The hero's journey: Understanding the experiences and motivations of international secondary students

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ACCEPTED VERSION

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The hero's journey: Understanding the experiences and motivations of international secondary students

This paper examines the utility of Campbell's narrative construction of 'the hero's journey' as a conceptual apparatus to understand how international students from Confucian heritage cultures navigate their experiences in Western schooling systems like Australia. The hero's journey framework was used to investigate the commonalities and differences in international students' beliefs and behaviours, which led to the development of three different student 'hero' models: the self-determined hero, the hesitant hero and the wounded hero. These models were used to represent the students' beliefs, behaviours and perceptions of support and to describe the experiences and motivations of students in different contexts during their secondary schooling in Australia. The hero's journey provides a potentially useful framework from which to engage schools, systems and policymakers in productive dialogue regarding the support and engagement of international students.

Keywords: international students, narrative methodology, hero's journey, Confucian heritage cultures

Introduction

The internationalisation of education over the past four decades has transformed universities and schools into a globalised, interconnected, and hybridised knowledge culture (Fielding & Vidovich, 2017; Hebert & Abdi, 2013). Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there were over 5.6 million students enrolled in foreign education institutions (OECD, 2020), with 75 per cent choosing to study in Anglophone countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK and US. During 2019, approximately 80 per cent of secondary international students studying in Australia were from Asian countries, while more than 50 per cent were from China (Australian Government, 2019).

This paper reports on how Campbell's (1968) hero's journey narrative framework was used as a conceptual apparatus for a study that examined the experiences, aspirations and motivations of international secondary students from Confucian heritage cultures (Sheehan, 2020) who were studying in Australia. The hero's journey was combined with concepts from expectancy-value theory and self-determination theory to analyse and represent data from interviews and focus groups with international students who had completed their secondary schooling in Australia and were now studying at Australian universities. While there is substantial literature on the experiences of international students at the tertiary level, less is known about those enrolled in secondary schools (Chue & Nie, 2016).

The strength of using a narrative framework is in the recognition that empirical understandings developed in research studies are a 'composition of narratives' (Heikkinen et al., 2000, p. 1). Further, the hero's journey enables representations of individual stories, with an emphasis on their commonalities and differences (Randles, 2012; Seary & Willans, 2004). Crucially, the hero's journey narrative framework emphasised the unfolding of the story, rather than focusing on the outcome (McCormack, 2002), which highlighted the agency of international students in their 'process of self-formation' (Matsunaga et al., 2020, p. 647). While previous studies have utilised the hero's journey to explore and represent the journey of individuals and organisations in the field of education (e.g., Brown & Moffett, 1999; Follo, 2002; Goldstein, 2005; Lambert, 2014; O'Shea & Stone, 2014; Randles, 2012; Seary & Willans, 2004), this study did so by weaving the narrative framework into theories of motivation—expectancy-value theory and self-determination theory—to analyse the experiences of international secondary students.

Expectancy-value theory (e.g., Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) contends that people's choices, effort, persistence, and performance are affected by their expectations of success and the value they place on the activity in question, while self-determination theory (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009) recognises that supporting the development of autonomy, competence and relatedness can enable self-regulation and intrinsic motivation. Expectancy-value theory has been used in studies that examined the motivation of students from Confucian heritage cultures (e.g., Chiang et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2009; Lu et al., 2011), while expectancy-value theory has been applied to different cultural contexts (e.g., Wigfield et al., 2004). Further, the two theories have been successfully combined to examine the motivations of international students (e.g., Vansteenkiste et al., 2005; Wang & Rao, 2020).

The hero's journey

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell (1968) described a narrative pattern, in which an individual undertakes a journey into a different world, where they confront challenges, befriend allies and develop new powers or skills. With their skills and help from allies, the hero overcomes all obstacles and succeeds in reaching their goal. The hero's physical journey ends where it began, with a return to home. However, their internal journey leaves them forever transformed; a more mature and capable figure who brings gifts to those who remained at home.

