

Exploring the Nexus of Travel, Learning, and Cultural Engagement of Chinese International Graduate Students in Manila, Philippines

Brian Bantugan, PhD¹, Shule Fan², Yue Shi², Fang Tian², Xulian Wang², Mei Yang², and Mo Zhu²

¹*Faculty Member, St. Paul University Manila*

²*Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila*

Abstract: This study investigated the value of traveling in the Philippines among Chinese international graduate students in Manila. Specifically, the inquiry focused on the student's experiences in the Philippines, factors influencing their destination choices and travel experiences, and the instrumental role of travel in the achievement of learning or academic goals. This study involved the participation of 12 international Chinese students of St. Paul University Manila enrolled in the doctorate program of the College of Education and have spent time traveling around the country since they started their academic program. They voluntarily participated by answering an online survey with three open-ended questions (focusing on their travel experiences, decision-making, and learning goals) within a period of 30 minutes. Their individual responses were collated and processed through thematic analysis. Discussion was done by creating a dialogue between the themes generated the theories constituting the study framework. Results showed that the international Chinese graduate students in the Philippines undergo a transformative journey marked by cultural immersion, personal growth, and resilience, navigating challenges while exploring the country's heritage and natural wonders. Their destination choices reflect a nuanced decision-making process, considering factors such as cultural exploration, academic relevance, practical considerations like time and budget, and personal interests. Data also reveal travel's instrumental role in achieving academic goals, enhancing understanding, critical thinking, and cross-cultural communication while fostering personal and professional development and overall well-being, highlighting its transformative impact on graduate students' holistic growth in higher education.

Keywords: Travel, International Chinese graduate students, Travel experiences, Learning and academic goals, St. Paul University Manila

I. Introduction

With globalization fostering increased mobility and connectivity among nations, the pursuit of higher education often transcends geographical boundaries. In recent years, the Philippines has emerged as a hub for international students seeking quality education in various disciplines, most recently Chinese graduate students (Bantugan, 2022). Among these students are a significant number of Chinese graduate students who choose Manila as their academic destination. While academic pursuits undoubtedly form the core of their experiences, the opportunity to engage with the host country's culture and society presents invaluable supplementary benefits. However, the extent to which Chinese graduate students in Manila engage in travel within the Philippines and the impact of such experiences on their personal and academic development remain relatively underexplored areas of research.

Traveling within the Philippines offers Chinese graduate students a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in the country's rich cultural tapestry, interacting with local communities, experiencing indigenous traditions, and exploring historical landmarks to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of Philippine culture. These experiences foster cross-cultural empathy and cultivate intercultural competence, crucial skills in today's globalized world. Beyond the classroom, travel experiences provide invaluable learning opportunities, enriching theoretical knowledge with practical insights gained from field trips to natural wonders, archaeological sites, and cultural heritage destinations, as well as research projects or internships outside of Manila. Navigating diverse landscapes and communities fosters resilience, adaptability, and self-confidence, while contributing to mutual understanding, friendship, and cooperation between China and the Philippines. Conducting a comprehensive investigation into the value of traveling in the Philippines for Chinese graduate students is imperative to inform institutional policies and support services aimed at enhancing the educational experience and holistic development of international students in the country.

The Importance of Traveling for Personal Growth and Development. Traveling is a transformative journey that offers countless opportunities for personal growth (de Botton, 2012), self-discovery (Hoffman, 2020), and lifelong learning (Voigts, 2024). By embracing new experiences, engaging with diverse cultures, and fostering meaningful connections, travelers cultivate resilience (Psychologists Magazine, 2024), empathy (Andrews, 2021), and a deeper understanding of themselves (Hoffman, 2020) and the world around them (Janaína, 2023). As individuals venture beyond their comfort zones and explore the unknown, they embark on a journey of personal development, empowerment, and fulfillment that shapes their lives and enriches their humanity.

