the institution. In other words, the less integrative those experiences are, the more likely students are to leave the institution voluntarily before degree completion. He then identified four clusters of factors that could possibly lead to students leaving institutions before completing their studies. They are: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Results of the present study correspond to his theory in multiple ways that I discuss in the paragraphs below.

First, according to Tinto, when individuals start post-secondary studies, they need to adjust themselves both socially and intellectually to the new world. In Tinto’s (1987) model on domestic students, it is stated that students may find it is hard to separate from past forms of life, such as the family and neighbourhood where they grew up, and at least partially detach
themselves from old friends and peer groups from their local high school. In my study on international doctoral students, his model is still valid. However, this transitional process consists of the adjustment from one country to another country and from one culture to another culture. International students are forced to detach themselves from their familiar home country environment and transition to the new host country environment. In another word, there is some amplification of this effect with international students.

Second, Tinto (1987) also emphasized intellectual demands of college, namely, that meeting the minimum standards in academic work is one major difficulty all students face. For international doctoral students in my study, this intellectual demand consisted of two parts: one part is the academic challenge of doctoral work, for instance reviewing the scholarly literature, coming up with research ideas, seeking approval from the research committee, and later in the process passing candidacy examinations, etc. The other part of the challenge comes from the difficulties of being an international student, which includes language barriers, cultural differences in teaching and learning, different expectations and perceptions about education etc.

Third, for Tinto, the absence of integration first comes from incongruence between the
student and the institution in terms of needs, interests and preferences and it refers to the state where “individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution” (Tinto, 1987, p. 53). This incongruence appeared to be an obvious phenomenon among my participants. All of them lacked community support on campus during their studies. The majority of their peers were local Canadian students, in spite of its benefits on the one hand, which was on the other hand a fact that partially caused incongruence. Also, some of them preferred more practical course content and were worried about their program’s practicality, which also enforced the feeling of incongruence.

Fourth, social isolation makes the transition period more challenging for students (Tinto, 1987). Lacking connection with faculty members and peers creates the feeling of isolation for students and those who have difficulties making new friends tend to withdraw (Tinto, 1987). My findings corresponded with Tinto (1993) in the way that the connection with several specific faculty members—such as one’s supervisor and committee members—is an important factor for doctoral students. Isolation for international students that comes from studying in a foreign country with different language and culture is also a phenomenon that I observed in my study.
Lastly, in his newer work on doctoral students’ attrition, Tinto (1993) added that the persistence of doctoral students is also influenced by interaction with external communities, such as family, to which the student belongs. Other empirical studies also have generated the conclusion that as adults, among all the social relations, marriage and partnership are major ones that could influence the decision-making of doctoral students (Brooks, 2015; Goff & Carolan, 2013; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Martinez, et al., 2013). My study yielded similar results with the literature, indicating that family responsibilities, marriage and partnership heavily impacted the withdrawal decision of my participants. However, my study was able to reveal the deeper reasons for that. Elements of Chinese culture in family responsibilities, marriage and partnership—such as “Raising sons to provide against (for) old age (养儿防老)”, “Men in charge of the outside world and women in charge of the internal affairs (男主外女主内)”—with which my participants were raised and current societal conditions contributed to the construction of their belief systems and shaped their perceptions about gender roles and family roles, which in turn influenced their decision-making.
Unexpected Findings

In Tinto’s (1987) model of college student departure, he pointed out two primary roots of departure: intention and commitment. Generally speaking, the higher the level of a student’s educational or career goals, the more likely the student is to complete college. In my study, all the research participants were motivated and held strong goals for seeking the Ph.D. degree at the beginning of their studies. They all viewed this degree as the ladder toward a brighter future. However, when their research stalled or when the educational goal conflicted with their other life goals, they chose to withdraw. To understand the reason for this inconsistent finding, I widened my literature search to include the learning culture in China, the function of education in Chinese history to understand how Chinese people perceive the purpose of education. As I have discussed in Chapter Six, education was associated with climbing the social ladder to achieve upward mobility and examinations were used by the central government to select talents to become government officials (Bai, 2010; Louie, 2016; Zhu & Zhang, 2016). Education was associated greatly with one’s career and future social status (Bai, 2010; Liu, 2016). I also searched literature on Chinese international students and found immigration is a major purpose for them to apply to
study in some Western countries such as the U.S. and Canada (Trice & Yoo, 2007).

