

2017

## "They are friendly but they don't want to be friends with you": A narrative inquiry into Chinese nursing students' learning experiences in Australia

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[10.5430/jnep.v7n8p27](https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v7n8p27)

This article was originally published as: Wang, C. C., Whitehead, L., & Bayes, S. (2017). "They are friendly but they don't want to be friends with you": A narrative inquiry into Chinese nursing students' learning experience in Australia. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 7(8), 27. Original article available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/2648>

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# “They are friendly but they don’t want to be friends with you”: A narrative inquiry into Chinese nursing students’ learning experience in Australia

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**Received:** February 8, 2017

**Accepted:** March 5, 2017

**Online Published:** March 7, 2017

**DOI:** 10.5430/jnep.v7n8p27

**URL:** <https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v7n8p27>

## ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest in the phenomena of international student mobility and the growing global demand for skilled nurses. Little is known, however, about the learning experiences of Chinese nursing students at Australian universities. This study begins to address this gap. A narrative inquiry methodology was employed. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions, along with field notes and observations were conducted with six Chinese undergraduate nursing students studying undergraduate nursing in Western Australia. Chinese nursing students in Australia experienced fear and anxiety, driven by unfamiliarity with the hospital environment, education methods, and assessment expectations. Clinical placement experiences in Australian health services were identified by participants as the most stressful learning experience. Forming friendships with domestic students was difficult and rare for these students: none made friends with local students or joined university groups. Despite the challenges they experienced, the participants were motivated and adaptive to a new culture and learning methods, and all, demonstrated academic success. This study provides new knowledge about the learning experiences of Chinese nursing students at Australian universities. Many of the issues identified relate to the wider discussion around effective support for international students.

**Key Words:** International mobility, International student, Chinese student, Nursing shortage, Nursing mobility, Narrative inquiry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

China is currently in the grip of a nursing shortage and needs its overseas-trained nurses to return, to address both this shortage and the issues with Chinese healthcare system and nursing education that have contributed to the situation.<sup>[1-4]</sup> Meanwhile, Australia continually seeks strategies to attract and retain international nursing students from China in order to both maintain its economic advantage and to alleviate its own projected impending nursing shortages.<sup>[5-8]</sup> In earlier papers by our team, the literature pertaining to this conundrum is discussed in depth and the conclusion reached that

what is not yet known is why young Chinese men and women choose to come to Australia to study nursing, their intentions when they graduate in relation to where they will choose to live and work, or what their learning experience is like while they are in Australia.<sup>[6]</sup> The focus of this paper is on the latter of these three aspects of this phenomenon (see Figure 1).

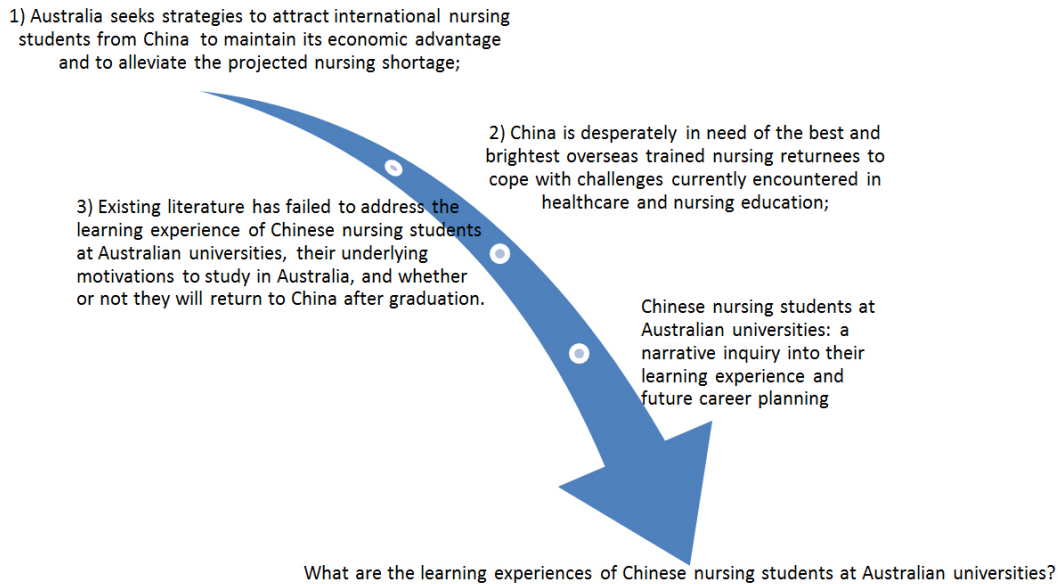
### Overview of narrative inquiry

This article explores the six Chinese nursing students’ learning experiences through a narrative inquiry in Western Aus-

