

Entrepreneurship and trans-national education (TNE): insight based on entrepreneurial trait theory and the reflections of returnee Chinese graduates

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the contribution that a trans-national education (TNE) programme may make to entrepreneurship in terms of developing the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business. Indeed, the research question that the paper will seek to address is what contribution a TNE programme may make to the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business.

Design/methodology/approach – The research underpinning this paper constituted the qualitative phase of a larger study into TNE and entrepreneurship. The data was generated from 12 in-depth interviews with Chinese graduate returnees of a TNE programme run jointly by universities in China and the UK.

Findings – The main finding of this study is that TNE programmes may encourage entrepreneurship by developing student's entrepreneurial traits. It also suggests that there is value in studying entrepreneurial traits inductively and collectively as well as deductively and individually or in small groups.

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The authors would like to thank all the returnee graduates of the TNE programme operated by Beijing University of Agriculture and Harper Adams University who took part in this study. The dataset generated and analysed during the current study is not publicly available because piloting suggested that acquiring the necessary data in China would be very difficult and in order to encourage participation the respondents were promised that their data would not be made publicly available.

Statements and declarations: All authors confirm that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.



Research limitations/implications – The findings of this study are subject to the normal limitation of qualitative research, a small sample size precluding statistical significance, as well as a narrow sampling base (Chinese students from one TNE programme), the issue of attribution and the issue of articulation.

Practical implications – The paper's two main practical implications are that policymakers and university authorities may use TNE to encourage entrepreneurship and academics should consider the approach that they use to study entrepreneurial traits.

Originality/value – This paper makes a valuable contribution to knowledge with respect to both entrepreneurship in China and entrepreneurial traits.

Keywords Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship in China, Entrepreneurial traits, Entrepreneurship and TNE

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been increased recognition of entrepreneurship as an important driver of economic growth, productivity, innovation and employment worldwide (Parker, 2018). Indeed, Karadağ (2016) argues that entrepreneurship is a vital component of the economic and social success of a nation.

As such, entrepreneurship has attracted considerable research attention. However, much of the work has focused on Western nations and much less is known about the subject in developing or transitioning countries. One country where there are aspects of entrepreneurship about which little is known is China (Lyu *et al.*, 2021; Roztocki and Weistroffer, 2015) and one of the areas that requires research concerns the contribution that trans-national education (TNE) programmes make to the entrepreneurial process (Gruenhagen and Davidsson, 2018).

According to the Quality Assurance Agency (2019) for Higher Education in the UK, TNE is defined as *the provision of education by one country in another country*. TNE may take a number of forms (Robert and Yu, 2018) including the joint-venture institution; the secondary college, which is a separate institution that is affiliated to the overseas partner; the double campus where students start their programme with the overseas partner, but then are required to transfer to the foreign institution to complete their programme with the foreign partner; the joint programme in which students generally complete their entire programme with the overseas partner; the distance-learning programme, in which the students study programme materials, either alone or with the assistance of a support centre; and the advanced professional programme, which is a postgraduate programme offered on a part-time basis to managers in employment (He, 2016). TNE is of interest in this study because the Chinese government supports TNE as a means of capacity-building, especially with regard to the development of the current education system and the teaching and research staff (Zhang and Heydon, 2016) and, as a consequence, China is currently the largest exporter of international students with 15.2% of all students enrolled in higher education outside their home country (Cockayne and Cockayne, 2018).

Over the past three decades, there has been an increasing number of students who have completed their studies on TNE programmes and returned to China to engage in entrepreneurship by starting up their own businesses (Fuller, 2019; Qin *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, while only 9% of returnee graduates started their own business in 2016 this figure had increased to 48% by 2017 (Centre for China and Globalization, 2019) making returnee entrepreneurs a major entrepreneurial force in China (Armanios *et al.*, 2017). According to the Centre for China and Globalization (2019), the industries in which most returnee entrepreneurs set up their own business are information transmission, software and information technology services, wholesale and retail, education and accommodation and catering.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide insight into the contribution that a TNE programme may make to entrepreneurship in terms of developing the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business. Specifically, the research question that the paper will seek to address is what contribution a TNE programme may make to the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business. The significance of this paper is that it provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of how TNE programs can foster entrepreneurship in China by developing entrepreneurial traits in returnee graduates. The paper will outline the methodology underpinning the study, provide an overview of the results, discuss the results and provide conclusions. To begin, however, it is propitious to consider the extant literature relating to entrepreneurial traits.

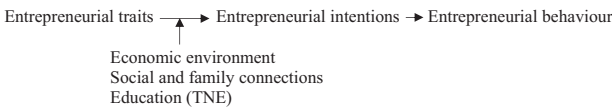
2. Entrepreneurial traits

Today, many commentators believe that although entrepreneurial traits provide a general understanding of an individuals’ predisposition towards entrepreneurship, they may not offer insights into or predict specific intentions or behaviours in the TNE context, and they may manifest differently in different entrepreneurial contexts. Indeed, most authorities (Abhayarathne and Kodithuwakku, 2018; Acharya and Chandra, 2019; Bae et al., 2024; Caird, 2013; Laukkanen, 2022; Sun et al., 2023) now consider *entrepreneurial intention* to be a better indicator or predictor of *entrepreneurial behaviour* in various contexts than entrepreneurial traits and for this reason a substantive amount of the contemporary entrepreneurship literature focuses on *entrepreneurial intention*.

However, although *entrepreneurial intention* is a popular focus for entrepreneurship research, it is itself determined by the *entrepreneurial traits* that people possess and the moderating influence of factors such as the *economic environment* in which people live, their *social and family connections* and their *education* (Figure 1).

In this context, *entrepreneurial traits* are the personality characteristics that people have that predispose them to engage in entrepreneurial activities. These traits tend to be relatively stable over time, compared to intentions (Kassin, 2003), so studying traits provides a more long-term perspective. Traits are also often seen as more culturally universal compared to intentions (Kassin, 2003), so study of traits will, produce more generally applicable findings where the subjects come from diverse cultural backgrounds. As such, as well as being an important precursor to *entrepreneurial intentions*, there are several benefits of studying *entrepreneurial traits* rather than *entrepreneurial intentions* and their study remains popular amongst researchers [1].

