

Chinese International Students' Spiritual Development in the Cross-cultural Context

Introduction

As the largest group of international students in the US, Chinese international students' (CIS) cross-cultural experiences tend to be particularly stressful (Wei, Liao, Heppner, Chao, & Ku, 2012; Yan and Berliner, 2011). Studies revealed a series of problems faced by CIS: academic difficulties, health problems like eating disorder, the lack of social support and low identification with the host culture, and psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and distress (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wei et al., 2012; Yan and Berliner, 2011). Under the stressful cross-cultural context, CIS struggle to explore career, romantic relationship (Huang, 2012; Xu, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2011, 2013), and spirituality, the three central developmental tasks for emerging adults (EA) (Arnett, 2004).

Spirituality has been reported to be not only a key developmental task but also a strong protective factor for risky behaviors, mental health problems, and academic struggles of emerging adults (Astin et al., 2011; Barton & Miller, 2015; Berry, Bass, Shimp-Fassler, & Succop, 2013; Yonker, Schnabelrauch, DeHaan, 2012; Milevsky, 2017; Ozmen, Brelsford, & Danieu, 2017; Smith & Snell, 2009). Limited research conducted on Hong Kong and Australia found the consistent results supporting spirituality as a clear predictor for quality of life among Chinese college students (Lau, Hui, Lam, Lau, & Cheung, 2015; Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008)

However, there is a huge gap in literature on CIS's spirituality and how it develops in the cross-cultural context, especially crossing Chinese and American cultures, which are fundamentally different in all aspects, particularly in ideology and religion. Without a good understanding on this topic, services and practical strategies cannot be developed to promote CIS's spirituality and therefore global well-being.

Methods

Twenty-three in-depth interviews have been conducted with Chinese International Students from the universities across Washington D. C., New Mexico, Wisconsin, Utah, and Kentucky in July and August of 2019. The participants were recruited through online social networking groups of Chinese international students (Wechat groups) and interviewed by the investigator in Chinese through either Skype or Wechat voice call. Each interview was one hour long and covered topics of life purpose, spiritual and religious exploration and experience, difficulties in adjusting to the life in US, and observation and reflection on the cultural differences. The qualitative inductive content analysis method has been used to analyze the data for preliminary findings by the investigator in October 2019.

Preliminary Results

Their perceptions of life purpose can be classified into 3 groups: 1) material and practical group, including self-actualization and fulfillment of social responsibilities, and success in career and family life; 2) spiritual group, including knowing the world, experiencing and exploring the world, and being remembered by others due to the positive impact on them; 3) religious group, including knowing God and helping others to know God.

Factors shaping their opinions on life purpose: 1) family and school education they received in China; 2) loss of significant others; 3) significant others' opinions; 4) study abroad

experience; 5) conversion to a religion; 6) information from internet; 7) books related to life purpose; 8) observation on reference groups; 9) observation on different life experiences. Their opinions on life purpose develop based on the reflection on one or more of those factors.

Almost all the participants were curious explorers on spirituality and religions regardless of being spiritually open or close. The main factor contributing to the spiritual openness is the loss of significant others, and another factor is reflection on different life experience. The major factor contributing to the conversion to Christianity is the difficulty they experienced and the help they received from church leaders and friends during their adjustment, and family support is another important contributing factor.

The reasons mentioned by some participants for not accepting any faith were 1) do not want to be bound by faith; 2) do not care or feel needing a religion; 3) hard to accept the new beliefs given their already established values. Particularly, the reasons why not accepting Christianity were 1) the conflict between some bible stories and what they learned on science and materialism; 2) cannot see the hope and beauty of the Christian faith through the Christians; 3) observation on the conflicts between two Christian churches, the mix of faith and problems in secular world; 4) the partner's resistant attitude towards Christianity.

Discussion

Recommendation for the higher education with CIS:

According to the data, college professors are an important reference group for many CIS, that is, many CIS appreciate professors' opinions and guidance on career and other life issues, and some of them see their professors as role model. More discussion inside and outside classrooms between college professors and CIS on life issues may help CIS's spiritual exploration. Courses addressing and encouraging reflection the life issues, such as death and life purpose, may promote CIS's spiritual exploration.

Recommendation for the clinical work with CIS:

It may be helpful to encourage CIS to reflect and examine how the traditional Chinese worldview, which is materialistic, self-focused, and utilitarian, impacts their values, decision-making, and ultimately daily functioning.