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tralian universities. Narrative inquiry articles such as<sup>[9,10]</sup> were referred as models around which to structure this paper. Connelly and Clandinin's<sup>[11,12]</sup> three-dimensional space narrative structure model: interaction, continuity, and place, was used to explore these students' learning experience. In this model, interaction refers to personal conditions and social conditions. Personal conditions indicate the feelings, attitudes, and moral dispositions of a person toward events.

Social conditions include the context of administration, policy, and community.<sup>[11]</sup> Continuity refers to the temporal conditions in which people and events are situated.<sup>[11]</sup> In this sense, the six Chinese nursing students' past experience, present actions, and future plans all inform and relate to their learning experience and cannot be discussed independent of time. Place refers to the situation in which an event happens. Narrative inquiry is bound by place.<sup>[11]</sup>



**Figure 1.** Rationale and research question

By giving voice to their collective experience, this study seeks to contribute to a fuller understanding of Chinese nursing students' education related experiences. Through a three-dimensional space of interaction, continuity, and place where the six Chinese nursing students' stories unfold and their learning experience is situated. The details of this approach have been reported previously.<sup>[13]</sup>

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Participants profile

The sample of six participants, comprising one male and five females, were international students from China who were studying in their third and final year of an undergraduate nursing program in one of three Western Australian universities. Participants were all Chinese nationals holding a student visa, had completed two years of study in Australia at the time the study commenced, and were aged 20 to 25 years.

### 2.2 Research ethics

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by a University Research Ethics Committee. Participants were aware that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time,

and of confidentiality in relation to the storage, analysis and presentation of the data.

Further, it was anticipated that some participants may have found the telling of their story emotional, and an appropriate plan was prepared in advance for the management of such a situation.

### 2.3 Research tools

In keeping with Clandinin and Connelly's<sup>[11]</sup> preferred processes, the data for this study were collected through individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes derived from interim conversations on the topic.

Since all participants and the first author are bilingual, with Chinese as their first language and English as the second, interviews with participants were conducted in their preferred language (Chinese and/or English). For those interviews conducted in Chinese, the first author translated the interview verbatim into English and then participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. This member checking is a key step in narrative inquiry to preserve the integrity and authenticity of the stories told by participants. The first author also

back checked the transcriptions against the original audio recording for accuracy.<sup>[14]</sup>

### 2.3.1 Interviews

Individual interviews with participants took between 2-3 hours each. The first author met participants at venues of their choice; these included offices, cafés, or wherever was most convenient, quiet and comfortable for participants and privacy could be found. An interview guide and interview probes were used only as conversation starters and only when necessary during the interview. The interviews were audio recorded and then treated as described above by the first author. All participants were given pseudonyms.

### 2.3.2 Focus group discussion

A focus group was conducted to give the participants opportunities to reflect on their learning experience in Australia while listening to other participants' stories. Participants developed a comfortable friendship amongst each other due to sharing some of their interesting experiences prior and during their time in Australia. The focus group took two

hours and was audio recorded and then treated as described earlier by the first author.

### 2.3.3 Field notes

The participants were also encouraged to communicate regularly via emails or any other media with the first author, who also sent regular group phone messages to encourage continual communication with her about their experience of studying in Australia.

## 2.4 Thematic analysis

In keeping with the methodology, this study employed a thematic approach to data analysis. Transcribed data were deconstructed and reconstructed to 'arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or cross stories'.<sup>[14]</sup> The process requires the researcher to follow specific guidelines for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data and describing data in rich details'.<sup>[14]</sup> The process of thematic analysis followed the six phases (see Table 1) outlined by Braun and Clarke.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Table 1.** Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarising with data	Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Gathering data and collating codes into potential themes.
Reviewing themes	Checking the themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine each theme and generate clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the report	Selection of vivid, compelling text extracts relating to the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report.

*Note.* Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 35).

