A STUDY OF SYSTEMS RESEARCH DESIGN:
AN EXAMINATION OF SYSTEMIC AND SYSTEMATIC METHODS USED
TO STUDY CHINESE WOMEN'S DECISION TO STUDY ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the systemic methodological choices involved in studying the ethical decision space within which Chinese women come to decide to attend an American university in pursuit of a business education. In the research we wished to develop insight about the role of the student herself in the decision-making process in relation to others involved. Insofar as the decision-making process involves a multitude of interacting influences, the researchers conceived of this space as a system of people and ideas that contribute a sense of the "rightness" of studying abroad in a young adult Chinese woman's life.

From a research design perspective, exploring a decision space like this was not straightforward. We were studying what we conceived as a systemic ethical decision-making phenomenon, fraught with the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural data collection. This research was not designed to critique the complex decision-making processes that study participants had engaged in before coming to study in the U.S. Nonetheless, we faced the very real potential that women participating in the research could perceive themselves as having to hide certain information, or conversely, display their idea of favorable responses to the researchers' questions. We needed to overcome differences of both language and culture between members of the research team and research subjects. Further, we set for ourselves the challenge to formulate a design that would be both systemic and systematic.

No extant theories existed on the ethics of decision-making processes resulting in Chinese women coming to study abroad. Consequently, we used grounded theory methods to inductively illuminate the emergent meaning-making processes involved in such a decision, given this method's systematic and rigorous set of procedures and techniques for theory building. Along with grounded theory-informed interviews, we facilitated each study participant in developing a rich picture of the systems of people, processes, and meaning-making that exerted influence on her decision to study abroad. Together, interviews and rich pictures enabled our participants to make explicit the contextual complexities of their decisions and to communicate those complexities to us. Importantly, the research techniques we used helped participants to explore ethical complexities of their decision in a safe way.

A Study of Systems Research Design

Keywords: systems research, systemic research, systematic research, Chinese students, studying abroad, ethics

INTRODUCTION

There are many approaches to systems research. Regardless of which one chooses, good systems research involves a coherent set of processes and involves many sophisticated competencies in order to address the kinds of complex, interconnected problems that require systemic solutions. While many excellent books have been published about specific systems research methods and practices, *A Guide to Systems Research – Philosophy, Processes and Practices* (Edson, Buckle Henning, and Sankaran, 2016) has outlined an overarching, consistent framework in which systems methods and practices can be carried out coherently to deliver high caliber research outcomes. Among the central questions a researcher must address is this: "How are inquiries into problems structured and designed to conduct research in a systemic (holistic, comprehensive, complicated, and complex) as well as systematic (logical, rigorous, and disciplined) way?" (Edson and Klein, 2016). This paper presents the authors' attempts to design and execute a research project about a complex human process – the decision to send a young woman from China to the United States to study business – a process undertaken by elaborate networks of participants for reasons we only partially understood. Our aim was to execute a rigorous systems research study; hence, we strove to design a project that would be deemed sound, both systemically and systematically (Ison, 2008).

STUDY PURPOSE

"Systems research involves identifying the subject systems with the intentions of understanding how they organize and operate within their environment" (Edson and Klein, 2016).
Chinese student scholars have become a noteworthy population in American business schools. The experiences of female students from China, in particular, have been unexamined in research up to this point. We felt their untold stories of undertaking business studies abroad were interesting and important. "One chooses a career with a purpose in mind, that purpose often being viewed as noble, benign, or positive… This view suggests that we are in *meaningful* relationship with the world around us" (Natale and Sora, 2010, p. 81 – emphasis in original). The choice to pursue careers in business and to prepare for such careers halfway across the world could not have been inconsequential; we wanted to learn how the life experience of a Chinese woman could come to include the deeply personal decision to study in the United States. Hence, we designed a study to collect self-report data about the decision-making processes that occurred when these students considered studying at a Western university.

SYSTEMIC PREMISES

"International students come to the United States from all over the world with the hopes of receiving a better educational and professional experience than they would receive in their home countries" (Jung, Hecht, and Wadsworth, 2007), p. 606). While most discussion of such students in academia and the popular press describe this population as a homogeneous mass, preceding each individual student's arrival in an American business school is a complex series of personal deliberations, moving through identification of the possibility of leaving one's country for international study, to formulation of an intention to act on that possibility, to the act of enrolling and traveling to a foreign place to attend school. Given our experience and interests as systems scholars and practitioners, upon being presented with the opportunity to study Chinese students

at an American business school, we framed our interests as personal – what was the unique experience of each person to whom we would speak – and systemic – we would conceptualize our project systemically.