Traveling as a Means of Enhancing Academic Experience. Traveling serves as a transformative journey that enhances the academic experience by promoting experiential learning Kolb (1984), cross-cultural engagement (Vygotsky, 1978), academic networking (Nadine, 2023), and research and fieldwork (Wilbourn, 2020). By embracing travel as an integral part of their academic journey, students enrich their academic perspectives (WYSE News, 2013), expand their intellectual horizons (Bishop, 2017), and prepare themselves to thrive in a rapidly changing and interconnected world (OECD, 2018).

Traveling in the Philippines as a Learning Opportunity. Traveling in the Philippines offers students a holistic and immersive learning experience that transcends the boundaries of traditional classroom education (Lubin, 2024). By embracing cultural immersion (Wens Travel, 2023), historical exploration (Crawford-Lackey, n.d.), environmental education (Šimková et al., 2023), and community engagement (Nusair et al., 2024), students gain invaluable insights into the complexities of the Filipino society, environment, and human experience, empowering them to become meaning-driven individuals (Rocamora, 2021) who make a positive impact in the world (Armstrong, 2022).

Challenges and Considerations for Chinese Graduate Students Traveling in the Philippines. While traveling in the Philippines offers Chinese graduate students valuable opportunities for cultural exchange, personal growth, and academic enrichment, it also entails various challenges and considerations that require careful planning, preparation, and adaptability. By addressing language barriers (Paz, 2008), cultural differences (Ramnac, 2015), safety concerns (Gov.uk, n.d.), health risks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.), academic commitments (Tabora, 2022), and visa regulations (Philippine Consulate General, 2024), students can overcome challenges and make the most of their travel experiences in the Philippines.

Traveling and Study Abroad Experiences in Southeast Asia. The traveling and study abroad experiences of Chinese international students in Southeast Asia offer a transformative journey of cultural exploration (Vygotsky, 1978), academic discovery (Kolb (1984; Nadine, 2023; Wilbourn, 2020), and personal development (de Botton, 2012). By embracing the region's cultural diversity (Asia Society, 2024), academic opportunities (Lim et al., 2022), and natural beauty (Uriate, 2024), students learn beyond and towards the fulfillment of their academic degree programs.

II. Study Framework

Considering the interview questions provided, the most relevant theories to integrate would be Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), and Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). These theories directly address the individual's decision-making processes, cultural interactions, and learning experiences during travel. Here's how they could be integrated into the discussion:

SCT. Bandura's SCT has emerged as a pivotal framework in social psychology, focusing on cognitive processes in understanding behavior. It highlights observational learning, self-efficacy, attribution theory, and social comparison as core tenets, shedding light on how individuals perceive and respond to their social environment (Bandura, 1977). SCT's applicability extends to various domains, including business management, healthcare, and education, where understanding cognitive processes enhances workflows, patient treatment, and teaching methodologies (Bandura, 1997). In the context of Chinese graduate students traveling to the Philippines, SCT underscores the profound link between travel, learning, and cultural engagement. By immersing themselves in a new cultural milieu, students undergo experiential learning, fostering intercultural understanding, empathy, and open-mindedness. Moreover, travel serves as a conduit for expanding academic and professional horizons,

enabling students to gain new perspectives, forge connections, and contribute to their personal and professional growth. Ultimately, SCT elucidates the transformative nature of travel experiences, enriching students' cultural, academic, and personal development as global citizens.

ICC. ICC plays a pivotal role in extracting value from travel experiences, especially in culturally diverse countries like the Philippines. Chinese graduate students actively engage with individuals from various cultural backgrounds during their travels, thereby enhancing their intercultural communication skills. Emphasizing considerations such as cultural immersion and effective communication, students strategically select destinations where they can interact with locals, participate in cultural activities, and overcome language barriers, thus fostering their ICC. ICC, as outlined by Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009), encompasses key elements like motivation and self-knowledge, driving individuals to navigate diverse cultural contexts effectively. This intrinsic motivation aligns with the principles of SCT, emphasizing the voluntary and rewarding nature of lifelong intercultural learning. Given the importance of ICC in today's globalized world, travel serves as a vital avenue for Chinese graduate students in the Philippines to hone their skills by immersing themselves in local culture and navigating diverse social environments. Despite the inherent challenges of cultural collisions, students can develop critical thinking, language proficiency, interpersonal skills, and adaptability, laying a solid groundwork for their future endeavors in an increasingly interconnected world.

