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## **Jean-Michel Montsion “Making Sense of One’s Feelings: The Emotional Labour of Chinese International Students in Canadian Universities”**

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# Making Sense of One's Feelings: The Emotional Labour of Chinese International Students in Canadian Universities

Jean-Michel Montsion

Jean Michel Montsion is an Associate Professor in the Canadian Studies Program at Glendon College, York University. His research interests are found at the intersection of ethnicity, mobility and urban research. Montsion investigates state-driven gateway strategies in cities like Singapore, Toronto and Vancouver, and their impact on the activities of civil society actors, as well as on the everyday lives of selected migrant groups. He has notably published in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *Citizenship Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, and *Geoforum*.

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## Abstract

*Canadian universities' sharpened focus on international students starting in the early 2000s coincided with the growing interest by students from China to study abroad. Various actors, including states, have shaped and benefited from this increase in student migration. I examine how student migrants deal with the feeling rules transmitted to them, as an under-explored site where the migration experience is shaped and justified. In light of the work of Sara Ahmed and Arlie Russell Hochschild, I explore how students feel and are asked to feel about their studies abroad, and how emotions work in framing and maintaining the migration narrative. Through Ahmed's concept of skin of the collective, I argue that Chinese student migrants are affected by and contribute to an affective atmosphere regarding their years of study in Canada as specific feeling rules help them make sense of similar experiences of confusion, frustration, self-reliance, and responsibility. Based on interviews with students and university staffers, I discuss the links between this type of migration, the actors involved, and the emotional landscapes students navigate in order to highlight how they interpret their own experiences and how these interpretations contribute to maintaining a general narrative about being Chinese international students in Canada.*

Canada's official engagement with international students began in the 1960s through policies of development assistance and Commonwealth relations, but became increasingly important in the early 2000s when federal and provincial authorities explicitly focused on the economic and immigration potential of international students. Although Canada had relatively low numbers of international students at the time in

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comparison to countries such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom, and Australia, a 2014 federal education initiative signified a clear commitment to increase this number and to diversify the source countries. The Canadian government made an explicit case for utilizing international students to economically boost local service-based economies, to add to the next generation of highly skilled workers, and to act as a form of soft support for Canada's engagement with its key trading partners (Scott et al. 2015).

Similarly, international students from a country like the People's Republic of China (PRC) are encouraged by their government to obtain quality training and develop overseas networks to support the country's international visage. Coined as the Twelve Words Approach in the 1990s, the PRC developed a policy "to support study overseas, encourage returns and guarantee freedom of movement," which were seen by many Chinese students as a cornerstone for gaining the experience needed for upward social mobility upon their return to China (Biao and Shen 2009, 515). In a social context in which international education has become synonymous with better opportunities in a rapidly changing China, students are encouraged to study abroad, and many do so either on their own means or through the government's scholarship program. The logic behind such official encouragement is that international students become a source of closer and more peaceful relationships with various foreign institutions and countries (Biao and Shen 2009, 514-17).

The Canadian and Chinese states have looked at international student mobility through a strategic framework. The same can be said of Canadian universities, which have increasingly focused on recruiting international students because they pay higher tuition fees thereby helping to compensate for reduced public funding for higher education (Fisher et al. 2009). To offer a critical complement to these lenses, one can focus on how bodies move across borders and how individuals experience these state designs (Wilcox 2014, 11). More specifically, the role of emotions in shaping the mobility of these bodies and how student migrants navigate their experiences is still an under-explored site from which to document the migration process, and it speaks of the ways in which international students are emotionally guided through and actively produce a broadly defined migration narrative, despite their distinct individual experiences. As Sara Ahmed (2004, 117) notes, emotions are "crucial to the delineation of the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation." A study of how emotions work will shed light on the migratory experiences, the expectations of actors such as states, and the affective atmosphere of which students are part (Anderson 2009, 77-78).

In asking how international students from China feel and how they are asked to feel about studying at Canadian universities, I explore the ways in which emotions work in framing this type of migration experience through Ahmed's (2004) concept of "skin of the collective." I argue that Chinese student migrants are affected by and contribute to a similar affective atmosphere regarding their years of study in Canada by dealing with specific feeling rules, or "what guides emotional work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges [...] between 'what I do

feel' and 'what I should feel'" (Hochschild 2003, 56-57). Although they follow different pathways and have different experiences, student migrants are similarly made to feel in specific ways towards their home society, their host society, and their migration experience, and these feelings are constructed through specific material, ideological, and cultural parameters imposed by various actors involved in their migratory experience. Here, the emotional labour these students perform is key to grasping a broadly defined migration narrative at play, as it speaks directly to the individual and collective work they do to navigate between the social tensions, contradictions, and pressures of the process, including how they accept or resist specific feeling rules and how they emotionally participate in giving meaning to their migration.