Systemic research focuses on the complicated and complex nature of real world problems (Edson and Klein, 2016). If we were to understand the experiences of young women from China in deciding to study business in America, we needed to strive for a comprehensive view of how their decisions came to be. That view would, necessarily, be complicated (involving many parts) and complex (involving myriad connections among the parts). Following psychoanalytic and social psychology views of human beings, each person is a system of multiple agencies operating within and surrounding us. Thus, the decision of where a Chinese woman should study is necessarily shaped by many subjectivities. Whose decision it was to pursue an American MBA and how that decision came about would not be a question with a singular answer, from a systemic perspective. People operate in a web of influence that involves conflicting desires, ambitions, and concerns. Each strand of that web represents a world of assumptions that drive behaviour (Natale and Sora, 2010). Thus, the decision to study in a far-off country is borne of many beliefs about how such study would change a young woman's life, assumptions varying in accuracy and concordance with other beliefs. In choices to study internationally, "the promised transformations are inherently contradictory" (Rizvi, 2009), p. 261), leading us as researchers to frame our study as that of the systems of relationships and personal connections in which each of the women we studied had lived before coming to the U.S.. Multiple agencies of varying strengths are involved in a person's life and decision-making space. The fact of a Chinese student sitting in an American business classroom is a visible manifestation of plural agencies working to shape an individual destiny. The stakes are high; Marginson has described the international study experience as a project no less important than that of forming one's self, and that "student self formation is irreducibly complex because it entails more than one project – educational, economic, occupational, familial, cultural, social, linguistic, and so on" (2014, p. 13). In the decision to study abroad, such projects intersect and influence one another in ways both complicated and complex.

From one systems lens, the problem facing a student contemplating international study is one of boundary making. Individual persons are always in relation to others and those others, those relationships, form the context-dependent possibilities that shape our lives. Not everyone has an impact on a student's decision. Only some do. Those who influence students' decisions vary in relative influence on the ultimate decision to study business in America. Whose opinion gets valued the most? How are dissenting opinions handled? Critical systems theory heightened our awareness of the power relations involved in decisions such as those our research subjects faced (Ulrich, 1994). The exertion of influence on the decision has both enabling and delimiting effects on the contexts in which the students come to operate. How much agency, we wondered, does the student herself have in the decision (Sen, 1995)? In what ways is the student's own voice central or marginalized in the deliberations that result in a Chinese student's enrolment in a Western university?

Systems research necessarily involves explaining the context and interrelationships in which a system operates, and the relevant boundaries one will examine within the scope of a research study (Edson and Klein, 2016). Our research question was this: how did the human systems of

which these women were a part organize to create this decision – to pursue an MBA at an American business school?   From a systems perspective, we did not know how our research subjects defined the boundaries of that system. Who was involved in their decision-making process? Whose arguments were involved, what arguments were valued when a young Chinese woman decides to get a business degree from a Western university?

In fundamental ways, making a decision to study abroad is an ethical one. Fundamentally, ethics are systemic phenomena. The researchers wanted to know whose agencies were involved in deciding that studying abroad was the *right* thing for these women to do. At the outset, we could only guess at the relevant stakeholders. People have "idiosyncratic mapping of the moral domain" (Whitaker and Godwin, 2013), p. 63). We did not know how our research subjects navigated the differences among parties involved in their decision. How had these students weighed considerations of who was delivering what arguments about whether or not studying abroad was good or otherwise? The field of normative ethics addresses how people arrive at concepts of right and wrong (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016). And central to Chinese thought for centuries have been questions about how one ought to live, how to weigh duties toward family and society (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2016). We knew that what is normatively appropriate is socially constructed by cultures, and varies over time (Gunia, Want, Huang, Want, and Murnighan, 2012). We knew also that traditional ethics has a history of depreciating or devaluing women's moral experience (Jaggar, 1992), overrating "culturally masculine traits like independence, autonomy… while it underrates culturally feminine traits like interdependence, community, connection…" (ibid). From a perspective of feminine ethics, how do Chinese women situated in relationship with people important to them decide that studying abroad is the right thing to do? Such a decision is one of many in contemporary life wherein people must consider and manage tensions that invariably arise from their unique relational context – contexts rife with complex intersubjectivities, power, and reflexivity.

