

HOME(STAY) IS WHERE THE HEART(ACHE) IS

A study of Chinese international students living with local families in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

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The export of education has become a big industry in many western nations. There are about two million post-secondary students studying in countries other than their own at present, and it is estimated that by 2025 there will be more than seven million globally. Many of these international students live in "homestay" accommodation, where they stay with local families. A commonly held expectation is that the homestay would be a "home away from home" for the students, providing them with not only board and lodging but also friendship, support, and opportunities to practise the language and learn the culture through day-to-day communication. The title of this paper, borrowed from a newspaper headline, however, suggests that the reality may not completely match the expectation.

We interviewed 40 Chinese international students studying in New Zealand and 33 host parents to find out what their homestay experiences were. The findings provide insights into many aspects of the homestay issue and have implications for current and prospective students, host families, and homestay providers and agents. It is hoped that recommendations derived from the study will make a difference to the homestay experience of both the students and the hosts.

Going abroad to study is not a new phenomenon. Students in various countries, particularly in Asia, have been doing it for centuries. According to Furnham and Bochner (1982), the practice could be traced back to 273 –232 B.C., which was during the reign of the Emperor Asoka the Great of India, when the University of Taxila became a major institution attracting students from surrounding countries. In the nineties, UNESCO estimated that there were more than one million post-secondary students studying in countries other than their own (Goulter, 1996). The number increased to 2 million in 2003, and it is expected that by 2025, there will be more than 7 million international students studying all over the world (Ministry of Education, 2003). The global education market has been estimated to be worth billions of dollars a year (Goulter, 1996; Lewis, 2000).

The number of international students in New Zealand has increased dramatically over the last decade or so (Beaver & Tuck, 1998), with more and more students coming from Asian countries. As a result, the education of international students has become a big industry (Campbell & Guyton, 2003; Gibson, 2003; “Overseas students,” 2002; Lewis, 2000)). Students from the People’s Republic of China form the biggest group of New Zealand’s international students (Gibson, 2003). They represented over 36 percent of the 82,000 overseas students in 2003 (Allen, 2003). At the University of Waikato, the number of Chinese students has increased from 212 in 1997 to 2,503, or 74.16 percent of the university’s international student population, in 2003.

Since international students are a major source of revenue for New Zealand, customer service and customer satisfaction have become important considerations. One of the issues that are of major concern is that of accommodation. Homestay is a popular arrangement among international students. According to Welsh (2001), a homestay is “[a]n accommodation option which includes full board and lodging for students studying in a foreign country through which they may be exposed to the culture, language and social structures of that country” (p. 4). A common perception is that the homestay would be a “home away from home” for the students while they are overseas (“Rewarding experience,” 2002). The title of this paper, adapted from a newspaper headline (Laugesen, 2002), however, suggests that the reality may be more complicated than it seems.

PURPOSE

The overall purpose of this research was to investigate various aspects of the homestay practice

in relation to Chinese international students. In this paper, however, we will focus specifically on the following two issues: (a) the students' experience during the initial period of their sojourn in New Zealand, and (b) the students' expectations and the extent to which they were met.

THE HOMESTAY ARRANGEMENT

According to Fryer and Lukasevich (1998), homestay is practiced everywhere around the world and is the most popular type of accommodation for overseas students. Because the students are a long way from home and, therefore, do not have parental supervision, living with a host family is the type of arrangement that is usually suggested so that the students will be "supported and cared for" (Fox, 2003). But what specifically can an international student expect of the homestay? Students are told the following in a brochure produced by Education New Zealand (2003):

You will live with a New Zealand family in a suburban house with your own room. Your host family will welcome you as a member of their family and will provide breakfast and dinner. At the weekends, they will also provide lunch. Homestay families are carefully selected and offer a safe and caring environment. You will have every opportunity to experience the New Zealand way of life and to practise your English. (p. 1)

As Welsh's (2001) definition and Education New Zealand's promotional material above suggest, homestay is not just about board and lodging. It is also about providing an environment in which the student is able to enjoy the security, warmth, informal friendships, and support that only a family can offer (McMahon & Reuter, 1972). Indeed, some students choose this type of accommodation for the feeling of being in a family (Quirke, 2003). The homestay accommodation is also commonly expected to provide overseas students with an opportunity to experience the local culture and language in real, everyday terms (Campbell & Guyton, 2003; Laugesen, 2002; McFedries, 2002; Welsh, 2001; Woodall & Takeuchi, 1999). Fryer and Lukasevich (1998), for example, reported that many international students who went to Canada to learn English and Canadian culture chose to live in a homestay instead of living independently in an apartment. Hokanson (2000), in his report on the homestay immersion experience of 29 American students in Guatemala, asserts that "homestays, combined with attendance at local language schools, are widely recognized for enhancing foreign language proficiency and cultural understanding" (p. 239). In New Zealand, studies by Welsh (2001) in Auckland and McFedries (2002) in Christchurch also suggest that the

main reason why high school international students chose to live with homestay families was to improve their English proficiency and to get a chance to experience the New Zealand culture.