ELT. Developed by psychologist David Kolb (Cherry, 2022), ELT underscores the transformative potential of travel experiences for learning and personal growth. It emphasizes that learning is deeply influenced by experiences, encompassing cognition, environment, and emotions. Unlike cognitive and behavioral theories, ELT takes a holistic approach, highlighting the cyclical nature of learning and the central role of experiential activities. Chinese graduate students traveling in the Philippines can leverage ELT by engaging in various experiential learning opportunities, such as cultural exchanges, field trips, and language learning projects. These experiences enrich their academic journey, broaden their perspectives, and cultivate practical skills relevant to their research and career goals. ELT serves as a widely recognized framework that elucidates how individuals learn through hands-on experiences, making it integral to understanding the educational value of travel.

III. Statement of the Problem

This study investigated the value of traveling in the Philippines among Chinese graduate students in Manila. Specifically, the inquiry focused on the graduate student's experiences in the Philippines, factors influencing their destination choices and travel experiences, and the instrumental role of travel in the achievement of learning or academic goals.

IV. Methodology

This study involved the participation of 12 international Chinese students of St. Paul University Manila enrolled in the doctorate program of the College of Education and have spent time traveling around the country since they started their academic program. They voluntarily participated by answering an online survey with three open-ended questions (focusing on their travel experiences, decision-making, and learning goals) within a period of 30 minutes. Their individual responses were collated and processed through thematic analysis. Discussion was done by creating a dialogue between the themes generated the theories constituting the study framework.

V. Results

Graduate student's experiences in the Philippines

The graduate student's experiences in the Philippines are rich and diverse, encompassing cultural exploration, natural beauty, personal growth, and resilience. The thematic analysis of their responses unveils the multifaceted aspects contributing to the memorability of their journey.

Cultural Immersion. Cultural immersion emerges as a pivotal theme, evident in the student's exploration of the country's rich heritage and traditions. As the student recounts, "In the early days of studying in the Philippines, I faced the challenges of language and cultural differences, but it also helped me to step out of my comfort zone and look for more possibilities." This firsthand encounter with cultural differences fosters a deeper appreciation for Filipino culture and society, as highlighted in their visit to the National Museum of the Philippines. Reflecting on this experience, the student expresses, "Inside, the museum's extensive collection of artifacts, paintings, and photographs transported me to different eras of Philippine history." Such encounters evoke a sense of awe and reverence for the country's history, contributing to the student's cultural understanding and connection to the Philippines.

Exploration of the Philippines' Natural Beauty. The natural scenery of the Philippines is diverse, comprising beaches, rainforests, mountains, and world-famous tourist destinations. One student remarked, "The Philippines is made up of more than 7,000 islands and is known for its beautiful beaches and world-famous tourist resorts." Another student described their trip to Boracay, stating, "One of my most memorable travel experiences was a trip to Boracay, a place of breathtaking natural beauty with turquoise waters and lush rainforests." Additionally, another student mentioned, "I also specially arranged a trip to... see the world-famous Chocolate Hills." This exploration not only provided relaxation but also offered insight into the country's nature and culture, leaving a lasting impression and fostering a deeper appreciation for its natural treasures.

Engagement with Filipino Culture. Cross-cultural differences manifest in various aspects of life, and experiencing them firsthand in the Philippines enables students to gain a deeper understanding of these disparities and foster cultural exchange. As one student observed, "The (train) is actually on the ground. Our country's subways are all underground." This exposure not only broadens their perspective but also enhances their language and cultural comprehension, as expressed by another student who mentioned, "In addition, I took some local crafts

classes." Furthermore, students actively engage with Filipino culture through culinary exploration, art appreciation, and interactions with locals. Reflecting on their experiences, a student suggests, "Try some traditional dishes such as Adobo and Halo-halo," highlighting their immersion in Filipino cuisine. These interactions and participations in cultural activities serve to deepen the students' connection to Filipino life and further enrich their cross-cultural learning journey.