The premises we held entering into this study were systemic. We saw each of our subjects as a system herself – each a whole comprised of multiple viewpoints, somehow holding the tensions among them. *A systems research aesthetic emphasizes balance among tensions, between different components, within one comprehensive structure (Varey, 2016).* For our research to be systemic beyond aesthetic considerations, there was a need for a rigorous study design "linking causes and effects and connecting contingent factors" (Varey, 2016). An entry point to systematic research is a review of existing literature.

SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH - PART I
One aspect of sound systems research, as in all sound research, is to locate one's study in the existing system of concepts and ideas about a subject. Much has been written about the "marketization of education" (Natale and Doran, 2012) whereby the function of education has been reduced to job training for the masses. Much of the literature about international studies presumes that international students simply enroll in Western universities "to become like us" (Marginson, 2014, p. 8). Our approach instead was to suspend the assumption that job training was the only reason a Chinese woman would come to America to study business, or that becoming Americanized in one's skills and knowledge base was the goal of every international business student. We wondered if the factors that went into a student's decision to study abroad

might involve more than pragmatic concerns of maximizing future earning potential in a business career.

Whitaker and Godwin have called for more research attention to contextual and interpersonal attributes of moral decision-making (2013). A preponderance of studies about student motivations to study internationally assume that the decision is a largely self-determined one. There are exceptions, such as Li and Bray's study of the internal characteristics and perceptions of students and the parents of mainland Chinese students who decide to pursue higher education in Hong Kong and Macau (Li and Bray, 2007). For the most part, however, studies of international students tend to frame the student as a relatively autonomous actor who owns the decision to study abroad (or, conversely, is controlled and coerced by the volitions of others), (e.g. Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch, 2007). The possibility that the decision for an Asian person to study business in a Western nation could be a collaborative, cooperative, collective decision is largely absent from scholarly study. We chose not to assume the decision was made by an "I," leaving open the possibility that it was a decision owned by a "we."

Given our choice to forgo assumptions that students felt a Western business education was superior and that the deciders were more than autonomously operating agents, our study planned for the possibility that multiple factors may have been at play in how a student comes to determine a pathway toward study abroad. We were interested to understand that pathway in greater depth than the existing literature offered. We wanted to know the antecedent conditions in the lives of our study participants that contributed to their decision, the personal and interpersonal sensemaking processes that contributed to their decision. Our curiosity took a long view, as we wondered what had brought them to be sitting in the classroom of an American business school on a chilly October weekend sharing their stories with four researchers.

Much research before this had examined student attitudes toward international study. The topic had been handled with exacting rigor and intricate logic. Scholars have examined ethical attitudes of East Asian people toward business. A great deal has been written about ethical decision-making processes. And much has been written about the phenomenon of Chinese students coming to America to pursue higher education, for good reason. "Chinese students have become a big market in the United States – and nobody understands this better than universities," writes Schiavenza (2015). He points out that tuition revenues from Chinese students is "subsidizing the education of their American peers," and so "American universities are addicted to Chinese students." Citing recent figures, students from China represented 31% of all international students in American schools, contributing "an estimated \$22 billion to the U.S. economy in 2014." Given the scale of the phenomenon of Chinese students in America, and the advantages this "market" brings to American universities, the literature portrays this student population as a homogenous, commoditized mass.

Our contribution to this literature was a study intended to present the personal experience of making the complex decision to study overseas, to surface stories of cherished values and value tensions, human stories of gains and necessary losses, stories that were poignant and personally meaningful to the women living them. We decided to focus our attention on the emergent circumstances that unfold before an individual becomes "a Chinese student studying in a Western university." This kind of research would demand a greater depth of reflexivity on the

part of research participants to disclose themselves in more intimate ways than standard survey research requires.

HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If we were to become closely acquainted with our research subjects we would need to understand their lives from multiple perspectives. Hierarchy theory, a subset of general systems theory, is useful here. "There are, of course, many models of the human person" (Natale and Sora, 2010, p. 80). We took the premise that a human being is a complex structure organized in particular ways and participating in other complex human structures. Hierarchy theory posits that these systems act on one another and act as contexts for one another (Wilby, 1994). A person operates in quasi-autonomous ways, integrated amongst oneself, while also being integrated (nested) within other human systems that are hierarchically organized. To understand our subjects well, we would need to understand their relationships with the cultural, social, and interior worlds in which they operated.

Cultural Systems

Although three members of our research team had experience with Chinese people as teachers, colleagues, or friends, we recognized that we had limitations in our ability to deeply understand the cultural context from which these women came. And if our research was to reach for the systemic ideal of a comprehensive view of their decision-making experience as set out by Edson and Klein (2016), we would need to educate ourselves (and allow our subjects to educate us).

