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The *European Journal of Chinese Studies* (EJCS) is published by the European Science & Scholarship Association, currently under the scholarly auspices of the German China Association.

The journal contains articles, occasional papers, review articles, book reviews, annotated translations, notes, and essays as well as abstracts of papers of other journals and monographs in German, English, French and Chinese dealing with the history, economy, culture and society of Greater China. Founded by Martin Woesler in 2018, it offers a forum especially for scholars from the EU and other European countries. We welcome contributions based on independent research by scholars (including PhD students) everywhere. Currently the journal is actively seeking to expand its contributor base (see instructions for contributors)!

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Contributions by any author, including those with any relation to the editorial board are double blind peer reviewed externally.

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Content analysis of the experience reports of

Chinese students after their return to China

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In Process of Reviewing

DRAFT

Study on the situation of Chinese students in Germany

Chinese students represent the largest group of non-EU foreign students in Germany. They are generally well prepared for their stay in Germany with language skills and informed cultural acquaintance. Even though they make use of social and cultural offers, but still often feel unfamiliar in Germany. Loneliness and homesick are their common experiences. One coping strategy is therefore to find familiar protection and communication in Chinese groups. Another is to seek psychological help/support. But such psychological support is quite hard to be found.

Chinese students are therefore in a very specific life situation with considerable *pressure*, such as:

- Pressure to perform socially, with achievement, due to Chinese socialisation.
- Pressure from their families

- Pressure due to lack of sufficient language skills and cultural integration as well as the challenges of the unfamiliar societal, studying and living situation in Germany
- Pressure due to social rejection, isolation, loneliness.

Even before the Corona crisis, many of the students complained of anxiety, depression, loneliness and some even had suicidal attempts/thoughts. Dropping out of studies and returning to China prematurely are not uncommon.

But where can Chinese students find appropriate culturally-adequate and *psychologically-professional help* in Germany? Which was further complicated by the Corona crisis.

Exploring this situation we have to look at the significance of this research and why is this could be valuable to be read. This research is created in contrast to other such research with a clearer structure like: 1 Chinese students had extraordinary experiences during the study and live abroad. 2. However, the challenges and pressures. 3. Twist: no need and cultural adapted psychosocial help. 4 Summary, very important to report/summarize their experiences, which could inspire or encourage adapted psychosocial services. Our research is grounded on our clear decision and the consequent reference to the perspective of action research.

The *qualitative, explorative study* has two aims. On the one hand we want to promptly determine how Chinese students experience their living and study situation in Germany before the Corona

crisis and also now. What are their specific difficulties?

On the other hand, central guidelines as well as relevant and specific support and counselling services are to be derived from this. This will be communicated to relevant institutions and organisations.

As it is an action research project it could be helpful or even necessary to proceed and communicate the results *step by step*. This has two effects: on the one hand the results of each part of the study can be perceived on its own relevance. On the other hand we intend to support so too say a work (discourse with colleagues and relevant people) in progress. Aspects of this discourse will be integrated into the final results and already develop the participation in the project by itself.

Here are the first results deriving from the reports of experience.

Methods

Source reports: First results of the experience reports

Four groups of experience reports are available:

- Reports that are available via the website of the DAAD.
- Reports that are available via the website of Tongji University in Shanghai.
- Reports made available by Zhejiang University in Hangzhou.
- verbal reports with students and 7 or feedback on wechat, weibo and QQ

Analytical methods

We made two basic distinctions in the assessment. On the one hand, we are concerned with pleasant, good, enriching, new experiences. On the other hand, experiences that were more troublesome, "unpleasant," or problematic. The latter were usually not declared as such and named in detail as unpleasant, conflictual or problematic experiences. This is, in our opinion, not surprising insofar as a conflict-related connotation is uncommon in China. After all, one does not speak directly of an unpleasant or conflictual experience. We conclude a rather arduous experience from the deeper content analysis of the texts as well as from the specific attribution of an experience described in each case. We assume that a positive and new experience is attributed stronger, more detailed, more emphasized. If a "new" experience is stated without such an attribution, we currently still assume that this space of experience may have been rather burdensome, unpleasant or even conflictual.

When the results of the content analysis of the experience reports are contrasted with the results of the survey as well as those of the in-depth interviews, a more accurate assessment can be made later.

