

Monographic article

Spanish literature and well-being: The case of Chinese students in Spain

Literatura española y bienestar: el caso de los estudiantes chinos en España

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Abstract

Chinese students who study abroad have to face with many added life stressors compared to those who remain in China. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the use of literature is an important didactic tool in the teaching of foreign language.

This study analyzes the experience of a group of 66 Chinese university students (87.9% women, mean age = 23.45 years, SD = 1.303) who have come to Spain to study Spanish as Foreign Language. Well-being, life satisfaction, engagement, attitude and appreciation concerning Spanish literature were assessed quantitatively. Happiness was assessed through a qualitative approach.

Results show that student's happiness is linked to family well-being. Students were more engaged while studying in Spain. Students showed greater personal growth and independence while they were in Spain; although they had less interpersonal relationships while living in Spain. Social well-being was higher while they were in China. A relationship between attitude toward literature, engagement, satisfaction with life and psychosocial well-being was found.

The main conclusion is that well-being and happiness of Chinese students are variables that are affected by the change of country. Literature and its way of teaching have an important role in the enhancement of engagement, life satisfaction and well-being.

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Keywords: Classic literature; Psychosocial wellbeing; Life satisfaction; Engagement; Happiness; Chinese college students

Resumen

Los estudiantes chinos que estudian fuera afrontan estresores añadidos en comparación con aquellos que permanecen en China. Además, se ha demostrado que el uso de la literatura es una herramienta a la hora de enseñar una lengua extranjera.

El presente estudio analiza la experiencia de un grupo de 66 estudiantes universitarios chinos (87.9% mujeres, edad media = 23.45 años, DT = 1.303) que vinieron a España a estudiar español como lengua extranjera. Se evaluó el bienestar, la satisfacción vital, el *engagement*, y la valoración de la literatura española cuantitativamente. La felicidad se evaluó cualitativamente.

Los resultados muestran que la felicidad de los estudiantes está vinculada al bienestar familiar; tenían más *engagement* cuando estaban en España; mostraron más crecimiento personal e independencia cuando estaban en España; el bienestar social era mayor cuando estaban en China; se encontró relación entre la actitud hacia la literatura, el *engagement*, la satisfacción vital y el bienestar psicosocial.

La principal conclusión muestra que el bienestar y la felicidad de los estudiantes chinos son variables que se ven afectadas por el cambio de país. La literatura y su didáctica tienen un importante rol a la hora de promover el *engagement*, la satisfacción vital y el bienestar.

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Palabras clave: Literatura clásica; Bienestar psicosocial; Satisfacción vital; *Engagement*; Felicidad; Estudiantes universitarios chinos

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Introduction

The psychosocial state of Chinese students who study abroad

China's growing international role is reflected in a 23% increase in the number of students who study abroad. The Department of Education states that more than 1.4 million Chinese students studied abroad in 2011 (China Daily, 2012), nearly 7000 study in Spain from 2014 to 2015 (GB Times, 2015). This marked surge in the overseas education of Chinese students has been studied in several countries (Henze & Zhu, 2012); these studies have not focused on the measurement of positive experiences (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011). Also, the number of Chinese students who have shown an interest in the Spanish language continues to grow. Spanish, with an estimated 2000 enrolled students, is the second most studied language in China, with English being the first (Instituto Cervantes, 2012).

Chinese students who study abroad have to face with many added life stressors compared to those who remain in China (Yan & Berliner, 2013). In order to demonstrate this, Wan (2001) measured positive and negative experiences of students from China who studied abroad, finding that this group identified cultural, social, political, and linguistic differences as sources of both positive and negative experiences. These factors along with geopolitical and social-emotional variables coalesce to shape students' personal experience and self-concepts (Newsome & Cooper, 2016). O'Reilly, Ryan, and Hickey (2010) underlined that Chinese students were more prone to sociocultural imbalance and overall stress. Trice (2004) noted interactions with classmates from the foreign country as protection factors, and Yu (2016) found that integrative motivation and linguistic confidence were the strongest predictors of sociocultural and academic adaptation. Given these results, it is of utmost importance that academic institutions and instructors not only understand the customs and culture of the foreign student's home country and their language and learning style, but also promote peer support (Anderson, 2008; Salili, Chiu, & Lai, 2001).

Well-being, happiness, engagement and life satisfaction in Chinese university students

The model proposed by Ryff and Keyes (1995) established the multidimensionality of well-being. Research has proven that students who engage themselves with their own culture in the same way that they apply themselves to learning a new one have a greater probability of finding social support. This is related to self-sufficiency, the achievement of goals, and a greater mastery of their environment (Hui, Lent, & Miller, 2013).

For Chinese people, interpersonal support (including that from spouses, parents, friends, neighbors, and colleagues) and support utilization were significant predictors of happiness (Liping, 2001). In Chinese students, subjective well-being comes from life satisfaction, positive feelings, social support, and an orientation toward human values (Biao-Bin, Xue, & Qiu, 2003). Zhi (2007) found that interpersonal and romantic relationships, academic pressure, future work prospects,

personal finances, expectations, personal values, and personality influence the well-being of these students. Personal values can add to providing meaning in life, and thus serve as predictors of well-being (Zhang et al., 2013). After analyzing happiness, Lu (2001) concludes that for Chinese university students, happiness is defined as a state of mental satisfaction characterized by positive emotions in which needs are being met. According to this author, harmony is achieved when goals are reached and one lives freely and has hope about the future. Finally, he states that happiness can be reached through discovery, gratitude, altruism, and self-knowledge.

On the other hand, engagement is linked to academic performance and self-sufficiency (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007; Schaufeli, Martínez, Marques, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Students who have parents with a college degree are generally more motivated than their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Engagement is related to higher levels of subjective well-being (Schueller & Seligman, 2010) and life satisfaction (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). It is also related to a well-adjusted university life, increased psychosocial competence, practice, development, and well-being (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Determination, which is an aspect of engagement, is related to academic achievement (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Professor's attitude may influence students' learning in a way such as professors with higher engagement motivate and generate more life satisfaction in students (Küster & Vila, 2012).

The use of literature in the promotion of psychological and social well-being of students

Success in learning a new language depends on the motivation of a student (Wong, Chai, Chen, & Chin, 2013). This complex variable is used to explain individual differences in the learning of a new language (MacIntyre, MacMaster, & Baker, 2001). According to Yu (2012), it is important to promote the study of the classics, as well as to encourage writing in order to improve communication. The use of literature is an important didactic tool in the teaching of foreign language (Albadalejo, 2006).

Using literature to explain the meaning of passages, especially when related to irony and humor, serves to introduce sociocultural, pragmalinguistic and literary aspects of those texts (Villarrubia, 2010).

The present study

The results of previous studies show that there might be changes in different variables related to the well-being and the academic performance. In addition, the present study shows that there may be a role of literature and its pedagogy of Chinese students' well-being and motivation.

The present study aims to analyze the well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and engagement of Chinese students who came to Spain to study Spanish, to compare their standard of living in Spain with which their well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, engagement, they had in China and to study the role of literature in the well-being of students. Both quantitative and qualitative

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