Chinese women pursuing a university education at this time are the product of a nation with an ancient history and rich traditions. In recent decades (i.e. the 1960s and 1970s), Chinese leadership developed strong anti-capitalist ideological campaigns, limiting the population' contact with Western nations. This was followed in subsequent decades by a shift toward a market-based economy with extensive international aspects to it (Chung, Eichenseher, and Taniguchi, 2008). Alongside these ideological and economic forces, China instituted a family planning policy in the late 1970s, limiting most of the population to one child per family (although some of the population was permitted to have a second child if the first was female). The one-child policy is credited with shifting thousands of years of lower status for girls in Chinese society, prompting present-day parents of a young woman to focus attention on their well being, education, and job prospects unprecedented in Chinese history (Ren, 2013). The typical Chinese 'singleton' child is the exclusive focus of attention for six adults: two parents and four grandparents. Many eyes watch over the decisions that go into charting a young person's life.

Chinese parents' interests in the good of their society are accompanied with concerns for the good of their own families. Higher education is deemed by many Chinese parents and children as "a ladder for maintaining their upper middle social class or for climbing from lower social status" (Li and Bray, 2007, p. 804). Desirable status, both economically and occupationally, is intricately connected to the educational choices a family makes for its child. Given the country's more permeable international borders, non-local study has come to be viewed by some as prestigious (Li and Bray, 2007), with expectations of increased cross-border mobility and greater income prospects within China. The child's gender is also a factor in choices that get made about what subjects should be the focus of higher education. Some Chinese parents believe that

certain careers (the oil business, for instance) are not appropriate for girls. And cultural expectations that a young woman should ideally be established in a career, married, and beginning to have children[1] of her own by the age of 30 also influences the amount of time she is expected to dedicate to education, whether she studies locally or abroad.

China has centuries-old traditions that influence the way its population today views itself and the possibilities available to its members. Its ancient history and complex present shape perceptions of the role of education in society broadly, and a woman's life personally.

Interpersonal Systems
When a young woman sits in an American classroom, it can be easy to overlook that she is a part of a complex interpersonal system integrally involved in the decision getting her there. That system of people to which she belongs is important: "we are social animals, and need the group's support and protection" (Natale and Sora, 2010), p. 81). Social relationships bolster well-being by numerous means – from information and practical help, to emotional comfort and respect (Jung et al., 2007, p, 611). A decision to stay in a foreign country has important implications for human relationships.

The cultural context of a Chinese woman's interpersonal support network is well-studied. East Asian people place great emphasis on "social harmony (less willingness to harm the interests of others" (Chung et al., 2008), evidenced in "guanxi" and related concepts that stress the importance of maintaining relationships by cultivating human connections based on implicit values of mutual obligation, reciprocity, and trust (Luo, Huang, and Wang, 2011). The choice to study abroad is likewise shaped by jointly shared values such as these (Chirkov et al., 2007).

The presence of a woman sitting in an American business school classroom then, is one that begs systemic questions. Which lives besides hers were affected by the decision to come here? Whose needs and aspirations are being addressed in the fact of her enrolment in a Western MBA program? Without considering a person as a member of an interpersonal system that influences her choices, important questions such as these are overlooked. As researchers, we anticipated that each participant in our study would have interpersonally-oriented stories, ways in which their coming abroad to study might involve a sense of moral responsibility and responsiveness to important others (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015). When considering this move, we wondered, whose stories were they told about what it means to study in the United States. Was the perceived "rightness" of certain voices buttressed by "mightiness" (Flood and Romm, 1996) – i.e. by people whose opinions overshadowed the ideas of others? Would our study participants have come to a Western university in response to people in their interpersonal network seeking good standing in their community through their affiliation with a young woman with an international degree? Were these women playing favorable roles for families seeking a "good" daughter or grandchild (i.e. one who would establish herself in a stable job by the time she reached childbearing and marriageable age? Of the myriad perspectives about the rightness of study abroad, which ones held sway in each woman's decision – said differently, which relationships were most prized and protected in the decision each woman took? The interpersonal systems of which a person is a part provide necessary support for every person's

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[1] The one-child policy was formally changed to a two-child policy on October 29, 2015.

healthy functioning. They provide each of us with invaluable coping mechanisms, and they also create additional stressors. We wanted our study to explore both facets of our study participants' lives.