Entrepreneurial traits are something that people are born with and either have or do not have. They cannot be acquired at a later date. Yet, while people cannot acquire traits that they are not born with, it is contended that the traits that people do have can be encouraged or discouraged by external forces in a person’s external environment. Indeed, TNE is one of the external factors potentially impacting entrepreneurial traits. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to investigate the links between TNE and entrepreneurial traits.



Source(s): Authors’ own work

Figure 1. Contemporary conceptualisation of entrepreneurship

Trait theory was developed within the psychology discipline as a means of understanding personality. According to [Kassin \(2003\)](#), traits are habitual patterns of behaviour, thought and emotion that are stable over time, differ across individuals, are consistent across situations and influence behaviour. Traits are generally regarded as something that a person either does or does not have and, in early applications of the theory, this could be determined using a research instrument comprising simple dichotomous scales. Today, contemporary applications consider traits as dimensions with people revealing their disposition regarding a trait by scoring between two extremes. Although there is no consensus that explains all behaviours, some psychologists ([Costa and McCrae, 1992](#); [McCrae and Costa, 1987](#)) believe that most can be explained by the traits of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness, which are known as the *big 5*. Nowadays, most psychologists view the big 5 as higher-order traits that are, themselves, multivariate in nature and based on various lower-order traits.

It is assumed that individuals who are more inclined to engage in entrepreneurial activity have a fairly common trait profile that differentiates them from individuals who do not engage in entrepreneurship ([Gartner, 1989](#); [Pattanayak and Kakati, 2023](#); [Sexton and Bowman, 1985](#)). These traits have been a popular focus for entrepreneurship research and there is now an extensive literature on the subject. A comprehensive list of 28 traits that have been associated with entrepreneurs, together with the underpinning literature, is provided as [Appendix](#). A summarised list is provided in [Table 1](#). The literature reviewed for [Appendix 1](#)

Table 1. Characteristics of entrepreneurs

1.	Propensity to take calculated risks
2.	Need for achievement
3.	Need for autonomy
4.	Internal locus of control
5.	Creative tendency
6.	Self-efficacy
7.	Tolerance of ambiguity
8.	Self-confidence
9.	Persistence
10.	Capacity to make decisions
11.	Independence
12.	Energy
13.	Ability to self-learn
14.	Flexibility
15.	Passionate
16.	Communication skills
17.	Leadership skills
18.	Patience
19.	Open-mindedness
20.	Self-respect
21.	Optimistic
22.	Tendency to think critically
23.	Tendency to work hard
24.	Brave
25.	Ability to problem-solve
26.	Emotional stability
27.	Analytical ability
28.	Human relations ability

Source(s): Authors' own work

is not intended to be definitive, but is nonetheless substantive, including what are understood to be the better-known papers on the subject.

According to Bird and Schjoedt (2009) the traits of *calculated risk taking, need for achievement, need for autonomy, an internal locus of control and a creative tendency* are the more frequently cited entrepreneurial traits. These traits are regarded as essential for entrepreneurship and so can be thought of as being the higher order entrepreneurial traits that are the defining characteristics of entrepreneurs and the basis of the entrepreneurial personality.

It may not be essential for an individual to possess other lower-order traits to be an entrepreneur but having additional traits may facilitate various forms of entrepreneurship. Some of these additional traits are aspects of general personality (e.g., *Independence, Confidence, Flexibility, Open-mindedness and Persistence*), whereas others relate to knowledge and skills that are useful in a specific context or endeavour (e.g., *The ability to self-learn, Interpersonal skills, Leadership, Problem-solving, Communication, Analytical ability and the Tendency to think critically*).

Much of the existing research into entrepreneurship in general and entrepreneurial traits in particular has been undertaken in the West. The fact that the fieldwork for this study was undertaken in China, where the environment is very different, means that it is useful to consider this context.

3. Entrepreneurship in China

Prior to 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power, China had a proud reputation for private economy and entrepreneurship stretching back several thousand years. However, once the CCP came to power, entrepreneurship was severely restricted for the next three decades. The CCP, under the leadership of Zedong Mao, implemented several anti-entrepreneurship initiatives during the 1950's including the *Three-anti Campaign* of 1951 and the *Five-anti Campaign* of 1952 [2]. The 10 years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 further inhibited entrepreneurship (Yang and Li, 2008) and, at the end of this period, China was left with a less-developed economy and poor institutional support for entrepreneurs (Ahlstrom and Ding, 2014).

It was not until Xiaoping Deng became leader of the CCP in 1978 that China started to reform and the private economy could start operating again as people were allowed to set up their own businesses (Yang, 2004, 2016). Since the start of the Chinese economic reform and the adoption of an open-door policy, China has transformed from a *centrally planned economy* to a *socialist market economy*. The changes have resulted in the emergence of huge numbers of entrepreneurs and venture businesses and entrepreneurship has made great progress during this transitional period (He et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Pistrui, 2001; Meyer et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). The re-emergence of entrepreneurship occurred in three phases (Phan et al., 2010). Phase 1 of the transition began in the 1980s: market regulation was limited and entrepreneurs focused on building informal social networks (known as Guanxi) to survive by securing funding mainly from family and friends (Naudé and Rossouw, 2010). The new enterprises often took the form of individual household businesses (known as Getihu) and collectively owned town-and-village enterprises (known as Xiangzhenqiye) (Schaper, 2010). Phase 2 of the transition occurred in the 1990s when entrepreneurs tried to build competitive advantage through cost reduction with key funding sources now being mainly bank loans and stock exchange listings. Market regulations were established with the socialist market economy system being formally recognised in 1992 (Kshetri, 2007). Phase 3 commenced in the first 10 years of the 21st century, when entrepreneurs, many of whom were well-educated overseas returnees, focused on innovation

and new product development as they started to recognize the importance of innovation and long-term competitive advantage (Obschonka *et al.*, 2018). The returnee entrepreneurs actively developed new products, services and technology to establish internet-based businesses. Their funding sources were normally bank loans or venture capital (Bruton *et al.*, 2018).

