Exploring Chinese students' intercultural communicative practice in the UK and their reflections of culture of origin

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Abstract

By investigating the intercultural engagement of Chinese students in the UK as well as the returning experience of students who come back to China after studying in the UK, this research identifies learning and social activities that effectively help students engage in their new cultural environments and navigate the challenges these may cause, as well as including their reflections of their culture of origin as former international students. This qualitative study collected data through three methods – participant-led photography, 'photo interviews' and an online photo exhibition – to ensure participants had control over the use of their data and felt free to contribute what they wanted, enhancing their active engagement in the research process.

This study draws on Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence as an interpretative tool to explore how Chinese students manage cultural adaptation, as well as the impacts of study abroad on their lives after returning home and their reflections of their culture of origin. The data yields three principal findings that are relevant to Chinese students' intercultural practices: 1) food practices play an important role in Chinese students' cultural adaptative processes and reflect students' attitudes and knowledge about the unfamiliar culture in the initial stage; 2) Chinese students' sense of belonging to the local community grows through language practice with local people and their co-national peers; and 3) study abroad triggers Chinese students' reflections on their own cultural understanding, empowering them to critically evaluate their cultural needs, though this can cause discomfort and anxiety as they readapt to their home culture.

This study has implications for the way in which prospective international students can be prepared for intercultural encounters in the receiving society. It also sheds light on the post study abroad period, emphasising the importance of understanding returning students' experiences. Furthermore, the study has relevance for UK higher education institutions, underscoring the need to promote inclusive education and integrate Chinese students into both academic and social settings. The insights gleaned from this research can contribute to enhancing the overall experience of international students in the UK, fostering a more culturally sensitive and inclusive environment within educational institutions.

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Acknowledgements

Doing a PhD is the most bravery decision I made in my life, and the most challenging thing I have done so far. My pursuit of a PhD started with my admiration for wide and in-depth knowledge, the fierce insight of the essence of problems, and calm attitudes when facing any difficulties. The entire journey has led to a significant expansion in my knowledge in academia, invaluable collaborative experiences with brilliant minds and profound personal growth across all facets of life.

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Authors declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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List of Abbreviations

HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher educational institutions
IC	Intercultural communication
ICC	Intercultural communication competence
UG	Undergraduate
MS	Master's
PhD	PhD
UG (R)	Undergraduate returnees
MS (R)	Master's returnees
PhD (R)	PhD returnees

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis is a qualitative study of the intercultural communicative experiences of a sample of Chinese students adjusting to the UK's academic and cultural environment. It includes an investigation of returnee students' experiences of readapting to the culture of origin after returning to China at the end of their study period abroad and focuses on students' understanding and responses to cultural differences in their intercultural encounters and their reflections on their home culture after studying abroad, drawing on the perspectives of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Drawing on social constructivist theory and interpretivist epistemology, this research project seeks to explore the complexities, dynamics and uniqueness of Chinese international students' intercultural communicative experiences with the aim to improve existing knowledge in relation to international students' cultural (re)adaptation.

I begin this introductory chapter with an overview of the research background (1.1); I then illustrate the research gaps, aims and impacts of this research project (1.2), followed by a brief presentation of key concepts that are often shown in this research (1.3). In section 1.4 I present the research questions and methods, followed by a reflection on my own position in this study (1.5). Section 1.6 presents an overview of the next chapters.

1.1 Background of the study

In 2021—2022, China was country sending the most international students to the UK, making up 27.8% of the total, followed by India, Nigeria, the US and Pakistan, and these numbers have been increasing (HESA Student Record, 2022). The reasons for this study abroad choice vary in China, but one of the main reasons is China's need to develop talent to deal with the existing brain drain. Returning students are seen to be endowed with 'transnational human capital' with access to new ideas, technologies and information that supports globalisation, thereby increasing their value to society (Bao et al., 2016). Meanwhile, research indicates that returnees may experience greater prospects for professional growth (Hao et al., 2016), enhanced well-being and satisfaction in life (Meijers and Lengelle, 2012), and recognition and high social status from their home country (Hao and Welch, 2012).