## 3. FINDINGS

Four broad themes emerged from the analysis, state the four here and each theme comprised a number of sub-themes (see Figure 2).

### 3.1 Separation (continuity)

All participants described being away from home, feeling disconnected from familiar environments (language, family, friends, and homemade food) were challenging for them. This them comprises four sub-themes.

#### 3.1.1 Language

Having to function in a country where Chinese was not the first language spoken was one of the key factors that challenged participants; it impacted their ability to converse with others, caused misunderstandings and led to difficulties in forming friendships with Australian students. Participants'

response to this was to throw themselves into their studies, as outlined by Yuan below:

My biggest realisation on clinical placement was that, when you can't talk as good as others, the only thing you can do is to work harder. You do all the dirty, hard work those locals don't want to do, then hopefully you will be fine, well, at least people will think 'you are nice' then they will be more tolerant with what you are not good at. Yuan

This presented its own challenges however, specialist terminology (nursing language) used in the clinical placement settings was identified as the most significant contributor to their language barrier.

Language, especially professional language, the

medical terminology and jargons, also communication skills are the most hindrance to (my)

learning in Australia. Chun



Figure 2. Four themes relating to the learning experiences at Australian universities

### 3.1.2 Family

All participants were the only child in their family, and separating themselves from home was described to be emotional and difficult for all involved. The parents of all the participants reportedly wrestled with the dilemma of being worried and concerned that their child would not be able to look after themselves but wanting them to have 'a better life'. Participants were home sick but were spurred on by believing that they were fulfilling their parents' expectations; all spoke of being determined to make their parents proud. Ling exemplifies this aspect of all the participants' experiences in the following quote:

At the Beijing International Airport as I was saying goodbye to my dad, my mum and my uncle; father hugged me tightly to his chest. He said in an unexpectedly calm voice: "Son, you are going to embark on a new life in a new world!"

Yes! Embarking on a new life in Australia, carrying my family's expectations. I am determined to bring honour to my parents and I am unwavering in my resolve to make my dreams come true! My mother was crying when I hugged her and my uncle's eyes also turned red.

After entering the departure hall, I refused to look back because I knew it would only make me seem weak. My future lay before me and there would be no retreating. I also knew that if I turned my head back, I would cry.

I cried anyway. Ling

As an only child and being my first time living abroad, my parents were worried and feared that I did not bring enough of my belongings. From spring clothes to winter ones, shoes to appliances, it was all tightly packed into my enormous luggage. Not only was it filled with a whole wardrobe but also bedding. My uncle and girlfriend had even helped my parents to pack my luggage. They used vacuum sealed bags to fit everything in and they even packed a rice cooker! If they had not already heard that foreign foods were not allowed to enter the country, they would have packed food in my luggage! For almost every student studying abroad, their parents have packed them over the top, super heavy suitcases. . . .

I thought I would be very happy after receiving the visa, going to Australia which I have been looking forward to for so long, but my heart was

all mixed with emotions. I cried when I saw my parents' grey hair and their endless care. Chun

### 3.1.3 Friends

Another challenge experienced by participants was the development of relationships with their Australian peers. Although it was perceived by participants that forming friendships with Australian resident students could be important for a successful learning experience, this was challenging and rare, and none of them made friends with 'locals'. Participants felt that Australian students simply did their own thing; they came to class and disappeared immediately after. They were friendly but showed no interest in making friends or engaging teamwork with these Chinese students. Yuan and Ping, like the other participants, reflect on this in more depth thus:

I miss my university classmates in China. I think university life in China was the best time and memory for me. We lived together, usually four girls in one room, we go to class together, do things together. . . We shared lots of things together, we had much good laughter and good times. . . So much fun! University life in Australia is really boring; everyone comes for lecture, and then goes home. Yuan

I don't have many local Western friends here in Australia. . . I had discussion with my Chinese friends, they all found it's difficult to make local friends, local students are very friendly, but it's hard to be a 'real friend', just different circles. Ping

Participants did, however, appreciate the more interactive classroom setting that they found in Australia, and they valued their interaction with teachers and other students. Participants also recognised the benefits such as language development and cultural understanding that peer collaboration with domestic students could offer. Frustratingly thought, they found that local students were not interested in working together with them on class projects, and come to the conclusion that the reason was because local students thought they were not good contributors in group work.