There are approximately 10,000 homestay families in New Zealand (“Foreign students miss,” 2003). The homestay accommodation is usually arranged by agencies attached to educational institutions, although there are also some independent agencies that offer this service as well. In the tertiary sector, if students choose to live with a homestay family, it is normally compulsory for them to live with that family for a period of one to three months depending on the requirement of the institutions providing the homestay service. Usually, the homestay fee for this initial period is paid, together with the students’ tuition fee, to the agents before arrival. The fee for the stay after the required period can be negotiated with and paid directly to the host family.

Literature shows that while there are many happy homestay stories, there are also many disappointments. McFedries (2002), for example, found that among 144 Asian school students, 40 percent were unhappy about their host families. There have also allegedly been “thousands of complaints” from Chinese overseas students about the poor quality of homestay accommodation (Allen, 2003, p. 1). News media in New Zealand have frequently reported the homestay situations in New Zealand with headlines such as “Foreign students shortchanged” (Scanlon, 2002), “Students claim victimisation” (Moriarty, 2002), “Mean hosts jeopardise a billion-dollar industry” (Cumming, 2002), and “HORROR homestays” (Boyes, 2003). These stories, though anecdotal, have attracted public attention and suggest that all might not be well in the homestay industry.

LIVING AND STUDYING IN ANOTHER CULTURE

When students from one culture go to live in another culture, they are likely to experience some degree of cultural stress in their adjustment to the new life (Barker, 1990). Cultural stress has been defined as “the tension and uneasiness that accompanies encounters with a new environmental culture” (Holmes, 2000, p. 55) and can be caused by a number of factors. One such factor is cultural differences (Campbell & Guyton, 2003; Crealock, Derwing, & Gibson, 1999; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Holmes, 2000; Klepinger, 1995; Ramasamy, 1998; Rao, 1979; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). For example, students may find that what is normal behavior in their cultures is considered rude in the new environment. The greater the cultural distance between the host culture and the culture of the student, the more difficulties the student is likely to encounter and the higher level of cultural stress they are likely to suffer (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

Rao (1979), in his study of overseas students in Australia who were from agricultural and collectivist (Hofstede, 1980) social backgrounds, reported that the students found it difficult to integrate in Australia, an industrial and individualist society (Hofstede, 1980). Rao also found that because of the differences in teaching and learning methods, these students, who depended more on the guidance and ideas from their lecturers, found it difficult to adapt to the Australian educational system, which requires more analytical and critical assessment of materials. Similarly, Holmes (2000), in her study on Confucian-heritage Chinese (CHC) students, concluded that cultural differences between New Zealand and the CHC cultures, such as a clash of values regarding communication patterns, and teaching and learning styles, are the main reason for the students’ difficulties.

Other factors contributing to cultural stress include high expectations of the overseas students (Barker, 1990), information overload, lack of familiarity with the host culture, and inadequate linguistic proficiency (Campbell & Guyton’s, 2003, Church, 1982). Campbell and Guyton study found that students were not adequately informed about the new culture before going to study there. Their finding is in line with Singh’s (1963, cited in Furnham & Bochner, 1982), in which nearly half of the 300 Indian students in Britain in his study were not prepared for what they encountered. Such inadequate preparation may result in the students being disappointed when their expectations do not match reality, overwhelmed by the amount of new information they have to take in, and at a loss as to how to behave in the new culture. The lack of language proficiency, a major source of anxiety in itself, is likely to compound the problems mentioned and further add to the students’ cultural stress.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The research was carried out within the broad framework of the qualitative paradigm. The qualitative paradigm was appropriate because the study was concerned with exploring personal experiences of participants, and the qualitative methods, such as the interview, which was used in this study, would enable us to “capture the individual’s point of view” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 10) and obtain information that is rich with feelings, thoughts, and actions as experienced or witnessed by the participants. Within the qualitative framework, social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966) was the theoretical approach that underpinned the study. This approach fits well with the focus of this study, which is the interpretation and understanding of phenomena in everyday life—the feelings, thoughts, and actions mentioned above—of international students and host families in a social context and from their own perspectives.

A study of students living and studying in a foreign country inevitably involves the concept of cultural adaptation. This research was conducted within the theoretical context of Anderson’s (1994) dialectical model of intercultural adaptation. According to Anderson, intercultural adaptation (a) involves adjustment, (b) implies learning, (c) involves a stranger-host relationship, (d) is a cyclical, continuous, and interactive process, (e) is relative, and (f) implies a personal development.

Like other sojourners, international students face a situation where the old rules for interpreting the environment no longer apply (Schild, 1962) and so they need to adjust to new ones. Adjusting to a new culture requires overcoming obstacles and students have to solve problems by learning the parameters of the situation and then working out responses to the problems. Intercultural adjustment and learning processes are, therefore, interdependent.