After a theoretical discussion on the emotional labour of student migrants, I examine key moments in the stories of two sets of friends, all Chinese international students at Canadian universities. I discuss how these students navigate the emotional landscapes associated with their migratory experiences in order to shed light on various feeling rules that contribute to a general narrative of being a Chinese student migrant to Canada.

### ***Methodological Note***

This qualitative research with ethnographic sensibilities was conducted in 2008 and in 2015 in British Columbia (BC) and Ontario. Of 12 in-depth interviews with Chinese international students and four semi-structured interviews with university staff members, I zero-in on six individual interviews at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the University of Waterloo. University staff were helpful in illuminating the institutional expectations of Chinese international students, while also connecting me to the student body. Recruitment through posters and snowballing allowed me to access specific student social networks. Focusing on friends' circles, moreover, enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of shared stories and worldviews, including the prominence of the social dimensions of their experiences and emotions. After the interviews were concluded, I gave each interviewee the opportunity to comment on how I had interpreted their experiences.

Through the analysis, I aimed primarily to connect how, through emotions, different ideas and thoughts are linked together. I anchor these interviews in a post-positivist and hermeneutical framework and use them in a heuristic fashion to make linkages between student migration experiences and overall narrative, affective atmospheres, and the actors involved in shaping students' emotional responses, such as states, universities and families. I clearly recognise the impact of my positionality as a white male scholar on the interview process, and as such, these interviews are not meant in any way to imply representativeness or objectivity. Rather, they are used as a way to reflect on under-explored dimensions of Chinese student migration to Canada and Canadian universities and to develop a research agenda. Because the intent is to draw connections between the migration process and the emotional landscapes students develop in a social setting, a key limitation is a lack of analysis of the gendered differences among the participants.

## **Framing Student Migrants' Emotions**

Emotions are a useful lens through which to shed light on processes like international migration, which is usually explored from a more rational perspective. In the classical model of push-pull factors that is used to explain international migration, the onus is on rational factors that attract or dissuade a migrant from living in a specific location, even if such decisions are ingrained in under-explored and under-theorized emotional landscapes involving interactions with family, friends, and various actors involved in the process (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). Building on an emerging scholarship documenting “the emotional geography of migration” (Menon and Sreekumar 2016, 7), I explore how emotions work to support this process, and more precisely, how international students perform emotional labour during their migration, which includes conforming to or resisting specific feeling rules.

The emotional turn in the social sciences has been documented in various bodies of literature, ranging from work that makes a commitment to everyday life theory to work that focuses on human senses, and to work that emphasises visceral and embodied realities and looks at affect (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008; Montserrat Degen 2008). The latter body of work (that which looks at affect) in particular adds to our understanding of social action, perceived and real limitations, and possibilities. As Ben Anderson (2009, 78) indicates, the locus here is not only on how bodies affect each other and their environments, but also how they are affected through “the shared grounds from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge.”

Framing emotions as part of affective economies, Ahmed (2004, 120) emphasises their transmission and transformation in everyday social interactions, as they are a “form of capital [...] produced only as an effect of [its] circulation.” Ahmed (2004, 119-23) highlights that emotions work in different ways depending on the situation, as they can “stick” unrelated ideas together to form a coherent normative framework, and can help differentiate between “us” and “them.” Emotions are productive and emotional labour is a key component in individuals and groups integrating, contesting, and negotiating their participation in society, often used to make sense of and give coherence to thoughts and actions that may seem contradictory if understood only through a rational lens. As defined by Arlie Russel Hochschild (2003, 7), emotional labour is inherently situational; it helps position us towards others depending on the context, as it requires “one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”

Despite being performed individually and in different ways, emotional labour is shaped by broad ideological precepts, often expressed through feeling rules that help individuals navigate entitlements, obligations, detachments, and other requirements of emotional exchanges. The management of emotions and emotional labour is of particular interest because it speaks to the ways in which global economic and political processes come with specific understanding of proper emotional conduct (Hochschild 2003, 20-27, 56-

58). Individuals seek guidance on how to act properly in expressing their emotions and they turn to desired feeling rules, shaped by various sources of authority, to know “how a situation ought to be viewed [and] how we should feel [about it]” (Hochschild 2003, 75).