Local students don't want to be a group with us. They will say I already have a group but later find out actually they didn't, because in their eyes they think international students don't understand the topic and are hard to work with, they feel it is hard to explain to them, they are not good at English. Ling

### 3.1.4 Food

All participants noted that Australian meals were a major cultural change for them and expressed their fondness and yearning for food 'from home'; typical of all the participants, Chun said, 'I am missing our food!' Underlying participants' narrative about this aspect of their experience was an emotional attachment to the 'food from home'.

My best memory in my own hometown was food. When I was in China, we always dine out with a group of friends, so many different food to adventure. I think we Chinese like food, especially eating out, go to restaurant, with family and friends. I think food is part of our culture. It's so different here. In Australia it's too expensive to dine out every day. Yuan

## 3.2 Unfamiliarity (place)

Three sub-themes contribute to the theme labelled 'unfamiliarity'. A very different hospital environment than they were used to, far more interactive education methods, and competence assessments unlike any they had encountered previously were significant factors contributing to their fear and anxiety about studying in Australia.

### 3.2.1 Clinical placement

Clinical placement, wherein students experience working in real healthcare setting and developing their nursing competence, was identified by all participants as a very stressful experience. Being unversed in Australian nursing language, the 'ways of' the hospital environment, clinical expectations, the culture, and group dynamics meant, they experienced substantial fear and anxiety about this element of their education. Ping and Li explained this aspect of the participants' experience as follows:

Clinical placement was the most challenging part in my study! It was the most painful experience I ever had. I completely lost confidence with my English, lots of terminologies I didn't know, it was hard! Ping

Clinical placement was the most difficult part in learning. Before I went on prac, I was so stressed about it, I didn't know what was expected, I didn't know what the hospital was like. I couldn't even imagine what the hospital and patient look like. I didn't know how nurses work there, how the system is, I had no idea ... It was very overwhelming, I didn't have any confidence. Many terminologies I don't know, I know how those are called in Chinese! I didn't know how to communicate with patients and

staff, what happens if it was an emergency situation? If I didn't understand what they say, I think that would be terrible to ask someone to repeat again in the emergency situation ... Li

### 3.2.2 Learning approach

All participants had previously completed an undergraduate nursing degree in China and this inevitably led them to compare their learning experience at home with that at an Australian university. All participants agreed there was a difference in educational approaches between Australia, where teaching is more student-centred and China, where a lecturer centred style is the norm. Their felt that the lack of familiarity with the new educational approach disadvantaged their learning. Zhe conveyed the difference as follows,

Teaching here is quite different from China, in China we just listen to tutors, they didn't give us many opportunities to express ourselves. We didn't study as small groups, we didn't discuss, unlike here... Zhe

However, most participants agreed that they preferred Australian classroom practices over those in China; they liked the more active teaching style, such as small group tutorials. As Li said of tutorials,

I like them, we can ask questions and the learning atmosphere here is very relaxed and flexible. The tutors are also very relaxed.

The classroom in China is different, quite a serious place, many rules... Students are expected to remain silent in class. Students are not allowed to speak with each other. Li

### 3.2.3 Assessment expectations

Unfamiliarity with assessment expectations was another great challenge for participants. Unlike in China where scores are determined by occasional exams, these students' Australian university assessments comprised several exams, assignments, and involvement or participation in learning activities, and attendance. Such a difference in grading practices was surprising to participants. In addition to needing to do so because of the language barrier, the varied approach to assessment meant these students worked hard but found themselves losing track of the topic and assessment criteria. This was, particularly the case for written assignments where participants found it difficult to grasp the expectations of the lecturer. They were unclear about how to write a good assignment, where to search for the appropriate information, how much was adequate and the assignment format. Two participants' reflections on this aspect of their experience are provided below.

In China, there is only mid semester and final exam, we all know that, no surprise, we know how to prepare for the exam, and we know what is expected.