Intrapsychic Systems
Just as each of our participants were integral parts of the culture in which they were raised and the interpersonal systems of which they were a part, we saw them as whole persons as well. Here too, a systemic view offers a useful lens.

People are plural. Within the mind of each of us is a web of influences – unrecognized inner "stakeholders" (Mitroff, 1983). In an organization, each inner stakeholder carries its unique perspective and value system; and in an organization, inner stakeholders vary in the influence they exert over a person's thinking, feelings, and behaviour. Which inner "others" were part of each of our participants when they first set foot on an American campus?

Object relations theory posits that how adults relate to situations is based on the human relationships they experienced as infants (Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 2002). Recollections of early people and events are internalized and used by the unconscious mind to anticipate how others will behave in social interactions; our own behaviour is oriented toward experiencing others like "objects" similar to those we encountered in our earliest years of life. In other words, long before a student reaches a university every individual student has unconsciously internalized the behaviour and morality of certain other people, and unwittingly behaves in ways that attempt to satisfy the expectations and minimize the conflicts among those internalized others. Writing about the goals a student has in choosing to study abroad, Chirkov et al. (2007) have noted the ways a student's choices and actions are driven by the needs of inner objects interjected (inserted) within them decades earlier. Simply put, every Chinese woman is composed of internalized parents, grandparents, and friends even when she lives halfway around the world. Thus, beliefs she holds about what it means to be a good daughter, for example – internalized morality – are the compelling voices of others she carries within; the beliefs of important people do not become inaudible once she lands in a foreign country. This way in which our histories are portable is a source of psychological coherence necessary for the healthy functioning of Chinese-American students (Ying, Lee, and Tsai, 2007). And, sometimes these internalized others create conflict within us. Asset or challenge, usually our internalized objects operate unconsciously. What this meant to us as researchers is that the stories we would elicit from our study participants would likely involve inconsistencies of which the students themselves would be unaware. The choices they described to us could just as readily be choices made in the service of important others more so than themselves. And the story of how they came to be studying at an American business school could be seen as the story of how a person strives for a coherent self-narrative despite conflictual forces they carry within.

Another perspective on the intrapersonal aspect of a human research subject is developmental. From this perspective, young adults, such as those populating universities, face certain developmental tasks they must master in order to achieve healthy psychological functioning in the world (Havighurst, 1948). As researchers, we could anticipate that, like other people in their 20s, the Chinese women we were studying would be living with a sense of considerable uncertainty as they struggled to manage their emerging agency as adults. They would be facing

the psychosocial challenges of managing aloneness alongside a growing capacity to form intimate relationships, while shoring up their sense of the myriad roles they should inhabit in life based on their own ideas juxtaposed with how they are seen by others (Erikson, 1994).

From a hierarchical perspective, every student who would participate in our research held membership in three important systems: an individual governed by internal psychological processes, embedded in an interpersonal network, operating within a cultural context that influenced how they each arrived at the decision to study business in America.

SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH II

We'd established that our subjects' problem was how to make the decision to study business abroad. We conceptualized the students' decision as emerging from human systems. We viewed each student as a system herself. However, adopting the idea that the research concerns 'a system' is not synonymous with using a 'systems approach' as the research method (Checkland, 1999). *To be good systems research, systems ideas, principles and concepts should be used for organizing the actual research itself (Varey, 2016).* We saw ourselves embarking on a project to understand a complicated and complex phenomenon, intricately embedded in contexts we wanted to understand. Our primary emphasis was to examine the relationships among the people and ideas that contributed to such a significant decision occurring in a young adult Chinese woman's life. If we wanted to conduct good systems research, our next problem was to determine a systematic method to map our subjects' decision space.

Good research is systematic, involving methodical procedures that are logical, rigorous, and disciplined (Edson and Klein, 2016). It surfaces the boundaries of a system, the system of relations of which the system is composed, and the totality of effect from their combinations (Varey, 2016). Systems researchers know that the systemic nature of real-world phenomena render them inordinately complex and difficult to research. As Edson and Klein counsel, we needed to set limits of the area of our investigation.

No existing study had mapped the decision-making space that resulted in a Chinese woman coming to spend formative years of her training in a Western university. Thus, any theory-testing research method, systematic though they might be, would be suitable for our purposes. We needed a systematic theory-building research method for our task, and elected to use grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is a research methodology emerging from the social sciences. Its purpose is the construction of theory through iterative sequences of primary and secondary data collection and analysis. It is known as a "systematic and rigorous set of procedures and techniques for collecting and analyzing data and creating new theoretical understandings" (van Vliet, 2008, p. 235).

