

Journey to the south: A case study of a Chinese PhD student in a Malaysian university

Zhou Fei¹, Amran Rasli², Tan Owee Kowang³, Goh Chin Fei³, Hii Puong Koh⁴

¹President's Office, Shinawatra University, Pathum Thani, Thailand

²Faculty of Business and Communication, INTI International University, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

³Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

⁴Faculty of Business and Management, UCSI University, Sarawak, Malaysia

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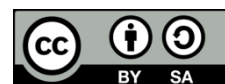
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ABSTRACT

Recent trends indicate that more mainland China students are selecting Malaysian universities to further their studies based on the push-pull model. This study aims to examine their motivation for further studies as well as the obstacles and problems faced by them in Malaysian universities. A case study has been adopted in this study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify the right respondent and data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the research revealed that peer recommendation, comparative advantage, cultural similarity, and self-desire for improvement have a significant influence on the mainland Chinese motivation to further their PhD studies at Malaysian Universities. Existing literature has not paid adequate attention to motivational factors that influence China students to select Malaysian universities to pursue their PhD. Furthermore, this research addressed the shortcoming of classic acculturation models that lacks importance given to how the dominant Malaysian majority can be affected by the acculturation orientations of mainland Chinese students. As such, this paper is an attempt to fill up these gaps. This study provides some practical implications for Malaysian universities with better strategic insight to review their research programs and improve the service quality of their research infrastructure.

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Corresponding Author:

Tan Owee Kowang

Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Skudai, Johor, Malaysia

Email: oktan@utm.my

1. INTRODUCTION

The need for PhDs in mainland China is increasing as the economy grows. Given the importance of a well-educated workforce in economic success, mainland China's fast-expanding economy has set ambitious educational development and reform goals. China already produces about the same number of scientific publications, and more PhDs in natural sciences and engineering, than the United States [1]. To further understand this phenomenon, the researchers feel that there is a need to examine the applicability of the push-pull model by assessing the push factors, such as the low quality of mainland Chinese PhD graduates and growing skepticism of the Chinese higher education system [1]. Ironically, those with a PhD from a mainland Chinese university have difficulty finding work in other countries, whereas those with a PhD from a Western university are regarded as superior even within their own country, and have top positions in the world's leading universities and institutes necessitate international training or postdoctoral degrees [1]. As a result, pull factors such as social recognition, government regulations, and the present employment market may

have influenced mainland Chinese students' decision to continue postgraduate education elsewhere [2]. As such, a significant number of mainland Chinese students have decided to pursue their higher education abroad, as evidenced by the fact that the number of Chinese students pursuing higher education abroad increased by 132.28% from 2010 to 2018 [3].

Mainland China is the leading source country for foreign education, with about 900,000 tertiary students studying abroad in 2017 at 'inner circle' English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Australia were popular destinations for Chinese students [4]. There are indicators, though, that its exponential expansion is slowing. The market is becoming more competitive, demand is changing, and institutions engaging in the market are operating and behaving in new ways [5]. Mainland Chinese students used to be the largest international student group in the United Kingdom, but they have recently turned their focus to Australia, which is cheaper and closer to home. However, the recent closed borders and safety worries as well as growing diplomatic and trade sanctions, have turned off many Chinese students. As such, mainland Chinese students who were unable to travel are now looking for alternative study destinations. Some may have found domestic possibilities through the expansion of spaces at local universities or explored regional alternatives such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Korea, and potentially even Malaysia [5].

The Malaysian Government and its higher education institutions planned to develop a holistic strategy to create a conducive learning environment and to build a regional higher education hub in Asia [5], [6]. The researchers observed graduate student mobility trend started with the influx of Iranian which peaked at 15,000 students in 2011 [7], followed by Africans, Arabs, and Pakistani/Bangladeshi students in the later years as well as mainland Chinese students in the past few years depicted in Figure 1 and Table 1. As expected, the percentage of mainland Chinese students in Malaysian universities is increasing annually.