For some participants, such as Fish and Jingwei, their goals to pursue the Ph.D. degree were not purely for the degree per se, but also included other life goals—for example: getting a job and immigration. Also, some of my participants were not able to associate the Ph.D. degree with concrete reality; namely, what they could or wanted to do career-wise after they gained the degree. For them, gaining this Ph.D. degree was an abstract goal, and they had impractical and vague illusions of this degree when they first started their programs. Therefore, when this nebulous educational goal conflicted with other life goals, such as the opportunity for immigration or when they lost the connection between this educational goal and their career goal, they showed the tendency to withdraw.

Tinto’s (1987) model identified goal commitment as one of the roots of students’ early departure, but the model lacks the consideration of the complexity of the relationship between education and other life realities. “Educational goal” was treated as an independent element in his model. However, my study supplements Tinto’s model in that educational goal/commitment is an important factor to consider when examining students’ withdrawal intention. However, it
has to be considered in association with other realities in students’ lives, especially for doctoral level students.

In addition, numerous studies on doctoral students’ degree completion have all emphasized the role of finances. According to the scholarly literature, financial constraints constitute one of the major challenges faced by graduate students (Earl-Novell, 2006; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; van der Haert et al., 2014). However, my study revealed different results. My two research participants who majored in Science were fully funded by their supervisors and departments, and during the interviews none of them mentioned that finances hindered their studies. Although the other two Social Science major participants were self-funded, they still could afford the expense of their studies. Finance was not a direct factor for their withdrawal. However, Isaiah’s concerns for finances was rooted more in his views of his role as a husband and a son. He perceived making contributions to the family financially as a manifestation of his masculinity. For Fish, she sold her real estate in China before she came to Canada to generate money to cover her expenses. After the first semester, her financial concerns were rooted more in a “cost-benefit” analysis of the value of the degree itself rather than inadequate funding to subsist throughout her studies.
Her view that her study “wasn’t worth the money” (Fish, recording 1, p. 4), corresponds to Tinto’s (1987) comment that students who see college experience as rewarding and helpful for their future careers and lives tend to bear financial burdens in order to complete the degree, while students who think college is irrelevant will be prompted to drop out by even the slightest financial pressure. But overall, finance did not seem to be a factor that led to withdrawal in this study.

Another point I want to discuss here relates to the perception of gender roles as conceptualized through Chinese culture. The existing literature indicates that family role and spousal relationships are factors in determining doctoral students decision-making (Brooks, 2015; Goff & Carolan; 2013; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Martinez et al., 2013). However, the existing literature ignored the fact that the perception of gender roles is culturally constructed. My study revealed that Chinese cultural views on gender roles influenced how my participants perceive their roles as a mother/father; wife/husband; daughter/son etc. The reason for this unexpected finding may come from the fact that previous studies examining students’ withdrawal mainly used surveys or questionnaires as research methods, and their results were
based on large-scale quantitative data, which has the disadvantages in terms of exploring deep and individually particular reasons for withdrawal. My study brings the discussion of culturally-determined views on gender to the broader field of university student withdrawal. That is, the perception of gender roles among my participants appears to have played an important part in their educational decisions and academic performance and is worthy of future research with broader groups of students who leave their studies before completion.

**Research Boundaries and Limitations**

This study has some obvious limitations due to the scope and boundaries I placed on its design. I used narrative as the research method to investigate the experiences and beliefs of Chinese international doctoral students in Canada. My intention was to highlight the in-depth experiences of this group of students who have generally been ignored in the scholarly literature. Through the use of in-depth interviews in their native language, the participants’ own voices can be heard. I limited my inquiry to Chinese international doctoral students to examine their reasons for withdrawing from their studies. Although I think my study added value by interviewing these participants in their own languages, other ethnic groups were left out of my scope, and other
cultural backgrounds were excluded as well. There is no doubt that broadening out of the participant pool by including students from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds could generate new findings and add to the richness of existing findings. By narrowing down my criteria only to doctoral students, international students who pursue Master’s or Bachelor’s degrees were not examined either, although I can see value in investigating the experience of other subgroups. The scope I set for this study created limitations, but at the same time, these limitations are also directions for future studies.