The analysis of the texts was not based on a predetermined set of criteria or on criteria we had previously developed. We were much more interested in implicitly identifying which themes or special features emerged when reading the reports. (European Journal of Chinese Studies Spring 2022)

The reports reflect individual, personal experiences on the one hand. On the other hand, experiences regarding the following experiential spaces:

- Situation at the university, learning in a new university milieu.
- One's own everyday life as a space of practical life experience
- Encounter with a foreign (German) society and culture
- The relationship space with oneself and/or with others.
- Experience of the self, self-development and self-enrichment
- Self-experience as Chinese
- Perspectives for the future
- Experience as experience of different styles/modes of experience.

Methodologically, our assessment evolved from the general to the particular/personal. This resulted in certain topics that were implicitly identified, compared to the other texts. These Topics were clustered over time so that the structure mentioned above became visible. These experiences, or topics, gained more meaning through juxtaposition with experiences from different, specific conversations with Chinese students, as well as colleagues. In developing topics and clusters, we found it helpful to have a specific reference: we were able to draw on the identification of typical, culturally and socially conditioned, patterns of behavior, experience and relationship creation of Chinese people. We will discuss this in more detail elsewhere.

Results

University situation, learning in a new university milieu:

The experience of the university experience space is described very pointedly. The situation there is experienced and described as fundamentally different from that in China. The "open" lectures are said to be good for learning, also form a pleasant learning climate, which is promoted by this. Thus, one has the opportunity/ability to get to know different ways of thinking and perspectives on life. This happens mainly through the nature of the group discussions, the methodology of brainstorming, the development of new ideas, and the opportunity and "permission" to ask/be allowed to ask questions. *Asking questions*, they say, is an important criterion in the university experience. The subject of study, as described by some, has taken on a new meaning and one experiences this as additionally more connected to his/her student identity in China. This goes hand in hand with the need not only to study and learn in relation to the subject, but also to act in a correspondingly "new" and different way. One report states that one has transformed into a "courageous adult." This courage goes hand in hand with the experience of being able to make one's own decisions even within the framework of one's studies (or this is even desired). Through this, one would not run away from reality, it is said.

The university experiential space would therefore promote "authentic living." After all, do the lecturers have patience with the students, do they constantly encourage the students and make the students feel that they are an important

player in the university game. Some students even experience themselves in a leading role as a result. This not only creates a new experience, not only encourages them, but causes a sense of being able to effectively open oneself to the world and to new perspectives in the world. One would not only learn knowledge, but learn life. Basically, this would be characterized by an unforgettable smell of freedom.

In conversations and personal contacts, some very different experiences are reported. These stand in clear contrast to the descriptions recorded in the written reports of experiences. I will go into this in more detail elsewhere and describe phenomena such as burnout, depression, loneliness, learning difficulties or rejection by lecturers. (EJCS Spring 2022)

The reference to the said marked difference confirms us in the view of the importance of other sources through which one can get additional experiences reported that one does not dare to report as a Chinese, or else that "cannot" be mentioned due to cultural communication patterns.

One possible area of tension is inexperience in terms of experiencing and working in the university space. Having not experienced oneself as sufficiently prepared in this regard, many "detours" would have been required. This refers to the difficulty of selecting the semester modules, but also the respective topic modules in a seminar, by oneself. A certain inexperience also refers to the new way of learning. While in China one is practiced "to learn by heart", in Germany one is confronted with the difficulty to work out the study

contents in more detail, more deeply, more differentiated and more complementary and then to present this to the others..

At German universities, there is a greater degree of freedom that can be shaped and filled out by the students themselves, which is also perceived as unfamiliar, in contrast to China. In China, there would also be the significant "final exams", while in Germany there would be more comprehensive intermediate steps in the process of examination. This would take the form of papers, short presentations, project reports and so on. Quite a few would therefore tend to experience themselves as inactive in the seminar, inactive in the sense hesitation or of shameful waiting.

In this context, the spoken and experienced language naturally plays a special role. One is rather experienced in terms of vocabulary, grammar and correct translation in written form without, however, having enough experience in living, linguistic exchange. The pressure in studying is therefore greater for quite a few than in China and it can be assumed that the pressure is more due to the new mode of learning, experience and communication, less in the difficulties of the content.

It shimmers through between the lines that some do have greater difficulty balancing work and leisure in terms of a healthy work-life balance. Thus, one would sometimes study all night, which would be linked to increased isolation and loneliness.

Some say very clearly that study abroad is characterized by crucial, previously unknown, influences. Thus, not all study

is the same. This is related less to the content than to study as a space of experience. This, it is said, is occasionally "hardcore." Elsewhere it is said that the new way of studying/learning is: "Reading through texts self-critically, thinking about them. Reading texts critically, adding additions oneself and searching for them in the literature or clarifying terms oneself in order to use them, related to the text, etc."