The path we took to execute our study was this. We identified nine female students that were currently enrolled in the MBA program at Buckle Henning's university. We met with each research participant individually for one hour. Each meeting produced two artifacts: a recording of the conversation, to be later transcribed, and a rich picture diagram drawn on flip chart paper by Wilby and the study participant. The subject of the diagram was the system of people who had exerted influence on that person's decision to study business in America, and the reasons they considered in making that decision.

Rich picture diagrams (Checkland, 1999) are a systematic mode of data collection designed to help participants analyze complex or ill-defined human circumstances where there are divergent views about the definition of the problem or experiences of it. They are a diagramming technique helpful in identifying contextual issues about a situation of interest, one that enables participants to "make explicit some appreciation of the messiness of a problem situation" (Bronte-Stewart, 1999, p. 83), and communicate the situation to others (in this case, the researchers). Rich pictures involve a combination of text, pictures, doodles, and/or symbols that participants decide are necessary to communicate their understanding of a situation. They incite the creators to reflect deeply on a situation and understand it well enough to express it pictorially. The technique helps people to convey their perceptions of aspects of a situation "such as attitudes, problems, roles, conflicts, harmony, tensions, influences, fears, and wants" (Bronte-Stewart, 1999, p. 84). We deemed this a good fit for our task of understanding the human system that generated the decision for our subjects to study abroad. Rich pictures allow individuals to explore complex things in a safe way (Bell and Morse, 2013), and have been found effective in overcoming differences in language and culture (Williams, 1988), which was useful given our choices to have a cross-cultural research team studying international research subjects. Given the research team's limited time resources (Edson and Wilby traveled to the research site in October 2015 for an intense weekend of data collection and initial analysis), rich pictures were a useful means of quickly gaining an information-rich representation of how our participants experienced their real-world decision-making dilemma.

Analysis (ongoing) of the results of this grounded theory study were intended to involve the creation of a conceptual framework – a system of ideas – of the decision-making space in which young Chinese women engage when deciding to study business in America. To aid us in developing this idea system, we analyzed the rich picture data according to accepted analytical schemes (e.g. Bell and Morse, 2013; Horan, 2000). We analyzed our meeting transcripts using atlas.ti, a software program designed to help researchers identify and systematically analyze complex phenomena hidden in unstructured text. Atlas.ti is a tool for coding data, understanding their weight and importance, and visualizing complex relationships among them.

Our phenomenon of interest was intricate. To investigate it demanded immersion in the topic, relevant literature, the rigors of our chosen research methods, and the customs of our research subjects. This is to be expected; "systems research implies immersion (Buckle Henning, 2016). The grounded theory method is a process of emergent meaning-making that arises from immersion in a subject (Charmaz, 2006). Using grounded theory coupled with rich pictures was a project decision designed to help us to do good systems research.

The intricacies of our subject also demanded that we consider how we, the immersed systems researchers, would be affected by this project.

RESEARCHERS' SUBJECTIVITIES
From a systems perspective, one's subjectivities are not merely private idiosyncrasies.
Rather, they are the ways that certain systems of thought have claimed us,
governing the ways we think and feel, the values we privilege and those we de-emphasize,
the normative opinions we hold and the ethics we espouse, the power relations we notice

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and the thousands of judgment calls we make through the span of a research project.
(Buckle Henning, 2016)

Traditionally, researchers are schooled to view their subjectivity as a threat to high-caliber research. To quell it, researchers must continually check their insights against those of others who use appropriate (i.e. widely-accepted) procedures of research for the phenomenon under study (Goodwin, 1999). This is how rigorous research is understood to be done; however, contemporary scholarship calls us to a different relationship with our personal subjectivities, particularly when we study humanly-experienced qualities of life (Buckle Henning, 2016).

Humanly-experienced phenomena are termed "qualia" (Lewis, 1929). It may well be that systemic wholeness itself is an instance of qualia – a quality of nature that can only be subjectively experienced. *From this perspective, moments of meaningfulness, elegance, or parsimony in systems research are often indicators of potentially important qualities of systemic wholeness, the very goal of systems research (Buckle Henning, 2016).* To discern qualia we must not dismiss our emotional reactions as a threat to our inquiry.

The art of good research involves using our own personal perceptual apparatus in "actively receptive ways" (Bortoft, 1996) that do not dominate what we observe by our preconceived ideas. At times we must seek to take in information in as unfettered a way as possible; at other times we must seek to impose intellectual structure on what we have perceived (Seamon and Zajonc, 1998). The challenge of good systems research is to recognize that human minds do both, and to develop an attunement to when one or the other is holding sway within us. The assembly of the team to conduct this research project was an effort to manage subjectivities as skillfully as possible.