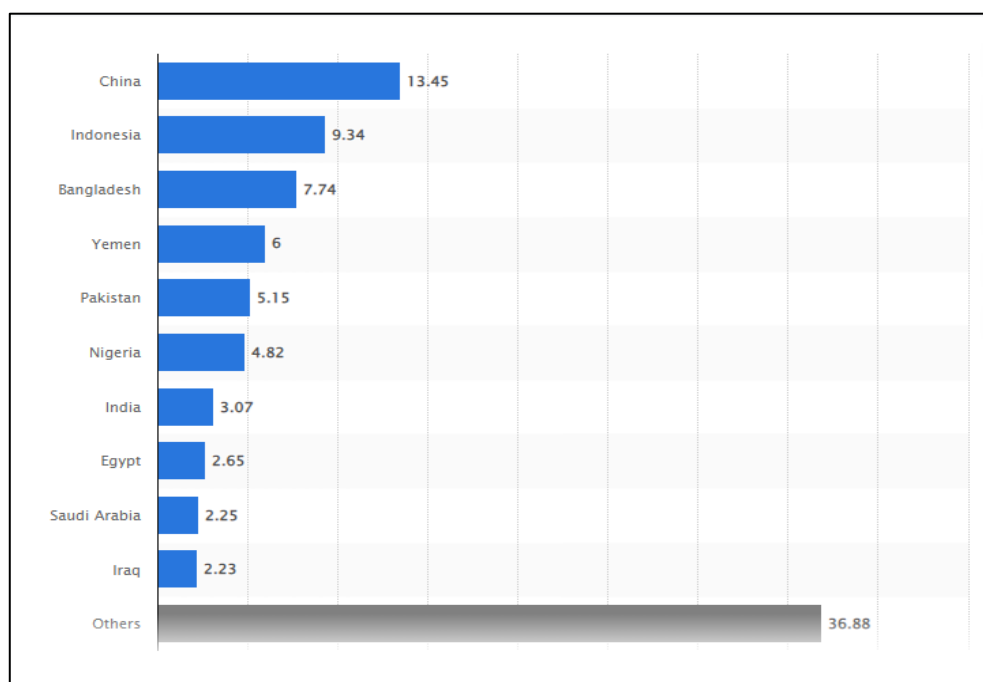


Figure 1. Number of international students studying in higher education institutes in Malaysia in 2019, by country of origin (in 1,000s)

Table 1. Number of mainland Chinese and total international students in Malaysia (2016-2020) [8]

Year	Number of mainland Chinese students	Number of international students	Percentage of mainland Chinese to international students
2016	5,556	99,532	5.5821
2017	14,854	133,860	11.0967
2018	16,361	130,245	12.5617
2019	13,448	93,570	14.3721
2020	16,957	95,955	17.6718

Most mainland Chinese students find the PhD programs in Malaysia to be very attractive. A recent study indicated that Malaysian universities offer internationally recognized education with many Malaysian universities offering exclusive-English taught degree programs thus improving its reputation in higher education global rankings [9]. In addition, studying in Malaysia is still a very affordable option for international students as compared to the US and UK. Malaysia is ranked as the 20th safest nation in the world and fifth safest in the Asia-Pacific region based on the Global Peace Index 2020 and is one of the world's most biodiverse regions [10]. The COVID-19 pandemic had adversely affected Malaysia's ambitious intention to be an International Education Hub with a target enrolment of 250,000 international students by 2025. The pandemic has not only significantly decreased international student mobility but is also shifting the inflow of international students including those from mainland China [11]. Based on the Higher Education Statistic for 2018-2021, the enrolment of international students has declined steadily from 91,707 in 2018 to 59,013 in 2019 and 55,789 in 2020 with a forecast of 55,732 by June 2021 [12]. The drop in current and new local and international student enrolment from 2018 had resulted in 49% of private higher education institutions (HEI) operating at a loss for the past three years resulting in the closure of 40 private HEIs and the closure of 34 private HEIs in 2019/20, with some being taken over by big corporations [12].

The researchers used University XYZ which is one of the biggest education groups in Malaysia with over 5000 students from 60 countries studying at their five campuses across Malaysia as the research site. For a variety of courses, University XYZ offers dual awards with several prestigious British universities. In recent years, University XYZ has seen an increase in the number of mainland Chinese students, particularly in postgraduate programs. The many Malaysian Chinese teaching staff at University XYZ is also another contributory factor. Higher salaries, greater career opportunities, better working conditions, and increased professional and personal mobility are some of the reasons for the growing interest in doctoral education [13]. Furthermore, PhD graduates use their research to create and share information, develop technologies, and contribute to social and economic growth [14].