Factors influencing their destination choices and travel experiences

The thematic analysis underscores the multifaceted considerations that inform travel decisions among graduate students in the host country. By balancing cultural exploration, academic relevance, practical considerations, and personal interests, students are able to curate meaningful and enriching travel experiences that contribute to their academic and personal development.

Cultural Exploration. Philippine culture is characterized by its diversity, blending modern, traditional, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and Western influences, as expressed by students in their experiences. One student recounted, "I can feel the blend of modern culture and traditional culture," highlighting the dynamic nature of Filipino culture. Another student emphasizes how Filipino culture provides a deeper understanding of diversity and tolerance, stating, "It gives me a deeper understanding of the cultural spirit of diversity and tolerance in this Southeast Asian country." Moreover, students recognize the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures within Filipino culture, acknowledging that it facilitates cross-cultural communication and reduces misunderstandings. This cultural exploration fosters better understanding and respect for different cultures among students from various backgrounds. Additionally, cultural exploration emerges as a significant consideration for students when choosing destinations, with one student stating, "I consider the cultural characteristics and historical background of the destination because I believe that understanding the local culture is an important part of learning." This emphasis on cultural immersion reflects the students' desire to deepen their understanding of the host country's heritage and traditions, contributing to both academic and personal growth.

Academic Relevance. For many Chinese students, the primary motivation for coming to the Philippines is to enhance their academic studies, as they prioritize learning and self-improvement. They consider the purpose of their trip, whether it is for relaxation, cultural exploration, or academic research, with one student emphasizing, "Learning to improve oneself is also the most important thing." Venturing beyond their comfort zones, students recognize the importance of understanding local culture as a fundamental aspect of learning. This includes visiting school libraries and nearby institutions to grasp cultural differences, as highlighted by one student who states, "I will visit my own school and library, as well as other nearby schools, to understand the cultural differences of the schools." Academic relevance significantly influences their travel decisions, with students selecting destinations aligned with their research interests and academic goals. Making decisions based on academic research ensures that their travel experiences contribute meaningfully to their studies, enriching their educational journey and broadening their perspectives.

Practical Considerations. During their time in the Philippines, students prioritize practical considerations such as time, money, and safety when making travel decisions. As one student explains, "I choose destinations that are in line with my interests and within my budget," recognizing the importance of aligning travel choices with financial constraints. Others emphasize the significance of time management and financial planning, acknowledging that some destinations may require more time and incur higher expenses. "Some places may take longer to explore, or may have higher fees," they note, highlighting the trade-offs involved in travel planning. Safety also emerges as a critical factor, with students considering the local security situation and transportation convenience. "I also consider the local safety situation and transportation convenience," one student mentions, indicating the importance of ensuring a secure and hassle-free travel experience. This emphasis on safety underscores the students' commitment to personal well-being while exploring new destinations. Additionally, students approach travel planning with meticulousness, conducting research to learn about weather conditions, cultural attractions, and other relevant factors in potential destinations. "Before deciding where to go, it's helpful to do some research...and learn about the weather, culture, attractions, and more in places you might be interested in," explains one student, highlighting the thoroughness of their approach. This careful consideration reflects their dedication to maximizing the enjoyment of their travel experiences while minimizing potential challenges or risks.

Personal Interests and Aspirations. Despite being PhD students enrolled in the same program in the Philippines, each student possesses unique interests and aspirations that influence their travel decisions and academic pursuits. As evidenced by their writings, one student expresses a keen interest in incorporating new elements into dance teaching in their home country, stating, "Or are you looking for inspiration to incorporate new elements into dance teaching in my country?" Another identifies as a PhD candidate in educational philosophy, highlighting the diversity of academic interests within the cohort. This diversity of interests and personalities among the students contributes to the richness of their academic experiences and adds an element of unpredictability to their studies and travels. Moreover, personal passions and aspirations significantly shape their travel choices, with students opting for destinations that resonate with their individual preferences. Whether it's exploring historical sites, enjoying leisure activities, or pursuing personal interests, students prioritize experiences that align with their passions and goals, as reflected in the statement, "personal interests and aspirations play a significant role in shaping travel decisions."

