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Talking Trees/树说/述说: A virtual journey to the East
in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Talking Trees/树说/述说: A virtual journey to the East in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic is a collaborative research project that provides students from the University of Nottingham (UoN) with the opportunity to ‘Journey to the East’ without travelling there physically. The project draws on the literature on student migration and chimes with previous projects delivered either separately or in partnership by Lo and Pinchbeck around notions of migration and belonging. It was devised in collaboration between Dr Lan Lo, Assistant Professor in Chinese Language, Culture and Society, from the UoN and Dr Michael Pinchbeck, Reader in Theatre (MMU) during the Covid-19 pandemic as an alternative to study placement for students taking Chinese on university degree programmes. It was part of a package of measures designed to address these students’ language and cultural needs in the context of lockdown and restrictions on international travel including to China.

This paper sets out the rationale for the project, the context in which it was developed, the questions it foregrounds, the theoretical assumptions that informed its design, as well as an initial evaluation of the main outcomes. It concludes by emphasising the value of such products, especially in the context of an uncertain international environment in which issues such as global health pandemics and political tensions between China and the West could have important implications for the future of placement programmes to China.

Context and Literature Review

There is a broad and ever-expanding literature on student mobility in the Higher Education context. In their contribution Ilieva et al. (2017), for example, argue that student migration and international student mobility (ISM) remain the most visible aspects of the internationalization of higher education. The importance of ISM to the internationalization of Higher Education is also addressed by Bohm et al., (2004). In their view, international education is an asset with significant benefits to a country: “*it is knowledge-intensive, high value-added and offers long-term benefits*”. More critically, Buckner and Stein (2019) argue that international students are often framed not as subjects but as objects of internationalization, thus marginalising students’ engagement with internationalization processes. This is an issue we will return to later in the paper.

While historically, much of the focus has been on mobility between English-speaking countries or from the English-speaking world to Europe, recently, there has been a shift towards exploring mobility outside of these traditional geographical parameters to include countries such as China as is the case in this paper. In this context, Gao & de Wit (2017) claim that China aims to receive 500,000 international students at the end of this decade and is already moving fast in this direction, by passing Australia, France, and Germany, to become the third destination country for international students after the United States and the United Kingdom.

At the same time, according to a recent article by ICEF Monitor (2022a) ((International Consultants for Education and Fairs) recent online article (11th June, 2022), although there have been signs for some years now of slowing growth in Chinese outbound and the profound disruption of the pandemic, China has been an important driver of global growth in international student mobility for decades. As of 2020, Chinese students continued to account for a significant share of foreign enrolment in the world's top study destinations – ranging from roughly a quarter of all international students in Canada to nearly 40% of the foreign enrolment base in both the United States and Australia. In the case of student mobility between UK and China, ICEF Monitor reported (2022b):

there are some signs of strengthening outbound numbers around the end of 2021 and first months of 2022, and for some destinations at least. In the UK, for example, the February 2022 data release from the national UCAS admissions service reports 12% year-over-year growth in the number of Chinese applicants”.

University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham (UoN), the physical location for this project, it was described by The Times in 2012 as “*Britain’s first truly global university*” due to its international profile. Since 2012, UoN has consolidated its position and claims that “*we moved from being a university with the boldest of visions to establish overseas campuses, first in Malaysia and then China, to one which has built on this vision and developed it into a core part of its being*” (<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk>). International mobility is at the heart of the University’s internationalisation strategy.

In the case of China, many of the outbound students are studying on 4-year joint honours degrees programmes in Chinese with either French, German, Spanish or History in the Department of Modern Languages (MLC) within the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies (CLAS). Students on these programmes spend their third year abroad in either one or two foreign countries depending on the number of languages studied. For example, students studying on French and Contemporary Chinese Studies split their year abroad between France and China. The main destination in China is the University of Nottingham Ningbo Campus where students study a range of modules on the history, culture, social and business environments of China and language modules designed to address their needs.

The Pandemic

In early 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, UoN was the site of an immersive audio project, ‘Sit with us a moment and remember’, designed by Dr Michael Pinchbeck and co-developed by Dr Lan. Following the success of this project and given the ongoing restrictions on student migration, in particular, to China, Lo and Pinchbeck decided to explore audio and migration further and what role projects like ‘sit with us a moment and remember’ might play in mitigating the negative effects of international travel bans for students.

The Chinese government’s response to Covid placed severe restrictions on travel to the country. According to Leung, Wu & Liu, et al.,(2020), “*by January 29, 2020, control measures had been activated in all of China’s provinces, and a semi-lockdown was in place in several*

prefecture-level cities by February 8, 2020". He M, Xian Y, Lv X, He J, Ren Y (2020) claim that these measures had serious socio-cultural consequence:

"Chinese New Year celebrations were cancelled, collective activities, bus and railway service was suspended, and factories and restaurants were closed. Curfew and quarantine measures were implemented in many mainland cities. The flow of people was controlled by allowing only 1 person from each household to go out to buy necessities every 2-3 day".