In the case of migrants, especially student migrants, emotional labour is oriented toward making sense of the journey and how one fits as a migrant in the designs of the other actors they encounter through the process. For Ahmed (1999, 343), the emotional work of migrants starts with the ways migrant narratives reproduce the uneasiness of the migratory experience:

*The experience of leaving home in migration is hence always about the failure of memory to fully make sense of the place one comes to inhabit, a failure which is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body which feels out of the place, which feels uncomfortable in this place.*

The emotional labour of migrants is intrinsically linked to the significance given to the migrant body, as interpreted by other actors. For student migrants, uneasy feelings arise from the fact that they are navigating the contradictory stance of many host countries, which on the one hand encourage the recruitment of and business related to international students, and on the other hand vilify their skilled or racialized presence in relation to a local ethos (King and Raghuram 2013, 130). Each student migrant may have his or her own individual experience, but the movement of bodies and the emotional negotiations of new social contexts that they experience nonetheless have some similarities.

As many studies in psychology have shown, the emotional lives of student migrants are constitutive of an affective atmosphere in which personal acculturative stressors in terms of language abilities and academic learning curves are enmeshed within the socio-cultural framing of their bodies and are present in terms of local expectations, social tensions, and immigration debates (Smith and Khawaja 2011; Zheng and Berry 1991). As “targets of increasing suspicion” in their host society, student migrants develop similar coping strategies to navigate the uneasiness of their presence as situated both outside and potentially part of the local population (King and Raghuram 2013, 131). These strategies are responses to how the student migrant body is understood as defying traditional understandings of migration as a settling practice, and as transgressing the common understanding of fixed categories of migrant classification, such as a family member or a foreign worker (Collins 2011, 322).

Amid the diversity of experiences, a general migration narrative emerges from the affective atmosphere created by and for student migrants, notably through the negotiation of various social, cultural, and ideological codes of other actors involved in the process. Sources of authority, such as states, families, and educational institutions, are key actors in helping student migrants give meaning to their experiences. These include, for example, home countries encouraging their outbound students to earn

academic achievements abroad to gain specific skill sets or to send back remittances; host countries welcoming student migrants as potential foreign talent to strengthen their own national economies; and these states' public designs to shape the ways in which the student migration experience is understood and emotionally negotiated (Collins et al. 2014, 662; Verbik and Lasanowski 2007).

Moreover, social institutions, such as families, shape the emotional landscapes of the migratory experience. As Kate Geddie (2013, 196) argues, personal and social bonds are the prime locus where decisions are made with respect to every step in the process of student migration, from the choice of the host country and institution, to the return to the home society or a move to another destination. This includes various family strategies: "study mothers" accompanying their children to a host country in order to make life better for the entire household, students serving as anchor citizens in a host society in order to engage in family reunification, or students returning to the home society to support the family's upward social mobility. Such strategies highlight the role of personal and intimate interactions in shaping the decision-making process beyond rationality (Geddie 2013). Student migrants are not alone in defining this emotional journey of migration, as emotions are working and circulating through all people and actors involved in the process.

The role of other migrants with a similar experience, such as other international students, is also important in understanding the affective atmosphere in which they are an active part. As Ahmed (1999, 345) indicates, migrants going through a similar experience can bond through the lack of common experience in the host country. As she explains:

*forming a community through the shared experience of not being fully at home—of having inhabited another space—hence presupposes an absence of a shared terrain: the forming of communities makes apparent the lack of a common identity which would allow its form to take one form.*

This bond in the host society and related pressures from states and social institutions all play a role in creating a nébuleuse of feeling rules that migrants must navigate. Despite their individual migration experience, they find in each other a site where they can start making sense of the process and contribute to a broadly defined migration narrative. Student migrants specifically may find familiarity not so much through their shared desires and anxieties, as through the various feeling rules framing these emotions.

Dealing with similar feeling rules is part of the emotional journey of international students, as they engage, as Ahmed (1999, 342) puts it, in the "transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied." In her view, the skin of the collective can be a starting point for the emotional patterns left by bodies on the move, as:

*feelings rehearse associations that are already in place, in the way in which they "read" the proximity of others, at the same time as they establish the "truth" of the reading, and the impressions left by others are shaped by*

*histories that stick at the same time as they generate the surfaces and the boundaries* (Ahmed 2004, 39).