This can trigger a pursuit of foreign credentials by Chinese students in the belief that they are more valued by employers and lose sight of the importance of cultivating also their human capital (Tran et al., 2021). There may be a lack of awareness regarding the time and diverse strategies needed to nurture these inherent abilities beyond completing coursework (W. Liu, 2016).

The insufficient attention to the human and cultural capitals of returnee students essentially reflects a trend of decline in the value of overseas diplomas, which can be observed in the way Chinese people refer to returnees. In Chinese, returnee students with higher education degrees from overseas used to be called 'hai gui' 海归 (overseas returnees), which sounds like the word for 'sea turtle'. (It should be remembered that in Chinese symbolic culture the turtle is an auspicious creature.) However, those who are waiting and seeking employment are called 'hai dai' 海待 (unemployed returnees), which sounds like 'seaweed' (an altogether less auspicious cultural object) in Chinese (Zewig and Han, 2010). The former conveys a positive meaning, showing that the Chinese domestic job market values returnees with foreign education, whereas the latter conveys a negative perception of returnees whose investment in overseas education has not been reimbursed with the necessary innate abilities (Du et al., 2021). China Daily (2004, p.143) explains this shift, suggesting that '[a] new wave of students who basically gilded their resumes by attending less-than-reputable overseas schools or easy-to-get certificate programmes … have been blamed for the sudden drop in the quality of the "sea turtles"'. Given that every international student expects and is expected to succeed, the key issue is, who is or should be responsible for the glorious "sea turtles" morphing into inglorious "seaweed"?

Reasons came from the following aspects. Firstly, some young people and their families are not aware that foreign qualifications do not send signals the expect to potential employers about their innate abilities (Du et al., 2021). Secondly, the impact of COVID-19 meant a move from in-person learning to distance learning, which led to a devaluation of overseas qualification acquired through 'studying at home' due to concerns about the quality of e-learning and lack of interaction with the institutions and with people (Lin and Nguyen, 2021). Thirdly, the increasing numbers of returnee students with international degrees has changed the former situation of shortage into a surplus in the domestic job market (Zweig and Han,

2010). Fourthly, domestic talents who graduated from top universities in China can grow their human capital as their competitive edge in the Chinese labour market in terms of their familiarity with local market and human resources (Law et al., 2020). All of these factors mean that overseas qualifications may no longer guarantee employment in highly paid jobs as they did before, but some young people and families still hang on to the belief that an international education will give them/their children a competitive edge.

The flow of international students, on the other hand, contributes to the increasingly multicultural nature of UK campuses, although there are reports about learning difficulties and cultural adaptative issues while studying abroad (e.g., God and Zhang, 2019; Heng, 2018; Yu and Moskal, 2019). This has drawn people's attention to the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Chinese students, which refers to the ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). The necessity of engaging in intercultural communication exposes Chinese students to various challenges, such as new learning strategies; insufficient English proficiency for the expression of complex, abstract ideas; unfamiliar social and classroom culture; and difficulties in engagement with local students – all of which might affect students' performance in a negative way (Binder et al., 2013). However, those outside the cultural context may not fully understand the significant effort required to navigate diverse cultures and adjust one's thoughts and behaviour. This process is often subtle and takes place gradually over an extended period. Furthermore, students may be reluctant to openly express their concerns or challenges. As a result, there is a lack of long-term observation and research on the ICC of Chinese overseas students. Additionally, there is a noticeable gap in research on the re-adaptation of returning overseas students to their native culture, an essential aspect of ICC investigations.

Therefore, by providing a close examination of Chinese students' intercultural communicative experience in the UK and after returning to China, this study exposes dynamic cultural adaptation by looking at its different aspects of socialising, language practices, and adaptative process. In particular, this study investigates how Chinese students adapt to living and studying in a different cultural environment and how study abroad impacts students' reflections of their culture of origin. Moreover, it considers the experience of returning as an integral

part of the study abroad period, one which needs attention in order to understand how Chinese students settle back into their original culture after a period of immersion in a quite different cultural context.

