Exploring the Experiences of Overseas Students in China

Ting Wang
University of Canberra, Australia
Xiaofei Liu
Beijing Public Security Bureau, China

Abstract This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study, which examines the experiences of Australian students in Chinese universities. It investigates the major challenges and issues regarding overseas students prior to departure, upon arrival and settling-in, and during their stay in China. There is a growing body of literature focusing on experiences of overseas students studying at Western universities. Given the increasing number of students coming to study in China in recent years, there arises the need to explore their experiences. To date and to the knowledge of the researchers, the study is the first in-depth and interpretative research on this field within the Chinese context, particularly from the perspective of Australian overseas students. An in-depth and semi-structured interview technique was employed as the research method. Eight Australian students who studied in Chinese universities for over six months from 1993 to 2006 were interviewed face to face or through telephone. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The findings reveal some differences in teaching and learning approaches between China and Western countries. This study makes a contribution to gaining insights into overseas student experiences in China. Recommendations on meeting their needs are also made to Chinese universities and the administrative authorities.

Key words: international education, cross-cultural study, learning and teaching
Context

This paper presents a qualitative study of the experiences of overseas students in China, which investigates the major challenges and issues regarding overseas students at Chinese universities. International exchange and cooperation is an important feature of the China’s educational development. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government has attached great importance to the exchange and cooperation with foreign countries and encouraged more overseas student to study in China (Xinhua New Agency, 2006). With China’s rapid economic development, growing national strength and rising international status, the higher education of China is increasingly known and acknowledged by the world (Zhang, 2005, p.5). China is becoming one of the most attractive destinations for overseas students. Over the past five years, the number of overseas students studying in China has risen more than 20 percent annually. In 2004, China is the sixth largest destination country with 110,844 overseas students, who came from 178 countries and studied a wide range of disciplines in 420 colleges and universities nationwide, mainly in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin (Cao, 2005).

China started receiving her first 33 scholarship overseas students from Eastern Europe in 1950 (Ministry of Education, 2006b). From then on, especially in the last two decades of China’s opening-up and reform, international cooperation and exchanges of higher education have become “more and more active and achieved fruitful results” (Ministry of Education, 2006a). Recent years have seen a rapid increase of students from European, American and Oceanian continents and enhancement of educational exchange and cooperation with countries in these areas. In 2000, Agreement on Sino-American educational exchange and cooperation was signed in China. In the following years, China signed agreements with the educational authorities of Germany, France, U.K, Australia and New Zealand to mutually recognize higher education degrees. All these achievements, to a large extent, attract increasing overseas students to study in China (Cao, 2005, p.2).

Rationale

It is estimated that by the time China hosts the 2008 Olympic Games, overseas students in China will go up to 120,000 (Agence France Presse, 2004). Given the significant increase of overseas students in China in recent years and the expected rise in the future, an in-depth exploration of overseas student experiences is timely and valuable in order to identify the challenges and issues regarding overseas students in China.

To date, and to the knowledge of the researchers, this study is the first in-depth and exploratory research on the perceptions of Australian overseas students in Chinese universities. The previous research into experiences of overseas students has mainly focused on those who study in developed countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, the U.K. and U.S.A. (See Kinnell, 1990; Ni, 2002; Pyvis & Chapman, 2004). There is relatively little research on the experiences of students studying in developing countries, especially in China. Thus, this study attempts to fill in the gap
of the in-depth research on exploring the experiences of overseas students within the Chinese context.

This study is intended to answer two research questions: 1) what were the challenges and issues concerning overseas students prior to departure, upon arrival and settling-in, and during their stay in China? 2) What are the possible strategies to address the challenges and issues regarding overseas students in China? The purpose of this study is to explore the personal experiences of overseas students in China and recommend suggestions to Chinese universities and administrative authorities for meeting the overseas students’ needs and requirements.