Student migrants who might have nothing else in common do experience a similar set of feeling rules related to the migratory process. As such, the skin of the collective gives an overall narrative of the journey and through this, Chinese international students may connect with and contribute to this collective, in addition to negotiating other aspects of their migrant bodies, such as the gendered, ethnic, age, class, and ableist realities about their experience.

## **Mapping Students' Emotional Lives**

As a host country, Canada has been seen as “operating in the shadow” of the US, while trying to support its postsecondary institutions to increase their share of international students by communicating directly to the PRC market—one of its key source countries—that Canadian universities have a strong reputation, that Canadian cities are a safe environment, and that the cost of living in Canada is reasonable (Verbik and Lasanowski 2007, 6). This follows significant changes in the management of Canadian universities over the last two decades. Adapting to the challenges associated with a global knowledge-based economy and reduced public funding, these institutions have taken on the roles of corporate entities, with for-profit expansion plans and internationalization strategies, including in the recruitment of international students (Fisher et al. 2009). In this section, I focus on the stories of two sets of friends from the PRC who are studying at Canadian universities and whose migration experiences stem from these strategic designs. The case of Lily and Susanne’s first year at the University of Waterloo highlights feelings of frustration and confusion, as well as the roles of various pre-migration actors in shaping their emotional lives. The story of Josh and Mike, who studied together at UBC in Vancouver, sheds light on the importance of developing a sense of purpose and responsibility through community involvement and support of other student migrants.

### **Lily and Susanne at Waterloo**

When I met with Lily and Susanne they were in their first year of studies at the University of Waterloo. They came directly from Shanghai to study in Canada and shared with me how they felt about their experiences so far, emphasising how their pre-migration expectations played into the emotional work to be done since they arrived. In fact, various actors have shaped their expectations and understanding of studying in Canada, starting with their families. Lily’s desire to study abroad was determined by the expectations of her family: “[m]y parents want me to get a good job, a good co-op program [...] after my degree, I want to apply for a job in Canada in computer sciences or in stats.” She indicated that she feels pressure to meet these expectations because of the financial sacrifice her family is making: “[m]y family is OK in China, but it costs a lot more here.”



Similarly, Susanne's choice came from her parents' plans for her: "[t]hey wanted me to study abroad because I was not fit for Chinese education. They pay more and the expectations are higher. They want it [to be] worth it, to get [a] better job and better life." Susanne has clearly internalised these expectations: "because of that, I do more [...] I want to find a job. That's most important to meet [these] expectations." Both students' stories reveal the role of their parents' expectations in determining their desires and emotional state while studying at Waterloo.

Beyond the difficulties of speaking English and misunderstanding local cultural cues during social events, they both expressed some unexpected frustrations in their academic transition. Emphasising the difficulties of relating to their professors and their teaching style, they identified the information they received prior to coming to Canada as responsible for these frustrations. Despite the preparation she received in Shanghai by attending the "BC Program" for students coming to Canada, Lily noted that she feels insecure because she is unable to understand her professors: "the profs talk fast and only read notes. Why pay tuition?" Returning to the issue of the financial cost of her education, Lily clearly feels unable to meet her family's expectations; experiences shock in being academically under-prepared; and makes a direct emotional connection between this shock, her family's expectations, and the financial cost of her migration experience.

Susanne expressed similarly negative feelings, but understands them differently, as she puts the burden on herself to adapt to what she was not expecting:

*Some professors are great, some are mediocre. They are not explaining well and I have some problems with the vocabulary. I have to do more work after class [...] the education system in China is different. I have to build myself the prof-student relation, go to the prof's office hours. It is more than just study [...] I have to ask the right questions and express my feelings right.*

For these two friends, their academic and migratory transition led to some unexpected feelings, and they are learning to connect, through emotional labour, these experiences to their expectations and what they anticipate will be the outcome of their studies.

They agree that part of the blame for these negative experiences is on the agent hired in the PRC to help them get into a Canadian university. For Lily, a lot of the confusion she felt in adapting to life and school in Waterloo seemed to come from having received the wrong information by the agent who helped her prepare her university application. She also feels she has missed out on opportunities she was not made aware of by the agent: "the information for international students is very little and hard to have access to. I could have applied to a co-op [program]—I had the marks for it!—but I didn't know it existed because of the information [given by] my agent." In contrast, Susanne frames her disappointment with the services of her agent through a more productive lens of what can be done to improve the experiences of others: "[t]he agents in China help to apply but the university should [ask] students to do it themselves. They confuse

students with [the] information they give, for me [they did] about Waterloo.” In this view, they both deal with specific unanticipated feelings of being lost due to the actions of a third-party actors benefitting from their migration.

