


## Western Faculty Members' Cross-Border Lived Experiences

**Xin Bu**, PhD

*University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, United States*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6604-6333>

**Bill McCaw**, EdD

*University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, United States*

**Patty Kero**, EdD

*University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, United States*

**Contact:** [xin.bu@umontana.edu](mailto:xin.bu@umontana.edu)

### Abstract

Universities in China and the United States have been engaged in cross-border education through partnerships establishing international branch campuses (IBCs). This qualitative study used Moustakas's (1994) strategy of inquiry as a framework and explored Western faculty members' cross-border lived experiences at IBCs in China. IBCs in this study were coestablished by American universities and their Chinese partners. The central research question that guided this study asked about the lived experiences of Western faculty members at IBCs in China. This study purposefully selected 14 participants and data were collected through semistructured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. Moustakas's (1994) seven-level method of analysis involving a process of meaning reduction was followed. The essence of the participants' lived experiences described two components: value and adjustment. Findings from this study are valuable for leaders to rethink how to better support Western faculty in this joint higher education venture.

**Keywords:** *Western faculty members; international branch campus (IBC); transnational education; partnership; lived experiences*

**Submitted:** March 2, 2020 | **Accepted:** April 4, 2020 | **Published:** April 15, 2020

### Recommended Citation

Bu, X., McCaw, B., & Kero, P. (2020). Western faculty members' cross-border lived experiences. *Higher Learning Research Communication, 10*(1), 20–36. DOI: 10.18870/hlrc.v10i1.1174

### Introduction

In today's changing global context, increased international engagement of higher education is a general trend. Transnational education (TNE), also known as cross-border education, has been growing in response to this trend. According to Burgess and Berquist (2012), TNE provided a platform for international collaboration, staff and student mobility, cross-border accreditation, and research collaboration.

According to Borgos (2016), China has been actively engaged in TNE since 2001 when they obtained membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Chinese government has since made efforts to improve academic quality through international partnerships. TNE in China was motivated by an unmet domestic demand for advanced degrees due to the limited number of quality postsecondary institutions and the prestige of holding a foreign degree (Marginson, 2004; Yang, 2008). Universities from developed countries had the capacity to supply higher education in China via TNE. As one of the TNE delivery modes, the international branch campus (IBC) is an educational model capable of meeting the demand for students to access quality higher education and obtain a foreign degree.

There is no universally accepted definition of IBCs (Altbach, 2011; Becker, 2010; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2015). Given that China was selected as a host country in this study, the definition from Becker (2010) was used because this definition matched the U.S.–Sino partnership model of IBCs in China. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, an IBC was viewed as

an off-shore entity of a higher education institution operated by the institution or through a joint venture in which the institution is a partner (some countries require foreign providers to partner with a local organization) in the name of the foreign institution. Upon successful completion of the course program, which is fully undertaken at the unit abroad, students are awarded a degree from the foreign institution. (p. 3)

Therefore, an IBC is a joint educational venture between a home country and a host country. Importantly, IBCs are physically located in the host country. For this study, the host country was China. The IBCs are independent campuses owned by foreign education providers and operated similar to the main campus in the specific institutions' home country, with academic and student facilities and a range of course options (Becker, 2010).

Knight (2011) noted numerous elements of TNE, one of which was people. People are critical to cross-border education as faculty members hired by the home countries travel to the host country to provide quality education. The experiences of Western faculty members who were hired by the home campuses in the United States but moved from English-speaking countries to IBCs in China were the focus of this study. Because Western faculty members are critical in determining the quality of higher education experiences at IBCs in China, they provided an educational experience to Chinese students comparable to that at the home campus. However, historically IBCs have experienced difficulty retaining well-qualified faculty members to teach at IBCs for longer than a semester (Altbach, 2011; Helms, 2008).

Few empirical studies (Cai & Hall, 2016; Gopal, 2001) have been conducted exploring the lived experiences of Western faculty members teaching at IBCs in China. The continued lack of understanding about their experiences decreases the likelihood of host campuses meeting Western faculty expectations, accommodating their needs, and may even contribute to the faculty's unwillingness to continue teaching at IBCs in China. To address this problem, the Western faculty's experiences were explored through a qualitative design. Data analysis from this study provided an in-depth understanding of Western faculty members' lived experience in the context of IBCs in China.

Participants in this study were Western faculty members who have worked at IBCs in China for at least one semester. Western faculty members in this study were defined as instructors, assistant professors, associate professors, or professors who were assigned to teach full time at an IBC in China by their home universities in the United States.

## Literature Review

IBCs have been growing as a result of the globalization of higher education (Spring, 2015). Higher education has come to be viewed as a tradable commodity (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), and developed and developing countries are increasingly interested in IBCs (Cross-Border Education Research Team [C-BERT], 2017). The WTO has accelerated the trend of global marketing of higher education since the 1990s (Spring, 2015). The WTO opened "... the door to free trade in educational materials and services, as well as the marketing of higher education" (p. 94) since its creation in 1995. WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services categorized IBCs as a mode of supplying higher education through a commercial presence (Knight, 2003). Like other commercial enterprises, IBCs have a seller and a buyer. In the context of IBCs, the "buying" countries were middle-income countries from Asia and Latin America and the poorer nations of the developing world that lacked the capacity to meet the growing educational demand (Altbach & Knight, 2007). According to Altbach and Knight, the "selling" countries are often the developed English-speaking countries and some larger European Union countries.