**Literature Review**

Much of the literature reviewed on overseas students in China is about government policies and statistics. Although some studies regarding overseas students have been conducted in China, they are mostly presented from the perspectives of academics and administrative staff (See Li, 2005a; Wu, 2005). Two factors may contribute to a lack of systematic research on this field. China has developed international education in the contemporary age for over fifty years and overseas student education is a relatively new area (Li, 2005b, p.51). Furthermore, the administration of overseas students is “a very professional field” in China which falls within the responsibility of the public security bureaus and education authorities (Wang and Dang, 2005, p.3).

**Overseas Student Administration**

In China, the Office of Overseas Student Administration (OOSA) at each university is responsible for the enrollment procedures, curriculum arrangement and routine administration of overseas students. Moreover, the Public Security Bureau (PSB) administers students’ entering, leaving and residing in China and investigates criminals involving overseas students. Current law stipulates that overseas students are not allowed to work in China. However, a report from DEEA (2002a, p.1) shows that a lot of overseas students do work in China and the exact figure of illegal employment cases of overseas students can hardly be obtained. Beijing Municipal Education Committee drew up a temporary regulation in 2000 to deal with overseas student employment in Beijing (DEEA, 2002a). However, this regulation failed to be issued due to the disagreement between the relevant departments on such issues as work areas and application formalities (DEEA, 2002a). To date, no specific regulation regarding overseas student employment is operable (DEEA, 2002b). Given the increasing number of illegal employment of overseas students in China, detailed laws and regulations should be formulated by the relevant administrative departments to resolve this problem (DEEA, 2002b).

In order to better administer overseas students and increase their awareness of abiding by Chinese laws and regulations, the Public Security Bureau cooperates with the universities to publicize laws to overseas students upon their arrival. This practice is regarded as “a routine task” (Wang & Dang, 2005, p.9) and has developed to one unique strategy of overseas student administration in
China (Du, 2006, p.3). Since 2004, Beijing PSB has provided information sessions about laws and regulations for 23,000 students from more than 140 countries (Du, 2006, p.4). Given most new overseas students’ lack of knowledge of the Chinese language, English is often employed in the publicity sessions (Jia, 2005, p.4).

**Life and Learning Experiences of Overseas Students**

Isolated from their families, friends and familiar environment, overseas students may have to cope with culture shock, a sense of loss and loneliness, and study shock. Therefore, the new “parents” universities have played a key role in assisting overseas students to adapt to their life and study in China. “Good accommodation in a comfortable and relaxing environment is an important prerequisite for settling down to study” (Kinnell, 1990, p.89). In China, universities provide accommodation on campus for their overseas students. But unlike Australia, “a separate dormitory on campus for overseas students is required at the university” (Beijing Educational Committee et al, 2005) because overseas students may not be used to the living conditions of Chinese students (six or eight Chinese students often live in a room while two overseas students live in a room). Meanwhile, in order to guarantee the safety of overseas students, a caretaker or security guard is employed at the dormitory. Although strict administration is meant for the benefits of overseas students, some researchers (e.g. Thurston et al., 1994) argue that many overseas students are disappointed at these rules.

Appropriate orientation guidance and help should be emphasized in consideration of the culture shock experienced in the first crucial week at the university (Kinnell, 1990). In China, the OSSA staff are responsible for arranging orientation programs at the university. The specific contents and forms of these programs vary in different universities. However, few universities can provide the university-wide orientation activities for both Chinese and overseas students because “many overseas students, especially the language course students, arrive at different times of the semester” (Zhu & Liu, 2005, p.70). Orientation activities are arranged particularly for the overseas students, such as introducing the university staff, publicizing the Chinese laws and regulations, and organizing welcome parties or sightseeing trips (Zhu & Liu, 2005, p.72).