The project itself began as an opportunity for Buckle Henning to study the experiences of Chinese students in her business school – a population that had grown exponentially in the past five years. Conceptualizing those experiences as inherently systemic, and wanting the opportunity to demonstrate the contributions that systems theory could make to the broader academic community of management researchers, she enlisted respected systems scholars Wilby and Edson, both of whom had extensive experience as business school educators and, in particular, as teachers of Chinese students. To manage their subjectivities skillfully, researchers must become intimately familiar with "our own personal involvement in how we usually meet the world" (Wahl, 2005), p. 62). We knew, as a group of Caucasian academics, that no amount of good-willed curiosity about the experiences of Chinese women could overcome our inherent distance from the lived experience of that population. As intimately as we each strove to understand our personal blind spots, the caliber of our research would be compromised by the cultural gap between ourselves and our study subjects. We didn't want our cultural origins to contribute (subtly or otherwise) to oppressive biases (Flood and Romm, 1996) in how we gathered or analyzed our data.

We enlisted Zou to help bridge that gap. Born in Wuhan, China and studying business in America for three years, she brought an intimate understanding of the lived experience of female Chinese business students studying in the United States, herself having experienced making that decision. Zou played many roles in the design of this study. It is known that not all international

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students talk readily about their own subjective experiences of studying abroad (Marginson, 2014). Zou vetted the interview questions the other researchers designed, modifying questions' wording, and the order of questions, to maximize the likelihood that study participants would be forthcoming in their responses. She was present during the interviews, and assisted with Chinese-English translation difficulties that arose as students recalled and explained their decision-making experiences. Our intention was to ask study participants to reflect upon relational dynamics between themselves and important others in their lives. Our research was not designed to critique or find flaws in the complex decision-making processes they engaged in before coming to study in the U.S.; nonetheless, it was quite possible – given Chinese cultural norms of deference to authority figures and given the Buckle Henning's role as a faculty member in this business school – that students could feel obligated or coerced to perform in appeasing ways. To ameliorate this possibility, we wanted to convey that each participant was the respected subject matter expert, that we appreciated her expertise, and that we sought to learn from her. Zou played the invaluable role of coaching the research team in the challenges involved in conveying this message.

Among the strategies we used was to greet each participant with authentic Chinese mooncakes freshly baked in New York City's Chinatown and green tea served in tea bowls consistent with Chinese custom. We viewed these refreshments as more than an inconsequential courtesy. Rather, they were a way of immersing participants in recall of the decision-making that occurred when they were back in China. Our data collection dates coincided with China's annual Mid-Autumn Festival ("Moon Festival"). Traditionally, Chinese people celebrate harvest during this season by holding family reunions. The roundness of the moon is seen to symbolize the completeness of family; hence, this festival is a time when Chinese people are expect to reunite with their families to have dinner and celebrate prosperity, no matter how far away they are from home. Eating mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival season has been a Chinese tradition for thousands of years. Those people unable to gather with their families on Mid-Autumn Day eat mooncakes and watch the round moon on this day, knowing that their families are doing the same thing and that they are being missed and loved. Learning from Zou the significance of moon cakes was an immersive learning experience for the Caucasian members of the research team. Study participants were touched at the offer of mooncakes and tea, not expecting that participating in an academic study could involve familiar delicacies from their home country.