The style as well as the mode in Germany of experiencing studying as a completely new experience space makes it difficult for some to enjoy a fulfilling life at the same time. Add to that the fact that the Mensa food would not taste good. In addition, there is the realization that one has so far thought too little about one's own studies and that until then one was not at all practiced in being able and allowed to make mistakes, to develop questions, to dare to give unusual answers and, above all, to think for oneself, independently, (self-)critically about texts at hand and to relate to them. Basically, this would feel like *"having to leave the comfort zone of a familiar learning experience common in Chinese universities."*

Encounter with a foreign (German) society and culture

In all reports, reference is made to the completely foreign culture that opens up, especially upon arrival in Germany. This is experienced by most as a jump into cold water. Life in Germany is completely different from the way it is described in reports on the Internet or in second-hand accounts of life experiences. Although life was perceived as so different, everyone learned their own way of coping with it.

In general, life in Germany is described as slower. This gives life a special attractiveness. Life in Germany is quickly perceived as an alternative life, despite initial adaptation problems. At the same time, the experience of the alternative forms of life led to learning and to understand oneself in a new way through the experience of difference. The differences in experience were linked to a clear freedom that led to the experience that the different lifestyles were accepted, had their meaning, and that there was no "compulsion" to agree to one or another lifestyle. Most of them did not feel lonely in the lived everyday life at the university, shopping and forming relationships. After all, they felt welcomed by the encounter with Germans. Despite the different lifestyles, this led to a feeling of being at home. If, for example, there were contacts, relationships and events organized through a foreigners' office at the university, one appreciated the lived exchange between representatives of very different cultures. The more such contacts and events could be used, the more secure one felt in the encounter with the "foreign", new culture in Germany.

On the one hand, familiarizing oneself with the new culture and society takes place on a practical level (shopping, cooking, visiting government offices, etc.). On the other hand, the Chinese students registered the difference between Chinese and German culture through the experience of different values and core beliefs of people in their dealings with each other. Thus, as emphasized by some, they had experienced "real" freedom, independence, openness, humanism and respect. It seems that the experience of

such values and core beliefs has made it easier for the Chinese to accept the "otherness". On the one hand, it seems that the Chinese students perceived the difference between Chinese and German culture/society on the practical level. There they tried to cope with it in the best possible way. On the other hand, they were very open to experiencing and recognizing the different values and core beliefs of people in Germany. This seems to be an important element in becoming adaptable in the foreign culture. Thus, it is reported by some that one can do what one wants. This would be like an unwritten "motto of life," if one were also aware of and respected the rights of others. Many feel free to try out themselves and different steps in everyday life without being "judged". The experience of the new culture gains a special charm as well as meaning, through the possibility to realize oneself. It was possible to get involved in individual encounters, activities and peculiarities (even if this was not always so easy from the beginning).

Particularly noteworthy is the experience of the general social atmosphere in Germany, in everyday life and in the encounter with very different people. Being able to get involved with the atmosphere in a foreign culture indicates a greater willingness to embrace the new. After all, one then experiences oneself as fundamentally more open, curious and open-minded, and inwardly emotionally freer.

Language has a special, as some have put it, "magical" power. Language is thus experienced not only as a means of intentional, goal-oriented communication, but also as a medium of shared

experience with other people. After all, one has experienced that one was listened to, even if there were language problems, or that one was smiled at, even if linguistic communication was so difficult at the beginning. Language, and this becomes clear, is perceived and valued as a means of encounter and shared experience. Language is therefore not only learning vocabulary and grammar or acquiring the ability to translate in writing, but also entering the white water of lived exchange.

Some refer to the special appreciation of environmental awareness in Germany.

Directly expressed or subliminally implicitly perceptible, astonishment is expressed about why life here in Germany is so different from the idea of life for which one was prepared in China or with which one arrived in Germany.

There are also other impressions.

Some describe their first impressions in Germany as a *culture shock*. One had been frightened about the dirt, drunken people on the street, loud parties, beggars on the street, etc.. As a rule, one had successfully completed a language course in China, and yet the lived language, the linguistic communication in the country (and not in school or in the seminar) was a completely different, new space of experience. Not infrequently, therefore, the Chinese reported an inhibition to express themselves linguistically, to approach someone linguistically, and/or to approach someone at all despite linguistic inhibition.

They are thus hesitant in their efforts to express themselves more boldly and

confidently linguistically. It seems that they see language as a means of factual communication *rather than as a way of self-expression, of also communicating emotionally, and of developing lived cultural competence*. In this regard, there seems to have been little specific training during the preparation in China. The accompanying (lack of?) unexpressed self-reflection might suggest that language acquisition is therefore understood more as a means of factual communication and less as an exchange between people.