It should be noted that adjusting to the teaching and learning environment takes time in China (Thurston, et al., 1994, p.115). Previous literature suggests significant differences in educational styles and philosophy between Asian and Western traditions (See Ballard, 1989; Kennedy, 2002). Thus, when overseas student come to China, they have to cope with the “study shock” (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984, p.1) and shift their learning habits to suit the new demands of the Chinese educational system. As Wu indicates (2005), teachers in China basically follow the textbooks. This kind of teaching style is more suitable for Asian students rather than Western students because “the textbooks currently used for all overseas students in most Chinese universities are designed with little attention paid to the cultural difference between Asian and Westerners” (Wu, 2005, p.96). Meanwhile, the Chinese teaching style tends to be less interactive than the Western
style. In western countries, students are encouraged to “speak up in class, to question and challenge the teacher” (Pe-Pua, 1994, p.9). But in most Chinese universities, courses are more likely to be lectures and the learning skills mainly “rely on memorization and imitation” (Ballard, 1989, p.89). Students always pursue the one right answer to any question but not the creative and new knowledge by discussion and evaluation (Thurston, et al., 1994, p.122).

Moreover, the teacher-student relationship is another focus of many discussions on the differences in the learning environment (Pe-Pua, 1994). In most previous studies, the relationship between teacher and student is frequently regarded as hierarchical in China and informal in Western countries (See Pe-Pua, 1994; Ballard, 1989). However, some studies show that Chinese teachers usually establish more casual and personal relationship with their students beyond the classroom. A visit from a teacher to student dormitory is not unusual and teachers are concerned if their students are ill or have problems in their lives and studies. Although this personal relationship with teacher is not familiar to Western students, most feel “affection and respect for the dedicated and hardworking Chinese instructors” (Thurston et al., 1994, p.137). Many overseas students encounter difficulties as a result of “different teaching styles and inefficient approaches to study” (Burke, 1989, p.81). What can be done by the academic staff to create appropriate and better teaching and learning environment for overseas students in China? It is still “a question to be constantly explored and resolved” (Wu, 2005, p.97). Variations in terms of gender, length of study and type of university may also lead to differences of the experiences that student have. This paper is inspired by the gaps in the existing literature and seeks to address the issues identified.

Research Approach

In-depth Interview

This study intends to examine the experiences of Australian overseas students in China. Since qualitative research essentially aims to “provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstance, their experience and histories” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.3), a qualitative methodology is considered most suitable for this research. In-depth interviews “use individual as the point of departure for the research process and yield rich insight into people’s experiences, values, attitudes and feeling” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.119). Because this study is to explore the subjective feelings and opinions on a range of issues regarding overseas students in China, the researchers have chosen a semi-structured and in-depth interview as the research method.

Interview Participants

In this research, a purposive sampling method is employed because the features of purposive sampling (See Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.78) make it well suited to small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies. Moreover, the researchers expect a purposive maximum variation sample to provide for wide diversity in the experiences being examined. Every effort has been undertaken to
purposively maximize the coverage of potential variations in student experiences. Eight participants in this study, five males and three females, are Australians who had learning experiences in five cities of China. They studied Chinese language at twelve universities which are ranked as the top, second-tier, or third-tier universities in China. Meanwhile, their lengths of study ranged from six months to nearly three years from 1993 to 2006. In addition, some participants had learning experiences at two or three different universities as either a self-paid student or government-sponsored student. All of these factors contribute to obtaining an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Australian students in China.

Data collection

Prior to formal interviews, one of the authors interviewed a male Australian student who studied in Beijing in 1990s. This pilot interview aimed to ensure clarity of interview questions. Upon receiving the consent forms from the participants, six face-to-face interviews were conducted in Canberra while two telephone interviews were administered because both interviewees were not in Australia at that time. The participants were interviewed individually for 40 to 90 minutes in March/April 2006. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. A copy of each interview transcript was sent to the participants to check the accuracy of transcription. A profile of the participants can be seen in Table 1. To preserve their confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this study.