However, Lily and Susanne have different emotional reactions to their first year of study at Waterloo based on these unexpected experiences. Whereas Lily expressed a lot of frustration and negative feelings about still not knowing how to navigate university life successfully, Susanne attempted to find resources to help her become a student and a migrant who knows where she is going and what she is doing. As Susanne indicates: “I saw the academic advisor a lot this year, asking for the job market and my program requirements [...] I am not focused on social clubs now, because studying is more important in the first year—next year maybe.”

This echoes what Zoe, an advisor to international students at the University of Waterloo, expects:

*International students must understand the academic expectations in the classroom and in their program. There are also social expectations in their interactions with their peers and with professors, and they must learn to build resiliency here [...] I see a lot of students, and the stress stems from their success in the classroom.*

Zoe expressed what the university expects of international students: they go through a somewhat difficult time of transition, build resiliency and independent social support, and eventually find their way to academic success. Speaking of a broader affective atmosphere, the university’s expectations of students like Lily and Susanne seem to explain and justify the feelings of confusion and frustration they are working through as first-year Chinese international students in Canada.

## **Josh and Mike at UBC**

When I met Josh and Mike, they were in their final year of undergraduate studies at UBC. After three years at UBC, they were now leaders of the Chinese Students and Scholars’ Association (CSSA) on campus, and expressed a sense of purpose and pride in their migratory experience by playing a role of representing and supporting other Chinese international students from the PRC at UBC. This was not the case initially, as both experienced a state of confusion and frustration similar to what Lily and Susanne felt. Echoing what university staff expect for Chinese international students, the case of Josh and Mike shows that it is up to the individual to develop the skills and experiences to find their way socially and academically. As Colleen, a university staff member working with international students at UBC, mentions, “[w]e help them explore their new surroundings to make new friends [...] I do not recommend clubs to students based on their ethnic background because many would be offended.” In this way, both Mike and Josh experienced what Lily and Susanne referred to as it is part of the design and the framing of the migratory journey, at least as understood by Canadian universities.

Of note here is that Josh and Mike's difficult transition experience was the basis for their involvement in the CSSA and their commitment to provide services to newcomers based on what they themselves would have wanted to receive. Focusing on offering a place of comfort and cultural support geared towards Chinese students from the PRC, Mike understands the CSSA as a platform "to serve the students living, starting here, so they have a convenient transition." The various activities they plan, including for the children of CSSA members, are not only based on cultural differences of Mainland China, but also offer a space where members can feel at ease and close to home and can gain a sense that they are currently working—albeit from a distance—toward a happier future back in China. They do this, for example, by organizing many networking and training events to help members find employment opportunities after their studies.

Josh and Mike added to UBC's cultural events during their tenure, especially during Chinese Lunar New Year, and they are conscious of how the CSSA serves as a place to support the emotional lives of their members. For instance, they organized a vigil for their members to grieve after the 2008 Sichuan earthquakes. During the event, an official of the university spoke about the importance of hosting such events to help students emotionally reconcile their academic migration with their life back in China:

*"I am here because we have many Chinese students and I want to say that your pain is our pain"* (Participant observation, 30 May 2008).

For Josh and Mike, this event was a way of offering emotional support and relief to students affected by the disaster, helping them see how UBC and the CSSA are there to support them through a difficult time, while at the same time finding a sense of purpose in their own migratory experience by supporting others. As Josh indicated while speaking of the vigil, "I guess I'm the most proud of being able to help when people needed it. It makes the studying experience more fun." Josh's statement reflects the dual nature of his emotional labour: supporting the emotional needs of other international students from the PRC, and gaining enjoyment and his own sense of purpose in fulfilling this task.