Intercultural adaptation also implies a stranger-host relationship. All cultures make a distinction between insiders and outsiders, and even though the word “home” in the term “homestay” may suggest a “warm and fuzzy” feeling of being an insider, the fact remains that the overseas student is a stranger to the family, who, in turn, is the host while the student is staying there.

Intercultural adaptation is a cyclical, continuous and interactive process. Adjusting to challenges in the new culture is a repetitive process involving encountering and overcoming one obstacle and then another and another. International students do not accommodate a new “culture” all at once but have a series of obstacles, in various contexts,

to overcome over time, all the while influencing and being influenced by host-nations with whom they interact.

Intercultural adaptation is relative. As it is an on-going event, it is “almost never a completed process, in the sense of an individual functioning exactly like the person who has been socialized into that culture from birth”, even after decades in the new environment (Broome, 1985, cited in Anderson, 1994, p. 318). This is a major point of difference between Anderson’s model and other theories of adaptation, which tend to emphasise the “failure” or “success” of coping with or overcoming the obstacles (Chen & Starosta, 1998) rather than focusing on the relative degree of the intercultural process. We feel that Anderson’s approach is more useful in understanding the experiences of international students because the great majority of them are likely to be between the two extremes, working out some kind of adjustments and making some sort of peace with the new cultural environment (Szanton, 1966).

Finally, intercultural adaptation implies a personal development. Adjusting to a new culture is a dynamic process that pushes the individual to cope with stressful events and overcome the obstacles caused by the new environment, and this results in his or her personal growth (Reiss & Oliveri, 1980). In the homestay environment, the international student is like a child for a second time, a child in the cultural sense. During the sojourn, the major challenge for the student is to “grow up” culturally and to move from being an “outsider” towards being an “insider”.

Anderson’s (1994) adaptation model can be used to with “different types of sojourners regardless of the length of time they stay in the host culture and the depth of their interaction with the host nationals” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 178) and provides an appropriate theoretical context in which to examine the experience of international students in the homestay environment.

METHOD

We used the interview method to conduct this research. The method was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to obtain detailed information about the participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a way that quantitative methods such as a questionnaire survey would not. This section describes the interview sample, the procedure, and the analytical technique employed to interpret the data.

The Sample

We interviewed 40 international students from the People's Republic of China and 33 homestay parents. Due to privacy issues, we were not able to find participants through educational institutions who arranged homestay accommodation for students. The snowball technique, therefore, was used to recruit both student and homestay participants. The snowball sampling technique is one in which "[o]ne subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on" (Vogt, 1999, cited in Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 2). The technique is used most often to conduct qualitative research through interviews (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) and offers real benefits for the researchers to get access to the participants who are hard to reach. Various studies have found this technique to be not only economical but also efficient and effective.

The student sample consisted of 19 males and 21 females, ranging in age from 19 to 30 years old. Thirty students were studying at tertiary institutions, 15 of whom were graduate students. The time spent in New Zealand ranged from one month to three years. Twenty-one had lived with only one homestay family, the rest with two to four families. At the time of the interview, only nine students were living in a homestay. None of the students had previous experience of studying overseas before coming to New Zealand.

The homestay parent sample consisted of 11 males and 22 females, mainly of European extract. In a few families, the husband and wife were from different cultures. Almost half of the families were one-parent families. Their experience as homestay parents ranged from one year to 25 years, with the average of 6 _ years. A few families had hosted a very large number of students: one had hosted about 200 students over 20 years; another had hosted more than 30 Chinese students. The average number of students hosted was six. Apart from seven families who only hosted Chinese students, most families had hosted students from more than three cultures, including Japan, Korea, Thailand, India, Brazil, France, Germany, Canada, and Malaysia.

Procedure

The interviews were semi-structured. The second author, who did the interviews, had a list of mostly open-ended questions to serve as a general guide. Apart from background information, the questions were designed to find out the difficulties and problems faced by the students, the expectations about the homestay arrangement, the interaction and relationship between the students and the host families, and their perception of the effectiveness of the homestay arrangement. Prompting and probing questions were used as needed to encourage participants to talk freely about their experience, feelings, and opinions. In particular, we wanted participants to give specific examples and incidents relevant to the issues being investigated. As English was the students' second language, and the interviewer was a native speaker of Mandarin, it was decided to interview the student participants in Mandarin to make it easier for the students to express themselves.

Most of the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the study, the nature of the participation, and the rights of participants were explained to the interviewee. The information sheet and the consent form were then given to him or her. All interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants' permission. Most interviews with students took between 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews with homestay parents took from 30 minutes to more than one hour.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and Owen's thematic analysis (1984) was employed to interpret the transcriptions and identify themes that are related to the research questions. According to Owen (1984), a theme is noted in discourse when three criteria are present: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence means that two or more parts of the discourse carry the same thread of meaning although different words are used. Repetition refers to the repeated key words, phrases, or sentences in at least two parts of the discourse. Forcefulness refers to such features as the vocal inflection, the sudden change of volume, or the use of dramatic pauses for emphasis. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to find not only themes that emerge within individual interviews but also those that are common across participants (Zorn & Ruccio, 1998).