There are two main spaces experienced as areas of tension. It is regretted to make an appointment everywhere (e.g. at authorities, the university, the doctor, etc.). On the other hand, one must take one's own "life management" into one's own hands. One experiences this already as a clear renouncement opposite "the supply in the life in China". There one is as an only child, mothered, supplied and must worry about little itself. This "care" also takes place in the university environment, so that there is hardly any opportunity to gain practical experience in one's own way of life. In retrospect, in relation to the Chinese life situation, this is a field of tension that is experienced particularly clearly in Germany, especially since one is stressed in a completely different way in the conduct of one's life there. The experience of having to take care of everything oneself contrasts with the high expectations one had in China with regard to Germany. The conclusion is that people could not even imagine a life that was about managing their own lives.

Another area of tension relates to food, cooking and eating out. Students like to

eat Chinese food and regret that there is hardly any typical Chinese food in the cafeteria, or anywhere else, as they know it from their home country. Many regret this. But many regret even more the fact that they can't cook themselves. They have never learned. They have an inhibition to try cooking themselves, even though many acquire it over time. This points to a specific tension experienced from a distance in relation to home in China. Eating, and thus also cooking, has a particularly high cultural, communicative and social function in China. People cook and eat together. People also communicate in the process, and in many cases social life takes place in the restaurant. In retrospect and from a distance, this is perceived in Germany as a sacrifice and a loss, as a deprivation.

The students have obviously been well prepared in terms of language, culture, typical features of the country, and so on. It seems, however, *that they were less well prepared for something like their own way of life and the practical management of everyday life*. This includes cooking. Being able to cook for oneself would therefore be an important step towards being able to cope with everyday life by oneself. At the same time, this would also be a gustatory reminder, thus an emotional self-strengthening in relation to the connection with China, with the homeland and with the everyday experience.

The relationship space with oneself and/or with others.

The decision to study abroad in Germany represents an indescribably great challenge for most Chinese students. Even if they were prepared for this step

in China, they all describe an enormous uncertainty, especially in the beginning. This is a constant companion in the beginning. However, the reports also show that they are not discouraged by this and are looking for a very personal approach to the new experience. One is aware of some of the advice one has received along the way. But increasingly you also know that you have to "go beyond your own limits" so that others can perceive you at all. One has learned to live alone and to take care of oneself, and yet a curiosity to explore the new life grows. This curiosity is fed by "one's own inner voice" to "synchronize" with the new world. Of course, one is also speechless in the process and does not even know how that could work. The experience of occasionally being "comforted" by others helped. The experience that this learning process takes time also helped. It was also helpful to experience the relationship in a "language tandem" (such a tandem brings together a Chinese and a German, each of whom introduces the other to his or her own language). The openness and friendliness of the respective German counterpart also helped.

Basically, the multifaceted richness of the interaction is described, which opens up in the interaction between the inner willingness to engage in such an open process (despite some pain, if it does not work out that way), and the experience of a positive, encouraging, strengthening resonance, if one is willing to relate to someone else, a counterpart (in contrast to the often described tendency of Chinese students to either spend their private life alone and/or in the cries of quite isolated groups of Chinese).

Surprisingly, there are far more statements on this point that do not consistently reflect happy and enriching experiences. This experiential space seems to have a central function in enabling transcultural experience, the experience of such palpably distinct differences. This experiential space therefore also seems to be a significant, concrete starting point for developing and offering possible support later on. (More on this in another publication in spring 2022) An essential element of this specific support, and this should be said already now, seems to be the direct contact between a Chinese student and a German counterpart. This can be a person, a small group, a family, or a fairly small social population.

Many report that they have learned the language but have not been able to communicate. The completely new living space experienced here demands a high degree of self-responsibility. Some clearly describe having to control their emotions in order to independently complete tasks in everyday university life. In doing so, but also in their free time, they would feel inner emptiness and loneliness. Life outside the university does not seem to be so enriching, diverse, and varied (elsewhere, when answering the questions, this will be referred to more specifically, especially in terms of gradual differences as expected). As already stated in relation to other experiential spaces, living alone is not exactly easy. This includes the everyday feeling, but also, for example, the visit to Ikea. This visit confronts the students with a completely strange, new, practical area of life. After all, it is not a matter of buying furniture, but of buying it and then assembling it themselves at

home. To take such things into one's own hands, to design them, to deal with them more intensively, requires sufficient willingness, motivation, manual skills. This could be called an ensemble of *life-practical effectiveness*. In China, as is emphasized in various places, one was cared for and not well enough exposed to "the whole of life". If one is confronted in Germany now with small, middle and larger problems, which are to be solved themselves, then not few feel rather helpless, demotivated and/or passive. In the leisure time this leads among other things to a longer sleep behavior, since, as is said, nobody would wake one up. In private life, in leisure time, one would "kill time" and rather indulge in three activities: Sleeping late, playing online games, and/or socializing with other Chinese students over dinner.