Six mainland Chinese doctorate candidates in America were studied from which four motivational elements were uncovered [15]. Motivators include an intrinsic interest in research and an unduly broad and optimistic perspective of American doctoral education. In addition, the high utility value of a PhD in securing permanent residence and the high social cost of quitting are latent motivators among Chinese scholars. This is expected as most doctoral students from abroad are motivated to work and further their post-doctoral studies in America as the research facilities are more advanced and the opportunity for employment with better salaries is more readily available. Recently, mainland Chinese students have surpassed all other nationalities as the largest group among Australia's millions of international students, and their numbers are increasing. Academic requirements and achievement, job and future career chances, host country atmosphere, and social connections all impact Chinese students' decision to study in Australia [16]. However, the recent trade sanctions had affected the inflow of Chinese students to Australia as discussed earlier.

According to Jing, Peng, and Dai [17], in research based on the push-pull model, students are motivated by favorable incentives and pushed out by unfavorable ones based on economic, educational, and social factors, and is widely used to analyze a study abroad opportunity. A recent study identified seven pull factors (mobility costs, employment, and income in the host country, geographical distance, climate in the host country, reputation and quality of the host institution, financial assistance, and career opportunities) and four push factors (economic development in the home country, a lack of foreign language and intercultural training, parental influence, and personal interest in international academic mobility) that are relevant to mainland Chinese students mobility [18]. In addition, five categories, i.e., knowledge and awareness of the host nation, recommendations from friends and family, cost concerns, social and learning environment, social linkages, and geographical closeness explain international students' decisions to study in Australia [19]. Also shows that Australia's and its institutions' high academic reputations are a big draw for overseas students, especially among mainland Chinese students [19].

As such the problem of the study is to assess the motivation of a doctoral student from mainland China with regard to her choice of studying at a Malaysian university, the problems faced, and the strategies planned during her PhD journey. A single case study using a semi-structured interview based on critical incidents was used due to the uniqueness of the doctoral student which will be elaborated on in the next section accordingly.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

An interpretivist approach is based on the naturalistic approach to data collection such as interviews and observations used in this study. The researchers need to interact with a doctoral student from mainland China. A phenomenological methodology was used to get the doctoral student to relate her experience based on a case study while studying at University XYZ, a private university with four branch campuses in

Malaysia. The case study design was chosen for this study due to its intrinsic goals of gaining significant insights, exploring in-depth the richness and complexity of a phenomenon, and examining the uniqueness of an individual's reality [20], [21]. This approach is most appropriate when the purpose is to illustrate, conceptualize, and describe a phenomenon, qualitative research is more appropriate than other methods [20]. For this reason, interviews and observations were used to assess the motivation of a particular Chinese student who enrolled in a PhD program at a Malaysian university as evidenced by the increasing enrolment in the past few years.

In Malaysia, the target imposed by the Ministry of Higher Education is to finish the PhD within 4 years while most Malaysian universities make 3 years as their graduate-on-time (GoT) target. The researchers decided to find a volunteer who has been studying at University XYZ for between 3 and 4 years for this study. Purposive sampling was used to select volunteer PhD students from mainland China who have registered at University XYZ beyond the GoT target.

The objective of the study is to examine their motivation for further studies as well as the obstacles and problems faced by mainland Chinese PhD students (MCPS) in Malaysia. A semi-structured framework was used, which is most appropriate for “finding out Why rather than How many or How much” (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, p.66). Relevant pre-interview questions were created, allowing the interviews to have a conversational tone, and allowing participant information to emerge spontaneously. This limited research biases, allowing new questions to emerge from the data, and allowing actual participant opinions and viewpoints to develop. The researchers identified a female PhD student named ‘Celeste’ who enrolled in the PhD program at University XYZ in May 2015 that fulfills the uniqueness criteria [22] when developing single case studies. Celeste was introduced using WeChat as she is in mainland China since the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in Malaysia.