Josh and Mike's migratory experiences take on meaning through the various roles they played in representing their constituents to various bodies on and off campus. Mike, the association's former president, says of the experience: "I was most proud of leading the club. It was a great honour to be their representative. This work comes with responsibilities [...] and there is a lot of pressure to do the work well." For Josh, his experience was highly influenced by the various events he organized to keep up with world events, from mobilizing his members after the Sichuan earthquakes and the 2008 snowstorms in the PRC, to the various debates he was part of pertaining to the politics of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. Josh's own emotional labour involved making sense of all these activities and his positionality as a student migrant and leader of his peers: "It triggered a sense of belonging to the motherland, not in patriotic ways, but as cultural and national pride." In this way, Josh was happy and proud to be from the PRC and to represent this perspective in Canada and at various UBC events. This

gave him pride in his cultural heritage and his home country and helped him frame how his study migration fit into the broader picture. Similarly, the two friends found similar meaning in their migratory experience through being involved in the CSSA and making the association a place where they themselves could grow emotionally, while emotionally and socially supporting their peers after they arrived at UBC.

## **Productive Feelings and a Student Migrant Narrative**

Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne have all distinct migration experiences but contribute to a similar, broadly defined migration narrative. Whereas Lily and Susanne's story speaks to the anxieties and desires related to the first year of studying in Canada and to their transition, Josh and Mike's story encapsulates a later moment in their experience, and demonstrates the productive impact of community involvement on their emotional journey. In this section, I draw some similarities in the experiences of all four students to explore how their emotional labour connects to the skin of the collective and the related feeling rules with which they commonly engage to create a broader narrative associated with Chinese international students at Canadian universities.

In terms of the emotional journey of migrants, as bodies move across borders, defining a sense of home is key in understanding how the migration experience creates a unique skin of the collective (Ahmed 2004, 30). In the case of Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne, their automatic association with other students from the PRC is "read" through a similar narrative of what makes Mainland China culturally distinct, all having navigated the cultural differences between Hong Kongese, Taiwanese, and Chinese Canadian students. Through the various events they participate in or lead, they emphasise a feeling rule of comfort in the cultural proximity of hanging out with other Chinese international students from the PRC. This process of association plays on emotional closeness, as it is part of a broader context in which alumni and senior students help and guide new students in choosing how to associate with other international students, and in which university staff members prefer not to interfere. This emotional closeness and cultural proximity helps students develop similar social boundaries, share stories, and create a common history.

Furthermore, they all participate in reproducing expectations about experiences, desires, and anxieties that are generally similar among student migrants. Desires and anxieties, which are not understood as inner feelings disconnected from social interactions and context, circulate among international students and give us some sense of their collective priorities, at least as another feeling rule with which student migrants engage. In this case, Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne shared stories expressing their desires relating to betterment and social mobility, employment prospects and family support, and anxieties over family expectations and academic achievement. As two sides of the same coin, these desires and anxieties find a collective presence in the emotional labour of Chinese international students, which has also been reinforced by generalizations about the desires and anxieties of Chinese international students, as shared by university staff

in framing services and support for this student body. Students work to keep these desires and anxieties alive in relation to their expectations and interactions with other actors involved in the migration process, including states and families.

There are specific collective expectations of the Chinese international student's emotional journey and a precise, affective atmosphere framing the student's migration from China to a Canadian university, an atmosphere that many student migrants themselves help to reproduce. Josh, Mike, and Susanne all expressed how initial feelings of isolation and confusion had to be replaced by self-reliance, and they made the point to interpret their own experiences as a difficult emotional journey through learning this lesson. As for Lily, her story reveals a considerable amount of confusion and frustration with having yet to figure out how to deal with the various roadblocks she sees to her academic success, and she still felt comfortable sharing such negative feelings. As such, Lily's negative state is also re-appropriated as a cautionary tale, and friends like Susanne attempt to help her move on to resiliency, which seems to be an important part of the journey. In this way, the emotional narrative of Chinese international students at Canadian universities takes the shape of key milestones in the migratory experience, and students help to interpret these milestones and make them productive in concrete ways, both for themselves and for others in the same situation.

More precisely, the performance of struggling and engaging with specific feelings becomes key to maintaining the coherence of the affective atmosphere to a much greater extent than do the differences in the individual experiences:

*The actual content of feelings – or wishes, or fantasies, or actions – is not what distinguishes the false self from the true self; the difference lies in whether we claim them as 'our own.' This claiming applies to our outward behavior, our surface acting (Hochschild 2003, 194-95).*

Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne are all engaging with specific feelings related to the migration process, and they utilise these experiences as performances that help them actively identify as being part of this group of Chinese international students in Canada.