Table 1 A Profile of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Length of study</th>
<th>Uni code</th>
<th>University rank</th>
<th>Self-paid/sponsored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 4</td>
<td>Second-tier</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 4</td>
<td>Second-tier</td>
<td>Sponsored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 5</td>
<td>Third-tier</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 1</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Sponsored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>U 6</td>
<td>Second-tier</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>U 1</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Sponsored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tianjin</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 10</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>U 11</td>
<td>Third-tier</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2000-2002</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>U 12</td>
<td>Third-tier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>U 2</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Sponsored</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>U 3</td>
<td>Second-tier</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hangzhou</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 7</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kunming</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>U 9</td>
<td>Second-tier</td>
<td>Self-paid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis

Data analysis in this research was dealt throughout the whole data-gathering and transcribing process. This integration of data collection and analysis provides an opportunity to “identify emergent categories within completed interviews and to explore these categories with future respondents” (Parks, 2006, p.257). Once the transcribing was finished, the researchers/authors reviewed each interview transcript several times in order to be further familiar with all the data. Then, the excerpts of each participant were coded by the authors which formed the first level of coding and ensured inter-coder reliabilities. Furthermore, by using “an issue-focused analysis” (Weiss, 1994), the responses of each participant to each question were listed together and put into tables. Followed by the primary category, the researchers integrated the responses of all participants to each question in the order of the interview questions covering the three stages: prior to departure, upon arrival and settling-in, and during the stay in China.

Findings and Discussions

As can be seen in Figure 1, this study identified challenges and issues regarding overseas students prior to departure, upon arrival and settling-in, and during their stay in China. Based on the three stages, the findings are categorized into three sections. Typical responses from the interviewees are employed along with the data presentation.

![Figure 1 Challenges and issues regarding overseas students in China](image.png)
Pre-departure

Access to University Information
As for the channels of obtaining information about the university, courses and enrollment procedures, responses from the interviewees considerably varied, ranging from websites, suggestions from teachers and friends, contact with Chinese universities and personal experiences. The findings indicated that the most widely used way for overseas students to get pre-arrival information was university websites. In this study, almost all the participants visited the websites of the universities prior to their departure to China. However, the majority of the interviewees who studied before 2002 did not obtain sufficient information, especially about visa application information from the websites. Jack and Mike mentioned that some universities did not have English website yet. But those who studied in China in recent two years held different perceptions. Lucy, Mike, and Sharon claimed that they got adequate information and the websites were much better than before. Moreover, Mike and Sharon stressed that the quick responses of the university staff to their e-mails made them obtain more detailed and confirmed information prior to departure. This finding suggests that the information-providing service in many Chinese universities have been greatly improved in recent years. Sharon described her different experiences in 2001 and 2005 as follows:

My Chinese was not good. There were not much English on the website. So it was very difficult. I knew little about the dormitory and the address. I was very nervous at the first time (2001).

However, Sharon found adequate information on her second time to study in China in 2005. She felt much more comfortable and commented like this:

It was pretty good. I had the details of the day I was there, details about the prices of the accommodation, a map of the university and the university posted me information about enrollment. … It was very organized.

Most interviewees believed that a comprehensive and updated website with information about the university and the courses was helpful. As Lucy indicated, “it is so important because everyone wants to find out before they go. I chose this university since it had a very good website”. Cathy agreed that “when students are selecting universities to study, they wanted to choose what fits them 100 percent”. But David had a different opinion and explained that “sometimes the personal experiences in China were more important than the website”. In fact, two participants in this study, Mike and Jack, inspected the university before making their decisions. Jack explained that “they had very good classes, very few foreigners. I thought it was a better place to study Chinese. Finally, I chose this university”. This study suggests that each university should establish a website both in Chinese and English where basic information about the university and visa application is presented. Moreover, competent bilingual university staff could be appointed to provide detailed replies to overseas students’ inquiries.
Understanding of Chinese Culture and Customs

The findings showed that all participants knew little about Chinese culture and customs before they studied in China, unless they had visited China before their study. Some participants learned Chinese in Australia, but what they knew about Chinese culture and customs was mainly Chinese festivals. Nor did they know much about basic lifestyle or customs of Chinese people. The interviewees all believed it was helpful for overseas students to have some knowledge about Chinese culture and customs prior to their departure to China. “It makes life easier and adjustable”, as Sharon mentioned. David also commented that “when you leave from one culture to another, of course it is different. You have to understand basic things about culture”. David illustrated his points by citing a very interesting example like this:

When you give a present to a Chinese person, you do not buy a clock. The word for “clock” (Zhong) is the sound of the word for “death” (Song Zhong in Chinese). It is not a good present. But if you give a box of eight pieces of fruit, it can mean you can be very successful and have more money because “eight” sounds like “fa” (richness) in China.