Although the increase of IBCs is a more recent development, their actual establishment was not recent. Reilly (2008) noted that a number of American institutions experimented with Chinese branch campuses as early as the beginning of the 20th century. Harvard School of Medicine was one of the earliest Chinese branch campuses. It operated from 1911 to 1916. Forty years later, in the 1950s, Johns Hopkins opened a campus in Italy that provided graduate programs in international relations (Lane, 2011). In the 1970s, at least five IBCs were opened by American-based institutions in Mexico, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Switzerland (Becker, as cited in Lane, 2011).

### Development of IBCs Since the 1980s

Reilly (2008) described three waves of development for IBCs since the 1980s. Each wave existed for approximately 10 years. The first wave took place in Japan. Japan was the country that attracted U.S. institutions to build up IBCs in the 1980s (Lane, 2011; Reilly, 2008). Both Japanese leaders and American academic leaders were motivated to establish IBCs in Japan. Lane (2011) posited that Japanese leaders' intention was to strengthen the country's relationship with the United States and the U.S. academic leaders' intention was to have a presence in one of the fastest growing economies in the world. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as many as 40 U.S. schools had established IBCs in Japan (Reilly, 2008). However, only Temple University and Lakeland University remained as of January 2017 (C-BERT, 2017). Reasons for the failure of the early IBC wave in Japan included economic recession, decline of student populations, students' low proficiency in English language, and bad choices for IBC campus locations (Lane, 2011; Reilly, 2008).

In the 1990s, the second wave of IBCs was characterized by the diversity of both home and host countries (Lane, 2011). Institutions from Australia, Mexico, Chile, Ireland, Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Sweden started to export their higher education by establishing IBCs that awarded bachelor's degrees to participating students. The host countries expanded from Japan to include developing countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and South America (Lane, 2011).

The third wave, which started in 2000 and continues to the present, occurred mostly in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and the Arab Gulf States. The third wave also saw the rise of regional education hubs in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and South Korea (Beecher, 2016). Institutions from these countries sought IBC partnerships in this third wave. The most recent data available from C-BERT (2017) confirmed the success of the third wave, reporting over 300 international branch campuses worldwide as of January 20, 2017.

## Current Context in China

China has been hosting a growing number of IBCs, especially since 2000. The first IBC in China was established through a partnership between Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Nanjing University back in 1986 (C-BERT, 2017). The intention of this partnership was to promote mutual cross-cultural understanding by implementing language programs. From 2006 to 2017, the number of IBCs grew from 15 to 43 (C-BERT, 2017). As of 2017, the 43 IBCs in China were set up in partnership with universities from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Ireland, Russia, and the Netherlands.

The diversity of source countries indicates that the IBC market has become more competitive. English-speaking countries as well as non-English-speaking countries actively expanded their influence through IBCs. The United States no longer dominates the IBC market as it did prior to the 1980s (C-BERT, 2017). Asian countries like Japan and South Korea are able to compete for China's IBCs market due to the perceived quality of their higher education, although the United States has the most IBCs in China. In 2017, there were 43 IBCs approved in China (including Hong Kong). Of these IBCs, 17 were, or will be, established in partnership between American universities and Chinese partner institutions or organizations. These partnerships include 12 IBCs on the mainland, three in Hong Kong, and another two under development (C-BERT, 2017). In mainland China, the United States and the United Kingdom account for over 60% of the market share of IBCs (C-BERT, 2017).

The U.S. IBCs share three features: a partnership with a host university located in China, geographic distribution, and the levels of education provided. All 12 universities hosting IBCs are respected universities in China. Seven out of the 12 host universities were included in Project 985, initiated by the Chinese government to improve the global competitiveness of its universities (Wang, 2014). Geographically, there is a clear distribution imbalance because 11 out of the 12 IBCs are located in the eastern part of China, particularly along the east coast. Only Sichuan University—Pittsburgh Institute is located in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, which is inland in the southwest of China. All the host provinces are relatively wealthy provinces in China as measured by Gross Domestic Product (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018).

The IBCs generally replicate the curricula as well as the governance and management structures of their home campus. However, China's Ministry of Education requires some adjustments for accreditation and admission. For example, IBCs must offer a Chinese culture course and Chinese students who apply to study at the IBCs will take the Chinese National College Entrance Exam, also known as the *Gaokao* (Olson, 2016; Stanfield & Qi, 2012). In terms of admission criterion, *Gaokao* scores are not the only consideration. Students' academic background is also considered (Olson, 2016).

Providing an education comparable in quality to that at the home campus is important to keep the institutions' reputation (Altbach, 2011; Lane, 2011). For example, IBCs like Duke Kunshan University and New York University Shanghai seek to provide programs that reflect the quality and experience of their home campuses (Stanfield & Qi, 2012). Faculty play a crucial role in accomplishing this goal. Students and parents preferred that faculty members from the home campuses teach the classes (McBurnie & Zигuras, 2007) because it is the interaction with the Western faculty that attracted Chinese students to the IBCs (Helms, 2008). The participation of Western faculty contributes to an academic environment that is similar to the home campus. Thus, retaining Western faculty by recognizing their personal and professional needs has become a critical consideration for the sustainability of IBCs in China.