Currently, the share of global trade and output that may be attributed to China as the country opened its markets in 1987 has increased rapidly. With a population of 1.4 billion, China has become a dominant business force of the 21st century, having overtaken Japan as the world's second largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) to become the largest economy in the world using Purchasing Power Parity (Sznajderska, 2019).

After three decades of sustained market transition and domestic entrepreneurial reform, McKinsey's *China and the World* report (Woetzel *et al.*, 2019) confirmed that entrepreneurs were now the primary source of China's economic growth. Indeed, the *China Statistical Yearbook* (2018) indicates that private enterprises contribute more than half of China's taxation, 60% of GDP, 70% of technological innovation and new products, 80% of urban employment and 90% of new jobs. The Chinese Government, having now recognized the benefits that entrepreneurship brings in terms of innovation and change, as well as being a key driving force behind productivity and economic competitiveness (Lin and Xu, 2017), has sought to encourage it further via a recent initiative known as the *Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation by All* programme. This is a national strategy for economic restructuring (Reshetnikova, 2018) based on encouraging a wave of entrepreneurship and innovation activities unique in recent history. Specifically, this programme is intended to create jobs with an improved business environment; create more finance and upgraded incubator facilities; invest more in advanced technology, research and innovation and knowledge transfer to boost market vitality; and promote entrepreneurship education (NDRC, 2019).

Although entrepreneurship is a major plank of economic development in China, the 2018/2019 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor China Report (GEM, 2019) puts China's entrepreneurship into perspective by ranking China 52nd out of 54 countries worldwide when assessed in terms of *perceived capabilities to start a venture*. The same report also ranked China 37th out of the 54 countries in terms of *entrepreneurial spirit*, which provides a measure of individuals' intentions to start a business when presented with an opportunity, and 22nd among the 54 countries in terms of the *early-stage start-up index*.

It appears, therefore, that while the environment for enterprise in China has improved, especially as the *mass entrepreneurship and innovation* policy was introduced, there is still considerable potential for further improvement. One aspect of the entrepreneurial environment that is particularly difficult to change relates to Chinese culture (Scheu and Kuckertz, 2022). The Confucian values that are still deeply rooted in the mindset of most Chinese people are not entirely congruent with entrepreneurship and do not encourage people to become entrepreneurs (Wu and Tseng, 1985). In Western countries, culture values and encourages the individuality and change that is required for entrepreneurship. Chinese culture, however, which has its roots in Confucianism, values collectivism, stability and harmony that tend to discourage entrepreneurship (Barmé, 1999; Fan, 2000). Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with changing Chinese cultural attitudes towards entrepreneurship, practical suggestions to improve the entrepreneurial environment include shifting the focus from *efficiency-driven* entrepreneurship to *innovation-driven* entrepreneurship (Khattak *et al.*, 2022; Wei *et al.*, 2019), developing consistent regional policy and support for entrepreneurial activities and finance (Qin *et al.*, 2019; Qoriawan and Apriliyanti, 2022), further provision of financial incentives for business start-ups (Chaarani

and Raimi, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2019) and better entrepreneurial education and training (Chu and Wen, 2019; Sim *et al.*, 2023).

For China to meaningfully address the challenges facing its entrepreneurs requires a better understanding of the issues. Work has been undertaken by Huang *et al.* (2020) to understand the unique aspects of undertaking entrepreneurship in the Chinese context, but one issue that various commentators (Wang and Liu, 2016; Miao and Wang, 2017) have noted as requiring further investigation is the contribution that TNE may make. It is such a study that is reported in the remainder of this paper.

4. Methodology

Background: The data on which this paper is based was part of a larger study that sought knowledge regarding the impact of TNE on entrepreneurship in China. The research involved graduates of a TNE programme run jointly by Beijing University of Agriculture (BUA) in China and Harper Adams University (HAU) in the UK. The programme is based on delivery of a BSc/BSc (Hons) International Business Management and a BSc/BSc (Hons) Food Quality and Retail Management. The programme commenced in 2004 and now nearly 1,000 students have graduated from the two courses. The programme takes the form of a 3 + 1 model, with the first three years being delivered in Beijing and the final year in the UK. The programme has been the subject of several previous research projects and further information regarding its design and operation can be found in Walley *et al.* (2017), Liu *et al.* (2018) and Walley (2020).

Method: The method on which this study is based is qualitative depth interviewing.

Sampling: The research findings reported in this paper were provided by a sub-sample of the students who had graduated from the TNE programme in its early years and who had subsequently become established entrepreneurs. Accordingly, the interviewees were returnee graduates, typically in their early 30 s, who had set up their own business at least three years earlier (Table 2).

The interviewees were selected using a combination of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Burnard *et al.*, 2008; Veal and Darcy, 2014) [3]. Initially, interviewees were recruited through a request for assistance sent to the BUA International Centre alumni group on the WeChat platform (a popular Chinese messaging and social media app). Once contact was made with one person, that person was then asked to identify other graduates of the joint programme who had started their own business. In the end, a total of 12 interviewees were identified for inclusion in this study. This sample size is small but considered satisfactory for qualitative research where the intention is simply to generate insight rather than produce statistically significant results (Byrne, 2004; Warren, 2002).

Data collection: The data for this study was collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used with the graduate returnees to investigate issues identified through earlier research. Following the advice of Turner (2010), when the in-depth interviews were arranged the respondents were asked to use the time prior to the interviews to reflect on their experiences of the TNE programme. Specifically, they were asked to consider the changes that their foreign sojourn had had on their entrepreneurial development.

An Interview Schedule was used to provide structure for the in-depth interviews (Supplemental Material). The Interview Schedule was developed from the project's research objectives, a literature review and an initial scoping study. The Interview Schedule comprised of three sections:

- (1) career history;
- (2) study abroad experience; and
- (3) entrepreneurship.

