Chapter 7
Chinese Graduate Students at a Canadian University:
Their Academic Challenges and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

With the growing trend of globalization and internationalization of education, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to pursue higher education in Canada. In order to explore Chinese international students' academic challenges and coping strategies in Canadian universities, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 students studying graduate programs in one Canadian university. The findings reveal that Chinese graduate students encounter a number of academic challenges due to their limited English language proficiency, and the different educational norms and practices between China and Canada. By employing the theory of student agency as the theoretical framework, the study finds that Chinese graduate students possess the agency to cope with their academic challenges. The coping strategies can be grouped into two categories: the first category is to rely on students' personal improvement and the second category is to resort to external resources. The chapter concludes with implications for future research.

INTRODUCTION

With the growing trend of globalization, internationalization and neoliberalism, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to pursue higher education abroad with the aim of enhancing their competitive advantages in the labour market. According to the latest statistics, the number of Chinese students studying abroad rose from approximately 39,000 in 2000 to 662,100 in 2018 (Liu & Liu, 2016; Ministry

of Education of China, 2019). Among the major destinations of Chinese international students, Canada ranks fourth following the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, hosting nearly 170,000 Chinese studying in 2018 (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2019; Institute of International Education, 2018). As shown in Figure 1, the number of Chinese students studying in Canadian educational institutions has increased rapidly in the recent decade, among which university students have been the largest student group.

Figure 1. The number of Chinese students in Canadian educational institutions (2000-2018)
Data source: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada. (2019). Canada: Study permit holders with China as country of citizenship by province/territory of destination, study level and calendar year 1998-2019. Ottawa, Canada: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada.
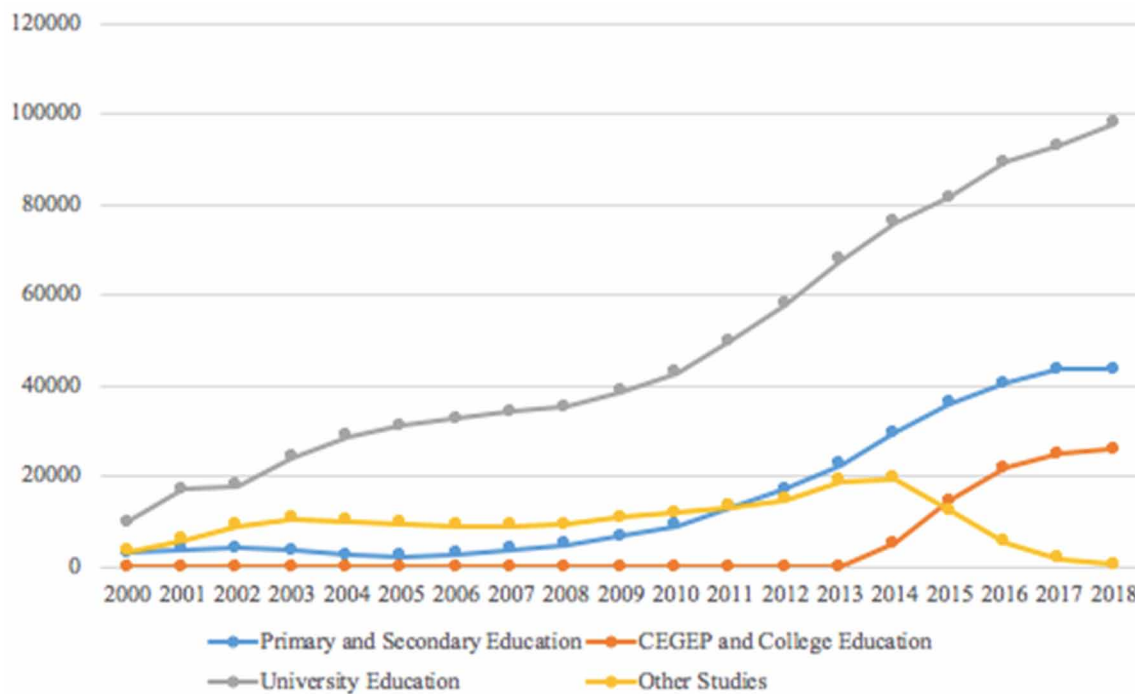
Despite this large enrolment, only several studies have been conducted to investigate Chinese students' academic challenges and coping strategies as part of their learning experiences in Canadian universities. These several relevant papers describe Chinese students' learning experiences in Canadian universities from both positive and negative perspectives. On the one hand, they highlight the positive elements of the Canadian educational system that Chinese students feel comfortable with, such as the opportunity to participate in classroom discussion (Foster & Stapleton, 2012), more chances to make class presentations (Foster & Stapleton, 2012), the rigorous academic requirements (Zheng, 2010), constant support from professors (Li, DiPetta, & Woloshyn, 2012). On the other hand, the difficulties and problems Chinese students encounter while studying at Canadian universities are also mentioned. Among them, the students' limited English language proficiency (Huang & Cowden, 2009; Li, 2004; Li, DiPetta, & Woloshyn, 2012; Yang, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2010), lack of critical thinking skills (Huang & Klinger,

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