The general and broad research question, ‘what motivates you to enroll in the PhD program in Malaysia and at University XYZ?’ was used to initiate this research and create opportunities for data collection. Sub-questions posed during the interview sessions included, ‘what are the difficulties and problems faced during PhD studies?’ as well as ‘what are the concern, strategies, and plans to complete your PhD studies?’ The purpose of the interview session was to allow latent themes and concepts to emerge during the collective data collecting and analysis stages by using the concept of informality as the research's contextual background and research setting.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Initial findings

Based on the initial interview, the researchers found out that Celeste is an executive staff in a university in mainland China and has seven years of working experience. The purpose of Celeste taking a PhD is to improve her own academic research capabilities. According to Celeste:

“I graduated with a bachelor's and master's degree in management studies and I am now doing my PhD in a technical field. I have been doing my PhD for almost 7 years already while working at my university in China.” (Field note, Page 2)

Based on her initial introduction of herself, Celeste is a unique case as she has been working on her PhD for more than 4 years which is the average GoT target at Malaysian universities. In addition, she switched disciplines from social science to engineering, which could be a reason for the extension of her studies. Doing a PhD while working could also be a contributory factor to why she is taking a longer time to complete her studies. These points contribute to the uniqueness of the subject to be studied [22].

3.2. Why study in Malaysia?

As discussed earlier, many mainland Chinese students are now choosing to study in Malaysia for their PhD [9]. The trend seems to be increasing especially at private universities in Malaysia. When asked why she chose to do her PhD in Malaysia, Celeste answered:

“I choose University XYZ because it is recommended by colleagues (from the Foreign Affairs Office) in my university (in China). University XYZ has a good reputation and has a cooperative relationship with the university where I work.” (Field note, Page 3)

Malaysian universities' comparative advantage by offering internationally recognized education further attracts many MCPS to study at Malaysian universities as in the case of Celeste who further elaborated:

“The cost of the whole study period is relatively cheaper compared with the cost of studying in Britain or America or so. In choosing a region to study, I choose Malaysia because there are many Chinese there (Malaysian Chinese). The culture there is friendly and the communication barrier is low, so I do not feel uncomfortable. My English is not so good, I figure that at least I can have some Chinese supervisors who can easily communicate with me.” (Field note, Page 3)

It is apparent that Celeste can easily blend into the Malaysian community and environment without having to undergo acculturation and modification to her lifestyle. Celeste’s university relationship with University XYZ coupled with its good reputation made her choice easier.

3.3. Decision to study at the PhD level

As mentioned earlier, decision making for further studies is not a straightforward process. Age, family commitment, financial are common factors that influence a student’s decision to study at the PhD level [18]. When asked about her decision to further her studies, Celeste claimed:

“The purpose of taking a PhD study is to improve my own academic research ability. I graduated with a master’s degree in 2015 and experienced 7 years of exhausting work. I feel no growth and no improvement in my work. I hope that there is a platform to allow myself to grow academically and have a self-improvement effect (at work). The motivation for reading a Ph.D. is not a competition or seeking some privileges, it’s more from the inner drive. Which means I don’t think too much of others.” (Field note, Page 4)

When probed about the area of her research, Celeste indicated:

“My research focuses on paying for knowledge online. I am personally interested in this topic and I should say I already had a forward-looking judgment on this education model and its industrialization. At the same time, this topic also has strong relevance to my routine work aspects. I am only worried that my bachelor’s and master’s research area was on business and finance, which might not fit my PhD research (on engineering background).” (Field note, Page 5)

Most students pursue the PhD for their own self-benefit, i.e., to gain promotion or new employment opportunities. Celeste is unique as she wants the PhD to “grow academically” and “self-improvement”, i.e., to be applicable at her workplace. This is a rarity and further enhances the uniqueness of the respondent to be selected for this case study.