## Conceptual Framework

Moustakas's (1994) strategy of inquiry guided this qualitative study. This conceptual framework, with a foundation in transcendental philosophy, is guided by research questions seeking the essence and structure of the participant's lived experience and utilizes descriptive language. Moustakas noted the limitation of science to study a person's experiences because science failed to adequately consider "the connections between human consciousness and the objects that exist in the material world" (p. 43). Transcendental philosophy suggests that "all objects of knowledge must conform to experience" (p. 44). Therefore, knowledge and experience are closely related. Experience can be a source of knowledge. Likewise, Husserl (1859–1938) believed that truth "emerged from internal perceptions and internally justified judging" (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 46).

Within this framework, participant's feelings are sought to ascertain ". . . the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Giorgi (2009) recommended to "regard everything from the perspective of consciousness, that is, to look at all objects from the perspectives of how they are experienced regardless of whether or not they actually are the way they are being experienced" (p. 88). According to Giorgi (2009), the participant's experiences are then explored using descriptive language articulating the intentional objects of the experience.

## Methodology

### Research Approach

This qualitative study, guided by Moustakas's (1994) strategy of inquiry and informed by the literature, sought a holistic description of Western faculty members' lived experiences with regards to educating students, colleague collaborations, and cross-cultural interactions at IBCs in China. As such, this study placed an emphasis on obtaining a description of the participants' feelings. The institutional review board at the researchers' home university approved all aspects of the study. Research questions sought the structure of the participant's lived experience. Following Moustakas's definitive characteristics of a research question, a central question and three subquestions were developed:

*Research Question:* What are the lived experiences of Western faculty members at IBCs in China?

*Subquestion 1:* How do Western faculty members describe their experiences educating students at IBCs in China?

*Subquestion 2:* How do Western faculty members work collaboratively with other faculty colleagues at IBCs in China?

*Subquestion 3:* How do Western faculty members ascribe meaning to their cross-cultural interactions at IBCs in China?

Data from 18 open-ended, nondirective interview questions were obtained and analyzed to inform these three subquestions.

### Participant Selection

For a qualitative study, it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989) because participants can provide "rich descriptions of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 47). Therefore, participants for this study were those who had experiences at an IBC in China during 2013–2018.

A purposeful sampling approach incorporated two sampling strategies: maximum variation and snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Maximum variation applied not only to the participants but also to the IBCs established by U.S. universities. Snowball sampling strategies asked participants to recruit other people who had met the selection criteria.

Selection criteria sought participants who (a) were citizens from countries other than China, (b) had taught at an IBC in China for more than one semester during 2013–2018, (c) were willing to participate in interviews, (d) gave permission to be audio recorded and have direct quotes published, and (e) had a first language that was not Mandarin or Cantonese. The criteria were set because (a) the participants have to be foreign citizens to fit the definition of Western, (b) the length of stay one semester would allow them to have sufficient experience to share, (c) their participation willingness made this study possible, (d) the purpose of this study was for publication, and (e) their language background differentiated them from Chinese faculty.

Invitations to participate were sent by email to 56 potential participants. Initially, 12 people responded indicating a willingness to participate. Later, two more agreed to participate after being contacted. Eventually, 14 individuals representing six IBCs comprised the participants which is within the acceptable range for a qualitative study (Boyd, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). Table 1 describes the home university, IBC name, Chinese province of the IBC, and the number of participants from the specific IBC.

**Table 1.** *Participants' Organizational Affiliation*

Home university	International branch campuses name	Chinese province	Participants
Duke University	Duke Kunshan University	Jiangsu	2
Johns Hopkins University	Hopkins—Nanjing Center	Jiangsu	3
New York Institute of Technology	New York Institute of Technology—Nanjing	Jiangsu	2
Kean University	Wenzhou—Kean University	Zhejiang	5
University of Michigan	University of Michigan—Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute	Shanghai	1
Missouri State University	Liaoning Normal University—Missouri State University College of International Business	Liaoning	1

There are a total of 12 IBCs in China that were co-established by China and the United States and participants in this study represented six (50%) of the current IBCs. These IBCs are located in four provinces. China recognizes Shanghai as a municipality under the direct administration of the central government and is equal to a province. Once these individuals agreed to participate, data collection began.

## Data Collection

Data from 14 semistructured, one-on-one interviews were collected in the spring of 2018. Prior to the interview, each participant orally gave his/her consent to participate after reading the participant information and consent form. The length of interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min. All interviews were conducted via Skype (telecommunications application software) or WeChat (a Chinese social media application). During the interviews, clarification of ideas and comments were sought by the interviewer. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed by either one of the researchers or a professional transcribing service. Accuracy of the transcriptions was verified by listening to all audio recordings while reading the transcriptions.

## Data Analysis

After assuring the accuracy, data were imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software program to assist with managing and analyzing the data. Data analysis in this study was guided by the seven-level analysis procedures recommended by Moustakas (1994): (a) obtaining a full description of the participants' experience; (b) considering and identifying each statement with respect to its significance for description of the experience; (c) reducing the data to nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements, which became the meaning units of the experience; (d) relating and clustering the meaning units into themes; (e) creating a description of the textures of the experience; (f) describing the structures of the experience; and (g) producing a textual–structural description of the meanings resulting in essences of the experience.