1.2 Research gaps, aims and impacts

Many studies investigate the wide range of Chinese students' study abroad experiences, focusing on, for example, academic outcomes, obstacles faced and strategies adopted to deal with the challenges (e.g., Dai and Garcia, 2019; God and Zhang, 2019; Yu and Moskal, 2019). However, the complex relationship between Chinese students' cultural understanding and their adaptative strategies and experiences in and beyond higher education have not been fully investigated. Specifically, there are three areas that current studies on Chinese students' study abroad experiences have not yet fully discussed: (1) the dynamic nature of Chinese students' cultural adaptative process in the context of study abroad; (2) the impact of length of the programme on international students' IC experience; and (3) the post-study period when students return to their home country. In relation to (1), the dynamic nature of cultural adaptive processes, the current literature on international adaptation (e.g., Christidis, 2021; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015; Wu, 2014) usually focuses on a specific time during the students' journey. These risks overlooking the dynamic aspect of the adaptation process, one that is affected by a complex set of social elements and individual experiences, and one that can change and shift as the time passes. In relation to (2), the impact of the length of programme on international students' IC experiences, most current research focuses on a specific group – most likely on Master's students because of their one-year stay (e.g., Fang et al., 2016; Gill, 2010; Wu, 2014) – but overlook the undergraduate and doctoral students who remain abroad longer, leading to a somewhat incomplete picture of the overall intercultural experiences of Chinese students. Finally, in relation to (3), the post-study period, when international students return to China after finishing their studies, has been overlooked by research on study abroad experiences. The potential impact on returnees' social behaviour of having been immersed in Western culture needs to be addressed as an integral part of students' intercultural journeys.

The main aims of this study area as follows: 1) to help Chinese international students expand their intercultural knowledge and deepen their understanding of the importance of intercultural communicative skills during and after the school study period; 2) to inform the educational and pedagogical practices of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to better integrate international students and promote cultural inclusion in higher education; and 3) to inform Chinese local agencies which cooperate with UK HEIs on sending students abroad to pay attention to the cultural re-adaptation issues of returnee international students and provide assistance for returnee students to be able to better re-integrate into Chinese society. By providing a more nuanced and articulated understanding of the challenges and strategies adopted by Chinese students over a period of time (including those who have returned to China), this project can make a set of recommendations that can help to maximise opportunities and reduce stress and anxiety for this group of students. To achieve this aim, this study pursues the following objectives: (a) look at the process of students' intercultural experiences over a period of time in order to highlight the crucial aspects of each stage of cultural adaptation, such as the obstacles faced and strategy adopted as well as the ways in which these can change and evolve over time; (b) explore the effects of different variable such as subject of study, reasons for studying abroad, and duration of study on students' cultural adaptation during a period of time; and (c) examine students' experiences of returning home after a period of study abroad and the extent to which this affected students' self-awareness and comprehension of their home culture, and whether this has any bearing on students' IC practices in their home society.

This study examines students' intercultural communicative practices, both on coming to the UK and returning to China, as a complex, situated and interactive process. These practices are influenced not only by students' English competence and cultural factors but also by negotiation of identities, relationships with peers and the local society, and pedagogical experiences. As a result, this study can lead to impact on the following groups: (1) Chinese students in the UK, by highlighting ways in which students can increase their engagement with the UK's educational and social contexts and so ensure an experience which enhances both their achievement and wellbeing; (2) returnee students who returned to China after finishing their study in the UK, by increasing their awareness of potential 'reverse

cultural shock' in the hope that it will minimise the possible challenges to re-adapting to their culture of origin; (3) UK HEIs, through raising awareness of the educational and social activities that can result in effective engagement of international students and, consequently, on their ability to attract and retain international students; and (4) Chinese local agencies, which cooperate with UK HEIs on sending students abroad, by highlighting ways in which they can assist returnee students to establish connections with the domestic society and take care of their mental health and improve their cultural re-adaptation.

1.3 Key concepts

It is important to clarify the key terms that underpin and are mentioned often in this study and how I use them. Therefore, I illustrate below four key concepts: culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence and study abroad – linking these to theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.