Other than the scope, my research design also created some limitations. I used narrative as my research method, which allowed me to investigate the experiences of my participants in depth. However, I was only able to interview my four participants and did not talk with their spouses and partners.

Another factor that may have impacted this study is my recruitment of participants. As I have presented in the previous chapters, all of my participants expressed their satisfaction towards their current lives, which might be the reason for them to accept my invitation to participate. In other words, they do not view their withdrawal as a complete failure in their lives,
so they were happy to open up to me and share their experiences. It is quite possible that other Chinese international students who once pursued doctoral study but did not complete had other reasons and different views but were not willing to reveal their experiences. This is a natural bias of this study.

There were also some things I wish I could have done to add more richness to my data. Of my four participants, I was able to conduct face-to-face interviews with three of them. It was clear that face-to-face conversation provided me with the opportunity to build up trust and to create a relaxing atmosphere for more natural interactions. Also, I was able to notice the subtle facial expressions and body language during face-to-face interviews, which was not possible during a WeChat voice call with one of my participants. In addition, as a new researcher, on numerous occasions I also failed to probe my participants’ comments more deeply. Better probing could have provided more valuable information.

**Implications and Suggestions**

In the process of conducting interviews and analyzing data, I found many implications in the aspect of practice, research and theoretical and methodological. I present my thoughts here as the
implications of my study.

**Implications and suggestions at a practice level.** I always believe that the results generated from educational research should guide educational practice. For the present study, I hope it could help pedagogical practice of supervisors who supervise international doctoral students and administrative practice of staff members who work with international doctoral students in the following ways:

1. Universities (through the Faculty of Graduate studies or specific departments) could consider delivering series of workshops to help international graduate students start their journey. My study shows that not every doctoral student knows what doctoral study means or the nature of doctoral study when they begin their journeys. They might have unrealistic illusions and expectations they bring from their past experiences. Thus, I suggest universities or faculties deliver a series of workshops as orientation to new international graduate students. The workshops could include for instance: shared experiences, where experienced students could be invited to talk about the difficulties they have encountered and how they overcame them; what does it mean to become a
Ph.D. student; time management for graduate students; how to deal with student-supervisor relationships, where university policies on graduate student supervision could be presented. Departments could even make attending several workshops mandatory for newly-enrolled international graduate students so that they can be mentally informed about what they would face ahead of time and get ready for the challenges. In addition, if it is possible, workshops could be designed that target international graduate students specifically. Current practice, for example at my university: University of Victoria is for the International Student Services office to provide support and assistance to international students; however, they combine undergraduate students and graduate students all together. I suggest that due to the different nature of graduate study, the workshops or training should separate these two groups of students and offer different content to target their special needs.

2. Departmental administrative bodies could consider building community for doctoral students and tracking their study path to better assist students. Doctoral students tend to work individually, and thus a community in the departments would create a sense of
belonging and provide opportunities for students to communicate and learn from each other. From my knowledge and my participants’ input, current departmental seminars usually are the occasions where doctoral students present their own work and ask for feedback from their peers. I suggest adding more content that relates students’ lives to the meetings. In other words, instead of only talking about academics, discussion groups could be formed to talk about some real life concerns that students might face. For example, cases could be about a student who wants to change supervisor or what to do when the supervisor will be away from campus for one year. In these discussions, the facilitator could consider informing students about university policies and department procedures in dealing with such issues. In the meantime, graduate advisors could track the progress of each doctoral student and hold meetings two or three times per year to talk about students’ research progress and future career development since my study shows that students are motivated by the perception of a clear link between their studies and their future careers. Above are the actions I suggest to the institution to retain international doctoral students, and I also have one suggestion for professors’
professors’ cultural awareness. Given the increased number of international students on Canadian campuses, it is time for university staff and faculties to become more aware of what a more diverse student population means. Although my study is not aiming for generalization, the findings show that Chinese international doctoral students do have different expectations about graduate programs and classroom teaching and learning. They also might encounter difficulties with academic writing, such as structuring of a proposal and other forms of academic communication, etc. My empirical work and also the existing literature all generated the conclusion that supervisors play an extremely important part in doctoral students’ study progress; therefore, it would be helpful for professors who supervise international doctoral students to raise their cultural awareness and participate in some relevant training to better work with international students and to avoid any possible misunderstandings and conflicts during their joint journey.