## Credibility

Credibility of this study's findings was verified through the accuracy of data and four validation strategies. The accuracy was ensured as all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then checked with the original recordings. This study used auditors, member checking, rich thick descriptions, and triangulation to ensure validation of its findings, following the recommendations by Creswell and Poth (2018). Several aspects of this research, such as the accuracy of transcription, the relationship between the data and research questions, data analysis, and consistency of findings and conclusions with the data, were reviewed by five auditors with experience in qualitative research. Member checking was conducted through follow-up questions asked during interviews to clarify the participants' meaning. Rich thick descriptions were used throughout the study to assist with the transferability of the findings. To ensure triangulation, the researchers sought insights from different sources of data providing validity of the findings. Doing so ensured an accurate understanding of the participants' account.

## Findings

The essence of the experience was supported by the textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions and structural descriptions influenced each other, creating interwoven and parallel relationships. Textural descriptions provided a context for the structural description. Structural descriptions described the participants' feelings within the context of the textural descriptions; That is, the participants' feelings varied depending on the context of the setting. By merging the textural and structural descriptions, participants' experiences were unified into a statement describing “the essence of the lived experiences,” which consisted of two components: value and adjustment.

## Textural Descriptions

By taking the setting and context that participants experienced into account, textural descriptions evolved to comprise three elements of the participants' experiences: instructor–student relationship, academic life, and personal life. Instructor–student relationships took place in both in-classroom and outside-classroom settings. Academic life involved the participants' experiences adjusting curricula, collaborating with colleagues, and feeling frustrated with restricted access to internet on campus. Personal life experiences included challenges the participants faced living in China.

### Instructor–student relationship

The participants reported enjoyable interactions with Chinese students in the classroom. They perceived Chinese students as polite and respectful. Rather than directly questioning instructors in class, the students were more likely to approach instructors for questions after class. Data revealed that Chinese students were perceived as good listeners, diligent, and motivated to learn, although they were often hesitant to speak in class.

The participants also realized that students recognized the importance of maintaining good relationships with their instructors, which partially contributed to the shaping enjoyable instructor–student relationships.

Outside-classroom interactions with students were described as informal and relaxing compared with the participants' experiences in the United States. The participants reported the boundaries between instructors and students after class were not as clear-cut as in the United States for several reasons. First, due to the physical setup of IBCs, some participants lived in the same small confines with students, which created more social interactions. Second, the social media WeChat connected instructors and students after class. WeChat allowed students to create class groups where all students in a particular class could share their ideas with all other members in the group anytime, regardless of the topic, blurring the boundaries between instructors and students. Third, the participants conveyed appreciation for students' help after class, such as assisting them with grocery shopping and translations.

### **Academic life**

The participants' academic lives were reflected in curriculum delivery, restricted access to internet, and collaboration with colleagues. Participants reported adjusting their pace of instruction and curricula due to the Chinese students' learning styles, limited English language proficiency, and accessibility of certain learning materials. Participants reported problems associated with limiting the scope of information presented to the students. These problems included restricted access to the internet and the avoidance of sensitive topics such as politics and religion. The IBC instructors participating in this study conveyed frustration and a loss of time when using a virtual private network, a service to access blocked websites and applications in China. These instructors described more collaborations in teaching than in research with other faculty at the IBC.

### **Personal life**

Participants reported that their personal lives were impacted by their Chinese language proficiency, administrative support, and the living environment in China. Those who didn't have adequate Mandarin proficiency realized that this language barrier negatively impacted their lived experiences. For them, communicating with Chinese people who didn't speak English was almost impossible. Consequently, communication and therefore engagement with local people was difficult. Additionally, there was a sense that the IBC administrators were not aware of the participants' challenges with communication and therefore they did not receive assistance from these administrators. Participants described their adapting to a living environment with limited access to quality food, inconvenient transportation, different medical assistance services, and interacting with Chinese people who often approached foreigners out of curiosity.

## **Structural Descriptions**

Structural descriptions were organized into three categories: accomplishment, flexibility, and frustration. The participants felt a sense of accomplishment teaching Chinese students. Given that China presented culturally and linguistically different living settings for the participants, they had to be flexible and willing to adapt. In addition, the participants experienced frustration from several sources.

### **Accomplishment**

The participants felt teaching at IBCs in China was a valuable experience. They reported that teaching at an IBC was an advantage because it allowed them to live and work in a foreign country, but in a similar academic setting as in the United States. These Western faculty members were aware that being exposed to Chinese culture was valuable and allowed opportunities for cultural immersion. Moreover, teaching Chinese students was rewarding. Participants felt a sense of achievement as the students grew academically as well as improved their English language proficiency. This sense of achievement was also reflected in the participants' observations of students eventually being more interactive in class and students' admittance to prestigious graduate schools.



### **Flexibility**

The participants felt they had to be flexible working at an IBC in China. For example, classrooms and the necessary technology was the responsibility of the Chinese partners, and the Western faculty reported that sometimes maintenance for technology such as computers or projectors was not provided in a timely manner. Hence, the participants needed to be flexible and adjust their delivery of content. In the case of apartments provided to Western faculty members on campus, the participants lived in small communities with students. They had to be flexible with setting boundaries between their personal lives and afterclass student connections. These faculty also described having to adjust their expectations of students, who were learners of English as a second language. They understood the Chinese context of learning. For example, memorization constituted an essential part of Chinese students' learning and parental influence on students' academic performance was significant. Moreover, the participants demonstrated flexibility by adjusting their curricula because information was less accessible than in the United States. They were also flexible when interacting with local people because some Chinese were curious about foreigners and were not aware of the physical distance participants were accustomed to in the United States.