Table 2. Profile of the returnee entrepreneurs

No.	Name	Gender	Age	Hometown	Year of graduation from HAU	Major field of study at HAU	Educational background	Type of industry	Family business background	Start business directly after graduation	Years in entrepreneurship	Age when start business	Age of company
1	J	Male	31	Beijing	2011	IBM	MSc in Project Management	Finance	Father	No	Since 2016	27	4
2	W	Female	30	Beijing	2011	FQRM	MSc in Food Security	Farming education	None	No	Since 2018	28	2
3	A	Male	29	Beijing	2013	IBM	MSc in Fashion Management	Wholesale and retail	Father	No	Since 2017	26	3
4	Y	Male	26	Beijing	2016	FQRM	BSc in Food Retail	Wholesale and retail	Parents	Yes	Since 2017	23	3
5	R	Female	32	Beijing	2011	FQRM	MSc in Food Project	Education	Parents	Yes	Since 2017	29	3
6	I	Male	30	Beijing	2012	IBM	Management	Finance	Father	No	Since 2016	26	4
7	M	Male	31	Beijing	2010	IBM	BSc in IBM	Finance	None	No	Since 2016	26	4
8	B	Female	33	Beijing	2009	IBM	BSc in IBM	Education	Mother	No	Since 2013	26	7
9	S	Female	30	Beijing	2012	IBM	MSc in International Business	Wholesale and retail	Father	No	Since 2016	26	4
10	L	Male	33	Beijing	2009	IBM	BSc in IBM	Manufacturing	Parents	No	Since 2012	25	8
11	H	Female	32	Beijing	2010	IBM	MSc in Project Management	Software and IT services	Parents	Yes	Since 2012	24	8
12	X	Male	33	Beijing	2009	FQRM	MSc in Business	Manufacturing	Parents	No	Since 2014	27	6
Note(s): HAU – Harper Adams University; IBM – International Business Management; FQRM – Food Quality Retail Management; BSc – Bachelor of Science; MSc – Master of Science													
Source(s): Authors' own work													

Further to advice provided by Yonge (1956), Dikko (2016) and Ouellette-Kuntz (1990), pilot interviews were conducted with two returnee entrepreneurs to ensure that the depth interviews and the Interview Schedule would work as required. These individuals were graduates of a TNE programme but not the BUA/HAU programme that was the focus for this study. Specifically, the pilots were used to test the length of time the interview would take, identify optional responses and establish the advantages and disadvantages of alternative structures and ordering of the questions as well as technical matters relating to the use of a digital recorder (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). Both pilot interviews lasted 60 min and an optimal form of the Interview Schedule and research process was then confirmed.

The interviews were then conducted face-to-face in Beijing either in the participant's office or at a local café depending on the participant's preference. Given the respondents' varying degrees of fluency in English, all the interviews were conducted by a Chinese national in Mandarin to remove any language barriers and to enhance the accuracy of the interview data. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min and were recorded using an electronic voice recorder. The recordings were saved onto a computer and the data stored in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998 (Data Protection Act, 2018).

Validation: The data was validated by establishing its credibility, transferability, dependability/consistency and confirmability (Cope, 2014; Kuper *et al.*, 2008; Guest *et al.*, 2012; Trochim, 2006). Subsequently, the data was transcribed and coded using NVivo version 12 software before being subject to a content analysis based on the items considered in the semi-structured interview schedule.

Ethics: The study was undertaken within the ethical frameworks of both HAU and BUA as well as the UK Market Research Society Code of Conduct. The respondents were provided with a *Participant Information Sheet* that explained the purpose of the research, the way the interviews would be conducted and their right to refuse to answer questions and withdraw from the study at any point. The interviewees also signed a *Consent Form* confirming that they had read and understood the *Information Sheet*.

5. Results and discussion

In the first instance, it is important to note that without exception all 12 of the returnee graduates involved in this study indicated that their TNE experiences had helped develop their entrepreneurial traits and encouraged them to start their own business. A selection of the respondent's comments concerning the TNE programme and the entrepreneurial traits that they believe it engendered are presented in TNE and its Impact on the Returnee Graduates Entrepreneurial Traits:

I learnt the ability to solve problems independently. Study abroad is something outside my comfort zone, I don't have my parents or friends with me, I need to make my own decisions and face the problem by myself. (Participant A)

I most enjoy the opportunity to learn more about myself during the study abroad process. It gives the opportunity for me to really get to know myself, my strengths and weaknesses, and to identify my goals, ambitions, desires, dreams, and begin working to achieve them. It allowed me to set up a structured plan and put it into action. Throwing myself into a completely new environment helped me to figure out what I am good at, as well as what I am not so good at. (Participant B)

In terms of my entrepreneurial traits, I think I have changed a lot after study abroad. Self-autonomy is very important. You have a lot of your own time. It's your own responsibility to manage your life and study; everything relies on you. My parents used to make all the big decisions for me in my life, for example, what subject I should choose for my degree, what

university I should apply to, even what type of clothes I should wear. However, I became more independent, and I made my own decisions during study abroad. (Participant J)

While studying abroad, the new environment pushed me to meet new challenges, get out of my comfort zone and develop myself. I needed to take full responsibility for everything in my life and career. Having studied abroad, I became more independent in making decisions. I have gained self-sufficiency and learnt how to think on my own feet. Study abroad helped me to unlock my own hidden entrepreneurial spirit, it also helped me to learn about other cultures and expand my thinking using a different perspective. I have become more brave, willing to take calculated risks, be autonomous, and never stop learning. At first it was very challenging, but this experience shaped me to become a better person and indeed a better entrepreneur. This spirit has and always will inspire me, and it certainly helped me to start my own business. (Participant J)

Studying abroad is very helpful and beneficial for starting my own business and it also helped in shaping my personality. Before study abroad, I used to fear taking the risks or meeting new changes. I have the fear of not being understood and fear of different cultural norms and practices. However, I become brave and willing to try new things after study abroad. I learned that there are endless possibilities in life. Nothing and nobody can stop me doing what I like; the only fear is fear itself. I have become more independent, confident, and mature in the decision-making process. I do not fear taking risks and pushing boundaries. It is essential for the success and growth of my business. (Participant I)