4. In the domain of practice, I also have a suggestion for prospective international doctoral
students. Completing a doctoral degree needs a relatively long time; thus, it is beneficial for the student to receive support from family members. Before taking on a doctoral student role, prospective international students could reflect on some questions such as:

Do I have the support from my spouse/parents/significant others or even parents-in-law? How do I balance family responsibilities and my own study? What should I do if my family members do not support my study? I do not mean to imply that one cannot complete doctoral study without family support; however, doctoral study only comprises one part of students’ lives, and my findings and the literature both reveal that whether or not the student receives family support could alter decision-making and impact degree completion. Therefore, I would suggest prospective students be aware of this aspect and make sure to maintain communication with their family members.

**Suggestions at a research level.** Other than the implications on a practical level, I also have some suggestions for future research. From my own study, I found the perception of gender roles and family roles directly impacted my participants’ motivation and withdrawal decisions. When I dug deeper, my participants’ perceptions of Chinese culture and past experiences in China
seemed to be hidden forces shaping their outlooks about the value of doctoral studies. The literature confirms that school-life balance could negatively impact doctoral students’ research progress and degree completion (Brooks, 2015; Kim, 2015; Lott, Gardner, & Powers, 2009; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004); however, the literature lacks explanation on how school-life balance influences doctoral students and what are the deep reasons for that. Future studies could probe more about gender role perception among students from other ethnicities and cultures. For example, what is the situation with second-generation immigrant doctoral students? Are they influenced by gender expectations within the culture of their origin or by their experiences in the new country? By examining students from various cultural backgrounds, we can get a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between doctoral degree completion and the perception of gender role and family role.

Also, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors, and how the relationship could impact their degree completion. However, there are not a lot of empirical studies that focus on questions such as: what students should do if they feel they are incompatible with their supervisors? Does changing supervisors
impact graduate students’ studies? If so, how? It is important for the institution and the entire field to know when issues happen in the supervisory relationship, what are the common practices of students and what are the consequences of such actions since there is a power dynamic at play between supervisors and doctoral students. While conducting the present study, I browsed several universities’ websites looking for documents and policies on this topic. It seems to me that university policy is distant from real practice, which is to say that those policies lack the consideration of the real interaction between doctoral students and their supervisors and departmental circumstances. I am assuming one of the reasons for those vaguely-written documents is the lack of intimate details about what is happening for students who may hesitate to voice their concerns when trouble arises. Therefore, the above-mentioned questions could keep policy makers informed and assist them to compose more practical guiding documents.

**Suggestions at theoretical and methodological levels.** In terms of theory, I think Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model is still valid to investigate students’ withdrawal to some extent; however, this theory may need some updates to fit different types of students: for example international doctoral students. I drew a visual to present Tinto’s model of students’ departure in Chapter Two.
However, based on the findings of this study I think this model may be more comprehensive if we add students’ cultural background as one pre-entry identifier and emphasize interaction with family members during the study period, which I illustrate and explain below using another figure.
Fig. 7.1. Suggested changes to Tinto’s model of institutional departure.
In the above figure, cultural background was added as one factor of pre-entry identifier for the reason that international students may come from countries with distinct views on education and gender roles. Their cultural background may influence their perceptions on education and many other aspects during their studies and those perceptions could further influence decision-making. I also changed the broad category named “institutional experience” to “interactions and integration” because students’ lives are not restricted to the institutions they enrolled in. The interaction with faculty and peers in the academic setting, with spouse or other family members in the social setting should all be considered as important experiences during their study period. The original name “institutional experience” emphasizes an institutional perspective, which I believe is only one part of students’ lives. In addition, I added “relationships with family members” as one factor to consider under the category: interactions and integration in social setting for the reason that based on my findings and the results from relevant literature, whether or not the student receives support from his/her family members or spouse could also impact degree completion, especially for international doctoral students (Brooks, 2015; Goff & Carolan, 2013; Kim, 2015). Above is my suggestion to Tinto’s (1987, 1993) model at a
theoretical level. Again, my study is only based on data from four participants, thus my suggestion is preliminary and tentative at this point, so future studies are definitely needed to explore more on this model.