RESULTS

In this section, we present major themes that emerged from the interviews in regard to the two research issues mentioned earlier: (a) the students' experience during the initial period of their sojourn in New Zealand, and (b) the students' expectations and the extent to which they were met.

Initial Experience

Students were asked about their experience when they first arrived in New Zealand. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: Disappointment and homesickness, coping at the homestay; and language barriers.

Disappointment and Homesickness

Although some students reported a feeling of excitement, disappointment and homesickness were the most common feelings among most participants. The disappointment was due to their impression that New Zealand was a big farm or countryside with few people. Most of the students were from the capital or big cities of China, and they would compare them with the cities in New Zealand. Some stated that they suffered "a kind of culture shock" when the world changed so much in just a matter of hours, and the shock started right from the beginning:

I felt somewhat disappointed when I first came. On the way the bus took me from Auckland airport to Hamilton, all I saw was the farms, emptiness. I come from Beijing, China. My home is just next to Zhong Nanhai [the residential place of the top officials of the Chinese Government].

They found New Zealand to be not what they had imagined Western countries to be like and were surprised at the differences between it and China. The feeling is similar to that of the Japanese students in the study by Crealock, et al. (1999). In that study, the Japanese students were also shocked, on arrival in Canada, by the contrast between rural and urban lifestyles of Canada and Japan respectively.

The disappointment was not restricted to New Zealand rural appearance but extended to their homestay environment as well. Some said that the families were "very poor", far from what they had imagined a Western family to be. A student was surprised to see that the furniture in the house "was similar to that used in China in the 50s or 60s".

Coping at the Homestay

The second major theme that emerged about the initial experience centers around the students coping in the homestay family in the first few weeks. There are three sub-themes: homesickness, being a stranger in the home, and lack of support.

Feeling homesick was reported by most students. As it was the first time they were away from their families, and on their own, many felt very nervous, confused, and anxious. Everything was different from what they were used to, and they were “uncertain about what was going on” and what would be the right thing to do. They were afraid of doing something wrong and offending the host families. Many revealed their apprehension about living in the homestay at this stage because they were not sure what the homestay would be like, as they had not been provided with information about the homestay family, or what it was like to live in a homestay situation, before they came. With the loss of loved ones and familiar objects, and the anxieties and uncertainties about the new environment, it was understandable that the most prominent emotion the students experienced during the initial stage of their stay was homesickness. The solution for most students is to email or call their families in China. A student called her family everyday during the initial weeks.

However, even making a call could be very stressful, if not impossible, for the students, who had just arrived and did not know how to make a call from New Zealand. A student told of her ordeal: she wanted to call China to tell the family that she had arrived safe and sound, but her homestay family went on holiday overseas immediately after she arrived and did not explain to her how to make phone calls to China. The student did not know how and where to buy a phone card to use on a public phone either. Some families did not allow calls to be made after 10pm, the time New Zealanders normally take as too late to call people, and this posed problems for Chinese students as it is the time when, taking into account the time difference between the two countries, their parents in China got home from work.

Many students felt they were strangers in the families. Some also remarked that the homestay parents also regarded them as such. As strangers, they felt that it was them, the students, who had to adapt to the lifestyle of the family rather than the other way around. A student reported: “They think you have to adapt to their life. They would not change anything for you. Because they think you come to the family, you should try to suit it, not it to suit you.” The prospect of doing all the adjusting was daunting to the students and contributed to the anxiety and stress.

Another sub-theme which emerged was the lack of support from the homestay provider or agency. Many students reported that the agent put them in their homestays and

never came back again to check on how they were doing. So they did not have anyone to turn to for help when they had problems at the homestay, which made their adjustment process even more stressful. A student told of being put into a homestay family where the host mother was about to give birth and, instead of taking care of the student, needed to be looked after herself.

As a result of being unable to cope with the initial challenges of the homestay situation, some students had to change to another homestay or moved out to live in a flat after the compulsory stay. Some even moved out after one or two weeks.

Language Barriers

The third major theme about experience during the initial sojourn was the language barriers they encountered. Most students had not passed the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test before coming to New Zealand and so their English, especially spoken, was poor at that time, resulting in communication problems. Some students felt that they could not fully express their meanings so that their homestays would understand them. One student said that she did not tell her hosts about her problem with the food because she “didn’t know how to say it”. The inability to communicate effectively with the host families made the students feel helpless and lonely and exacerbated the homesickness they felt. The linguistic experience of the students in this study lends support to the findings by other researchers that language barriers were one of the biggest challenges for the international (e.g., Campbell & Guyton’s, 2003; Holmes, 2000; Liang, 1990).

Expectations

The second objective of this paper is to look at the expectations of students in relation to living in a homestay. Four major themes dominated the interviews: language practice and improvement, food, culture learning, and emotional warmth.

Language Practice and Improvement

For 18 of the students, learning practical English in the homestay environment was the first and foremost expectation. In fact, this expectation was the reason why many did not choose to stay with Chinese homestays. However, only four students reported that their English

competency had improved to any significant degree. There are a number of sub-themes related to the language improvement issue.