### **Frustration**

The participants experienced a feeling of frustration originating from multiple sources. An IBC, as a Sino–U.S. joint educational venture, created a unique environment which presented opportunities as well as challenges to the Western faculty in this study. Most participants felt frustration because they were not prepared for the culturally, academically, and linguistically different context prior to their arrival to China. Cross-cultural communication was another source of frustration. For those faculty who were not equipped with Chinese language proficiency, communication with the local people was difficult. Consequently, they didn't feel integrated in the community. Instead, they felt a sense of being foreign. Sometimes on-campus cross-cultural communications were also not effective. Some Chinese staff members working for IBCs were perceived as administratively unsupportive. Additionally, limited accessibility to information and students' plagiarism negatively impacted participants' experiences. Students' plagiarism was an issue because of different the cultural interpretations of plagiarism. Despite faculty members' efforts to clarify the concept of plagiarism, this issue persisted and was reported as a constant source of frustration.

Textural and structural descriptions provided insight into the IBC experience. Textural descriptions portrayed relationships, whereas structural descriptions focused on understanding the participants' feeling. Textural and structural descriptions were combined to portray the essences of the experience.

### **Essence of Experiences**

Examination of the components value and adjustment illuminated the essence of the participant's experience. These components relate to each other in a symbiotic manner that considers the whole rather than two individual parts. Describing the essence of the participants' experience will begin with the component "value."

### **Value**

Participants felt working at IBCs in China was a valuable experience, and teaching students constituted a critical component of this experience. It was enjoyable and rewarding to teach Chinese students and contributing to this enjoyment was the students' energy, motivation, and eagerness to participate in class. Typical of this experience was Mike's comment: "They [students] were exceedingly energetic and motivated." Further, the progress that the students made was rewarding, which was evident in Peter's experience: "[Teaching at the IBC is] very rewarding, because I see the students' progress and I see them go on to the best universities in the world to graduate school."

These Western faculty members also appreciated the opportunity to explore Chinese culture, which broadened their perspective. They valued the opportunity to get to know people, interact with students, explore a new culture, and learn the Chinese language. Their understanding of Chinese culture was deepened by their length of time within China. A comment from Julie represented the value of this cultural exploration: “We felt very fortunate to be able to get to know people and places in depth, and I can bet, the most important thing that we took away from the experience.” These experiences contributed to the participants’ personal growth. Due to IBC housing arrangements, some faculty lived in a very small community that made it convenient for them to have out-of-class interactions with other IBC faculty members, leaders, students, and local people. This experience shaped their sense of community and overall enjoyment, as exemplified in Morrisa’s comment:

I think what I really enjoyed being at [the IBC] is that you have like a sense of community . . . here you kind of know everybody and you live together like the student dormitories . . . the classrooms are in the same building, the offices are close by, cafeteria is close by. So, everything is sort of in the same area.

Participants found it fascinating to explore both traditional and modern China such as China’s relics and historical sites, fast train, mobile payment, WeChat, and sharing bikes. This fascination was evident in the dramatic cultural changes that Julie perceived over a short period of time:

So, I think if you say, “Well, what’s Chinese culture now?” I would say, Chinese culture is things like, WeChat, right? . . . Mobile payment . . . In a few months you go from never seeing sharing bikes to seeing sharing bikes everywhere. Or you go from like, in maybe a year or two, you go from nobody using phones to pay for things, to everybody using phones to pay for everything.

Participants expressed their appreciation for the benefits of cultural exploration.

The context in which the participants worked was described as a combination of the West and the East. This combined context added value to their lived experiences. They teach in English using Western curricula, but their students’ first language is Mandarin. They teach in China, but work in a Western-style setting. Paul emphasized the advantage of this East–West connection: “The advantage of working in [this IBC] was that you could get the sort of benefits of working for a U.S. university while still being in China.” These faculty were academically supervised by American universities, but locally supported by Chinese partners. Professionally, participants hoped that the international teaching experiences enhanced their competitiveness and would later open up new career possibilities, as Henry noted: “then professionally, being able to have an experience abroad, learning [a] new language, I thought would open up possibly different career opportunities later on when I do come back to the United States.” All of this provides unique insight to the participants’ experience at the IBC.

### **Adjustment**

Adjustment, the second component of the essence of experience, and was an important component for the participants. With little or no predeparture preparation, these Western faculty found themselves having to continually adjust. They reported that predeparture training or orientation was typically missing. The participants wished they had been better prepared prior to the start of their job at the IBCs. As a result, they had no idea what to expect, as articulated by Terry: “An unfortunate thing is that we’re not well prepared. We really have to be very flexible and adaptable because there isn’t preparation prior to coming over.” Because working at an IBC involves a new environment, the absence of preparation contributed to the participants’ feelings of needing to constantly adjust.

The participants also adapted to the living environment. Depending on specific IBCs’ arrangements, they lived either on or off campus. For those who lived off campus, upon their first arrival they felt there was a need to

quickly familiarize themselves with their neighborhood. For those who had campus apartments provided to them, the participants reported their adjustment to an environment in which they had more opportunities for connections with students and colleagues. Eli reported this on-campus arrangement and outside of class interaction pattern: “I lived and taught in the same building where the students lived, and my office was in the same building, so there’s a lot of contact with the students outside of class.” It took time for these Western faculty members to figure out facilities, buildings, classrooms, and to know the Chinese administrative staff. For professors with school age children, schooling for their children is a consideration because, most likely, there will be a lack of accommodation for education, as noted by Harry:

But we don’t have people in kind of that critical 35 to 50 years old where people are married and they have families and there’s not an infrastructure for those type of professors that are midcareer where they can send their children to school.