In terms of methodology, there are two aspects I would like to discuss here. The first one is the translation across Mandarin to English. I have to say that I think I made the correct decision to stay as long as possible in Mandarin until the final report. The voices of my participants were retained to the maximum extent because I was able to put the nuances of their speech, the choices of wording and even the intonations into consideration when analyzing the interviews. In order to make sure I present them in accordance with their own voices, other than sending back the transcripts to them, when I use direct quotation from the interviews I asked them to check if my translation presents the original meanings. Luckily, the English proficiency level of all my participants is good enough to discuss with me the translation issues.

During the process of data analysis and the final presentation of findings, I felt lonely because of lacking support in the literature that pertained to how to conduct educational research in cross-cultural settings, especially when the researcher decides to analyze data in the interview
language. The previous studies that have been conducted in cross-cultural settings usually apply translation at the transcribing stage (usually from other languages to English) and then analyze data in English. As I have stated in Chapter Three that 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). Therefore, I would recommend in the condition that if the researcher and the participant(s) share the same language (such as the present study), 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 become lost during the translation process; as researchers, we should try our best to present our participants as truly as possible.

The second aspect I want to discuss is my “insider” status. In hindsight, I think my “insider” status definitely helped me get contact with the research participants, conduct interviews and analyze data. However, I have to admit that the drawbacks I mentioned in Chapter Three about “insider” role did influence me to some extent. I failed to probe on some topics during the
interviews because I took what my participants said for granted since I have the similar experiences or share the similar background. I also felt that because of my “insider” role, in some circumstances they were being cautious because of the fear of being judged. However, the advantages of being an “insider” outweighed the disadvantages in this study. If I had a chance to conduct a similar study, I would ask myself to be more cautious about the disadvantages of the “insider” role and keeping myself alert during the research process.

**Conclusion**

This study has sought to shed light on the experiences and voices of Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from their studies. My ultimate goal was to investigate their experiences to understand the reasons for their withdrawal and what had influenced their decisions. I was also curious whether their past experiences in China had impacted their decision-making and what kind of role Chinese culture played. My four research participants shared their experiences of being international doctoral students studying in a Canadian university, which included interactions between their supervisors and their spouses and family members, the differences in education between their home country—China—and the host
country Canada, and the difficulties they encountered during the study process. My participants also shared with me their educational experiences in China before they came to Canada. Those past experiences in China seem to have shaped their expectations about education, which required an adjustment of my participants to fit with Canadian campuses. The incompatibility with supervisors was one factor that led to the withdrawal of some of my participants but not all. The intention and willingness to fulfil their gender roles and family roles also impacted the decision-making of all research participants in different ways. I also found their perceptions of and ways of dealing with relationships were influenced by certain aspects of Chinese culture.

In the last paragraph of this study, I want to emphasize that 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 such as contribution to the enrichment of higher education, the development of research, the promotion of global understanding etc. (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Chapdelaine & Alexitch 2004; Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2008). However, their study status and overall well-being may not be getting enough attention from both the scholarly research and in real practice. Thus, I believe
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. I also hope 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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Appendix A: Ethics Review Approval Certificate

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Yan Gao
UVic STATUS: Ph.D. Student
UVic DEPARTMENT: EDCI
SUPERVISOR: Dr. Helen Raptis

ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17-145
Minimal Risk Review - Delegated

ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: 19-May-17
APPROVED ON: 19-May-17
APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: 18-May-18

PROJECT TITLE: Why did you withdraw? Experiences of Chinese International Doctoral Students in Canada

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS: None

DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: None

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.

Modifications
To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.

Renewals
Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.

Project Closures
When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations involving Human Participants.