The first sub-theme is that the improvement in language proficiency is closely related to the amount of communication engaged in between the student and the hosts. Communication provides a chance for the student to practice speaking and listening. The interviews suggest that for most of the students, there was not enough communication. The students were disappointed that their homestay parents spent little time talking and doing things with them. A common comment was that the host parents were too busy—with work, with their children, or both. One student, for example, said: “They would not actively communicate with me. They have no time to communicate with me. They go to work in the morning and come back late in the afternoon.” Many students reported that most of the conversations took place only at the dinner table or while watching TV.

Limited communication means limited opportunities for students to learn and practice the language. The opportunity for communication may also be made even more limited by other factors. A student said: “Also, I can’t find a topic to talk with them. One reason may be the language barriers, and another reason may be the cultural differences, the third reason is that because of the business relation between us, it is impossible for us to have much sharing of feelings.”

Another sub-theme in relation to the expectation that homestay would help improve students’ language proficiency is that some families were more aware of the students’ need in this regard than others and so they made deliberate and explicit attempt to help. For example, a student told how her homestay parents taught her English: “One of the homestays I lived with taught me a sentence in English everyday. I called it everyday English.” She found the practice very useful for her. It also helped that the host parent “was fond of talking.”

Food

The second major theme that dominated the interviews with students was food. The topic of food was brought up by 12 students. Because literature suggests that it is a major point of concern by students (Campbell & Guyton, 2003; McFedries, 2002; Welsh, 2001), food was one of the interview questions that was asked of all students whether or not they themselves brought up the topic. More than two-thirds of the students stated that they had problems with

food. For some, the food seemed to be the only thing that the students did not like. One student said: “Except for the food, everything was satisfactory.”

The most prominent sub-theme in relation to food was the quantity. Students complained that they did not get enough to eat, the same complaint found in McFedries’ (2002) survey and documented elsewhere (Mchegan, 2002). Students had to “spend extra money to buy takeaways or cookies” in order “not to suffer from hunger”. A male student said that he had to cook instant noodles almost every night after dinner.

Apart from the quantity issue, another sub-theme was the inability of the students to get used to the type of food provided. Students, for example, found it hard to eat raw vegetables, as vegetables are usually cooked in China. Furthermore, some students reported that their homestay families scrimped on food and often gave them instant noodles or sandwiches instead of proper meals. One student said: “We ate different food. They would eat tomatoes and chicken and gave me the sandwiches. . . . When they went on holidays, they would put a lot of noodles in the fridge. Then it was noodles for breakfast, noodles for lunch, and noodles for dinner.”

For most students, food seemed to be the biggest challenge. For many, food-related problems were so serious that they moved out of their homestays as a result, as one student’s comment demonstrates: “I moved out after a month because I couldn’t get used to the food. I couldn’t get used to the breakfast that is a kind of cold milk with muesli. Dinner is usually beef with potatoes. But the beef was too hard to eat. No lunch for us [the students in the homestays]”.

Both the students and the host families reported that those who lived with homestays for a short time were more likely to put up with the food than those who stayed for a long time, who might react to the food in ways that may not be very tactful in the eyes of the host family. A host father said:

All the short-term students like the variety, but the long-term ones they began to miss their own culture and food, and they became very fussy. Sometimes, they can be quite RUDE. But they will not talk about it because it’s embarrassing for them to talk about it. The real problem is that they are missing their own food. But instead of saying that they miss their food, they dislike our food.

In the families where, according to the host parents interviewed, there was no problem with food, the parents employed various coping strategies. First of all, they provided enough food for the students. As a Maori homestay mother said, Maori people always make sure that

people are fed first. According to her, if the students were nice and warm and got a full stomach, they would be happy. In keeping with the Maori tradition, in which food had a very high cultural importance, there was always plenty of food for the students.

Second, these families provided a variety of food, or a mixture of New Zealand and Chinese food. They sometimes bought Chinese takeaways or let the students cook for the families. Some host parents learnt how to cook Chinese food from their students. Both the students and their host families had a chance to try the different food, which they found very enjoyable. Some homestays provide plenty of rice to students because they understood that it was a staple for Chinese people. As a homestay father said, although he would like the students to get used to New Zealand food, he realized that he could not “expect too much”, as “[e]verything in New Zealand is so different for them, and they have to have time to get used to the things”

Culture Learning

Another major theme that emerged, from ten of the interviews with students, was that the students expected to experience and learn about New Zealand culture and customs. This was one of the main reasons why they chose to live with local homestays. Eight students reported that their expectation had been met or partially met, through doing everyday things with the family. For example, through having meals together, they learnt “how to use a knife and fork”; through going out with their homestays, they learnt about different places in New Zealand, and through visiting families, relatives, and friends of the family, they learnt to socialize with New Zealanders. Those who said the experience did not help them learn and adapt to the culture said that their homestay families never took them anywhere and there was very little communication between them. However, to host parents, “culture learning” also meant accepting the food and food habits of the family, observing house rules such as keeping the room clean and tidy and having short showers, and helping with minor chores such as doing the dishes and setting the table. Some student thought that because they paid fees to the host families, they should not be expected to do any housework.