Instructionally, participants adjusted their teaching styles to fit the Chinese students’ limited English language proficiency, less knowledge of related background information, classroom interactions, and restricted access to information. Ryan recognized the Chinese students’ lack of background knowledge: “They don’t have the background, so they can’t answer the questions in a deeper way with using more sophisticated language.” Harry encouraged students to speak in class: “I have to ask them to be not quiet as much as possible.” And Susan adjusted her assignments because not everything was accessible in China: “Differences [are] what consists of the type of assignments that I give in the States versus in China because they don’t always have access to everything.”

Instructional adjustments involved reducing the amount of reading, adding more background information, and slowing down their English speaking. Cary adjusted the pace of his speech and assumed that the students had less background knowledge: “The changes I’ve had to make, not just for history class, but [in] general, just speaking slower, [and] assuming less background knowledge.” Alicia assigned less reading: “The only difference that I can think of may be fewer pages, fewer number of pages. Still demanding.” Participants also made extra efforts to provide learning materials that were unavailable to students because the electronic access to these materials had been blocked. Cauldin explained the elaborate process:

I’ll use materials from things like the New York Times and stuff like that, which they’re not allowed to read, or they can’t access directly, so they would have to use VPNs [virtual private networks]. . . . The one thing I do is to make it available to them.

Dealing with plagiarism among students was another adjustment. The Western faculty reported plagiarism was rampant and prevalent, as Ryan proclaimed: “Plagiarism is alive and well in China.” Plagiarism took on various forms, such as copying without giving credit to authors or cheating on exams. The plagiarism that participants experienced was multi-faceted as exemplified in Cary’s comments:

I’ve so far found that it’s been much more prevalent in my classroom, various forms of either plagiarism, it’d be like trying to bring in notes to exams, notes on quizzes, taking pictures of examinations and tests, talking in some different sections, trying to find out what questions are asked.

Strategies to deal with this plagiarism included the participants bringing the topic up at the beginning of each semester. They continually explained plagiarism to students and made it very clear what was considered to be plagiarism. As an example of these efforts, Cauldin shared, “I have to demand and make [it] clear up front on the problem of plagiarism.” Some participants used online plagiarism detection software to check students’ work, making sure the students were aware of these procedures. Depending on the degree of students’ plagiarism, participants would have students redo their work or simply give zero points. They also gave students assignments that would make plagiarism difficult, as exemplified by Ryan: “We always talk about the

problem with plagiarism here. I would say, expect that and give students assignments where they can't plagiarize easily."

The final adjustment noted by the participants involved cultural adaptations. Language was an issue given that most had little or no proficiency in Chinese. The challenges caused by this language deficiency impacted the participants' experience. Consequently, those who had trouble adjusting tended to feel isolated, as evident in Peter's comments:

I think that's actually one of the big problems we have with faculty here, is that because of the language many people don't venture out and they don't meet people in the community. So, you become very isolated very, very quickly.

Because not many local Chinese people are able to speak English, interactions with them were limited to the basic needs such as when grocery shopping or eating at restaurants. Without proficiency in Chinese, the participants felt like a foreigner as Harry experienced: "You definitely feel like a foreigner you don't feel like a part of the local culture and everybody, like, sees you as a foreigner." In the case of having to see a doctor, language issues caused concerns because things simply did not function without an interpreter. Ryan's feelings confirmed this issue: "And of course the language, so we have to send somebody with them to the hospital if they're sick to translate. There's a lot of difficulties."

## Discussion

This study was conducted to better understand the IBC, a cross-border higher education delivery model, through the lens of Western faculty members' lived experiences in China. One assumption underlying the concept of an IBC is that the quality of a university experience for students could be tradable (Verger, 2010). IBCs provided a similar context to that of the home campus, so students had an opportunity to experience U.S. higher education without having to physically cross a border. Western faculty from the United States are critical to providing these higher education experiences to Chinese students. Thus, it is important that Western faculty members are willing to teach and stay at IBCs. Therefore, this study specifically focused on exploring Western faculty's lived experiences regarding faculty collaboration, cross-cultural communications, and their interactions with students.

Several findings from this study were consistent with existing literature and some added new insights about the experiences of Western faculty. For example, scholars have expressed their concerns about the retention of Western faculty at IBCs (Altbach, 2011; Chalmers, 2011; Helms, 2008). This study not only confirmed that Western faculty retention is an issue but also illuminated new findings about why they leave. Specifically, perceptions included home institutional requirements for individual performances for continued employment, insufficient administrative support in the host country, personal, professional, and adaptation issues. In addition, an absence of English-speaking schools for children made it hard to attract Western professors with school-age children.

Two components comprising an essence of the participants' lived experiences, adjustments and value, were presented. Students' insufficient English language skills is a major reason that the participants adjusted the amount of reading assigned to students, the pacing of their speech, and in-class interaction styles. These two components are consistent with the postulations of Altbach (2011) and Lane (2011). Participants reported issues consistent with existing literature in terms of students' plagiarism (Knight, 2015), restricted electronic access to information (Olson, 2016), and inadequate cross-cultural communications (Cai & Hall, 2016).