It is an art to create a safe environment in which research participants are willing to expose personal material that is meaningful to them. It is well known that skillful, interested listening elicits data (Fiumara, 1990). The depth of information participants shared exceeded our expectations as a research team. At the start of the interview, most communicated skepticism that they had any useful information to share, consistent with Hatch and Erlich's comment that "under-noticed aspects of daily life are rich with clues to cultural meaning and processes" (1993, p. 521). At the end of the interview, the students were surprised and proud to discover they had stories that were important and interesting. Several asked to take photos of their rich pictures, and the research team, before leaving. Many of them were reluctant to leave the room when their interview was over.
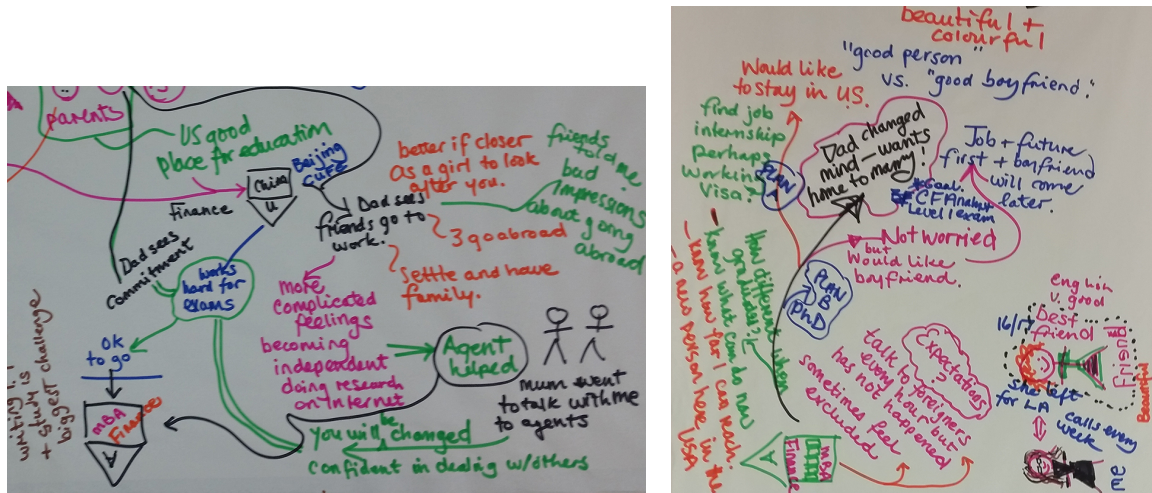
Figure I. Rich Picture Excerpts

No research involving self-report data can claim the information gathered is complete, particularly in cross-cultural research. This is humbling when juxtaposed with the wholistic ideals of systems research. Zou's assessment of students' behaviour at the end of their interviews and the depth of information our participants disclosed satisfied us that we had designed our study in a way that established a safe space for students to risk exploring the uncertainties, conflicts, vulnerabilities, and emotions involved in their decision to study business in America.

There are thousands of judgment calls to be made through the span of a research project (Buckle Henning, 2016). Among them was how to design a research team in a way that maximized the effectiveness of our individual and collective subjectivities as we executed the project. Given who we are and the subject we were studying, we particularly sought not to be dominated by preconceived ideas borne of the Western upbringing of most of the research team. The expertise of a Chinese student-researcher provided invaluable checks and balances to the academic training and assumptions of her research colleagues.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH, AND GOOD SYSTEMS RESEARCH

"International students consciously position themselves in disequilibrium within their origins and the host country" (Marginson, 2014, p. 12). Edson and Klein speak of systems research as demanding iterative, nested, and cumulative cycles of learning about one's subject systems. With each successive interview, the researchers discovered more and more about how the decision to leave China to study in America was a crucial bifurcation in the course of these women's lives and the lives of those important to them. The challenges of systems research are exacting. Through our quest to uncover the "thick" data (Maxwell, 1998) and "rich" pictures representing the decision-making experience we found ourselves listening to candid stories of parents, boyfriends, and "cousins" (i.e. family friends), surprising ethnocentrisms, and longings for friendship in America. Despite our concerns about the depth of self-reflection we could elicit, we heard stories of vulnerable self-doubt and inspiring confidence emerging from these women's struggle to decide to undertake the difficult work of graduate study halfway around the world from those they knew and loved. Such stories are lost in current discourse about Chinese

students in America that treat this population en masse, unconnected to unique personal histories. Our goal was to shift the discourse from Chinese students as an income stream for higher education to a view of them as individual persons, not only stakeholders in American education but members of intricate webs of other humans whose relationships they must manage, even as they manage their studies. A systems perspective on research is important because it gives us nuanced, multi-perspectival understanding of complex real-world phenomena. In our case, it is helping us perceive the nature of the interdependencies among people, culture, psychology, and constructions of gender. Few other studies of Chinese students in Western universities have sought to accomplish this.

Standards of good systems research as laid out in *A Guide to Systems Research – Philosophy, Processes and Practices* are not easy to reach. It is difficult to deeply understand the context and interrelationships in which a decision-making system operates. Undertaking systematic research, aided by accepted research methods, helps. However, systematic research is not necessarily systemic (Ison, 2008). To systematic rigor we must add systemic conceptualizations of our topic and how we will seek to understand it (Varey, 2016). Only by combining systematic inquiry with a perspective that actively seeks to be holistic, comprehensive, complicated, and complex can research be considered *systems* research.

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