Preface

As with every artistic creation, in order to understand the product, especially the hidden message, we should focus on the artists’ intention and the creation process. No studies are value-free and the values of the inquirers and their biases in qualitative research should be detailed as well as the “value-laden nature of information” collected from the research field. (Creswell 2012, p. 20)

The research topic in this book didn’t come from nowhere; it is closely related to my personal experience abroad and has evolved as a research interest during years of study. I’ve been studying in France since 2008 and the longer I’ve stayed here, the more I’ve realized how little knowledge of the higher education system I had acquired before coming to France. I succeeded in my application to study in France thanks to an intermediary agency that helps Chinese students prepare all the documents, language tests, and interviews; sometimes it even chooses the university for applicants. To be honest, until the moment of my arrival at the airport in Paris, I just knew that I would take intensive French courses for a year in a language training center affiliated to a French university. As the majority of my classmates at that time followed the same trajectory as mine, I used to think it was the only way.

Later when I enrolled in postgraduate study, I luckily got a part-time job in the student service center, helping international students who had just arrived in France with their problems related to the resident card application, accommodation, social insurance and health care, and so on. Thanks to this job, I realized that in addition to my type of international students, there were “others” such as exchange students, students for courses taught in English and “do-it-yourself” students who prepared the application all by themselves. Meanwhile, their individual experiences and their difficulties had aroused my personal interest in the international student population. Moreover, considering my previous studying and teaching experience in universities in China, it seemed interesting to conduct a comparative study and that was how my Master’s thesis was initiated. With the guidance of my supervisor Dr. Régis Malet, we analyzed with a comparative approach, data collected in interviews with two groups of international students in France and in China. The study analysis showed that the process of students’
preparation abroad, their experiences in the host country, and their personal transformation were closely related to the different profiles of international students. Considering that the study concentrated on the students’ individual experiences, we realized that the profiles of the interview participants might influence the findings and more important, we found that the hosting contexts both at social and institutional levels had had an important impact on the students’ experience. We thought more profound study should be conducted on this research subject from different perspectives. However, the complex problems that could be encountered by the many differences in terms of social, political, economic, cultural, and educational aspects in France and in China, made us give up the international comparative perspective. After having discussed this with my doctoral supervisors Dr. Régis Malet and Dr. Ruth Hayhoe, we decided to work on an intranational comparative scale of international student populations in grandes écoles and universities in France. To sum up, the study was initiated by personal curiosity and conducted with an exploratory and reflective attitude, during which cumulative knowledge and practice were considered indispensable.

The book is divided into five chapters and starts with the presentation of the research background, central research questions and objectives, and the significance and limitations of the study. The introduction includes as well a snapshot of the international students in France and French policies in promoting inbound student mobility at the national, European, and global levels. The second chapter of the book contains a major review of studies related to three main research subjects: internationalization of higher education, the French higher education system, and international student mobility. The third chapter explains the process of building a conceptual framework, and then presents and justifies the theories employed in this study. The fourth chapter analyzes the empirical data collected from the research sites to reveal the internationalizing process in the selected grandes écoles and universities. The final conclusion summarizes the main answers to the research questions obtained from the empirical data analysis and points out some interesting and potential research pistes.

The book is mainly derived from my doctoral thesis and based on an over five-year research interest in French higher education and international student mobility. This amazing journey could have never been achieved without the support and guidance from my two extraordinary thesis supervisors, Dr. Régis Malet and Dr. Ruth Hayhoe. I’ve been working with Dr. Régis Malet since my Master’s studies and during these years, I’ve benefited enormously from his guidance both in my academic development and career building. He showed me the French academic world and taught me how to conduct research and become a qualified researcher. His insightful criticisms and thought-provoking ideas have pushed me further in seeking better understanding and more possibilities. I would like to give him my true gratitude. Along this journey, the presence of my cosupervisor, Dr. Ruth Hayhoe has made it more exciting and she is more than a mentor for my research. Her encouragement has comforted me a lot at some difficult moments during the last several years and her inspirational advice has enlightened my path in pursuit of knowledge. I feel very honored to have shared this experience with both of my supervisors. I would also like to give many
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