Thus, the support in everyday life or the "comfortable life" in China is missed. This convenience is experienced, it is recalled, at home, at university, while shopping online, etc. In this respect, this experience does not seem to be a singular experience, but a rather *typical experience style/pattern*.

Experiencing "being free" in studies and in everyday life arouses a subtle, unspecific discomfort in quite a few. Some even feel actual despair and experience homesickness. It is therefore not surprising that some, without naming it directly, "*show traits of social phobia*." "I always had to express myself in unexpected situations, even if I didn't even know what it was about."

This experiential space and the hereby linked feeling of living in the foreign, German culture is not understood and described as an unpleasant, terrible,

conflictual or even rejectable time. On the contrary, the experiences described above are described subtly, cautiously, and "in bits and pieces". One feels secretly, increasingly growing and finally also with slight joy, that one, without having been prepared for this in detail, would begin to discover one's own life, even if very slowly.

Experience of the Self, Self-Development and Self-Enrichment

The time of study in Germany is a special challenge for most Chinese students to find their way in a foreign culture. It is also a personal challenge in relation to oneself. This consists of experiencing oneself in an unfamiliar way, being thrown back on oneself instead of having a "safe assigned place" in a social context/structure. Certainly, a culturally significant decision plays a role here insofar as *Chinese culture is more contextual and German culture is more individual-centered*. The present reports on the experiences of the Chinese students therefore make clear, differentiated and also emotional reference to this.

Even if the individual experiences are very different, weightings on the one hand and fundamental similarities (patterns/styles) on the other hand can be pointed out.

Basically, the experience was experienced like a "treasure" for which one was "eternally grateful". Thus one had been able to think about oneself and the world in a new way. Not only that, but also to be able to experience it in this way. Therefore, one is also proud to have dared to take such a step and to participate concretely in the everyday

creation of the relationship. Even if one would occasionally stumble or felt lonely and helpless in conflicts, one would always have been able to regulate and solve things. As a result, one experiences oneself as stronger, especially in the courage to dare to take one's own steps. On the other hand, to be open to different experiences that do not necessarily have to be "harmonized" immediately.

The new life experience is so important because it is an experience and not only a self-management in the new life. One could also, while writing the reports, easily remember many things because, and this had been especially important, one had also reflected on "thinking." One is impressed, he says, by the experience of "independent thinking," creative thinking and sharing with others. This leads to more courage, which in turn contributes to a more personal experience. One student sums it up by saying "When I can feel, I realize how valuable I am and this makes me grateful to the world." Even if one often still felt lonely, the willingness or first attempts to take responsibility for oneself began quite quickly, in that one experienced oneself as more independent and more honest with oneself. One could experience something like a "common sense" and also learn to appreciate it. *Self-reliance is therefore described as the integration of emotional experience, reflection and common sense.* Personally, therefore, privacy is experienced as pleasurable, which in turn led to more commitment to be guided by such pleasure in everyday life. The depth of the experience had been surprising in that it was greater than had been imagined. Therefore, one would never forget the following

questions that one had in mind as significant: "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?"

These are central questions in order to be able to experience oneself, to understand oneself better and to enable (self-) orientation in one's own life, in the foreign culture. The other side of the coin is that people have experienced themselves as more mature, and fortunately they have lost their "childish mentality". If someone experiences himself in this way, he also describes less homesickness. One could then deal better with loneliness, because one could develop one's "mental abilities" by experiencing oneself as more open, more active, more self-confident, as well as more tolerant. The enjoyment of the newly gained freedom is a special increase in personal growth.

Self-experience awakens self-development, which is experienced as a personal and emotional self-enrichment. Unlike the experience in China, *the experience of the personal self comes to the fore as complementary and enriching to the social self.* Therefore, the semantic, psychological, and transcultural analysis of the reports raises the suggestion that the Chinese students may experience a transcultural expansion of their identity and self-experience/self-determination.