Study abroad has influenced my personality. It helped me to have a positive attitude about life, as well as making me persist and persevere under pressure. Exposure to an entirely different country made me more aware about myself, the world, and my own country. (Participant H)

I become more self-aware. I think studying abroad is not only for getting a better education, but more importantly, you learn more about yourself and knowing your strengths, weaknesses and potential. It is about the exploration of oneself and the world. Parents give you all the support and resources they can provide to help you to stand in a good starting point, but it is all about you to explore and work to become a stronger and better person. You have the opportunity to make the decision to choose your life. Study abroad helps me to realize who I truly am, and who I want to be. Only through experience can you know what your limits and your strengths are. You will be able to know yourself better. Through overseas study, I am able to understand my strengths and weaknesses. The experience of studying abroad makes me find myself and discover myself. (Participant H)

My experiences studying abroad definitely influenced my interests and career pace. If I did not go abroad to study, I would never have started a business. (Participant H)

Living in a different country and environment, living in a completely foreign culture, far away from the help of my parents, many challenges were waiting for me. It required me to step out of my comfort zone, to become more courageous, self-autonomous, to explore myself, to explore the world. Challenge myself to stay out of my comfort zone. Work hard and to do things well. That spirit has always inspired me and helped me to start my own business. Many people choose to live an easy life in their comfort zone, but I enjoy challenge myself. (Participant L)

Study abroad was the best decision I made in my life. As a result of this life-changing experience, I began to really think about different career paths that I could take upon graduation. After study abroad and returning to China, although there are so many jobs in the Chinese marketplace, I learnt from the experience that I want to do what I like, and I want to be my own boss. (Participant Y)

Over the study abroad, I learned to take initiative and be active, make my own decisions. Far away from friends and family, I must learn how to rely on myself in difficult and challenging situations. I have learned a lot about myself during the process. The independence makes me become stronger and more resilient as a person. I have learned how to thrive in a place without any support from family or friends. I am forced to survive on my own, I need to do my own grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, make new friends, and learn how to survive on my own, which makes me more independent and stronger. When I stay at home, I live with my parents, and I have the convenience of relying on them for everything. I become my own boss in my own life. I can make all the decisions without any one's permission. (Participant Y)

During the study abroad, I need to overcome the difficulties from life and study independently. I have encountered all kinds of problems, both in life and study, I need to solve them by myself. I can think independently, make decisions independently, and solve problems independently. I have worked in the canteen and earned the money for the plane ticket back to China. I become more independent and earn the money for my living cost. It is the first time I am living on my own. I become more independent and self-reliant. Friends and family are not there to offer immediate support. I need to rely on myself to solve any problem. (Participant R)

Every great entrepreneur is an independent thinker who paved their own path. Study abroad changed my way of thinking, I learnt not to imitate or copy a successful existing business model, but to innovate, to think independently. Being an independent thinker enables me to increase my performance, productivity, efficiency and to reach a greater level of self-awareness. (Participant W)

Study abroad is very helpful and beneficial for starting a business. People who go abroad do a lot of things with vision. Vision is what makes me explore, challenge, insist, to keep pushing myself, to have the determination to succeed. Study abroad gives me a sense of my own identity and a vision of where I want to go. I have a clear vision, along with the courage to take action and follow through. (Participant M)

Study abroad helps me to know other cultures. I got the chance to observe the different customs and traditions and experience different perspective on life. I have changed my old way of thinking. Study abroad makes my thinking become more open. I have new understanding of money and new understanding of life and work. After study abroad, I am more willing to try new things or to hear and consider new ideas. The study abroad experience helps me to shape my views on life, my views about the world. It helps me with opening the mind to other people, cultures, and ways to live life. I realise success is not a single pattern or single definition. (Participant X)

The overseas experience changed me in the way of thinking and changed my mindset. After study abroad, I became more creative and think outside the box more. The experience I have with different cultures forces me to generate creative ideas and link seemingly unrelated concepts. Stepping outside of my comfort zone, study abroad helped me to develop problem solving skills, creative thinking skills and the confidence that I can handle unexpected situations. It is an important trait as an entrepreneur, as I need to keep improving efficiency in my business, and I need to find new ideas with the product to have the unique selling point in the market. This leads to innovative production that generates profits. When I need to find a solution to the problem, I will search and read a lot of data first, and then do detailed, rational analysis of the information. I tend to see things from more than one perspective. (Participant S)

Study abroad is a once in a lifetime experience where I got the chance to experience new opportunities and broaden my horizons. I have seen and learned new things that I would never have if I stayed at home. Study abroad have increased the range of my knowledge, skills, understanding and experience. It is all about learning, growing, changing, and adapting to a new life. It is the first opportunity in my life I could travel to another country and experience new

cultures. The only real way to understand a culture is to live among its people. I can meet people from different backgrounds and cultures. I got the chance to feel something different, experience new culture and see the world. I believe that the living and studying abroad experience itself is the most beneficial part of the study abroad programme. Such experience is composed of study and all kinds of problems and difficulties in life. The entire experience is very positive and has influenced my entire life. (Participant S)

The entrepreneurial traits that the respondents to this study claimed to have developed because of studying on the TNE programme are listed in Table 3. Although it is tempting to simply accept the list and start considering its content in more detail, there are two issues that first require acknowledgement.

The first issue may be referred to as *attribution*. Although all the returnee entrepreneurs involved in this project linked their entrepreneurial development to the TNE programme, the association between the two is unlikely to be a simple cause-and-effect relationship. While some of the entrepreneurial traits of the respondents may be directly attributable to the taught component of the TNE programme others, or some of the others, may have developed from aspects of the TNE programme out-with the taught component. Also, it is quite possible that the respondents would have developed some of their entrepreneurial traits if they had studied on a non-TNE programme or even not studied on an educational programme at all.