In the development of the hero's journey framework, Campbell (1968) applied Jungian analytical psychology to analyse oral and written narratives from multiple cultures throughout time (Brown & Moffett, 1999; Oxford, 2008), including mythological tales of legendary Chinese emperors and deities. Campbell (1968) drew upon the concept of

a *monomyth*, which is a narrative archetype common to different cultures and historical contexts. The hero's journey has been applied to various studies of individuals and organisations in a variety of fields, including application to the study of modern texts from Confucian heritage cultures (e.g., Kim, 2012; Stewart, 2015). The following are key phases of the hero's journey:

Ordinary world: Life at home

This initial phase of the hero's journey introduces the hero of the story prior to the beginning of the journey. This stage introduces important details about the hero's life, including their beliefs, pastimes, family and friends. In this study, this phase focused on the students' lives in their home countries prior to their journeys as international students.

Ordinary world: Call to adventure

The hero's journey begins when they receive a call to adventure. This call invites the hero, willingly or not, to leave their familiar surrounds and travel to a new world where their adventure begins. In this study, this phase explored the events and individuals that sparked the idea for the students to complete secondary school in Australia.

Ordinary world: Refusal of the call

The hero may feel overwhelmed at the enormity of the journey ahead or may be reluctant to leave the safety and comforts of home. They may also doubt their capability to conquer the challenges that may arise on the journey, so the hero refuses the call. This phase of the journey explored findings on students who were reluctant to move to Australia to complete secondary school.

Special world: Tests

Now in a world far from home, the hero encounters a series of obstacles that test her in a variety of ways and challenge her resilience to pursue her goal. These tests may come in a variety of forms such as physical, psychological or emotional challenges. In this study, this phase of the journey explored the range of challenges that the international students faced in secondary school in Australia that negatively impacted their achievement motivation. These challenges included academic challenges, threats to physical safety, arguments with friends, loneliness, isolation and bullying.

Special world: Allies

To succeed, the hero needs allies: people they can trust to give them good advice, share weapons, boost their powers and stand by their side in the face of challenges. These allies will help the hero to grow in strength so that she may overcome obstacles that lie ahead. Different allies arrive at different points in the hero's journey, providing various forms of support to help the hero achieve their treasure. This phase of the study provided findings on the allies within and external to the school environment who influenced the achievement motivation of the international students.

Special world: Reward

The hero reaches their goal and is rewarded for overcoming the challenges they faced throughout their long and treacherous journey. The hero rescues the imprisoned, finds the coveted treasure or is granted lands and great wealth. This section of the journey explored the students' achievement of their academic goal: entry to university.

Ordinary world: Return with gifts

In this final phase of the hero's journey, the hero returns to their homeland, a transformed person. The battles won, the enemies defeated, and the challenges overcome have all helped the hero to grow in knowledge and skills. The hero returns home to bring gifts to those who remained behind.

Three student hero models

This study examined the achievement motivation of academically successful international secondary students who had studied in Australian schools using expectancy-value theory (e.g., Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), self-determination theory (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the hero's journey conceptual framework (Campbell, 1968).

Participants (see Table 1) were international students from Confucian heritage cultures who had attended secondary schools in two major Australian cities and were subsequently accepted into Australian universities. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews with the 15 participants, focus group interviews with small groups of participants, researcher observations made during interviews and researcher journaling following interviews and focus groups. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and the study was provided with ethical clearance by the [University] Human Research Ethics Committee (#referencenumber). Data were then analysed via a 13-step process, which included transcription, collation, multiple rounds of thematic analysis and coding, confirmation of themes, constant comparative analysis and verification.

[Table 1 about here]

In investigating the nature of achievement motivation of the students and their perspectives on the role of the school in supporting their achievement motivation, it became evident that there were multiple commonalities in students' perspectives in different contexts. The recognition of these commonalities led to the development of three student hero models—the self-determined hero, the hesitant hero and the wounded hero—which were used to represent similar understandings and behaviours of students during the different phases of their secondary schooling in Australia.