More recently, they claimed that:

"The Chinese government has for most of the pandemic maintained a "zero COVID" approach to controlling COVID infections. This has famously led to extended border closures that have disrupted the study programmes for thousands of visiting students. More recently, this aggressive strategy has also led to severe lockdowns affecting, as of 28 March 2022, tens of millions in Shanghai. Travel bans and partial lockdowns are also in place in other provinces and cities throughout the country, notably in Jilin province. By some estimates, nearly 400 million people were living under full or partial lockdown conditions in China as of mid-April".

Outcomes

This led to the development of the **Talking Trees/树说/述说** project, which is based upon notions of student migration, international student migration, international education, mind migration/virtual journey, notions of home, migration and belonging, roots and routes. The main questions foregrounded in the project are:

1. What are the new challenges and new perspectives of student migration in the time of Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Can virtual journeys /mental migration be an alternative form of migration for students?
3. What other benefits might be derived from involvement in this type of project?
4. How might these benefits be realised?

According to Mars, Arroyo & Ruiz (2022), during the pandemic, mobility as the potential for physical movement and the ability to travel between two separate locations shifted to other forms of mobility such as virtual mobility via the internet. Given the new challenges and new perspectives of mobility and students migration from and to China, in this paper we hypothesise that Talking Trees/树说/述说 project might also be considered an alternative form of migration for students on a virtual journey without travelling abroad. The other benefits derived from involvement in this type of project might be a good virtual journey and mental experience for Chinese-speaking students to explore the migration destination, while it is a good chance/virtue window for local Chinese-learning students and public community to know the roots/routes and belonging of migration. And these benefits can be achieved through projects such as the Talking Trees/树说/述说 initiative that this paper now turns to.

Project design

During phase extant research within relevant disciplines was located, research questions were identified, and the interventions were designed. Regarding the latter, this involved:

- Research and development (Mapping, writing, and walking)
- Site visits to the Trees
- Interviews/Recording student migrants
- Editing/Composing audios
- Launch Event at Diversity Festival at UoN
- Dissemination of the Phase One outcomes, e.g., project website/videos/documentation

Talking Trees / 树说/述说 involves a living archive of stories to be listened to at trees, imported from China, by downloading tracks via QR codes. The stories explore the notion of home, roots/routes and how trees have grown over time as a metaphor for migration and belonging. In our website, we explain the evolution of the Talking Trees//树说/述说 project and ask students and the wider public to explore its many different meanings.

One tree represents the idea of ‘leaving home’ while the other tree represents the idea of ‘returning home’. At each of the two trees you are invited to listen to verbatim interviews with Chinese speakers on a variety of relevant themes. The voices were provided by students and staff from a range of backgrounds. A fictional narrative drawn from archival research and images explores the journey the trees might have taken from China to the UK more than 100 years ago, how they might be talking to each other and what they might say. This fictional narrative frames the interviews and forms an audio walk between the trees for visitors to follow. This immersive audio experience has been designed with Leicester-based sound artist, Chris Cousin.

Initial analysis of the data suggests that the project data has considerable value for both students and the wider community within which the project is located. Consequently, we have outlined plans to further develop the initiative along the lines set out below.

Phase Two: The Future of Talking Trees/ 树说/述说

The future steps of this project will be to locate and plot audio routes to new trees on the UoN campus; to capture additional interviews with younger participants post-pandemic; to explore the potential to expand the project nationally i.e. to other universities such as the University of Manchester (UoM); to explore the potential to expand the project internationally i.e. to partner universities in Europe and China.

Conclusion

As we know the global pandemic has had significant impact on study abroad especially to China. As a result, students have lost the benefits from such an experience. We believe, as explained in this paper, that we can mitigate this loss through projects such as Talking Trees/ 树说/述说, and so have designed this intervention accordingly. We have yet to fully evaluate qualitatively the truth of this claim (also the focus of phase two of the project), however, our initial analysis points very strongly in this direction.

While we have not yet completed a full evaluation of the project, initial results point to its success. So, feedback we received from students and the wider community identified that

although such initiatives cannot replace international mobility, especially to a country like China, they can help mitigate the negative impact of any obstacles to mobility as happened during the pandemic. If as suggested at the beginning of the paper, that Covid 19 could be just the start of a range of issues and tensions with negative consequences for mobility to China, then this project offers a way forward. By instead of travelling physically to the country, students are encouraged to travel mentally.

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