New findings emerged from the data analysis regarding the value of these experiences for Western faculty. Participants reported that the experiences were valuable, and they described these experiences as eye-

opening, fascinating, a broadening of their perspectives, and, ultimately, rewarding. These experiences promoted their personal and professional growth.

## **Implications**

### **For policy**

Findings from this study can inform policy makers to rethink the role of Western faculty in this Sino–U.S. educational joint venture. In terms of hiring practices, the faculty members' adaptability to the local context of IBCs should be a key consideration in addition to their academic qualifications. Chinese language proficiency is an important consideration to reduce problems with cross-cultural communications. Potential IBC faculty need to be made aware of (a) expectations of both the home university and IBCs in China, (b) the need for basic Mandarin skills, (c) cross-cultural skills, (d) the local context, and (e) Chinese students' learning styles. In an effort to reduce cultural shock, on-site orientation is required.

### **For practice**

Leaders at both home campuses and IBCs should understand that newly hired IBC employees need a clear idea of expectations in terms of administrative requirements, teaching load, and professional service. For those who have never been to, or lived in, China, leaders should warn them of possible difficulties. Difficulties are multifaceted, so new faculty should anticipate challenges with cultural nuances and pedagogical considerations as they adapt to the new environment. These suggestions are not intended to intimidate new faculty but to prepare them for a smooth transition from an American to a Chinese context, thereby increasing the likelihood of their success and length of time teaching at the IBC.

### **For research**

Findings from this study yielded possible topics worthy of future research efforts. Given that this study focused on Western faculty members' lived experiences, however, it is equally important to explore students' lived experiences to provide a holistic picture of this joint venture. Studies from the perspectives of students regarding their motivations to choose IBCs and their experiences studying at IBCs will be valuable to leaders from both home campuses and IBCs. Another possible line of inquiry should be the localization of curricula and program quality assurances. Given the learning styles of Chinese students and the local context of IBCs, it is time to rethink to what extent curricula adjustments should be made to facilitate students' learning without undermining program quality. It is also worth future research efforts to conduct an in-depth case study to examine the factors contributing to success of a specific IBC in China.

## **Limitations**

This qualitative study has limitations in several aspects. First, because the data were qualitative, the findings of this study were not generalizable to other similar programs. Second, the findings based on the participants' personal experiences are subject to other interpretations. The reliability of the data depends on how accurately the participants remember the past and how much they want to share their experiences. Another limitation is participant bias. It is possible that only the participants who wanted to talk about their lived experience at IBCs in China were interviewed, so they might have preexisting positive or negative biases. Additionally, the participants didn't represent all 12 IBCs coestablished by China and the United States. Consequently, their lived experiences did not reflect a full view of all perspectives of Western faculty members working at IBCs in China.

## **Conclusion**

Western faculty members' engagement helped secure the long-term success of IBCs. To seek a holistic description of Western faculty members' lived experiences, a qualitative method was used to explore their lived experiences educating students, interacting with other faculty colleagues, and exploring a different

culture at IBCs in China. Findings from qualitative data analysis presented two components of the essence of their experiences: adjustment and value. Recommendations from the findings can inform parties involved in any IBC relationship about the benefits and challenges. Although these cross-border partnerships have the potential to strengthen academic, cultural, and social relationships, there are inherent challenges. Not addressing these challenges decreases the likelihood of a successful experience for Western faculty members. An awareness of these findings will better support Western faculty members, ensuring a successful partnership with the host institution, and thereby impacting the learning experience for students attending the IBC.

## References

- Altbach, P. G. (2011). Is there a future for branch campus? *International Higher Education*, 65, 7–10.
- Altbach, P. G., & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11(3–4), 2–5.
- Becker, R. (2010). International branch campuses: New trends and directions. *International Higher Education*, 58, 3–5.
- Beecher, B. K. (2016). *Internationalization through the international branch campus: Identifying opportunities and risks* (Doctoral dissertation).  
<https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1807962232.html?FMT=ABS>
- Borgos, J. (2016). Addressing sustainable international branch campus development through an organizational structure lens: A comparative analysis of China, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. *Chinese Education & Society*, 49, 271–287.
- Boyd, C. O. (2001). Phenomenology the method. In P.L. Munhall (Ed.), *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (3rd. ed.). Jones and Bartlett.
- Burgess, P. & Berquist, B. (2012). Cross-border delivery: Projects, programs, and providers. In D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams (Eds.), *The sage handbook of international higher education* (pp. 325–342). Sage.
- Cai, L., & Hall, C. (2016). Motivations, expectations, and experiences of expatriate academic staff on an international branch campus in China. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(3), 207–222.
- Chalmers, I. (2011). International branch campuses and unique risk considerations. *URMIA Journal*, 15, 33–40.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the five traditions* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT). (2017). *Branch campus listing*.  
<http://cbert.org/resources-data/branch-campus/>
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne University Press.
- Gopal, A. (2011). Internationalization of higher education: Preparing faculty to teach cross-culturally. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(3), 373–381.
- Helms, R. M. (2008). Transnational education in China: Challenges, critical issues, and strategies for success. *International Higher Education*, 53, 14–15.
- Knight, J. (2003). Updating the definition of internationalization. *International Higher Education*, 33, 2–3.