Generally, the self-determined hero acted with high self-determination; had propitious beliefs, employed effective behaviours and perceived high-quality support. The hesitant hero acted with less self-determination than the self-determined hero. They may have had propitious beliefs but did not always act on them. The hesitant hero had a smaller range of academic behaviours or employed them ineffectively and perceived poorer quality support from the school. The wounded hero exercised limited self-determination. They may have had propitious beliefs and effective behaviours but felt controlled by others or outcomes and did not exercise autonomy. These three models were not designed as perfect representations of the expectations, beliefs and motivations of the participants, which would be impossible to capture. Instead, they were developed as character motifs to accompany the hero's journey framework in the analytical and representational work of the study.

The participants in the study would move between the hero models. For example, in one context, a particular student acted with agency and was driven by intrinsic motivation—beliefs and behaviours typical of the self-determined hero— whereas in another instance, the same student felt pressure to study, was driven by external influences and displayed anxiousness—beliefs and behaviours more typical of the wounded hero. The following section provides an overview of the hero's journey as

it was applied to empirical data collected during the study, to provide evidence of its utility as a conceptual apparatus for understanding the experiences, aspirations and motivations of international secondary students. For a more detailed reporting of the broader empirical findings from the study, see Sheehan (2020).

The hero's journey: Experiences of international secondary students in Australian schools

Ordinary world: The call to adventure

An intrinsically motivated, autonomous decision to study overseas is likely to have a positive impact on an international student's wellbeing (Chirkov et al., 2008), acculturation process (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006), inclination to engage in their studies (Eccles et al., 1983) and ability to sustain their motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, some students self-initiated the move to Australia, whereas for others, the idea was suggested by a parent or other close relative.

Most students in this study displayed beliefs and behaviours typical of self-determined heroes with regards to being intrinsically motivated to move overseas. They were excited by the prospect of experiencing a new culture, making friends with Australian students and trying a different schooling system. For example, Christine was motivated to move to Australia so she could pursue her love of learning English:

> When I was in (my country) and I was in middle school, English was my favourite subject and, actually, I was good at it and my parents knew that I was interested in learning English. (Christine)

Similarly, Charli was excited at the prospect of experiencing a different lifestyle in another country:

> I think, 'Maybe I am young, I want to have look world'. (Charli)

For Sarah, the idea of overseas study was raised by an aunt who lived in Australia. Her aunt believed that an international education would increase Sarah's opportunities for further study and employment. Sarah was excited at the prospect because of her interest in new experiences:

> I was like, 'I want to try new things.' Yeah, I was quite excited because I really wanted to go to overseas. I really like the stuff here … the culture. (Sarah)

Other students were more reluctant to move overseas to complete their secondary studies, acting instead as hesitant heroes in their refusal of the call.

Ordinary world: Refusal of the call

Some international students perceive a cost in moving overseas, particularly the loss of support of family and friends, which can negatively impact acculturation for these students (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006). Further, if individuals pursue an activity, such as moving overseas, to please someone else, they are motivated by a goal external to self and may find it harder to sustain motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, international students who are hesitant to move overseas and only do so to please their parents are at risk of a negative experience on arrival and may struggle to remain motivated throughout their time overseas. However, young people often adopt their parents' attitudes towards learning and their value for education (Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Chen, 2014; Hui et al., 2011), so hesitant heroes may be influenced to pursue international education despite their initial reservations.

These hesitant hero students who were wary of moving to Australia had a close family member or friend who convinced them to seize the opportunity presented. For example, Kay's father convinced her to move to Australia:

My father said, 'You have opportunity to go to overseas and see different cultural and different life'. (Kay)

For Shirley, school friends in her home country played a role in encouraging her to move to Australia. When Shirley told her close friends that she did not feel happy about her parents' decision, her friends enthusiastically persuaded Shirley that it would be a wonderful opportunity. Listening to the advice of her family and friends, Shirley reluctantly agreed to go to Australia to complete secondary school:

They (school friends) think that [the idea of moving to Australia] is so cool, 'Whoa', 'I'm so happy that you can go there.', 'If I were you, I would be so excited.', 'Why are you so worried?'. So, I thought, 'Okay, okay' (Shirley).