Emotional Warmth

The fourth major theme, also brought up by ten students, was emotional warmth, by which is meant a feeling of being included in the family, of belonging. Students expected that

living with homestays would provide them with a home environment and that their homestay parents would take them as their own children or grandchildren. Only four students stated that they were happy with their homestays in this regard. The rest said that their expectation was met only partially.

Like language environment, warmth seems to be closely related to communication. The students stated that if the parents were warm-hearted and considerate towards the students, they would be more likely to show concern for the students' study and welfare and spend more time chatting with them. A student, for example, said, "I expect warmth most, and communication with the homestay. It is very important for homestay to chat with the international students to make them feel at home, especially when they first arrived." To these students, emotional warmth in the homestays was even more important than language environment.

However, the six participants who reported that their expectation of emotional warmth had been fulfilled only partially suggested that it was impossible for the homestay parents to really take them as family members because they were, as Anderson (1994) asserts, actually strangers. They were really "outsiders". Some students said that they "could not require their host parents to take care of them as their parents would in China as they were not in 'their own families'". They could not "expect too much" because "the higher you expect, the wider the gap will be". The host parents interviewed revealed that they did not realize that emotional warmth was one of the expectations students had of the homestay experience.

DISCUSSION

Two prominent views relating to sojourn adjustment are Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve hypothesis and Oberg's (1960) concept of culture shock. The U-curve hypothesis posits that the process of intercultural adaptation moves through three stages: initial elation followed by a drop in satisfaction and ending with a period of recovery. Oberg's (1960) concept of culture shock identifies the process as consisting of four stages: initial euphoria or a "honeymoon" stage characterized by excitement, fascination, and intrigue, followed by irritation and hostility, then gradual adjustment, and finally, adaptation. Both views suggest a very positive initial period of the sojourn and follow a U-shape pattern. Some researchers, however, have claimed that support for the U-shape views is weak and over-generalised (e.g., Church, 1992;

Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and others have had results that are inconsistent with these views (e.g., Holmes, 2000; Pedersen, 1991).

The results we found in relation to the initial stage also do not support Lysgaard's (1955) and Oberg's (1960) views. Instead, they indicate strongly that generally, the experience was a negative one. The students did not start their stay in New Zealand and in the host family with optimism or elation. The experience, far from being like a holiday or honeymoon, was one characterized by disappointment, homesickness, anxiety, helplessness, and a sense of inadequacy. According to the students, this was because "the pressure was huge". The purpose of coming to New Zealand was to study, in a language that the students were not competent in and a society that was different in so many ways, and the pressure to succeed put on them by their families was enormous (Holmes, 2000). It was only after having lived in New Zealand for some time that they "got used to it". A student also described the same sort of adjustment: "I didn't feel like I was on holiday. Instead I felt very nervous. I didn't know what was going on. After living here for some time, I gradually felt relieved."

The four themes that emerged regarding the expectations of the students are in line with what the literature suggests the homestay environment provides: an environment in which to learn the language and improve proficiency; the security, warmth, friendship, and support of a family; the experience and learning of the host culture; and, of course, the food. However, for most students, these expectations were generally not met or only partially met. Lack of communication and interaction seems to underlie much of the dissatisfaction with the experience, which supports what Fryer and Lukasevich found (1998): students with negative experiences about language learning reported that they did not have enough interaction and communication with their host families. Similarly, McFedries (2002) and Welsh (2001) have found that limited time, and concomitant limited communication, was a major issue in their studies of international students in New Zealand.

In terms of language learning, it is clear from the interviews that simply living in a homestay environment does not necessarily lead to language improvement, and this finding challenges the common assumption that "the best way to acquire language competency is to live in an environment where the language of study is needed" (St Martin, 1997). The Chinese students in this study have shown that unless the students have input from the host families, students will not be exposed to an environment conducive to language improvement. Again, communication with the students is essential for such input to occur. The host family needs to be aware of the students' language expectation and be willing to put a conscious effort into communicating with the students and helping them improve their

proficiency. However, as the interviews with host families show, only a few parents realized that practicing English was what their students expected most out of the homestay experience.

Communication has also been found to be central in facilitating culture learning (Hammer, 1992; Bochner, McLeod, & Line, 1977 cited in Holmes, 2000). Close social interaction with people in the host culture has also been found to lead to positive stranger-host relations and better adaptation (Seltiz, Christ, Havel, & Cook, 1963, cited in Holmes, 2000). The host families can, by engaging with the students meaningfully—that is, by doing more than talking to them at the dining table—on a daily basis, make a difference in helping the students to acquire “cultural literacy” (Robinson, 1992, cited in Holmes, 2000) and learn new skills to operate more effectively in the new culture.