Experiencing oneself in such unusual, new situations, shaping this space as an experiential space by oneself, motivating oneself to do one thing or another, and being left to one's own devices in the process, is not only new and thus burdensome, but also leads to the three "questions" already mentioned above:

"Who am I? Where do I come from?
Where am I going?"

These questions per se involve coming to terms with oneself in a distinctly new, unfamiliar life situation. These three questions in themselves represent a field of tension or a space of emotional, inner turmoil. After all, one is often not very familiar with an orientation in this regard. As a rule, one is left to one's own devices. And one usually does not yet have words for what one experiences and learns and no experiential knowledge that could give one self-confidence in this regard. Even if you sleep longer/too long in the morning or look into the empty refrigerator in the evening because you have nothing to eat, most people experience themselves as *much more mature* when they return to China. It would be a gift to be able to take more responsibility for oneself and make one's own upcoming decisions. The fact that new decisions (could) steer one's life in a different direction is experienced not only as surprising, but also as unsettling and conflictual. One is, after all, too "fragile" and sensitive oneself as well as helpless and powerless without one's parents, family or the protected university space on campus.

Self-experience as Chinese

Chinese students experience themselves clearly and in concrete interactions with Germans as Chinese. They consciously show themselves as Chinese and experience themselves, with varying degrees of naturalness, as responsible in this self-expression.

Some also describe an interest in informing Germany about China. They want to be "cultural diplomats", so to

speak. To represent China in this way would be important, they emphasize. But one would also feel better as a Chinese. On the one hand, one would feel more determined to speak about China oneself. At the same time, one would experience a tolerance in oneself to listen to others when they describe their impressions of China. If one listens more carefully, one asks more differentiated questions, without experiencing a premature polarization. Some report that they would put aside their "China mindset," but that does not mean denying Chinese identity. After all, it is precisely by remaining identified with China that one experiences oneself as emotionally stronger, while at the same time experiencing oneself as more tolerant. Some bring it to the point by saying that every Chinese student should take such a step of personal learning experience.

The longer someone is in Germany, the more courageous one feels not only to experience a sense of "mission consciousness as a Chinese person" but also to express it to others. Occasionally, this is linked to a nostalgic experience, if one remembers the "comfort", the experience of security in everyday Chinese and social life. Against the background of the diversity of the experience described in Germany, this could be understood as a complementary self-expression. On the one hand, one appreciates the newness, tolerance, freedom and independence, etc. in Germany. And one remembers more concretely personally significant aspects of life in China. Is it nevertheless also really comfortable and beautiful, if one does not have to worry about so many things as in Germany. This memory,

occasionally described as nostalgic, surfaces at moments, including when one experiences increased insecurity in everyday life in Germany. The fact that these are complementary aspects ultimately confirms the impression that one is inwardly, emotionally open enough, is awake enough, and is curious enough to be able to allow quite different modalities of experience at the same time. On the one hand, this could be understood as an expression of a successful tolerance of ambiguity. On the other hand as an expression of a juxtaposition. (Juxtaposition would still have to be defined at this point).

One's own everyday life as a practical space of experience:

The experience of everyday life and coping with everyday life is of central importance. Coping with everyday life means, among other things, dealing with the authorities, finding what one is looking for when shopping, getting along with the public transport system, getting to know the locality, finding a place to live, approaching people for support, setting up a bank account, taking out insurance, and so on.

There is no escaping or avoiding this experience. In this respect, life in Germany is a significant chapter in the lives of Chinese students. They therefore always emphasize how important this learning process was for them. The area of shopping and cooking takes up a lot of space. Most of them regret that they never learned to cook themselves, but are increasingly enjoying their own growing cooking skills. And yet they are often at a loss in the store/discounter and feel completely disoriented. They are confronted with an abundance of offers.

They usually don't know where to find what, or they discover foods that are unfamiliar to them. If they succeed in cooking in their own kitchen, however, they experience this as an "overwhelming pleasure" and an important skill.

The more one can make this experiential space one's own, the more likely it is that quite a few of the students are convinced that they have made "everyday life" their own. On the one hand, this includes the practical things in everyday life (in the sense of self-efficacy). On the other hand, however, it means above all that one has created the new living space (called everyday life) as one's own by himself (efficacy in relation to the outside world). Quite a few of the students emphasize this as a personal achievement, since life in China generally deprived them of such a space of experience. After all, it was written, one is either served by one's family, or one lives at the university in a rather pre-structured daily routine. One does not need to cook there. As a rule, one does not need to look for an apartment. One does not need to worry about insurance and the like or a bank account. Even though one may have a bank account, in China this does not necessarily mean that one has conquered the living space called "everyday life".