The second issue may be referred to as *articulation*. The respondents have articulated themselves as best they can but may, in fact, be using different words to refer to the same trait or the same words to refer to different traits. This issue is further compounded by the

Table 3. Entrepreneurial traits identified in this study

1.	Propensity to take calculated risks
2.	Need for achievement
3.	Need for autonomy
4.	Internal locus of control
5.	Creative tendency
6.	Self-confidence
7.	Persistence
8.	Independence
9.	Ability to self-learn
10.	Flexibility
11.	Communication skills
12.	Leadership skills
13.	Open-mindedness
14.	Tendency to think critically
15.	Ability to problem-solve
16.	Analytical ability
17.	Human relations ability
18.	Maturity
19.	Sense of self
20.	Adaptability
21.	Resilience
22.	Courageousness
23.	Propensity to take the initiative
24.	Responsibleness
25.	Determination
26.	Enthusiasm

Source(s): Authors' own work

multivariate nature of traits and issues of translation when working in the international context. Indeed, it is apparent that many of the entrepreneurial traits identified in this study intuitively appear related to one or more other traits. For instance, *internal locus of control* may be related to *independence* and *sense of self*. Furthermore, while in some circumstances identifying the traits separately may be useful, in others, it might be more valuable to refer to them collectively. Another, complicating issue is the dynamic nature of language, so what once may have been referred to as *human relations ability* is now probably best thought of as *emotional intelligence*.

Notwithstanding the issues of *attribution* and *articulation*, the data in Table 3 does appear to provide valuable insight into the entrepreneurial development of the respondents in terms of their entrepreneurial traits. In total the respondents identified 26 entrepreneurial traits that they felt their TNE experiences had developed, which is not an insignificant number.

When compared with the entrepreneurial traits to be found in the literature (Tables 1 and 4) it is apparent that many are the same (e.g. *the propensity to take calculated risks*, *the ability to self-learn*, *leadership*, *problem-solving*, *communication*, *analytical ability*, *tendency to think critically*), whereas several others are similar (e.g. *sense of self* would appear to be similar to *self-efficacy*; *resilience* may be related to *patience*; *courageousness* may be linked to *bravery*; and *enthusiasm to passion*). Indeed, of the 28 entrepreneurial traits identified from the literature, only seven are not also identified in the current study. This appears to confirm that the results of this study are subject to the issue of *articulation* and that they have a high degree of validity.

Conversely, of the 26 traits identified by the present study there are five that do not appear in the literature (i.e. *maturity*, *adaptability*, *propensity to take the initiative*, *responsibleness* and *determination*). It seems reasonable to presume that these traits may be specifically useful to entrepreneurial success in China.

Some additional traits identified by the respondents to this study may perhaps be denoted as “skill traits” and are therefore not included in Tables 3 and 4: i.e. *academic knowledge*; *cross-cultural skills*; *language skills*; *presentation skills*; *writing skills*; *enhanced self-management [independence] abilities*; *collaborative skills*; *teamwork*; and *research skills*. Rather than being generic entrepreneurial traits useful in most instances of entrepreneurship, this latter group appear to be useful in the more specific contexts of the respondents’ individual enterprises. Furthermore, while some of these traits seem to relate to the opportunities afforded by the TNE programme itself (e.g. *cross-cultural skills*), others appear to relate to the Chinese context of this study (e.g. *language skills*). Indeed, the main point arising from the data is that while some of the traits underpinning entrepreneurship are generic many of the lower-order traits are contextual.

Although the study abroad experience has apparently helped develop entrepreneurial traits in the individuals participating in this study not all the students on the TNE programme went on to become entrepreneurs. Indeed, many of the respondents in this study spoke about the difficulties of returning to China, especially the difficulties of re-adopting Chinese culture and reintegrating into Chinese society, following their TNE experience. This challenge is widely acknowledged in the literature on sojourning and referred to as *reverse culture shock* (Wang and Bao, 2015). In the context of this study, several respondents reported the experience of *reverse culture shock* upon returning to China (see The Difficulties that Returnee Graduates Experienced When Returning to China). Although this obstacle was overcome by the respondents – who all became successful entrepreneurs – it is possible to conjecture that reverse culture shock could dissuade some students from engaging in entrepreneurial behaviour. In any case, the interview data suggest that entrepreneurial traits can be eroded as well as built by TNE experience and that allowing for different experiences

Table 4. Comparison of entrepreneurial characteristics identified in the literature and those identified in this study (equivalents noted in parentheses)

Characteristics	Characteristics identified in the literature	Characteristics identified in this study
1. Propensity to take calculated risks	x	x
2. Need for achievement	x	x
3. Need for autonomy	x	x
4. Internal locus of control	x	x
5. Creative tendency	x	x
6. Self-efficacy	x	(Sense of self)
7. Tolerance of ambiguity or uncertainty	x	
8. Self-confidence	x	x
9. Persistence	x	x
10. Capacity to make decisions	x	
11. Independence	x	x
12. Energy	x	
13. Ability to self-learn	x	x
14. Flexibility	x	x
15. Passionate	x	(Enthusiasm)
16. Communication skills	x	x
17. Leadership skills	x	x
18. Patience	x	(Resilience)
19. Open-mindedness	x	x
20. Self-respect	x	
21. Optimistic	x	
22. Tendency to think critically	x	x
23. Tendency to work hard	x	
24. Brave	x	(Courageous)
25. Ability to problem-solve	x	x
26. Emotional stability	x	
27. Analytical ability	x	x
28. Human relations ability (emotional intelligence)	x	x
29. Maturity		x
30. Sense of self	(Self-efficacy)	x
31. Adaptability		x
32. Resilience	(Patience)	x
33. Courageousness	(Brave)	x
34. Propensity to take the initiative		x
35. Responsibleness		x
36. Determination		x
37. Enthusiasm	(Passionate)	x

Source(s): Authors' own work

to build or erode traits might be a useful framework for evaluating the impact of TNE on an individual's inclination to engage in entrepreneurship:

At the beginning, I felt I was disconnected from the Chinese society. There was a lot of stuff that I didn't know how to deal with, including communication style, attitude to leaders, working process and performance in public. If you handle it with the western style or habit, the result usually wouldn't be satisfactory. The biggest frustration for me was that I could not freely express my true feelings for fear of being regarded as a show-off. I was constantly warned by friends and family to not make complaints in public. I don't want others to think that I am different only because of my overseas experience, or that I am trying to show off this experience. (Participant B)

Everything is based on Guanxi. You have to have resourceful connections in order to achieve anything in China. Guanxi is extremely important and powerful for business success. It applies everywhere. Although you need a social network abroad too, after all, rules are rules. No one really breaks the rules or changes the rules in order to do a favour for anybody. In China, the importance of Guanxi has become an unspoken rule, which leads to double standards when it clashes with regular rules and regulations. (Participant J)

I think the most difficult thing for returnee entrepreneurs' start-ups is that the product needs to change customers' habits. Having lived away from China for so many years, I initially failed to study my target customers' behaviour. The company also lacked marketing channels. All this happened because I had lived outside China for many years, so I was unfamiliar with the domestic market. (Participant I)

I think the education I received overseas taught me that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. However, in China, in order to get something done or achieve business success, I have to treat people nice, build that relationship, build that trust before talking about business. It is not just a transaction, but people need to do you a favour, so you do them a favour, so they could do a favour back later. All that takes hard work, and it does not happen in the office. (Participant X)

When I came back from abroad, I just naturally had English words pop up when I am speaking Chinese, but this created an impression that I am trying to act like I am more westernized than other people or that I am just showing off. However, it is just the natural way I am thinking and speaking. I needed to change myself to become more integrated into the local Chinese culture. (Participant S)

It is difficult for us to get loans from banks, because we have limited assets to use as a deposit. Therefore, angels and institutions have become the most important way of raising funds. (Participant I)

Despite visible progress and attempts to reform, China's low level of protection and enforcement for trade secrets and intellectual property rights (IPR) theft continues to be a major concern and irreparable harm for us (the start-up company). These practices put us at risk of losing our competitive edge. (Participant H)

6. Conclusion

Although subject to the normal limitation of qualitative research (a small sample size precluding statistical significance) as well as a narrow sampling base (Chinese students from one TNE programme), the issue of *attribution* and the issue of *articulation*, the findings do address the research question at the heart of this study (i.e. What contribution might a TNE programme make to the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business?) by providing valuable insights into the contribution that a TNE programme may make to entrepreneurship in China as well as to the study of entrepreneurial traits more broadly.

This paper reports the following main findings regarding the contribution that a TNE programme may make to entrepreneurship in China:

- (1) Without exception the respondents to this study felt that the TNE programme had helped develop their entrepreneurial traits.
- (2) Although Chinese culture may still serve to discourage entrepreneurship, this study suggested that the TNE programme on which the respondents in this study had studied provided them with the conviction necessary to overcome the cultural barriers to setting-up their own businesses in the Chinese context.

- (3) This study identified 26 entrepreneurial traits that the graduate returnees believe their TNE experience helped to develop and which were valuable in setting-up their own businesses in China (Table 3). Comparison with the literature on entrepreneurial traits suggests a distinction between entrepreneurial traits that are generic and those that are specific to our context (Table 4):
- Generic entrepreneurial traits are those that appear both in the findings of the present study and in the literature, namely, *calculated risk taking; need for achievement; need for autonomy; internal locus of control; creative tendency; self-confidence; persistence; independence; ability to self-learn; flexibility; communication skills; leadership skills; open mindedness; critical thinking; problem-solving; analytic ability; and human relations ability* (i.e. emotional intelligence). In addition, the following are similar across the present study and the literature: *sense of self* (self-efficacy); *enthusiasm* (passionate); *resilience* (patience); and *courage* (bravery).
 - Contextual traits are traits specifically useful to entrepreneurial success in the Chinese context, such that they appear as findings of this study but not routinely in the literature; namely: *maturity; adaptability; propensity to take the initiative; responsiveness; and determination*.
- (4) Entrepreneurial traits are not only built but can also be eroded by TNE experience and the *reverse culture shock* that sojourners may experience upon returning to China.

The practical implications of these findings for policy makers and university authorities are twofold: to increase the number of entrepreneurs, encourage universities to set-up TNE programmes and promote them to prospective students; maximize the entrepreneurial benefits from TNE programmes by developing and publicising support measures to reintegrate returnees and so offset the obstacle of *reverse culture shock*.

The main findings that relate to the study of entrepreneurial traits more broadly were the following:

- By considering either an individual or a small number of specified entrepreneurial traits much of the existing literature takes a deductive approach to the study of entrepreneurial traits, whereas this study confirms that there is also value in adopting an inductive approach and researching entrepreneurial traits collectively.
- By researching entrepreneurial traits collectively, the data analysed in this study suggests that while some entrepreneurial characteristics are generic, others are context specific.
- The respondents to this study also report other traits or skills associated with their TNE experience that are not easily related to those appearing in the entrepreneurship literature, including *academic knowledge; cross-cultural skills; language skills; presentation skills; writing skills; enhanced self-management [independence] abilities; collaborative skills; teamwork; and research skills*. Rather than being generic entrepreneurial traits useful in most instances of entrepreneurship, this group of skills appear to be useful in the more specific contexts of the respondents' enterprises. Indeed, the main point arising from the data is that while some of the entrepreneurial traits are generic many of the lower-order entrepreneurial traits and skills are contextual.
- Although this study followed the established tradition of researching traits that encourage entrepreneurship, it became apparent that the lens of entrepreneurial trait

theory may also be useful when researching the reasons that discourage students from becoming entrepreneurs.

The practical implications of these findings for academics are that they should consider the implications of adopting a deductive approach to their work that focuses on prespecified individual or small groups of traits or an inductive approach that considers traits collectively. Academics may also find value in designating traits as either generic or contextual.