Meanwhile, four participants in this study maintained that it was difficult for them to have a deep understanding of Chinese culture and customs in advance. As Tom argued, “we were given some introduction to Chinese culture, but the image I had was quite different from what it was really like”. This point was particularly emphasized by David who explained “China has a culture of 5000 years. It is unrealistic to be expected to understand culture before you go to China”. Cathy shared the similar view and commented that:

When I first was in China, I did not know anything about the culture and customs in the first week. We were hosted to visit different people in their offices or at homes. They gave me a glass of tea and I was trying to finish, as in Australia, so I could leave. But they came over and added it up.

The findings revealed that having some knowledge of Chinese culture and customs was necessary for overseas students before their departure to China, which would assist them in adapting to the new country and culture. Therefore, it is suggested that booklets about Chinese culture and customs, especially Chinese manners and lifestyles be posted to overseas students together with the letter of acceptance. Moreover, considering that culture and customs are difficult to understand without experiencing it personally, articles about experiences of overseas students at the university could be presented in the booklets or on the website of the university. The personal meetings of students who have returned from China could be organized, if students come from the same city in Australia.
Upon-arrival and Settling-in

Reception on Arrival
In this study, almost all participants had not been met by the university staff on arrival in China at the airport. However, responses from the interviewees showed the majority of the participants would like to have been met by the university staff or students at the airport. Jack claimed that “somebody should meet the students at the airport because many students do not speak Chinese and are maybe young and scared”. Lucy also argued that it was important to meet new students on their arrival so that they did not have to “struggle with the transport and the uncertainties when trying to reach their final destinations”. Mike illustrated his points as follows:

When I first came to the airport, I was very scared. ... I had a lot of luggage. When I put the luggage into the taxi and the taxi was not big enough. So it would be nice if the university could meet new students at the airport.

This finding suggests that being met on arrival would be an effective way to reduce students’ initial anxieties and uncertainties to come to a new place. Therefore, meeting the newly arrived students at the airport either by university staff or senior students is strongly recommended. Some universities may find it hard to organize transport, especially those top universities with a large number of overseas students. However, it would be advisable to provide detailed information in English in advance, such as, the university location, how to get to it and transportation fee.

Accommodation arrangement
Almost all participants lived in the university dormitory when they first came to China to study. All students living on campus, except Mike, claimed that their rooms had been arranged beforehand. The findings revealed that accommodation arrangement prior to students’ arrival was viewed crucial to help them easily settle down to study, especially for those coming to China for the first time. This finding is consistent with Kinnell’s (1990, p.89) argument that comfortable accommodation could help students adapt to different environment. In this study, Sharon declared “it makes us adjustable. If you are in China and you do not even know where you live, that can be worrying”. Mike described his stressful experiences in getting his accommodation.

We went to the foreign student dormitory. They said: “... We do not have a room for you”. We were shocked because we came a long way from Australia. In the e-mail, the university staff said we should go to foreign student dormitory on this day. But … I felt confused and sad because for most of us, it was our first time to China. The first night we stayed in a hotel.

Mike finally got his room on the next day, but he still felt bad because:

We went to the university and sat down for maybe two hours. When two hours finished, they gave us a room in an old dormitory. The room was not clean and the
This study suggests that effective measures need to be taken to address overseas students’ needs on accommodation. Lucy commented that alternative accommodation would be welcomed by overseas students. She explained that “it is nice we have accommodation (on campus) so we can live there until we choose a cheap one to move out”. This view was supported by Sharon who commented that “you need somewhere living for a week or some time. So you can organize to find somewhere else”. Thus, a good and clean accommodation needs to be provided for overseas students on their arrival at the university. As for students who prefer to live off campus, the university could provide temporary accommodation on campus before they move out.