Instrumental role of travel in the achievement of learning or academic goals

The thematic analysis highlights the transformative impact of travel on graduate students' academic and personal development. By fostering cultural understanding, inspiring academic innovation, facilitating personal growth, and promoting well-being, travel emerges as a powerful tool for achieving learning goals and advancing academic pursuits in diverse and dynamic ways.

Cultural Immersion and Understanding. Students wrote the significance of traveling in the

Philippines as a means to deepen their understanding of local culture, transcending mere academic knowledge to embrace real-life experiences. One participant expressed, "Reading ten thousand books is no better than traveling ten thousand miles," emphasizing the invaluable insights gained through firsthand experiences. By immersing themselves in different cultural contexts and engaging with locals, students cultivate their foreign thinking ability, which proves beneficial for their academic research and career development. Additionally, cultural immersion and understanding emerge as central themes, with travel providing students with exposure to diverse perspectives and societal norms. As articulated by another student, "Travel helps me better understand the cultural and social environment of the Philippines, which was crucial for my study and life in Manila." This firsthand cultural understanding enriches students' academic endeavors and contributes to their overall academic growth.

Academic Inspiration and Innovation. Traveling serves as more than just a means of collecting materials; it also acts as a catalyst for academic inspiration and innovation, providing students with firsthand experiences that enrich their academic pursuits. A participant mentioned, "Traveling can enrich my academic research materials. Through field visits and cultural exchange activities, I was able to collect first-hand research materials and understand the local history, culture, language, and economy." This exposure not only enriches academic research but also sparks inspiration and creativity, alleviating academic pressure and enhancing learning efficiency, as highlighted by another participant, who noted, "It helps me relieve my academic pressure and improve my learning efficiency." By visiting historical sites, museums, and academic institutions, students engage with local scholars and experts, fostering creativity and critical thinking skills. A third participant shared on this saying, "These experiences not only gave me access to valuable academic resources but also inspired new thinking and new insights into research problems," underscoring the transformative impact of travel on academic growth and innovation.

Personal and Professional Development. Travel plays a key role in fostering the personal and professional growth of students by providing them with invaluable experiences and skills. Exposure to diverse environments cultivates open-mindedness and tolerance, while honing essential life skills like adaptability and problem-solving, as highlighted by the student who recounted, "Traveling also honed my independent living and problem-solving skills." Moreover, travel enhances resumes by offering international experience and networking opportunities, positioning students advantageously in a global job market, as expressed by another student, "Through traveling, I can also make a more reasonable academic plan and make full preparation for my future career." Planning and executing travel itineraries promote independent thinking and decision-making, fostering confidence and resilience, while interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds enhance cross-cultural communication skills and global citizenship, as reflected by a student who said, "Communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds...enhances my self-confidence and ability to adapt to the new environment." Overall, integrating travel experiences into education significantly contributes to students' holistic development.

Relaxation, Rejuvenation, and Reflection. Travel serves as a multifaceted catalyst for relaxation, rejuvenation, and reflection among students, offering a much-needed respite from academic pressures and routine.

As students step away from their familiar environment, they find opportunities to decompress and recharge, with travel providing a refreshing break that improves their learning efficiency, as noted by a student who stated, "Travel is also a way to relax and recharge. It helps me relieve my academic pressure and improve my learning efficiency." Moreover, exposure to new cultures and experiences inspires wonder and invigoration, fostering personal growth and self-discovery through independent problem-solving and planning, as highlighted by another student who remarked, "Traveling also improves my personal ability and quality. During the trip, I need to plan the trip independently and solve various problems, which exercises my independent thinking and problem-solving ability." By engaging in leisure activities and connecting with nature, students can relax, rejuvenate, and engage in meaningful self-reflection, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and academic performance, as reflected by a student who emphasized, "Travel also provides me with valuable time to relax and rest, so that I can better adjust my mindset and maintain a positive attitude towards learning."