The fact that the study underpinning this paper was qualitative in nature means that the findings must be treated as provisional. In order that the findings be confirmed by known levels of statistical significance, further research is recommended that is quantitative in nature and makes use of a much larger sample size. In addition, it is recommended that research is based on both returnee and domestic entrepreneurs from a number of universities located in various countries around the world. Finally, future research might usefully explore the specific mechanisms through which TNE influences entrepreneurial traits as well as considering the traits that discourage students from becoming entrepreneurs.

Notes

1. Indeed, a search of Google Scholar conducted on 23 May 2024 identified 21,600 papers dealing with “traits theory” and 18,700 dealing with “entrepreneurial traits” that had been published since 2020.
2. The Three-anti Campaign (1951) and Five-anti Campaign (1952) were reform movements originally instigated by Zedong Mao a few years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in an effort to rid Chinese cities of corruption and enemies of the state. The result turned into a series of campaigns that consolidated Mao’s power base by targeting political opponents and capitalists, especially wealthy capitalists.
3. The sample in this study is unlikely to be representative in a statistical sense, but it does have sufficient coverage to be *useful*, by which we mean informative for the purpose of our investigation; i.e. informative about the contribution a TNE programme may make to the entrepreneurial traits of returnee Chinese graduates who have started their own business. Purposive sampling is common – if not the norm – in qualitative research across social, business and life-sciences research, as suggested by the references cited in the following description from [Palinkas et al. \(2015\)](#): on-line version – hence, no page number): “Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources ([Patton, 2002](#)). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest ([Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011](#)). In addition to knowledge and experience, [Bernard \(2002\)](#) and [Spradley \(1979\)](#) note the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner”. [Palinkas et al. \(2015\)](#) further note that, within the context of a purposive sampling strategy, “snowball sampling” may be “used to narrow the range of variation and focus on similarities [...] similar to the use of quantitative central tendency measures (e.g., mean, median, and mode)”.

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Further reading

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Table A1. Characteristics of entrepreneurs and associated literature

Characteristic	Literature
1. Propensity to take calculated risks	Cantillon (1755), Mill (1848), Hartman (1959), McClelland (1965), Timmons (1974), Welsh and White (1981), Casson (1983), Miller (1984), Koh (1996), Lee and Peterson (2000), Gibb (2002), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008), Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011), Gurol and Atsan (2012), Dimov (2013), Rodica <i>et al.</i> (2016), Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019), Susanto <i>et al.</i> (2023)
2. Need for achievement	Smiles (1859), Weber (1918), Sutton (2021), Hartman (1959), McClelland (1965), Hornaday and Aboud (1971), Gasse and Tremblay (2011), Steinhoff (1978), Welsh and White (1981), Carland <i>et al.</i> (1995), Timmons (1990), Robinson and Sexton (1991), Koh (1996), Gibb (2002), Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011), Dimov (2013), Rodica <i>et al.</i> (2016), Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019), Lingappa <i>et al.</i> (2024)
3. Need for autonomy	Smiles (1859), Weber (1918), Sutton (2021), Hartman (1959), Davids (1963), Hornaday and Aboud (1971), Hollingsworth and Hand (1979), Welsh and White (1981), Casson (1983), Gartner (1989), Lee and Peterson (2000), Gibb (2002), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008), Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011), Gurol and Atsan (2012), Dimov (2013), Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019), Chikh-Amnache and Mekhzoumi (2024)
4. Internal locus of control	Sutton (2021), Hartman (1959), Gasse and Tremblay (2011), Timmons (1974), Hollingsworth and Hand (1979), Carland <i>et al.</i> (1995), Koh (1996), Gibb (2002), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011), Gurol and Atsan (2012), Dimov (2013), Rodica <i>et al.</i> (2016), Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019)
5. Creative tendency	Schumpeter (1934), Hartman (1959), Hornaday and Aboud (1971), Timmons (1974), Hollingsworth and Hand (1979), Miller (1984), Gartner (1989), Robinson and Sexton (1991), Koh (1996), Lee and Peterson (2000), Gibb (2002), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008), Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011), Gurol and Atsan (2012), Dimov (2013), Rodica <i>et al.</i> (2016), Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019)
6. Self-efficacy	Smiles (1859), Davids (1963), Pickle and Abrahamson (1964), Hollingsworth and Hand (1979), Rodica <i>et al.</i> (2016), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019), Yusuf <i>et al.</i> (2024)
7. Tolerance of ambiguity or uncertainty	Pickle and Abrahamson (1964), Gasse and Tremblay (2011), Dunkelberg and Cooper (1982), Timmons (1990), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Sörensson and Ghannad (2024)
8. Self-confidence	Davids (1963), Timmons (1974), Welsh and White (1981), Robinson and Sexton (1991), Gibb (2002), Gurol and Atsan (2012)
9. Persistence	Smiles (1859), Steinhoff (1978), Timmons (1990), Ibrahim and Soufani (2005), Lingappa <i>et al.</i> (2024)
10. Capacity to make decisions	Cantillon (1755), Casson (1983), Miller (1984), Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008)
11. Independence	Hornaday and Aboud (1971), Dunkelberg and Cooper (1982), Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008), Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019)
12. Energy	Hollingsworth and Hand (1979)
13. Ability to self-learn	Smiles (1859)
14. Flexibility	Sutton (2021)
15. Passionate	Davids (1963)

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Characteristic	Literature
16. Communication skills	Pickle and Abrahamson (1964)
17. Leadership skills	Gasse and Tremblay (2011)
18. Patience	Steinhoff (1978)
19. Open-mindedness	Welsh and White (1981)
20. Self-respect	Miller (1984)
21. Optimistic	Timmons (1990)
22. Tendency to think critically	Lee and Peterson (2000)
23. Tendency to work hard	Gibb (2002)
24. Brave	Casson <i>et al.</i> (2008)
25. Ability to problem-solve	Raab <i>et al.</i> (2011)
26. Emotional stability	Dimov (2013)
27. Analytical ability	Kerr <i>et al.</i> (2018)
28. Human relations ability (emotional intelligence)	Sene <i>et al.</i> (2019)

Source(s): Authors' own work

Supplementary material

The supplementary material of this article can be found online.

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