**Orientation Week**

The findings revealed that orientation activities in China varied in different universities. Most universities held a brief information session to introduce the teachers and students or invited police officers to publicize Chinese laws and regulations. Some also organized a welcome dinner or party. However, some participants like Joe, Mike and Jack complained that they did not get much information from the university staff and the police who spoke Chinese or poor English. Cathy did not obtain any information because she arrived in the middle of the semester. Almost all participants agreed that the orientation week in Chinese university was different from that in Australia. Sharon explained that “all the activities were just arranged for overseas students and nothing was combined with Chinese students”. This view was shared by Lucy.

*In China, it (orientation week) is not really like that in Australia. In my university, the foreign student school was very separate. ... It was not like the whole university orientation. It was just for overseas students. They did not arrange other Chinese students to mix with us. That was something I thought was a pity.*

All interviewees welcomed the university-wide orientation activities and would like to participate in these activities. They held that organized arrangement in the first week would provide them with more opportunities to interact with local students and make their new life easier and convenient. This confirmed Kinnell’s (1990) comments that orientation activities should be specifically designed “in consideration of the culture shock experienced” by overseas students. Therefore, it is suggested that the university-wide orientation activities be adopted at Chinese universities. Meanwhile, for students arriving at various times, booklets or information sheets concerning university life and study in English should be made available to them. Furthermore, police with competent English are supposed to be involved in the law publicity sessions or at least good translators could be provided by the universities.

**During Their Stay**

**Accommodation Administration**

Most interviewees, particularly male students were dissatisfied with the accommodation
administration at Chinese universities due to living separately from Chinese students and a lack of privacy and convenience. Thus, three out of four respondents chose to live off campus on their second time to study in China. This was contrary to the university’s initial intention to provide overseas students with secure and comfortable living conditions in a separate building. The majority of the respondents would like to mix with Chinese students and believed that it was an effective way to meet local students and experience real Chinese student life. Three interviewees complained that overseas dormitory administration was too strict. They mentioned a security guy was on duty at the gate of the dormitory. Chinese students were not allowed to come in or were only permitted to stay for a couple of hours after signing the visitor book. At some universities, the dormitory door would be closed by a certain time at night. Joe commented that he had little freedom and privacy. David held the similar view and commented:

> **When foreign students lived in China, privacy did not happen. … We had the man to lock the door. … That was probably the hard thing with getting used to that…. If you came back late, you had to ring the door bell. … We did not like that. When the door was closed, it was a big problem to come in.**

However, David and Cathy also mentioned the potential difficulties for both Chinese students and overseas students to live together. Cathy commented that due to different cultural backgrounds, overseas students could not stand “living with five or eight people in the same room”. Chinese students may not like to live with overseas students who have different living habits. David, who lived with Chinese students in Taiwan supported Cathy and claimed that “if you bring your boyfriend or girlfriend back to your room, it is a problem because all the boys live together and all the girls live together”.

It is suggested that an option should be offered to overseas and Chinese students to decide whether to live in the same building. Meanwhile, considering the differences in culture and lifestyle between China and Western countries, the accommodation rules at university for overseas students could be relaxed to some extent. Moreover, those who prefer to live with Chinese students need to be well prepared psychologically in order to immerse into Chinese student life. As “do in Rome as Romans do”, some Chinese customs and traditions like girls and boys living separately should be respected and accepted by overseas students.

**Overseas Student Employment**

The findings indicated that a large number of overseas students, including the majority of the interviewees worked in China, although they knew that overseas students are not allowed to work in China. This study confirmed the report from DEEA (2002b) that overseas student employment is not uncommon in China. In this study, all interviewees preferred to find a job while studying in China. Many participants, like Joe, Mike, and Sharon agreed that working was helpful for them to practice Chinese language and learn more about Chinese culture. For other students, money was a big concern because sometimes they “need to support their study” (Tom). Half of the participants
suggested that overseas students should be allowed to work part time. They emphasized that the fact in China was that many overseas students worked. Mike argued that “the Chinese business, especially English schools like to employ foreign students to be teachers.” David made similar claims to support Mike and Lucy’s opinions.

