

Safety Issues in Young Chinese Overseas Students: A Canadian Case Study

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Abstract

China has the largest number of international students in the world, accounting for 25% of all international students. Canada is one of the four major destination countries where Chinese parents send their children for education. According to the China Counsel General, the number of Chinese overseas students in BC was 50,000 in 2017. With the increasing numbers of Chinese overseas students, serious incidents involving the students have also increased. More than 31 deaths of overseas students have occurred around the world in the last year. Among them, Yu Lin Hai died by suicide in Richmond, BC in 2017. Safety has now become a salient issue among Chinese overseas students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the case of Yu, a 17-year-old student, in the context of international student safety. As part of the case study design, seven interviews were conducted with field observations. Newspaper reports were collected and the analysis of data and interpretations were co-created with the participants. The discussion included potential psycho-socio-cultural influences. Ultimately, the question is: Was Yu's death a suicide or a murder? Recommendations are made for overseas students to carefully weigh their decision-making, overseas preparations, prior knowledge and coping skills; safety education; and consider possible culture shock and cultural adjustments. The rapid response to incidents, and support from the government, school, community, and family also need to be considered.

Background

China has the largest number of overseas students in the world, accounting for 25% of all international students. By the end of 2015, Chinese overseas students numbered 4.04 million [1]. Canada, as one of the four major destination countries (the US, Canada, Australia, Japan) for Chinese overseas students [2], was estimated to host 500,000 international students in 2017 [3]. Of these, 71,000 were minors, aged 17 years or less [3] and 24,000 were in BC [4]. Chinese overseas students accounted for one-third of the international students in Canada and 40% of the international students in BC (53,000) in 2017 [4].

With the increasing number of Chinese overseas students, their involvement in serious incidents has also increased. More than 31 deaths of overseas students have occurred around the world in the last year [5]. More than 40% of the cases were related to kidnapping, robbery, murder, and sexual assaults. Of these, 60% involved students who were under 22-years-of-age, mostly around 19-21-years.

Among the 31 cases, causes of death included: (a) passion or emotional problems, such as Haozhi Wang who was attacked by his ex's new love in Toronto, Jeffery Hu in Melbourne who was beaten to death in Chinatown, and Lin Hai Yu in Vancouver; (b) wrong friends, such as Michael Deng in the US who was involved in a fraternity pledge at Baruch College; (c) wealth showing off, such as Peng Sun who was kidnapped in North Vancouver; and (d) lack of safety awareness, such as Yangjie Li who was raped and beaten to death in Germany and Melissa Shen who was randomly attacked by a racist in Burnaby BC.

In September 2017, a Chinese overseas student, Lin Hai Yu, was reported to have committed suicide in Richmond BC. The case captivated media attention and activated the rapid response to the safety of young Chinese students in their community. The purpose of this study is to investigate the case of Lin Hai Yu, a 17-year-old student, in the context of international student safety.

Materials and Methods

Using an individual case study design, I obtained verbal consent and conducted seven interviews, including interviews with Yu's

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parents, an Uber taxi service owner, a community leader, and three local police officers. I took a field trip to the reported site and collected data from local Chinese newspapers. The analysis and interpretation was co-created with the participants.

Case Study

Yu was a 17-year-old Chinese high school student in Vancouver, who arrived at Vancouver in August 2016. Yu was reported missing on September 11, 2017. His body was found dead in East Richmond on September 22, 2017. The RCMP (police) indicated that the cause of death was not suspicious [6] and provided no further information.

Yu was a grade 12 student at David Thompson Secondary, who boarded in a homestayrun by a family friend. Yu was healthy without a history of depression, suicide attempts, or violence. Yu did not have outstanding issues at school. Yu lived with his homestay owner's son Yan, aged 15, who constantly challenged Yu in many aspects. Yu made no Canadian friends but shared the same circle of Chinese friends with Yan. Yu often wore or used things with expensive brands, stayed at Internet cafes or ethnic shopping centres, and traveled by Uber taxi.

Emotional life

Before arriving in Canada, Yu had a fight with Yan, who had seduced and taken away Yu's ex-girlfriend. Both Yu and Yan were from wealthy families. Yan had a reputation for showing off his family's wealth and power. He was once alleged to commit a crime in China but was not prosecuted with the assistance from his father's lawyer.

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In Vancouver, Yu continued to have rifts with Yan over girlfriends. After Yan found out that Yu admired a girl, Yan used the same tactics to pursue her. This triggered Yu to act out when he was rejected by the girl on September 10, 2018. As the events unfolded, Yu conversed with the girl's close friend until midnight. The chat was likely centered on the girl and the conversation may have eventually led to Yu's death.

Communication style with parents

Yu was his parent's only son. In their eyes, Yu was a quiet and caring boy. Yu wrote them every day with thoughtful and detailed messages on the *WeChat* communication service. Launched in China, *WeChat* was one of the most popular social applications in the world [7]. Yu had once requested to move out of Yan's house but his parents did not approve of the idea. On September 11, unlike his usual message style, Yu sent a brief suicide note on *WeChat* to inform his parents. It said, "I'm going. Bye!"