Special world: Tests

All students experienced a variety of physical, emotional, psychological, social and academic tests throughout their period of study at Australian secondary schools, which negatively impacted their motivation to persist with their studies and their sense of wellbeing. As the students' motivation and wellbeing were impaired at times of challenge, they could be described as displaying beliefs and behaviours typical of wounded hero students during these times.

Students faced physical challenges, including illness, weight gain and injury, as well as serious threats to their safety. While some tests were relatively minor: 'I loved the food in the boarding school and then I get fat!' (Shirley), there can be significant physical dangers, usually associated with racism and assault, faced by international tertiary students (e.g., Brown & Jones, 2013; Nyland et al., 2010). For example, Sunny had a terrifying experience just two weeks after arriving in Australia. While living in an apartment with her homestay family, an intruder entered her bedroom and lay down beside her on her bed. She explained that this incident frightened her so much that her

immediate reaction was to leave Australia and return home. However, the support she received from her homestay family and the police gave her the confidence to continue living in Australia:

> The 15 days arrived here, a man … three o clock in the morning jumped from the window and slept next to me. I was so scared. It's a guy and he is a local and he is a gardener, I think … He is targeting the Asian girls and he knows so many homes who live in Asian girls or something like that and he jumped into other houses at night and then he just like put the video camera in the bathroom and after that I was so scared … he slept next to me! Right next to me! And he just asked me to not speak anything and he keeps laying down and I find a chance to escape from the room and I get to the police … It's very awful. (Sunny)

Social tests faced by international students can cause feelings of isolation and loneliness (e.g., Kim & Okazaki, 2014; Newman & Newman, 2009). Relationships play a pivotal role in fostering or thwarting a student's motivation (e.g., Li et al., 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ward & Parker, 2013). For example, Esther explained that of all the challenges she faced during her time in Australia, it was difficult relationships with peers that caused her the greatest pain:

> Like I do got upset several times, but one big upset isn't being away from family, but the kind of situation I was in. The most upset time I had, well, they were about relationships with friends. (Esther)

Christine explained the debilitating effect that academic challenges she faced had on her. Even though she had felt herself quite competent in English in her home country, she was very distressed in the early weeks in her new school because she felt she had misjudged her ability to succeed in a Western school environment. She felt she had made a mistake in coming to Australia and seriously considered returning home:

> I feel like there are many challenges. I don't understand anything in the class, especially History and Geography. It's so hard (Christine).

12

Yvonne, who felt her English skills were not strong, struggled with the vocabulary used in her subjects and reflected that being competent in English before beginning secondary school in an English-speaking country is the most important factor influencing success:

> Language is the most important thing to have (Yvonne).

The academic challenges faced by the students mirror findings of research that document the range of tests international secondary students encounter (e.g., Alexander, 2017; Gan, 2009; Kim & Okazaki, 2014) and demonstrate the important role of perceived competence in the wellbeing of international students (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Leung, 2001).

Special world: Allies

International students often struggle to make friends with host nation students (Gan, 2009; Kim & Okazaki, 2014). Reasons for this include cultural dissonance (Alexander, 2017; Gan, 2009), language difficulties (Kuo, 2011) and perceptions of discrimination (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006). These obstacles to developing friendships mean that most international students form their closest relationships with other overseas students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; McFaul, 2016; Rienties et al., 2013). Most of the teenagers in this study, despite their efforts to establish friendships, faced difficulties in befriending Australian students, which sometimes left them feeling like wounded hero students. Many found their language skills were not sufficient to enable them to understand the fast-paced, colloquial-laden language of Australian teenagers. Even if they felt their language skills were adequate, the difference in cultural backgrounds meant that the students did not share a common teenage knowledge about movies, TV shows, sport and music:

> I still found it hard to make friends with local students. Not only about the language. The language is important. But also, I found we don't share similar topic that we can talk about. It might be the culture difference. Like the drama … the sports. We watch different stuff, that's what separates us. (May)

Two students, Kay and Amy, claimed that some local students sometimes bullied international students. Kay explained how some Australian students had regularly taunted and stuck chewing gum on international students' chairs:

> [Australian students] not bully me but bully my friend. They use mean words [and] put chewing gum on the seat. (Kay)

Hesitant hero students felt it was not possible to sustain friendships with both host nation students and international students because this was a sign of divided loyalties. International students who had a foot in each camp risked being ostracised. For example, despite Shirley's enthusiasm in the early months to make friends with Australian students, she recognised this was not as easy as she had hoped. In her later years in Australia, she found the greatest support came from her international student friends. As an example of the challenge of maintaining friendships with both groups, Shirley shared a story of a fellow international student who focused on making host nation friends and in the process lost her international friends:

> Then she really wants to make some local friends. Which she did. But maybe the balance between how you play with them and how you play with your international friends is really important to think about. 'Cause sometimes maybe … at that time I felt like she didn't want to play with us. You really need to find a balance in between … I don't know how to say that, but I feel kind of sad. Sometimes just because we're from the same country you don't want to talk to me … Trying to keep the balance … so then it becomes difficult. (Shirley)

Self-determined hero students were allies to themselves. Their motivation to engage in and persist with their studies was influenced by high-quality, internally sourced drivers.

Their motivation was underpinned by propitious beliefs, which was evident in their employment of a wide range of effective behaviours that led to academic success that increased their motivation to study. As these students were driven by internally regulated motivation and acted with autonomy, they enjoyed sound wellbeing.

Hesitant hero students' beliefs and behaviours meant they were a poorer quality ally to themselves. Although their beliefs motivated them to engage in and persist with their studies, the largely extrinsic, introjected influences on their motivation meant they operated with a poorer quality motivation. These students employed a narrower range of academic strategies than the self-determined hero, which may have impeded their achievement. As these students were driven by less internally regulated motivation and felt controlled by others and outcomes, it was harder for them to maintain their motivation to engage in and persist with their studies.

The wounded hero student was a poor ally to themselves. Although their beliefs and behaviours motivated them to engage in and persist with their studies, they were influenced by the extrinsic motivators of fear and punishment. These students employed a very narrow range of academic behaviours. Due to being driven by influences external to self, these students suffered from compromised wellbeing and struggled to maintain their motivation to persist.

Special world: Reward

Due to their inherent strengths and the aid of allies, students overcame many challenges and maintained their motivation to reach their goal: successful completion of secondary school and have earned their reward: entry to university. The students are currently enrolled in undergraduate degrees at Australian universities. All of the students claimed that they were glad they had attended school in Australia. They perceived that the knowledge and skills gained at secondary school made the transition to university

smoother than for those international students who enrolled post completion of their secondary studies in their home countries. They also perceived that the newer arrivals struggled more with the challenges of acculturation combined with the heavier academic demands of university. However, despite the recognition of the benefits they gained by attending secondary school in Australia, the students acknowledged that they still faced tests. The difficulties they encountered included new academic challenges, making friends with Australian students at university and managing the workload of tertiary studies while balancing part-time work and managing a household. No doubt, the beliefs and behaviours that influenced their motivation during secondary school continue to play some role in motivating them. The students also identified a range of new allies, including tutors, other international students and counsellors, who have helped them to navigate the challenges of university.

Ordinary world: Return with gifts

This phase of the journey sees the hero return to the ordinary world a much wiser and more capable person, who brings wisdom to those who remained in the ordinary world. At the time of the study, most students had not made plans about when or if they would permanently return to their home countries. Two students had clear plans: May, heeding her parents' wishes, will return home on completion of her studies, while Amy plans to stay in Australia and apply for permanent residency. If the plans of students who participated in this study align with a recent report on migration of international students into Australia in recent years (Birrell, 2019), approximately 20 per cent of them may apply to become permanent residents.