3.4. Motivation to undertake the PhD level

The supervisor-student relationship and the institution’s educational ecosystem are considered by many as some of the most important factors that contribute to a PhD student’s success [3]. As discussed earlier, Celeste’s supervisor at University XYZ is Malaysian Chinese. According to Celeste:

“My supervisor helped me the most. She encouraged me a lot and shared her life story with me, which gave me more motivation to complete my study. Getting help from my supervisor is precious (and important). However, due to a lack of self-effort and reading, I have no confidence in effective academic communication with her, which acquires me to accumulate more academic knowledge. The help received from the faculty and the university was also great. I am very grateful for the methodology classes and other communication activities provided by University XYZ. I think these activities can guide us to achieve more. At the same time, I also had (academic) exchanges and help from my peers and classmates, which gave me a sense of belonging. But there is not much communication and understanding with the (other) PhD students, only (discussion) related to taking advice on how to use some research tools and methodologies. I evaluate myself as a rookie and am used to taking a step back to make an observation. I have no desire of transferring to an alternative university because of the satisfaction with the supervisor, but there is a possibility to switch the present PhD program to another (discipline) due to the potential pressure of unmatched academic background.” (Field note, Page 6)

Family support is equally important to a PhD student since the PhD is a long and difficult journey. This was highlighted by Celeste:

“My family has (also) given me much tolerance and support, asking me to devote more of my time, energy and even money to my study. I can spend less time on taking care of the child and carry less burden of family expenses, especially the monthly mortgage payments (too).” (Field note, Page 7)

Internal motivation to succeed is important for PhD students to succeed. Celeste indicates that:

“To me, failure is not an option and there is no plan B. My motivation is simple, to polish my academic skills and research abilities and because of the high satisfaction with my supervisor, I desire no other alternative universities. I am only worried that my bachelor’s and master’s research area was on business and finance, which might not fit my PhD research (on engineering background). So, this is the biggest challenge for me, and I might have a plan to switch it to PhD for (business) administration if it is difficult to continue in the future, but I have no wish to transfer to another university.” (Field note, Page 7)

Finally, the employer could be another motivating force. A university is a learning organization and prides itself when having a large workforce with PhDs. According to Celeste, her university further supports her PhD studies:

“The university (where) I work for, allows and encourages its employees to pursue a doctoral degree, but employees’ work should be as good as usual, or even better. They have (an) even greater expectation of me to contribute more during the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Field note, Page 8)

The views of Celeste show several interesting features of herself and her personality. Firstly, she seems to be over-reliant on her supervisor who is Malaysian Chinese. The researchers feel that Celeste has missed a lot of opportunities to improve her English language proficiency which will be detrimental to her in the long run as the thesis, proposal defense, and viva are all written and conducted in English. Though highly motivated internally, Celeste seems to lack self-confidence, particularly with regard to her subject matter expertise. Further, she shows signs of uncertainty when indicating the willingness to switch from engineering to business administration if she continuously faced problems to progress in her PhD. Finally, it is worth highlighting that Celeste is most likely pursuing her PhD while working at the same time which could be a major obstacle to her progression, what more she is doing a PhD in engineering and uses online tools to communicate with her supervisor. Compounding the problem is the expectation of the employer for Celeste to be “as good as usual, or even better”.

3.5. Difficulties and problems faced during PhD Studies

If the PhD student is pressured at work and home, the candidate will surely face a lot of difficulties and problems. According to Celeste, she has a lot of problems with time management and financing her studies:

“Time is scarce, due to poor self-management or self-control, I am unable to use any free time after work effectively. I also face a lack of energy. People (like me) always get drained by work, no mention there is family, especially kids (who) are waiting ahead (for our return). Finance pressure (is another) issue. Studying for a doctoral degree is an additional expenditure to the family besides the original expenses, either from time, energy, or money (perspectives). In the past, my family finance requirement is supported by my husband and me, but now, an additional expenditure for the tuition fees is supported by my husband. However, the cost for my education would be a great source of investment which can be very profitable. Now I use it to study, which is both pressure and motivation for me. Finally, I strongly suggest that University XYZ develop a scholarship program which will be a great motivation for us to finish our study.” (Field note, Page 9)

3.6. Concern, strategies and plans

Most PhD students have strategies and plans to ensure that they will be able to complete their studies. The same applies to Celeste when asked about her major concern and subsequent strategies and plans:

“Affirmative, I've been worried about it for a time. I think I have difficulty in self-discipline, and at the same time, I have too much pressure from my routine, and I worry about my physical and psychological status. The worst result might be that the money is spent and the result is not achieved. The waste of time and cost is relatively low as I might waste my time watching TV, hanging out, or (doing) other low-value activities as well. But the money issue is more serious. I am always afraid the expenses outweigh the gain. With regards to (the) time issue, I will need to take advantage of summer and winter vacations and weekly free time to complete my studies.”
(Field note, Page 9)

Celeste clearly has a lot of trouble managing her time more effectively. She appears to lack self-discipline when it comes to prioritizing her activities. Failure to complete her PhD could lead to more serious problems. All of the investment would be for naught, and it would even cause major psychological issues. Her status as a PhD student is in jeopardy as she had made little progress. University XYZ has a strict policy of discontinuing students who show little improvement over two consecutive semesters. Like it or not, Celeste must reconnect with her supervisor and follow through with the regime of being a PhD student as the cornerstone of good doctoral study progression is a positive and strong supervisor-supervisee relationship.

4. DISCUSSION

This case study highlights just one of the similar predicaments of the many MCPS in Malaysian universities. The situation is made worse when many have returned to mainland China due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At times, distance learning or remote supervision may not be so effective at the PhD level, especially with regard to technical or engineering disciplines. The issue becomes even worse when students begin their PhD research projects, which necessitates more regular contact and interaction between the supervisor and the student [23]. Even with the advancement of internet connectivity, nothing beats face-to-face interaction between a student and his/her PhD supervisor.

The researchers believe that doctorate students should have good research skills before and during their graduate research work, especially when it comes to writing their thesis. In addition, methodological strengths and competencies in conducting the relevant analyses are equally important competencies. However, most graduate students typically believe they have not yet attained the degree of research abilities necessary to gather material for their study and that their analytical skills are lacking. Some of them have only acquired low-level information searching abilities, while higher-level information skills are required to undertake a PhD research project while most have never conducted research before their studies and consequently require training in areas such as data analysis and processing [24].

The researchers strongly believe that PhD students require adequate self-preparation because of the problems faced throughout the study. For instance, a very crucial tip is that PhD students should set their mindset positively. Instead of self-blaming themselves as poor time management and weak self-discipline which eventually lead to poor academic progress, PhD students should embrace positive mindsets to their PhD studies. Regular meetings with the supervisor and setting a fixed time for thesis writing are some good approaches to begin. Typically, PhD students' self-motivation will fluctuate during their studies [25]. Any personal issues that arise throughout the research study may cause delays in the completion of the research and non-compliance with deadlines [26], [27]. As a result, strong self-management is critical to ensuring that the PhD studies are finished on schedule. The researchers further believe that most MCPS take for granted the issue of readiness for PhD as they perceive that doing PhDs in Malaysia may not be as difficult as compared to America or Europe. It is not surprising that Celeste may consider dropping out due to difficulties in achieving a balance between work, personal life, and doctoral studies and problems with socialization [28].

In American colleges, African students suffered socio-cultural and academic challenges because of cultural value disparities, racial/ethnic prejudice, and difficulties with American university academic standards and expectations [29]. However, MCPS in Malaysia does not face many cultural problems as there are many Malaysian Chinese who are culturally similar to them and can easily converse in Mandarin with them. The researchers believe that the situation is a double edge sword to MCPS studying in Malaysian universities. Like Celeste, most MCPS tend to look for supervisors who understand their language and culture. Such behavior may have short term benefits but could result in long term loss as these students will have fewer opportunities to improve their English language proficiency. The researchers argue that MCPS who study in the 'inner circle' English-speaking countries as mentioned earlier perform better and graduate faster because they are forced to accept American/European PhD supervisors and must communicate in English from the start of their studies abroad. This is to be expected, given the acculturation theory is based on one's perceptions of a culture's supremacy [30], i.e., if the MCPS see the American culture to be more dominant than their own, they will tend to follow it.