Various actors in authority positions also contribute to shaping the feeling rules and the issues they feel they should care about as Chinese international students in Canada. For Hochschild (2012, 219-21), this is in the realm of "wantology," which relates to the interest of various institutions in systematically re-defining what people want and should feel in order to fit those institutions' broader strategic designs. For institutions like the University of British Columbia and the University of Waterloo, the interest is in transforming Chinese international students into mainstream students and future contributing alumni. As proximate actors, they enter into contact in various ways with the skin of the collective to imbue the narrative of what Chinese international students want for themselves with a specific ideological bent through which they emotionally connect with and interpret activities such as improving their English language skills, understanding Canadian and Western cultural cues, and looking for employment in Canada after their studies.

Other actors who come into contact with the skin of the collective, such as governments, families, and third-party agents, have their own expectations about the journey. These expectations make their way, through students' own emotional labour, into understanding and giving meaning to the migration narrative. Here, the intent is not to distinguish between the authentic desires of student migrants and these desires as they are framed by other actors because the emphasis is on how the process of the transformation of the skin of the collective is reflected in the affective work that is performed by student migrants themselves. When unpacked, the emotional labour of student migrants shows how the cultural preferences, expectations, and ideological predispositions of these actors fit together. For instance, Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne all expressed feelings about the PRC and Canada. The PRC was framed as a source of nationalistic pride and deference in guiding most of the rational actions and emotional stances taken by Chinese students in Canada. This feeling toward the PRC is grounded in expectations that help "stick" together ideas of responsibility toward the nation, responsibility toward the family, and expectations of themselves. Speaking to how Chinese international students in Canada feel or are asked to feel about their home and host countries, the affective atmosphere created for and by these students contributes to making their own emotional justifications of their individually lived migration process, and helps them shape the feeling rules for other student migrants.

## **Conclusion**

As migrants, Chinese international students at Canadian universities feel and are made to feel in specific ways about their experience of studying abroad. Through emotional labour, students make sense of their individual experiences and help shape a general migration narrative for students from the PRC in Canada. Focusing on the stories of two sets of friends, I discussed how dealing with specific feeling rules reflects a common experience and contact with the expectations of other actors involved in the process. Although not a representative study and limited in terms of understanding how other identity markers, such as gender and class, play into their experience, the emotional work of Josh, Lily, Mike, and Susanne is in line with what other scholars have documented. In various contexts, international students' unfulfilled desires and frustrations with the ways the host society operates serve as a starting point to help student migrants collectively navigate the unknown territories of academic life, one's sense of identity as/while migrant, and future aspirations (Collins et al 2014; Smith and Khawaja 2011).

A broader contribution of this study is that it connects the emotional journeys of student migrants to discussions about the management of emotions and feeling rules. It is unsurprising that the emotional contribution of market-based third-party actors, such as the agents hired in the PRC to help these students get admitted to a Canadian university, is vilified, while the contribution of family members through their expectations is framed positively as part of a "relief zone," an intimate place to be one's self away from the pressures of society (Hochschild 2003, 69). Hochschild argues that

making such a distinction between the contributions of these two types of actors allows students to distance their identities from the market-based interactions that are part of the reason for their migration, even though the third-party actor's contribution is just as influential as the family's contribution (Hochschild 2012, 222-24).

With a growing emphasis on the business of international education, the emotional landscapes of international students will increasingly involve third-party market-based actors, and may even influence how students understand the role of other actors who have yet to be seen in this light. As university strategies become similar to corporate strategies, students may increasingly interpret the emotional contribution of their professors and university to their experience as market-based. The emotional work of international students in interpreting the contributions can become a starting point in understanding broader societal shifts, and may shed light on the evolving responsibilities of market-based actors involved in the process, including universities.



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### **Selected Interviews**

Colleen [fictitious name] (International student adviser, University of British Columbia), in discussion with the author, April 18, 2008.

Josh [fictitious name] (Chinese international student, University of British Columbia), in discussion with the author, October 31, 2008.

Lily [fictitious name] (Chinese international student, University of Waterloo), in discussion with the author, January 28, 2015.

Mike [fictitious name] (Chinese international student, University of British Columbia), in discussion with the author, June 19, 2008.

Susanne [fictitious name] (Chinese international student, University of Waterloo), in discussion with the author, January 28, 2015.

Zoe [fictitious name] (International student adviser, University of Waterloo), in discussion with the author, January 14, 2015.

### **Participant Observation**

2008 Sichuan Earthquakes Vigil, University of British Columbia, May 30, 2008.