The incident

Those involved in the incident included: (1) Yu's roommate Yan, (2) Yu's circle of friends: Owen, who lived in a Trump building; Zoe, a girl admired by Yu; Karen, a female friend who was close to Zoe; Ting, who was Yan's female friend; and (3) other witness: the Uber driver and a passenger. All individuals mentioned in this study were given pseudonyms. All of the witnesses were of Chinese ethnicity.

According to the witness reports, Yu left his friends on September 10 at 9:00 pm at a SkyTrain station after he had been rejected by the girl he admired. He was agitated and emotionally disturbed. Yu had private conversations with Karen, Zoe's close friend, between 10:00 pm and midnight, the content of which was not disclosed.

What happened to Yu and what his mental state was like between midnight and 2:00 am was not known. While the start of his Uber taxi ride is unknown, we know that Yu got out of the vehicle at the Knight Street bridge around 2:00 a.m. Yu was conscious and had not been drinking. Ting received a text message from Yu at around 2:00 a.m. It said: "I hope you will like me in my next life time." That was his last known contact. Although a witness reported that he thought he saw Yu walk by the Trump building at around 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. the next morning, he later revoked his statement.

The homestay owner called Yu's parents and reported Yu's missing on September 11 at 1:30 p.m. Yu's parents who lived in China arrived at Vancouver on September 12. The Uber taxi company reported Yu's travel records until September 14.

Yan, who did not usually get along with Yu, acted as a spokesperson for all of the involved friends.

Discussion

Non-suspicious death

The RCMP announced Yu's death as non-suspicious and the coroner did not reveal how Yu died. What does suspicious or non-suspicious death mean? A reporter explained, "A death is suspicious when the circumstances, or the causes, are not medically or legally explained. . . . When a death is not thought to be suspicious, it means nobody else was involved" [8]. The police investigates both suspicious, violent death like homicide and non-suspicious, violent deaths like accidents and suicides [9]. Based on the suicide notes that Yu's parents and

Yan's female friend received from *WeChat*, Yu's death was considered as a case of suicide.

But did Yu really commit suicide? After all, anyone with access to Yu's *WeChat* account could sign in and write any kind of note on his behalf.

Moreover, obvious discrepancies were seen among the witness statements. Yu was still alive at around 2:00 a.m. His body was found some distance from the Knight Street bridge. The witness's statement that he saw Yu at 7:00~ 8:00 a.m. the next morning was surprising and Yu may have visited a friend in the Trump building. After the witness revoked his statement, it seemed more likely that he had died earlier.

Chinese news reporters speculated that Yu had died by suicide, because he left the Uber ride at the Knight Street bridge. The driver confirmed letting Yu off at 2:00 a.m. but did not see him jump into the river. Yu's body was found near 20000 River Road which would have taken him an hour and a half to walk from the bridge.

The Uber taxi service continued receiving travel reports for three days after Yu had been reported as missing. Who was using the service after Yu passed away?

We found evidence that had not been revealed to the public and could not conclude that Yu died by suicide. The idea of "non-suspicious death" was given based on the evidence the RCMP had at the time, but new evidence may change that conclusion.

Development issues – late adolescence

Developmentally, Yu was in late-adolescence [10]. His judgment about right and wrong was still not mature. Yu desired independence and autonomy and wanted to show his parents that he could handle his life by himself abroad. He wrote caring and detailed messages every day to reassure his parents that he was okay alone in the new country. Yu must have struggled a lot in deciding to leave the safety and security of his home in China to study abroad. To maintain his identity, Yu tried to fit in with his peers, but he stayed with the same ethnic group due to his language and cultural barriers.

In late-adolescence, boys typically want to fall in love and Yu was no exception. Before beginning his studies abroad, Yu had a girlfriend. He also admired another girl in Canada and wanted to show his affection for her and hopefully dated her. Unfortunately his attempts were thwarted by his roommate Yan.

On September 11, while on the SkyTrain, Yu appeared to be moody. He chose the moment to ask for a date with the girl in front of a group of friends. Apparently, he was turned down and left in anger. Generally, adolescents are at greater risk of being moody, impulsive, and engaging in risky behaviors, with a higher incidence of suicide, unintentional injuries, homicide, and drugs and alcohol use. Could Yu take his own life because of the rejection on the train? It seems unlikely.

Yu was a healthy boy who had no history of depression or attempted suicide. He survived losing his ex-girlfriend in China so why would he react so strongly to being rejected by a girl he had never dated? Perhaps Yu was more angry at Yan's behavior than at the rejection. After walking from the bridge to a nearby remote area, Yu was likely exhausted. But how exactly did he kill himself? Was it by drowning?

Culture shock and cultural adjustment

International students can feel anxious and lonely when they live in a new culture. The more social interactions they have with natives, the greater will be their adjustment to the different culture. Those who “bring family and have [the least amount of] interaction with their hosts experience more culture shock” [11]. Other factors include cultural differences, personality traits, and prior preparations for cultural learning and coping [12].