There are three important conclusions in this case study. To begin with, there is a unique link between the mother culture of the MCPS and the host culture (Chinese Malaysian supervisors) that qualifies as sibling culture. Even though cultural distance is considered one of the most important modifiers in the acculturation process, there are few research on student adaption to a sibling culture in the literature [31]–[35]. Celeste's status as a PhD student is significant in terms of the study level in which she is involved, as her adjustment to studying in Malaysia may differ from that of MCPS studying at other international universities, as numerous studies have shown. Finally, this study addresses concerns raised with regard to the shortcoming of classic acculturation models that lacks importance given to how the dominant host majority (French) can shape and be shaped by the acculturation orientations of immigrant groups (French-speaking African students in Paris) [36]. The context of this case study shows the reverse, i.e., the MCPS cannot be shaped by the dominant host's culture as acculturation in a sibling cultural context occurs when there is a movement of people to closely related but still distinct countries, such as Canadians to the United States, New Zealanders to Australia, or mainland Chinese to Hong Kong or Singapore with a common language and similar cultural heritage [37]. As such this study is not looking from a parallel perspective involving two different cultures as there will be limited behavioral changes due to the similar language and culture faced by Celeste during her studies.

The researchers believe that the findings of this study will be helpful to universities, particularly in Malaysia. They will need to strategically review their research programs to make their PhD studies more effective and attractive. Malaysian universities should relook into the service quality of their research infrastructure to attract international students on a sustainable basis to ensure a continuous inflow of international students to Malaysia [38]–[40]. Although many Malaysian universities have improved their global ranking, changes in policies by the Chinese government could be impactful in the long run.

5. CONCLUSION

Celeste is having difficulty motivating herself to complete her PhD. While she was initially very motivated, her inability to focus and prioritize her studies caused her to lose her motivation. Her problems were exacerbated by poor time management and supervisor-student interaction. According to the interview, Celeste is on a downward spiral, which could lead to depression and health problems if she allows her emotions to control her. Finally, additional research could be conducted to better understand this phenomenon. Longitudinal research with a tracer study may be more accurate and identify more constructs and actors than this single case study. Furthermore, another critical incident analysis involving another PhD student from China who completed the PhD within three years could be conducted to compare with the findings of this study.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

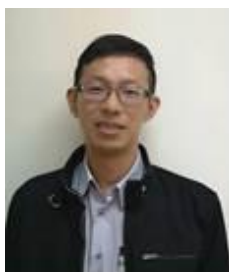
Zhou Fei    is the President of Shinawatra University, 99 Moo 10 Bang Toey, Sam Khok District, Pathum Thani 12160, Thailand. He is also a Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Business and Communication at INTI International University, Nilai, Malaysia. He has over 20 years of experience in higher education industry. He has served successively as the vice-president and associate professor of Sichuan Hope Automobile Vocational College, Sichuan, China; director of overseas affairs department of HOPE Education Group, China, and senior director of INTI International University. His research focuses on overseas education, internationalization of higher education, educational administration. He can be contacted by email at pricechow@siu.ac.th






Amran Rasli    is a professor at the Faculty of Business, Communication and Law at INTI International University. He was formerly at the Azman Hashim International Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). He was the Vice Chancellor of SUMAIT University, Zanzibar and Deputy Council Chairman of Muslim University of Morogoro, Tanzania and currently an Adjunct Professor at Universiti Selangor. His area of interest includes Institutional Service Quality, Human Resource Management, Institutional Administration and Psychological Studies. He can be contacted by email at amran.rasli@newinti.edu.my.






Tan Oween Kowang    is an Associate Professor and the Head of Operation and Quantitative Panel at Azman Hashim International Business School, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). He obtained his first degree in Mechanical Engineering, Master in Management (Technology) and PhD in Management from UTM. He has gained 21 years of industrial experience in the areas of Product and Tooling Design, Operation, Quality, Engineering and Projects management. He can be contacted at email: oktan@utm.my.



Goh Chin Fei    is a Senior Lecturer at the Azman Hashim International Business School at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. His area of interest includes higher education, e-learning and decision making. He can be contacted by email at: gcfci@utm.my.



Hii Puong Koh    is a lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Management at UCSI University, Sarawak Campus. His area of interest includes e-learning and management. He can be contacted by email at: HiiPK@ucsiuniversity.edu.my.