Although the journey is not over for these students, reflections shared in interviews and focus groups indicated that they recognised their growth into wiser and

16

more capable individual. For example, Charli recognised that she had become a much more outgoing person:

> I used to be a shy person when I was in (my home country). Australia helped me too [so] much … I keep growing. (Charli)

Some students commented that their relationships with their parents had improved as a result of their attending secondary school in Australia. Sunny was one of those students. One of her motivations to study overseas was to escape her difficult relationship with her parents. It seems the time away helped both parents and child develop a greater fondness or respect for each other:

> [In these] three years my relationship with my parents, it got closer. When we talk to each other we share our experience and we are more like friends. (Sunny)

Many students expressed they had developed skills in Australia that they had not previously had such as managing diets, doing paid part-time work, managing study timetables, cooking and finding tutors. Belinda explained the positive experience of having a part-time job and how it helped her to develop her English skills and her ability to relate to people. She believed that people in her home country would admire the skills she had developed:

> My job helps me relating to people. I really like having a job in Australia. I really like it when I go back to (my home country) and I tell my friends and they say, 'You got a job! That must be good!' (Belinda)

As for the gifts students will take back to their families and society, it is anticipated that the knowledge and skills gained from at least six years living and studying overseas will make them learned, experienced people who can share their wisdom and maturity with their family, friends and societies.

Though this exploration of their educational journey ends, the students continue their campaign. It is hoped that what has been learned in studying the achievement motivation of these students and what aided them to sustain their motivation despite the challenges they faced can benefit future students and all who are involved in providing international education to secondary school students.

Conclusion

Key findings that arose from the study included that students' motivations were complex and varied, influenced by their beliefs and behaviours; intrinsic student motivation was easier to sustain and fostered greater wellbeing than extrinsic motivation; and that schools played an important role in supporting motivation through meeting the students' need for relatedness, autonomy and competence. There are important implications for schools that serve international students to carefully consider how they identify and accommodate student engagement and motivation. Much of the focus of international schooling literature is on academic success, yet factors of motivation and student wellbeing are central to students' success. For example, schools will encounter international students who are self-determined, those who are hesitant, and others who will struggle with their motivation and social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

The continued growth in demand for international schooling by students and their families in Australia and other Anglophone countries requires careful consideration by policymakers, school systems, leaders and teachers, to understand the experiences and motivations of international students, to better engage and support them in high-quality learning experiences. It is not enough to provide a homogenous curriculum and pedagogical delivery to domestic and international students, without giving thought to the complexities and particularities of the needs and desires of

international students. The use of expectancy-value theory and self-determination theory can enable schools to better understand the extrinsic and intrinsic factors of motivation regarding their international students. Similarly, Campbell's (1968) hero's journey narrative framework is a productive conceptual apparatus for understanding the experiences of international students from Confucian heritage cultures who study in Australian secondary schools. The framework provides a potentially useful starting point for a dialogue with policymakers and schools regarding the importance of meaningful engagement with international students who make the decision to live and learn in a host country, while taking seriously their unique goals, motivations, strengths and challenges.

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Table 1. Study participants

Student pseudonym	Country of origin	Age on arrival (years)	Year group on arrival	Length of time in Australia (years)
Amy	China	15	10	3
Belinda	China	17	10	3
Brandon	South Korea	16	11	2
Charli	China	18	11	2
Christine	South Korea	15	9	4
Dan	China	17	11	2
Esther	China	15	10	3
Kay	China	15	10	3
Luke	China	17	11	2
May	China	16	11	2
Sarah	China	16	10	3
Shirley	China	16	10	3
Sunny	China	16	10	3
Victor	China	16	10	3
Yvonne	China	16	10	3