Those who show a strong preference for their ethnic culture may feel more secure in maintaining their own cultural practices [12]. Vancouver is an ethnically mixed city and according to the Canada 2016 Census, almost 30% of the population in Greater Vancouver [13] and 53% in Richmond were of Chinese heritage [14]. The discrepancy in cultures between Greater Vancouver and Chinese heritage were minimized, allowing Yu to feel socially and psychologically adjusted.

Personality traits can have a significant influence on adjustment outcomes [12]. Yu was described as being shy; he had limited access to the new host culture, and tended to avoid mingling with the natives. Yu did not have proper emotional outlet or have access to local native resources. Yu was constantly living under tension with other individuals and between cultures. Did Yu suffer depression when he started his studies in Canada?

Encouraged by Yan's parents, Yu's parents sent Yu to study abroad. Prior culture learning and coping were not mentioned or emphasized. The parents considered that his living with an acquaintance would be less of a culture shock for him in the less stressful host country, and make more sense financially. These factors are common for Chinese parents when choosing to send their children to a study abroad destination [15]. Neither Yu nor his parents had much knowledge about the local resources in Canada. Campus resources were not mentioned and only the local Chinese community was mobilized in the incident. Yu's parents were able to find Yu's body after 11 days.

Culture shock refers to psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments [16] and the development of cultural shock occurs in four stages [17]: 1) honeymoon, 2) cultural shock, 3) gradual adjustment, and 4) adaptation. Yu may have still been in the cultural shock stage and seeking comfort from the circle of his Chinese friends.

Safety issues

Safety was continuously ranked among the top five considerations when choosing a country for studies [15, 18]. In a 2017 survey, safety becomes a priority for prospective international students [19]. In the survey, 88% of the students indicated that a strong campus safety program was helpful or very helpful to their decision making.

Canada is considered one of the safest places to live in the world. Yu's parents also considered Canada a safe country, but unfortunately, Yu lived in an unsafe environment, with an enemy who constantly challenged him with his power, wealth, and seduction. Yu's parents may have been unaware that his environment was unsafe or that their decision could endanger their son. The homestay owner was a business friend of Yu's parents and they likely assumed that their friend would look after their son. Nevertheless, they ignored the complaints that their son made about Yan even though they learnt about Yu's prior connection to Yan. Yu's parents wanted him to be patient and they did not want to break the business relationship with the homestay owner.

Lacking in safety awareness, Yu's parents thought that Yu would be able to graduate and move out quickly.

Yu's death raised a safety concern in the Chinese community. The community blamed the death on mental problems and initiated a rapid response team to help young students in the future. A monthly education session was offered.

Yu's death opened up many questions that have yet to be answered. The incident may have been triggered by an earlier event. Yu might have been vulnerable and felt lonely in the new culture, and might have suffered from undiagnosed depression. He might have felt desperate, which caused him to act impulsively. After his hour and a half chat with Karen, Yu could have decided to challenge Yan for what he had done to both girls. Questions still remain about what happened between midnight and 2:00 a.m.? Who did Yu see? Why did Yu send a farewell text message to Yan's female friend instead of to the girl he admired? Why did Yu stop at the bridge? Why was Yu's body found at the remote area near the river? With so many unanswered questions, I believe the case should be kept open for now.

Conclusion

International student safety has recently been identified as a systemic problem [20]. Discussions have been held and safety assurance strategies have been instituted in four countries that are major international education destinations (i.e., the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia). Nyland et al. [20] suggested that host governments and education agencies should enact or support policies and practices to promote international student safety. The government and key representative bodies should also establish an international student service office to investigate and report serious incidents. Nyland et al. have also suggested that a voice should be given to international student representatives and their home governments on relevant advisory boards to advocate for safety issues [20].

Currently, no safety policies associated with international students have been instituted in Canada, though safe precautions may be mentioned in international student handbooks.

Like Jeremy Hu's murder in Melbourne [21], Yu lacked any awareness of local safety procedures in his new country. While school advisors appeared to play no role during Yu's investigation, they could help international students in adapting to the different culture and minimize the language barriers. Both schools and communities have a responsibility to educate international students about cultural values and behaviors, new social rules, safety precautions and protection, and to find help or report threats.

The local Chinese community responded rapidly to Yu's death and raised funds for monthly education sessions in the community dealing with prevention and intervention. Unfortunately, the sessions were not as relevant as they needed to be since support from professionals was also needed. Community leaders should take the opportunity to build a rapid response team and advocate further for safety issues in their governments and advisory boards.

Self-assessment and prior knowledge are critical for young people when studying abroad. Parents need to consider their children's mental status and their knowledge and skills for studying abroad in a given destination country. Parents should also ensure that their children are in a safe environment in a host country. Regular and

open communication should be maintained between parents and their children and parents should be able to recognize any signs that their children might be in danger.

Yu's case has widespread implications for safety policies, schools, local communities, families, and international students. Yu's death was a tragedy and only further investigation can elucidate what really happened.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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