In addition to language and culture learning, students also expected to be accepted as part of the family. Again, communication seems to be a major factor in whether or not students felt “at home”. Host parents actively talking to and doing things with the students can, the students suggested, enhance the feeling of being included in the family. However, as has already been established, communication within the homestay tended to be limited, and so the opportunity for the students and the host parents to interact and develop a relationship was also limited. It is difficult to feel that one belongs, that one is part of the family, when there is little communication and interaction with other members of the family. Consequently, many students said that they felt the host parents took them as merely boarders rather than members of the family and that the homestay arrangement was treated as a business activity by the host families.

A point worth noting in relation to this issue, however, is the possible differences in the concept of “family”—and the roles family members are expected to play—held by the host parents and the students. China implemented the “one-child policy” since 1978, and it is likely that the students in this study are the only child of the family. They are likely to be the center of their families, on whom six householders—four grandparents and two parents—focus their attention. The 4+2+1 family pattern may have turned them into “little emperors” as reported by some media. They would not have been expected to do housework but only to concentrate on their studies. Having no need to help around the house, they were likely to have developed the habit of being “looked after”, even well into their teens and twenties, and not learned to do things for themselves.

In contrast, it is likely that there is more than one child in New Zealand families. Each

child is just “one of the family”, and not “the focus” of it. Children learn to be tolerant and more independent, and they are expected to do some household chores. This difference may help explain why some homestay parents found their Chinese students to be too dependent—with the every age of 25, they were, to most New Zealanders, old enough to take care of themselves—impatient, and unhelpful, if not downright “lazy”.

Food as a problem in intercultural adaptation is a topic that crops up in many reports about international students (e.g., Campbell & Guyton, 2003; Mcgehan, 2002) and deserves discussion in some detail. Food is of a major cultural importance in the Chinese culture. According to a food expert, “Nowhere else in the world is the daily table so entwined with, so much a part of, a people’s national fabric. The food of [China] has a long, complex, exceedingly rich documented history, one that reaches further back than any other food tradition” (Lo, 1999, quoted in “*The Chinese kitchen*,” 2004, para. 4). Another expert writes: “Few cultures have a cuisine which is as developed as the Chinese. It is sophisticated in its flavors, textures, aromas and attention to presentation” (“Talking with Grace,” 2004, para.2).

Chinese foods are full of symbolism, especially but not exclusively those served during celebrations; for example, fish is served “with its head and tail intact to properly signify a favourable beginning and end for the New Year” (Young, 2004, para. 3), rice, revered like no other ingredient, is not just a carbohydrate but a symbol of prosperity and nourishment (Young, 2004, quoted in “Talking with Grace Young,” 2004). Food preparation integrates the yin/yang principles of internal harmony and balance and “reflects the layers of meaning and wisdom of China’s ancient culture” (Young, 2004, quoted in “Talking with Grace,” 2004, para. 2).

In the context described above, then, it is not surprising that food was a major issue for the Chinese students interviewed, a result that was supported by Welsh’s (2001) finding that food was the main reason for students in his study moving out of their homestays. The preoccupation with food is a characteristic intrinsic the Chinese culture ((Lo, 1999, cited in “*The Chinese kitchen*,” 2004) and may not be easy for non-Chinese, especially Western people, to appreciate. A bowl of cereals for breakfast, or a sandwich—“two pieces of bread with a piece of lettuce”—for lunch, common among New Zealand people, is not only “very simple” but also hardly enough to sustain people who enjoy eating and normally have hearty meals. There are often reports in the media about international students going hungry (Mchegan, 2002).

From the perspective of most host parents, however, food was not a major issue. This finding, which is in contrast to the students' view, is in line with what Campbell and Guyton (2003) had found in their study: "Homestay parents did not feel that [food] caused major problems or seriously impaired their relationship with the students" (p. 11). The host parents' unawareness of the seriousness of the matter may be due to the fact that the students were reluctant to talk about it. This reluctance relates to Hall's (1976) concept of high and low context. As Chinese people are from a high-context culture, they tend to hide their feelings and avoid being what they see as confrontational for fear of offending others or cause them to lose face, face being a very important cultural concept in the Chinese culture. Many students in this study were, therefore, too shy to tell their host parents about their problems. The following comment was typical of the students' responses:

I never tried [to tell them that I didn't like the food] because I thought the hostess was very kind and warm-hearted. I thought she had done her best. If I told her about this, I felt I would embarrass her. . . . The food they eat is the normal food New Zealand people eat. So I can't expect any more from her.

For some students, the reluctance to speak out was due to the stranger-host relationship the student and the homestay parent had (Anderson, 1994). As one student explained, "I think this is their family and I have just come as a guest. I have to follow what the host tells me to do." For others, the students felt that even if they told the host parents about the problems, the host parents would not accept their requirement or there would not be any improvement anyway.