VI. Discussion

The experiences of graduate students in the Philippines showcase a rich tapestry of cultural immersion, personal growth, and resilience. Their journey unfolds with encounters ranging from exploring the country's heritage to marveling at its natural wonders, all while navigating challenges that contribute to their development. Cultural immersion emerges as pivotal, with students delving into Filipino culture through visits to museums and interactions with locals. These experiences deepen their appreciation for the country's history and traditions, fostering a sense of connection and understanding.

Factors influencing destination choices reveal a nuanced decision-making process. Cultural exploration and academic relevance stand out as primary considerations, reflecting students' desire to integrate travel experiences into their studies. Practical factors like time, budget, and safety also play a crucial role, underscoring students' meticulous planning to maximize their experiences while minimizing risks. Personal interests further shape their travels, highlighting a holistic approach that prioritizes individual preferences and aspirations.

The instrumental role of travel in achieving academic goals becomes evident through thematic analysis. Cultural immersion enhances students' understanding of diverse perspectives, inspiring academic innovation and critical thinking. Travel fosters personal and professional development by cultivating independence, problem-solving skills, and cross-cultural communication abilities. Moreover, it provides a space for relaxation and rejuvenation, enhancing overall well-being and academic performance. Collectively, these experiences underscore the transformative impact of travel on graduate students' academic and personal growth, positioning it as a powerful tool for holistic development in higher education.

In analyzing the thematic areas of the interview responses through the lenses of SCT, ICC, and ELT, deeper insights can be gained into the decision-making processes, cultural interactions, and learning experiences of Chinese graduate students traveling in the Philippines.

Starting with SCT, it must be recognized that individual decisions to travel are influenced by personal factors such as motivation, self-efficacy beliefs, and observational learning. As graduate students reflected on

their memorable travel experiences, they often discussed how their motivations, whether for cultural exploration, academic enrichment, or personal growth, guided their choice of destinations within the Philippines. For instance, a student expressed how their desire to deepen their understanding of Filipino culture or history motivated them to visit specific locations. Additionally, observational learning from peers or recommendations from academic advisors play a significant role in shaping travel choices, as students observed and learned from the experiences of others, impacting their decision-making process.

Moving on to ICC, its importance for navigating and deriving value from travel experiences in a culturally diverse country like the Philippines must be recognized. Traveling provides Chinese graduate students with opportunities to engage with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing their intercultural communication skills. When discussing their thought process behind travel decisions, students often highlight considerations related to cultural immersion and communication. They described how they selected destinations where they could interact with locals, participate in cultural activities, or overcome language barriers, thus fostering their intercultural competence. These interactions not only enhance their understanding of Filipino culture but also contribute to their ability to communicate effectively in diverse settings, a crucial skill for academic and personal success.

Finally, ELT emphasizes the transformative nature of travel experiences as opportunities for learning and personal growth. Through travel, Chinese graduate students engage in experiential activities that deepen their understanding of academic concepts and foster holistic development. As students consider how travel in the Philippines can help accomplish their goals as graduate students, they often highlighted the experiential learning opportunities afforded by travel. Exploring historical sites, conducting fieldwork, or engaging in service-learning projects outside Manila enriches their academic experience, broadens their perspectives, and cultivates practical skills relevant to their research and career aspirations. By actively engaging with their surroundings and reflecting on their experiences, students are able to integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world applications, reinforcing their learning and personal development.

Thus, integrating SCT, ICC, and ELT into the analysis of thematic areas reveals the multifaceted ways in which travel influences the decision-making processes, cultural interactions, and learning experiences of Chinese graduate students in the Philippines. Through a combination of personal motivations, intercultural communication skills, and experiential learning opportunities, travel serves as a catalyst for academic and personal growth, enriching students' academic journeys and shaping their future endeavors.

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