[Signature]
Dr. Rachael Scarth
Associate Vice-President Research Operations

Certificate Issued On: 19-May-17
Appendix B: Recruitment Advertisement

Looking for participants! Your PhD Experience is VALUABLE

IF YOU WERE:
A Chinese international student
Had been enrolled in a doctoral program in Canada

BUT
Withdrew from study before completion

I WOULD LIKE TO HEAR YOUR STORY

Please contact Yan Gao @ yangao@uvic.ca, Faculty of Education, UVic
Appendix C: Recruitment Post on WeChat

大家好！首先做个自我介绍：我叫高砚，目前在加拿大西海岸某大学教育学专业攻读博士学位。我的博士研究需要符合条件的研究参与者。具体说明如下：如果您大学之前都在国内受教育，曾被加拿大博士课程录取，在博士课程未完结前决定退出，那您就是我要找的人啦！

您可能会好奇我想要这样的参与者一起研究什么？

研究缘起：我于 2013 年秋季被加拿大某大学博士课程录取。我一个人拖着两个箱子来到这个地方准备开始我的博士生活。由于不是第一次出国念书，我当时对自己还是十分有信心的。可是谁曾想到在上了两个月的课后，我就有了放弃的念头。甚至有一天晚上半夜睡不着，开始打包行李想回家。

在这四年间我也有看到或者听说很多留学生背着行囊远离家乡，不远万里来到加拿大攻读博士学位，但由于种种原因没有坚持下去。我很好奇他们经历了怎样的困难？怎样的纠结？为什么决定不读了？

在北美，博士的折损率大概在 50%到 60%左右。也就是说有一半的博士生被录取后没有最终拿到学位。这里面的原因是多种多样的。能被博士课程录取的学生都是在学业上十分优秀和出色的。从文献中看，最终没有拿到学位的原因与博士生和导师的关系，是否有研究基金，家人是否支持等等非智力非学习表现的因素很有关系。另一方面来说，作为留学生，我们比本地的学生要克服更多的困难去完成一个学位。我们有语言障碍，我们需要去适应本地文化，我们想家，我们在外国没有一个健全的支撑体系。这些给留学博士生增加了更多困难。

目前在这个领域的研究当中没有研究专门针对中国学生。我们是一群被边缘化的群体。没有研究就没有人听到我们的声音，那么我们获得支持和帮助的可能性就会变小。我们中国留学博士生的经历和我们遇到的困难需要得到更多的关注。这就是我想做这个研究的动机！

研究方法：我的研究将采取采访的研究方式。让参与研究的人讲述他们自己的故事（就像鲁豫有约那样）。采访资料就是我要收集的数据。之后我会将数据翻译成英文，再进行数据的分析。由于我研究方法的特殊性，研究参与者并不仅仅是一个普通的被采访对象，他们将跟我一同构建起这个研究。
请您放心：
1. 我本人包括我整个研究的基础，都没有半途不读了这个事情看成是一种负面的事情。读博士本身就不是义务教育，是个人的一种选择，是一种工作。工作中途跳槽去干了别的事情，或者换了公司是很正常的。我的访问是从社会文化的角度去看个人的读/不读的决定。
2. 您的参与将是全程匿名的。我的研究已经收到了道德委员会的批准。也就是说您的隐私和权益受到加拿大学术研究方面法律法规的保护。
3. 如果您同意接受我的访问，我将跟您约电话或面谈的时间。访问将分三次进行，每次一个小时左右。在每一次访问之后，我将会整理出来访问记录您过目。在每次访问之前我也将告诉您今天我们要谈的主题内容。
4. 这个研究是我个人的博士研究，所以并没有大笔资金的支持。但为了对您表示感谢，我将给您准备我能承受的范围之内的礼物或者礼卡作为答谢。

研究完成之后，会作为我博士“最后的作业”进行答辩。研究得出的结论将会在整理后送给国际学生办公室，研究生管理处等相关部门作为参考。我个人也会努力在国际学术会议等场合为我们中国留学生振臂一呼！以上就是我想说的。我的联系方式是：WeChat ID: gladys7gy

如果您对我的研究感兴趣，请您联系我。

如果您知道有谁会对我的研究感兴趣，请麻烦把这篇文章转发给他。
感谢您的阅读！
Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Why Did You Withdraw?
Experiences of Chinese International Doctoral Students in Canada

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Why Did You Withdraw? Experiences of Chinese International Doctoral Students in Canada that is being conducted by Yan Gao.

I, Yan Gao, am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by email: vangao@uvic.ca.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for the PhD degree completion in Doctor of Philosophy. It is being conducted under the supervision of Helen Raptis. You may contact my supervisor at hraptis@uvic.ca.