In Australia, many assessments, like assignments, group work, lot of self-learning, in a process of doing an assignment, we need lots of reference, I felt I have to understand many things in a process of doing an assignment. Li

I think it's easy to pass exams in Chinese universities, there are only two exams, mid semester exam and final exam, we will be told what are the things we are expected to know, then you just focus on that area, prepare, so you surely will pass the exam. Unlike here, too many exams, all different exams, not sure what we were expected to know, not sure how to prepare for exams, not knowing how to write an assignment, how to reference, how to 'critical thinking'. Yuan

Wanting to do well compounded the stress that resulted from this particular challenge, as Li outlines:

Lack of understanding the rules and not good at searching information disadvantaged many of us. I did not know what my lecturers really want me to write on my assignment, it was very stressful because I was so afraid of failing units... Li

### 3.3 Passing exams

Despite their trials, these six Chinese nursing students demonstrated academic success in completing their nursing study. They attributed their success, however, to being overly focused on passing exams at the expense of enjoying the learning process and their overseas experience; again, this was in a context of wanting to do well and particularly of being determined to make their parents proud of them. The near absence of invited engagement with local students described earlier served to assist this 'mostly work, little play' approach. This decision is characterised by the following two quotes.

I have not attended any university club or organisation because I worry so much about my study, my focus is to pass exams and pass all the units. I haven't failed any units. It would be a disaster to fail a unit. I cannot afford to fail a unit. I worked very hard as I don't want a fail. I didn't enjoy my study in Australia because there was so much stress, worries about exams, I cannot afford to fail the exam, I felt if I fail my exam I would let my parents down. Chun

Pass the exam is the most important thing in my life! We cannot afford to not pass the exam. I cannot imagine what my parents will say if I fail a unit. So far I haven't failed any unit. Most of international students (Chinese) are doing well (not fail the units). It's the worst thing ever to happen to an international student is that you only need 1 or 2 points to pass the unit. Some units are prerequisite units, if fail one unit, everything will stuck! ...

I did not enjoy my study in Australia, the learning process is not so painful, but exams are. So much stress, worried not be able to pass. Can't afford to fail. Zhe

### 3.4 Sources of support (interaction)

The fourth and final theme included three sub-themes. Family and friends were the main sources of support in these participants' Australian learning episode; self-determination derived in part from role models that had been through and survived the Australian university experience was also a major factor in their academic success. However, lacking a sense of community and belonging within learning environments detracted from their overseas university experience.

#### 3.4.1 Family and friends

Participants' strong wish to do well for their parents has been reported earlier in this paper, however they also described the emotional and financial support from their families as paramount to their motivation to succeed and their eventual academic success.

Mum always told me to work hard to fight for a better future. They believed that education is the most important thing in life... They want me to study in Australia ...

Family support is important to my study in Australia. Chun

Likewise, Li credits her parents with 'keeping her going':

My parents are the most important people for me, without their support and encouragement, I wouldn't be here, because of them I will never give up. Li

In addition, the participants were able to overcome some of the adjustment and cultural challenges by forming a bond with co-nation international students. This bond seemed as an important survival strategy to participants, and co-nation students served as sources of strength and encouragement to each other. For Chun, her 'Chinese friends were also very



supportive'; she stated it would 'not be possible to study here and pass all the units with them'. Ling felt similarly:

My Chinese friends, they told me everything . . . what should I do and how I should write. They also helped me with my English, they kind of know what I meant, even a westerner wouldn't know what I meant, but they know, they will correct me to what I should say, they really helped me a lot. Ling

For Yuan, friends on the same 'journey' as her were extremely significant:

Real friends are very important because my family is not here. . . . We are on the same boat, we understand each other, and we have sympathy toward each other. All my friends are international students. Yuan

### 3.4.2 Self-determination

Despite all the challenges they faced, the participants in this study conveyed that they were highly motivated and adaptable. Their self-determination and role modelling from Chinese friends and acquaintances that had completed university study in Australia were major factors contributing to their success.

Brother Liu's facial expression went dark as he told me and he became silent and fell into deep thought. This was the same expression that my landlord Chen had on his face when he told me of his hardships when he first arrived here. I think they feel the same. They are veterans of the highs and lows that come with this step in life. I don't know the extent of how much they have suffered but I know that I need to be as strong as they are . . .