Another reason why food-related problems seemed to be difficult for to solve could be that in most cases neither the hosts nor the students knew how to cook Chinese (or other Asian) food. Further, even if either or both parties could cook, the host families might not want Chinese food to be cooked in the house because the Chinese style of cooking could often make the kitchen dirty with oil and smoke. Furthermore, preparing a Chinese dish can be a complicated and time-consuming affair, as the following shows: "If you genuinely desire to cook Chinese dishes, you will need exotic ingredients, along with the time to properly prepare them" (Young, 1999, quoted in "The Wisdom," 2004, para. 3). Most of the host families in this study had no time to cook such food.

In addition, New Zealanders do not accord the same cultural value to food and food preparation as in China, and so cooking what is seen as elaborate meals on a daily basis is usually not a high priority. Even if they did have time, most host parents would, the students

remarked incredulously, rather spend it on other things, such as watching TV, gardening, fishing, and so on, unlike the Chinese parents, who would spend it on cooking delicious and nutritious meals for the family.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research suggests that the experience of the Chinese students during the initial sojourn in New Zealand and the homestay was generally not a positive one, nothing like a honeymoon suggested by the U-shape concepts of cultural adaptation of Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960). The sojourn, instead, was characterized by disappointment, uncertainties and difficulties about living in the homestay environment, and linguistic inadequacies. The research also shows that the commonly held beliefs about the benefits of living in a homestay—improvement in language proficiency, emotional support, and culture learning—were not generally borne out. Further, the majority of students found that a major problem of living with a homestay family was getting used to the food provided by the hosts. Even though quantity is the primary issue, the type of food was also of some concern.

Many factors contributed to the above findings. However, what has emerged from the analysis of the interviews is that cultural differences, lack of information, and lack of communication/interaction (due partly to lack of time) seem to be the main underlying issues. These have practical implications for all involved in the homestay arrangement: the students, the homestay providers, and the host parents.

The homestay providers, if they are not already doing this, should aim to better prepare the students by making sure that before they come to New Zealand, they have information about the homestay arrangement that is much more comprehensive than just the fees and the length requirement. The information should include topics such as what it means to live in a homestay accommodation, what can be expected of the host family and vice versa, and what some basic cultural differences are that may cause difficulties in adjusting and communication. Information about the family the student is going to stay with is important should also be available well before arrival. The provider should also encourage contact between the student and the host family before the student arrives so that the two parties do not meet as total strangers. Of course, students should be provided with information about how to contact the provider if the need arises, but the provider should also go one step further by checking to see how the student are doing in the homestay, especially the first few days, as it is likely that the student will not be confident enough at that stage to call the provider if there are problems with their host families.

Apart from information for the students, homestay providers need to make sure that

prospective host parents are informed about their roles and responsibilities. If the homestay industry is going to continue promoting the homestay arrangement as a home away from home for the students and an environment for language and culture learning, the homestay parents need to be aware of these expectations and the ways they can meet them so that students do not feel that they are shortchanged. As this study has shown, communication, and conscious effort to communicate, with the students is essential. The host families themselves may need to re-examine their motives for hosting and their commitment to meeting the expectations. It may also be necessary for the homestay industry to reconsider how realistic the expectations are.

As with the students, the homestay providers need also to help the host families to be informed about the cultural differences, including those in relation to food, that may affect their relationship and daily communication with the students. As Welsh (2001) suggests, “if homestay families are more aware of the cultural differences, they may be better able to accommodate them and improve the relationship in the homestay” (p. 112). An orientation or a seminar for host families, where they receive information from the homestay providers and where they can share personal experiences among themselves, can be a valuable exercise for the providers to engage in. The host families could also do something themselves that will inform them of cultural differences and prepare them for the areas where miscommunications or misunderstandings may occur. They could, for example, read about the students’ cultures, talk to people who have the cultural or the hosting experience or both, or even attend Chinese cooking classes. Certainly, they could, and, as the study has shown, should, talk to the students themselves once they have been put in the family.

Likewise, the international students need to make themselves as informed as possible about the new culture, its people, and its ways of doing things, and be prepared to be flexible. Of course, nothing will ever prepare them completely for the changes and obstacles that they will encounter but the more they know, the better they will be able to manage the differences and the easier the adjustment process will be. Specifically, it was suggested by some students interviewed, homestay students should show their concern and appreciation for the host families and not to be self-centered, behaving like “little emperors” as if they were at home. And they should not think because they have paid the fee, they can get whatever they want and do whatever they like at the homestay. According to many host parents interviewed, respect for the host family would go a long way towards a good relationship.

The experiences of the students in this study also have implications for future

research. According to Ward (2003), “[e]xport education, like most other industries, requires research and development, and investment in this is needed to foster positive growth in the sector” (p. 34). Homestay accommodation for international students is an area of the industry where research is lacking. If New Zealand is to remain competitive in the export education market, more needs to be done. The study reported here focused only on Chinese students, but future research could look into the students of other ethnicities so as to find out the similarities and differences regarding adjustment difficulties and challenges. This study also did not evaluate objectively the effect of the homestay on language improvement. The evaluation was based on self-reports by the students and may not be accurate. Future research could compare in an objective, more systematic way the English language level of students who live with host families with that of students who do not live with host families.

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