Purpose and Objectives
The purpose of this research project is to understand Chinese international doctoral students who withdrew from study in the North American context; and to elicit/ learn from the experiences of these voices

Importance of this Research
Research of this type is important because the number of international students is increasing every year in Canada. They come from different countries with different cultures and background. Among them, some successfully gained the degree, but some of them withdrew before completion of study. However, research seldom focuses on the reasons why they decided to withdraw, what they have experienced during their stay in the host countries and what are the reasons deeply rooted in their withdrawal decision, especially for those international students who pursue doctoral degrees. Thus, the proposed research will interview three Ph.D. students who were enrolled in a doctoral program in Canadian universities to try to find out the reasons for withdrawal. The result of my study will add to the literature and begin to fill a gap
for international and doctoral student education.

**Participants Selection**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you were a Chinese international student who studied in a Canadian university to pursue doctoral degree, and you decided to leave the program before completing your degree. Also, you were born and raised in China, and you received most of your education in Chinese education systems.

**What is involved**

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include three rounds of interview and each round of interview will take approximately one hour. The interview is semi-structured. The investigator will inform you of the proposed interview questions before conducting interviews. Audio-tapes and written notes will be taken. A transcription will be made. You will review the previous transcript before we start the current one. The last transcript will be sent to you to review by email. Ongoing consent will be confirmed verbally at each interview for the subsequent one. There are also possibilities that I may use materials supplied by you. If the material you provide relate to another person, this third party information will not be identifiable.

Please be advised that information about you that is gathered for this research study will be used for the fulfillment of PhD degree requirement located in Victoria, Canada (but your identifiable information will not be included).

**Inconvenience**

Participation in this study may cause you the inconvenience of taking approximately three hours of your time.

**Risks and Solution**

This research topic is somewhat sensitive and personal and it may appear that emotional or psychological discomfort and/or stress may be possible risks for you. Also I will be conducting three separate interviews with you, which may lead to fatigue.

During the interview process, if you feel any discomfort by the interview question, please let me know, we will move to the next question. If you feel fatigue, we will temporarily stop, have a break and then I will discuss the time that we could resume the interview with you.
Benefits
The potential benefits of your participation in this research include your story will contribute and provide reference to the literature and fill the gaps to international student and doctoral student education.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be removed from database and returned to you.

Anonymity
In terms of protecting your anonymity, your name and affiliation will not be appear in the study, the persons you mention will be anonymous as well.

Confidentiality
Please be advised that due to the limit of recruitment procedures, this may compromise the confidentiality of you. However, I will not provide identifying information such as your names, in which university, which program you have studied etc., and the potential (3rd party) people you mentioned will not be identified in the research. All participants will be given pseudonyms.
Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by password in personal computer, and paper documents will be locked in a cabinet in my research office at UVic.

Dissemination of Results
It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: dissertation reviewed by committee for degree completion, published journals, presentation at conference.
After defense, my dissertation will be posted on UVicSpace and can be accessed by the public.

Disposal of Data
Data from this study will be erased from my personal computer and destroyed three years after I successfully defend my dissertation.

Contacts
Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Yan Gao, the researcher by email: yangao@uvic.ca or by phone 778-922-5787.
In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).
Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

Name of Participant    Signature    Date

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Round one
1 How do you describe your experience in that doctoral program?
   Follow-up: Why did you describe your experience as…?
2 Did you encounter any difficulties while studying?
   Follow-up: If yes, what were the difficulties and how did they affect you?
3 How do you perceive the interactions between you and your academic environment during your study?
4 How was the relationship between you and your family during your study period?
5 At what moment you decided to quit that program? Can you share with me your thoughts on that moment?
6 What was your motivation for applying Ph.D. study overseas?
   Follow-up: Did this motivation ever changed during your study?

Round two
1 Where is your hometown? How do you describe your hometown?
2 Can you share with me your family background? What do your parents do?
3 Did you receive most of your education in your hometown? How do you describe your education experience before you came to Canada?
4 What is your attitude toward education?
   Follow-up: Does this attitude ever changed?
5 How do you view marriage/relationship?
6 How do you perceive your role as a (wife/mother/husband/father/son/daughter)?
7 Have you ever worked before? How was your working experience?

Round three:
1 What is your goal for life? What kind of life you want to live?
2 What are your hobbies?
3 How is life after you withdrew from that doctoral program?
4 How do you think of your withdrawal now?