Everyday life in Germany is also described as a space of open, diverse and exciting relationship experiences. If one lives in a shared apartment, this promotes communication with representatives of different cultures. In the evenings, people meet at parties to relax and also to enjoy life. Being together with friends, in very different

contexts, does not primarily take place on campus in the evening. Instead, people meet in very different places. You do things in the city, in the region and you travel together. All of this is described as a meaningful learning experience. The complexity and diversity of social contacts in everyday life promotes the experience of not having to play social roles. One is relieved about this, although uncertain about how to behave without having to play such a role. In this respect, the experience in everyday life is an open process. This is in contrast to communication that tends to serve a specific purpose or results from a specific function one holds in everyday life. The experience of such an open space, is filled with curiosity, with uncertainty as well as a joy of discovery and the desire to be able to develop in this way in the future and to participate in life or to shape it accordingly oneself.

Perspectives for the future:

The way of making new experiences in Germany or experiencing different, social contexts as a possibility space for experience leads to the realization that the world invites further discoveries due to its size. One therefore hopes to be able to experience it in a more differentiated and diverse way. This includes a broadening of the horizon, but also the expansion of the personality. This is said to be a personal enrichment for the shaping of one's own life, but also for the shaping of the world in the future. After all, it's not just about expansion, but also about fascination for what is yet to be discovered and that life itself is a journey of discovery. This includes freedom and the multi-layered, multi-faceted experience of realizing that "less

is more." The journey is far from over, it is emphasized, with thoughts of the return trip to China. In quite a few testimonials, therefore, the joy of sharing the experience with one's own family and friends is reported. Not only that: quite a few describe their conviction to bring China closer to the people in Germany as Chinese. After all, the new experience in Germany makes them feel more like representatives of China in the world. In this case, representative means to be proud of China, to be identified with China and at the same time to bring back to China the power and significance of one's own new experience in Germany as a Chinese.

The experience in Germany is consistently experienced as very positive, enriching and like a "treasure". One experiences oneself, as is emphasized, exposed to the whole of life and increasingly begins to "take the floor for oneself and one's concerns". On the one hand, it is emphasized that one definitely wants to come back or that such an experience should be a part of everyone. On the other hand, some are clearly interested in bringing this experience, with all its peculiarities and differences to the experience in Chinese culture, back to China to tell their parents, friends, colleagues and fellow students at the university about it. Here, a clear area of tension arises insofar as this kind of experience, self-experience and self-development is strange to many people in China. Strange, because their own personal experience is missing. Strange, because such a mode of experience is not necessarily connoted as culturally familiar. Finally, strange also when one feels and is enthusiastic about the experiences in Germany, but also about

the new self-experience, and wants to behave/behaves in the way one has learned to appreciate in Germany and does not know how to implement this in China. Thus it was reported that one should not ask so many questions after the return in China. Likewise one should not worry about the different roles one takes on in the context of the study or in the social interaction. This led, or is feared by some, to disappointment and this led to an inner withdrawal. One report puts it succinctly, "To say goodbye, I experienced melancholy and shed tears and that my laughter felt like it was spilled."

Discussion

Function of our exploratory study

An exploratory study is a research design in which there are no standardized research methods. It is used in scientific research to gain initial insights into a topic to be investigated, on which one has as yet virtually no information. It is particularly indicated when there is little material that is suitable for research.

An exploratory approach is also useful when there is "enough" research material, but the necessary connections have not yet been made. In order not to set limits for oneself too early and thus risk answering the research question too narrowly, the explorative approach is recommended. We therefore decided, on the one hand, to cluster the content analysis of the available testimonials. This could be compared to finding new patterns of argumentation. On the other hand, we conclude central and relevant questions for the further procedure.

We also put special emphasis on avoiding the occurrence of possible errors. Here are some relevant aspects:

- the field reports come from different sources and different regions of China,
- The selection of the field reports was done by distinguished people from different backgrounds with different relation to the topic. We discussed this thoroughly,
- Such an approach also serves to test the way forward. This implies the discovery of possible difficulties and "mistakes".
- By also being interactive and discursive in nature, there is always a certain uncertainty relation that has to do with the content and structure of this type of study. The supportive collaborative interaction in such a learning environment (research is already learning) and the demanding discursive exchange between learners and researchers makes possible mistakes discussable at an early stage.
- Already in the early stages of the study, we could compare some of our results with the results of a broad alumni study (CDHAW). This study targeted alumni who had studied or earned a doctorate between 2004 - 2013. 431 individuals participated in the study. (Total population of alumni 650, as of 2017). There are clear correspondences between the results of the CDHAW study and our initial impressions.