- Knight, J. (2011). Higher education crossing borders: a framework and overview of new development and issues. In Sakamoto, R. & Chapman, D. W. (Eds.), *Cross-border partnerships in higher education* (pp. 16–41). Routledge.
- Knight, J. (2015). International Universities: Misunderstandings and emerging models. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 19, 107–121.
- Lane, J. E. (2011). Global expansion of international branch campuses: Managerial and leadership challenges. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 155, 5–17.
- Marginson, S. (2004). National and global competition in higher education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 31(2), 1–28.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage.
- McBurnie, G., & Ziguas, C. (2007). *Transnational education: Issues and trends in offshore higher education*. Routledge.
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2018). *Annual Provincial GDP*.  
<http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=EO103>
- Olson, L. (2016). *U.S.–Sino joint education ventures in China: A stakeholder analysis of Hopkins-Nanjing Center, Duke Kunshan University, and Schwarzman scholars* (Doctoral dissertation).  
<https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/1845003499.html?FMT=AI>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential–phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41–60). Plenum.
- Reilly, B. (2008). Digital encounters: Using information technology in an overseas branch/campus. *The History Teacher*, 41(4), 531–541.
- Spring, J. (2015). *Globalization of education: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stanfield, D. A., & Qi, W. (2012). Full-scale branch campuses in China. *International Higher Education*, 69, 13–15.
- Verger, A. (2010). *WTO/GATS and the global politics of higher education* (Studies in higher education). Routledge.
- Wang, L. (2014). *The road to privatization of higher education in China*. Springer.
- Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2012). The international branch campus as transnational strategy in higher education. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning*, 64(5), 627–645.
- Yang, R. (2008). Transnational higher education in China: Contexts, characteristics and concerns. *Australian Journal of Education*, 52(3), 272–286.
- Ziguas, C., & McBurnie, G. (2015). *Governing cross-border higher education*. Routledge.

[Appendix follows]

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### A. Demographic Questions

1. Age  
20–29 \_\_\_\_\_ 30–39 \_\_\_\_\_ 40–49 \_\_\_\_\_ Over 49 \_\_\_\_\_
2. Highest degree earned  
BA/BS \_\_\_\_\_ MA/MS \_\_\_\_\_ PhD/EdD \_\_\_\_\_
3. Years worked at an international branch campus (IBC) \_\_\_\_\_
4. Years worked at other higher education institutions \_\_\_\_\_
5. Professional title (IBC and other higher education institutions) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Employment classification  
Full time \_\_\_\_\_ Part time \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. You are on the  
Tenure track \_\_\_\_\_ Nontenure track \_\_\_\_\_
8. Level(s) you have taught at the IBC  
Undergraduate \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
9. Level(s) you have taught at other higher education institutions  
Undergraduate \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate \_\_\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Subject(s) you taught at the IBC \_\_\_\_\_
11. Subject(s) you taught at other higher education institutions \_\_\_\_\_
12. How many countries had you visited before working at the IBC? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Was this your first time to visit China? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Your level of Chinese language proficiency:  
None \_\_\_\_\_ Novice \_\_\_\_\_ Intermediate \_\_\_\_\_ Advanced \_\_\_\_\_

#### B. Lived Experiences Educating Students

1. How did you decide to teach at the IBC?
2. How would you describe your experiences teaching at the IBC? How are these experiences similar to or different from other higher education institutions?
3. What did you learn from these experiences? In the context of Chinese culture, how did you adjust your teaching strategies, if at all? What led you to adjust those strategies?
4. Please describe distinctive aspects of Chinese culture that you incorporated into your teaching strategies. What are they?
5. How would you describe your efforts to ensure high quality instruction at the IBC?
6. If you taught the same subjects or courses at other higher education institutions and at the IBC, did you use similar curricula? Describe the similarities and differences. How are the curricula similar or different?
7. Do you feel you needed to make modifications or adjustments to your curricula within the local context of IBCs in China? If yes, how?
8. Please describe how your courses are assessed.
9. Do you have any recommendations for preparing faculty members from your home campus to teach at the IBC?
10. Existing literature suggests that IBCs are the most risky form of internationalization of higher education for both host and home universities. Are IBCs worthy enough to sustain? For instance, do you think they will be around in 50 years? If not, do you have any suggestions to improve sustainability?



### C. Collaboration With Other Faculty Members

11. How would you describe your teaching, research, and service interactions with other faculty colleagues at the IBC, if any?
12. Describe your experiences working collaboratively with your other faculty colleagues at the IBC in China. If no collaborations, was that by your choice or was that because there were no opportunities possible?
13. Please describe your professional development opportunities at this IBC. What impacts your decision to participate?
14. What recommendations do you have for new faculty members when they begin teaching at the IBC?

### D. Cross-Cultural Experiences

15. What were your experiences with the local Chinese culture during your time at the IBC?
16. What were the most valuable experiences at the IBC? Why were they valuable to you?
17. Are there other experiences you'd like to share about your time at the IBC?
18. What important experiences did you have that these questions did not explore?

---

The *Higher Learning Research Communications (HLRC)*, is a peer-reviewed, online, interdisciplinary journal indexed in Scopus, ERIC, JGATE and Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). It is an open access journal with an international focus published by Walden University, USA. Its aim is to disseminate both high quality research and teaching best practices in tertiary education across cultures and disciplines. *HLRC* connects the ways research and best practice contribute to the public good and impact the communities that educators serve. *HLRC* articles include peer-reviewed research reports, research briefs, comprehensive literature reviews, and books reviews.