I will do my best study well to make my parents happy and proud. So far, I have got at least Distinction for my results. Half of them were High Distinction. Ling

I have to be strong, also know how to ask for help . . . I have to take the initiative to talk to people, make friends, and ask lecturers and tutors to help me to overcome the difficulties especially at the beginning of my study in Australia. Ping

### 3.4.3 Local community

Differently to at home, where participants described spending much of their spare time at concerts, restaurants, shopping centres, and at movies, such activities were mostly absent

from their episode at university in Australia, where the majority spent time outside of lectures, tutorials and practice placements at the library or computer labs at university. None of the participants felt any sense of social community and belonging within their learning environments. As Chun said,

It feels like there are many support programs available at university level, but by the time we found out, it is often too late and it's over. We are not used to searching information by ourselves. At beginning of my study here in Australia, I was too busy with more important things, by the time when we settle down, we found it's too late to attend those supporting programs. Chun

All participants desired to make friends and they perceived this to be crucial to their educational experience; none, however, managed to befriend any 'locals' or join any university social groups participants did, however, join in groups and activities external to their learning environment, such as going to church or becoming an ambulance volunteer. They identified that this gave them a unique way into Australian culture and the means to mix with Australians who were more welcoming to them than were their peers at university. In all cases, participants were introduced to these activities by fellow Chinese students at Australian universities.

First time my friends brought me to Church . . . when I first went to the Church they played rock music, they have drum and guitar, sayings and dancing and plays, at first I thought this is just like a concert, a kind of social gathering, they talk about very interesting topics, of course they talk about the bible, but they also talk about daily knowledge even for non- Christians who can also learn from that, it's so different from what I thought. Ling

I have joined SJOG ambulance first aid. It's a volunteer job, it is a good thing to learn, also it's a local organisation, you can meet local people, make friends with them, and I found all those locals who joined volunteer job they are very friendly, helpful, if you have questions you can ask, they are happy to help. Also a good opportunity to attend local events, as international students, we are limited to knowing these things. Yuan

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Chinese students' prior learning experience influenced their current learning approach and future plans for learning (continuity). Forming friendships with domestic students was difficult and rare and family and co-nation friends remained the most important supporting source of support in their academic success (interaction). The specific contexts in which learning takes place, especially when on clinical placement influenced the perception of their experience (place).

At the heart of the experience of being a Chinese nursing student in Australia was fear and anxiety, and this was driven by a number of factors.

Unfamiliarity with the hospital environment, education methods, and assessment expectations all played their part, with clinical placement experiences in Australian health services identified by participants as the most stressful element of their learning experience. Further, forming friendships with domestic students was difficult and rare for these students; none made friends with local students or joined university groups despite their perception that this would likely be a fundamental contributor to a successful overseas learning experience, however participants did attend other communities such as Church and the St John Ambulance Service to experience the local culture and practice English. Despite the challenges they experienced, the participants were motivated and adaptive to a new culture and learning methods; they demonstrated academic success with their family and other Australia-based Chinese nursing student friends as the most important supporting resources in their victory. Their strong wish to make their parents proud, and their inability to form friendships and a sense of community within their Australian learning environment, however, led to a focus on passing exams instead of enjoying the learning process.

An earlier literature review<sup>[6]</sup> reported a range of challenges confronting international students in their assimilation into the host country. These include issues with English language proficiency, cultural barriers, social problems, different learning styles, academic demands, perceived racism, homesickness, lack of assertiveness and financial problems. Despite the in depth and diverse nature of the data in this literature re-

view, however, not a single study related to Chinese nursing students' learning in Australia was found.

The findings from this study support some previous research findings, but also revealed a unique characteristic of a particular group and their abroad learning experiences. However, there are no other studies that relate to Chinese nursing students studying in Australia. Our findings do, though, demonstrate that the experiences of international nursing students vary greatly to the experiences of students from other professions.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The student' learning experience in nursing programs at Australian universities is important and consequential for Australia's healthcare system. It is therefore important for Australian universities to explore areas where accurate and meaningful teaching and learning interaction can meet these students' academic needs and provide a positive learning experience for them.

We argue that if universities are unaware of the issues around the learning experience of Chinese students, this will impact on students' learning. At the same time, it also propagates the stereotypical perceptions of Chinese students as deficient learners and therefore intensifies the imbalance of power relations in teaching and learning in an international education context. Chinese students brought with them their perspectives, values, and academic practices that are deeply embedded in their culture. The changes in the educational contexts cannot and should not uproot their learning. Understanding the cultural values and philosophy that underpin these students' learning is a desirable strategy to foster a more inclusive learning environment.

We believe that this paper has implications for international education, healthcare provision, bi-lateral relations, and investment in global education. The insight gained can support the development of successful human capital investment for all parties involved.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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