No one cares about the regulation. I work all the time. I could work 24 hours a day. .... I taught at high school and university. That happens all the time. … Chinese people want to learn English from foreigners. I think it is impossible to police it. It is very difficult.

The findings revealed that a number of students work in China. The Chinese government may need to change the overseas student employment policy to cater to the increasing demand for native English teachers and provide more opportunities for overseas students to learn Chinese and Chinese culture. Meanwhile, detailed working hours and working areas should be regulated and teaching qualifications of overseas students as teachers should be required, which is also consistent with the report of DEEA (2002b).

Teaching and Learning
The interviewees reported considerable differences between China and Western countries in teaching and learning, such as learning and teaching approaches, class contact hours and structure, teacher-student relationship and academic assistance. Most participants claimed that Chinese learning was more memorization-oriented while in Australia more emphasis was placed on creativity, analysis and independence. Cathy commented that Chinese teaching went like “the teacher tells you what you need to memorize”. But in Australia, the teacher will “set the task and give you the skill to meet the task”. Students can learn how to think during the task rather than being told what is supposed to do. Moreover, the class was viewed as more teacher-centered in China while more student-centered in Australia. David commented that “in China, it was the teacher talked and students listened”. But in Australia “the students may talk more than teachers”.

The majority of the participants indicated that students studying in China had more classes than students studying in Australia. As Lucy argued, “the hours they studied were much longer and the term was much longer. In Australia, we did 26 weeks a year. In China, they had 40”. Sharon and Jack also mentioned that Chinese students had a lot of pressure. The findings also showed that Chinese teachers basically depended on the textbooks in class. As Jack indicated, “it was a very simple way to teach. It was just like reading the textbook, doing exercises and teacher talking. It was same all the time. There was no variety”. Joe and Mike shared the same views and indicated their initial difficulties in adapting to didactic Chinese teaching approaches.

It is interesting to note that unlike Australian teachers, Chinese teachers seemed to have more personal contacts with students beyond class and provide help if possible. This finding was in accordance with Li’s (2005a) argument that Chinese teachers usually enjoy casual and personal
relationship with their students beyond classroom. In this study, most overseas students were satisfied with the pleasant teacher-student relationship in China. Lucy expressed her appreciation to her teacher and described her feeling like this:

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\text{Actually, I like it (teacher-student relationship) in China. \ldots They always help us, even if it has nothing to do with our study. \ldots They are like friends and mothers. In Australia, teachers are friendly. But they concentrate on your study. They would not help you so much like in China.}
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In this study, participants seemed to obtain little help from the university when they had difficulties in their studies. But many claimed that they got personal help from their teachers. Cathy described that “if I was ill, they would pick up the classes again in a couple of days later when I felt well again”. In addition, it was interesting to note that students studying at the second-tier or third-tier universities could obtain more help than those at top universities. This study suggests that due to the differences in assumptions of knowledge and teaching and learning approaches between China and Western countries, many overseas students may have difficulties in their study. Therefore, the academic staff should be sensitive to the various learning traditions of overseas students and address the needs of increasing diversity of student body.

Making Friends

In this study, the majority of the participants agreed that it was difficult to make friends with Chinese students. However, for those studying in China for the second time or living off campus, it was much easier to make friends with Chinese people. Sharon described her experiences on both times to study in China.

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\text{I found the first time was really difficult for me to make friends with Chinese students. \ldots I lived with foreigners… I did not really have many opportunities to meet Chinese students. \ldots On the second time, I lived with a Chinese couple. We went out together and spoke Chinese together. I met a lot of Chinese people and made many friends.}
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Most participants commented that they found it difficult to make friends with Chinese students due to separate accommodation, cultural differences and language barriers. Some participants argued that the universities did not regularly provide activities to make them interact with Chinese students. Some participants, particularly those at top universities, held that Chinese students had great pressure on study and had no time to mix with them. Others mentioned that they did not know the availability of university activities for overseas students as a result of lack of communication channel. It was surprising to find that many participants insisted that when Chinese students wanted to mix with overseas students, they just wanted to practice their English but not to make friends. However, some participants indicated that sometimes it was the problem of overseas students themselves. David explained that “the university could not help someone hold my hand. That was something I have to do”. Lucy agreed that “if you are willing to be away
from other foreigners, Chinese people will welcome you and make friends with you”.