Concluding there are some basic questions to be found which could be relevant to better understand the situation of Chinese students in Germany. These questions later have to be correlated to the other results from the questionnaire and in-depth-interviews. This will be done in the first months of 2022 and also be published in the European Journal of Chinese Studies.

Basic questions are focused to different aspects like:

- **Lifestyle and everyday practice**

How can Chinese students already in China get a more precise idea of what their own lifestyle means in everyday life? What are the possible differences between the way of life in China and in Germany? This includes general and practical aspects. How can students in Germany receive specific support in this regard?

- **Role behaviour**

What do Chinese students need to be able to imagine the difference in role behaviour? After all, there is a different role paradigm between China and Germany. How can the students become familiar with flexible, overlapping, diverging role behaviour in practice when they are left to their own devices in Germany?

- **Overprotection vs experience of independency**

How does the experience of being overprotected as an only child and being left to fend for oneself

in Germany on the one hand, and being dependent on the company / collectiveness of other Chinese on the other, have an impact? What does it help (or need) for Chinese students to be able to integrate sufficiently into the new world and to experience this as a new and enriching experience? What could be the difference of experience when you become familiar with a new lifestyle and / or experience of independence by becoming familiar with this? (There is an important difference between whether you adapt a new life style or can develop personally by this)

- **Mastering everyday life and age / personal development**

in China, students obviously learn to master their everyday life independently later than in Germany. Chinese students in Germany have a corresponding experience much earlier in terms of age. Is there a difference in acquiring maturity / competence in this regard? If so, what is the possible difference? And what is the possible impact of becoming mature younger or at the age of about 30?

- **Curiosity and sustainable effect after the return to China**

Chinese students in Germany bring with them a strong curiosity, otherwise they probably would not have chosen to study in Germany. What can help them to use this curiosity for a new discovery of themselves in the

sense of personality development? And how can such experiences have a lasting effect, or what would one measure the sustainability of the experience by, especially after returning to China? And how can others be aware of this, by what expression?

- **Different modes of making experience in China vs Germany**

The interplay of the German language, the new environment in Germany and the new way of learning is a completely new experiential space for the students. How do they experience this experiential space and what is concise or primarily relevant in this experiential space? How is this expressed? What is different from the corresponding experiential spaces in China? And what can help students learn about different modes of experience? How can they acquire new competencies in the process, and how can this then be noticed?

- **Collectiveness as a transcultural competence**

How can the collectiveness competence, which they are used to, enrich their lives in Germany in such a way that even Germans become curious about it? What could make Germans be aware of this? What could help Chinese to open up in order to invite

Germans into their groups? What should they do practically?

- **The feeling of Identity as Chinese**

"I deeply feel that I am Chinese especially when I am in Germany." What then are the special identity characteristics in this respect (as Chinese)? What is the same and different about feeling Chinese (in China and / or in Germany)? And how do students express this or how can people in Germany can perceive this?

- **"official" and "unofficial" feedback**

How can possible discrepancies between "official" and "unofficial" feedback be understood and assessed? "Official" are the reports of experiences that were written for the university or e.g. for the DAAD. "Unofficial" are the reports or impressions that were shared via social media. How can the individual experience and that of a cohort be compared and / delimited in each case?

- **General study results vs respect for individual experience**

The experience reports also serve to evaluate the study stay in Germany. How can assessment and evaluation reflect the interaction of the concrete study results / outcome as well as the personal experiences? Such an assessment could be more

differentiated and serve to optimize the pre- and post-study in China.

- **The value of social and personal interaction**

People in Germany (e.g. a landlord or a professor) are interested in learning more about the person they are dealing with. They value individual, personal interaction. Chinese students are more familiar with appearing dutiful and well-behaved. How can students be prepared for this in a more targeted way?

Epilogue

As this first part of the research is mainly based on finding narratives, relevant questions and improving our collegial cooperation / project-team in order to get a better *sensed knowing* of the situation we will structure the research more clearly and add specific statistic results. These are based on the questionnaire, which was filled in by 75 students. This, we hope, can tell us more about certain relevant aspects like: study, university, culture, language, conflict, stress, relationship, professor, colleagues, exams, success, happiness, family, festivals and so on. This procedure will also support us to better understand the intonation of students` pieces of description in the experience reports. The last step will be to run some in-depth-interviews and / or focus-groups and relate the results to other findings and relevant literature.

Last but not least the research is part of a collegial discourse, which also discusses

our role as researchers and the methods being used.

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Sources / Literature:

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