Because of the limitations of accommodation, language ability and cultural differences, overseas students had little interaction with local students and few had Chinese students as real friends. It is strongly recommended that a wider range of social and recreational activities be organized to bring these two groups together. Moreover, it is essential to help overseas students understand whether these activities are available for them. Overseas students should also make their own efforts to have more interactions with Chinese students and local people.

Implications and Conclusion

Due to resource and geographical constrains during the data collection period, this research was built on a small sample of eight Australian participants. Oversea students from countries other than Australia or those who were studying in China when the current study was conducted were not covered. As different features and backgrounds of participants may generate different results, responses gained from this research may not be applicable to all overseas students in China. Further research is suggested to cover a larger sample or a wider range of overseas students in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of their life and experiences in China.

The findings indicated that great efforts had been made by the Chinese administrative authorities and universities to meet overseas students’ needs, such as improvement of pre-departure information provision, development of law publicity and establishment of close teacher-student relationship. However, some issues regarding overseas students’ life and learning in China need to be addressed: reception at the airport, accommodation arrangement and management, orientation activities, student employment, teaching and learning environment, and making Chinese friends.

Some findings in this study are consistent with previous research, such as legality of student employment (DEEA, 2002b), necessity of good arrangement of accommodation (Kinnell, 1990), appropriate guidance in orientation week (Burke, 1986), existence of teaching-learning differences (Kennedy, 2002; Wu, 2005) and recognition of teacher-student relationship (Li, 2005a). However, some surprising findings are also revealed in this study. One is the discontent of overseas students with the accommodation administration at Chinese universities. Although separate buildings and security guards at the dormitories are arranged for overseas students with a view of providing better living conditions and guaranteeing their safety, most students felt disappointed at these regulations. Given the different culture and lifestyles of overseas students, it is suggested that the accommodation management at Chinese university could be improved. Another surprising finding concerns the reluctance of overseas students to interact with Chinese students. Many participants claimed that Chinese students may have instrumental purposes in making friends with them. They commented that what Chinese students want is to practice their English, not to make real friends. It should be noted that this is the perspective of some Australian overseas students and thus further research could be conducted to understand the perceptions of Chinese students on this issue.
This study makes a contribution to an insight into the experiences of oversea students in China. With China’s joining the World Trade Organization and the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, more overseas students will come to China to study, who will act as important bridges of exchanges in education, culture, and science and technology between China and other countries. This study is significant in that it presents the experiences of some Australian overseas students in Chinese universities and will help those planning to study in China make better preparations in advance. Meanwhile, recommendations on major issues regarding overseas students are made to Chinese universities and administrative authorities to provide a more secure and comfortable environment for overseas students in China.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Before you left for China, how did you obtain information about the university, the course you wanted to enrol in and the enrolment procedures? Did you obtain sufficient information you needed?
2. Before leaving for China, what did you know about Chinese culture and customs? Did you think it was helpful to get the relevant information before you came to China? Why?
3. When you arrived in China, did the university arrange somebody to meet you at the airport? Did you think the university staff should meet newly coming students at the airport? Why?
4. Was accommodation an important concern for you when you just came to China? Why?
5. In your first week at the university, were there any orientation activities providing information about study and life at the university? Were they helpful for your adapting to the new environment?
6. Were you satisfied with the accommodation administration at the university? Why?
7. Did you know that overseas students can not work while studying in China? Would you like to find a job if you could? Why?
8. During your study in University, did you find obvious difference in teaching and learning between China and your country? What were the differences, if any?
9. During your stay in China, did the university regularly organize social and recreational activities for overseas students? Was it difficult for you to mix with and make friends with Chinese students and local people? Why?