1.3.1 Culture

In this project, I use the term 'culture' to describe knowledge, behaviour, language, values, beliefs and attitudes that are shared within a community and that are learnt via social encounters (Hall, 2013). I work with the idea that 'culture is a verb' (Street, 1993), i.e. that culture is something that people do, rather than something that people have, which highlights the constructed and reproductive nature of culture, created and maintained during social practices by people's ongoing actions. The study focuses on these dynamic aspects of culture, with a view to exploring how Chinese overseas students engage with intercultural encounters in the context of internationalisation in higher education, crossing the boundaries of human social practices in different communities. Therefore, when I refer to culture in this thesis, I consider it to be an evolving and fluid idea and I investigate the changes in students' awareness and constructions of culture, which often shifts its focus between differences and similarities (Holliday, 2016a).

1.3.2 Intercultural communication (IC)

In this study, intercultural communication (IC) is defined as 'the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system' (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005, p.39). This definition indicates the social nature of IC - one that it is constructed through the people's social behaviour, involving individuals' own attitudes and identities - and thus offers an interpretive lens through which to examine the complexities and nuances of international students' intercultural communicative journeys. This understanding of IC stresses that such interlocutors do not have the necessary background knowledge to ensure the accuracy of symbolic interaction, thereby highlighting the cooperation needed to construct shared meanings. This definition also indicates the importance of having an open and respectful view of exchanges across different national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds on the basis of mutual understanding. More specifically, I use the term IC to refer to Chinese students' communicative practices with people from different cultural backgrounds - British people and other international students - through the medium of English, as well as returnee students' interactions with Chinese locals after a period studying abroad.

1.3.3 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is defined in this thesis as a complex set of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and/or culturally different from oneself (Fantini, 2009). This definition stresses an individual adaptation to a new culture, including empathetic and tolerant reactions to other cultures, and draws attention to the communicative element of intercultural encounters, highlighting the role of linguistic proficiency. Two models that have been used to underpin this research are taken from Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006). Byram's (1997) model identifies five factors that affect intercultural interactions, namely: knowledge; skills of interpreting and relating; skills of discovery and interaction; attitudes of openness and curiosity; and critical cultural awareness (1997, p.34). Deardorff's model emphasises the dynamic nature of ICC and the influence of internal and external factors on its development, integrating them in ways that are useful in the context of higher education. It stressed the importance of contextual impacts, addressing interlocutors' ICC in higher education and communicative barriers

among native speakers where one of them has ‘lost’ part of their original culture. By utilising these models, I am able to give a broad and expansive picture of Chinese students’ ICC at different stages of their study abroad experiences.

1.3.4 Study abroad

Study abroad in this project refers to students pursuing an undergraduate or postgraduate degree from a university outside of their home country (Zwart, 2013). Studying abroad is a broad area of study that encompasses not only pursuing academic objectives in a foreign country but also taking into account the intercultural perspective that students are immersed in, an experience that has the potential to completely change their perspective on the world, their understanding of different cultures, and their ways of life. Drawing on literature on study abroad, I include in the discussion the motivation for studying abroad, taking into account academic difficulties that students can face, such as unfamiliar teaching methods, learning methodologies, and language barriers. Moreover, I examine the dual lifestyle that students lead in the UK, engaging in/absorbing some of the cultural practices of the receiving environment while retaining some aspects of their home cultures. It is impossible to ignore the influences on students’ performance of feelings such as homesickness, questioning of social identity and growing sense of belonging to the local community, etc. This study also takes into account how the commercialisation of higher education has affected overseas students and the standard of instruction in study abroad programmes, all of which are the focus of study abroad literature.

1.4 Research questions and methods

By investigating the subjective intercultural engagement of Chinese students in the UK as well as the returnee students’ experiences who return to China after studying in the UK, this research identifies learning and social activities that effectively help students engage in intercultural communication and navigate the challenges these may cause and how this shift and change over time. Moreover, this study explores the ways in which returnee Chinese students construct their identity as former international students within their culture of origin, and the benefits and challenges this entails.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows.

Question 1: What challenges do Chinese students encounter in intercultural communicative practices during study abroad?

Question 2: What intercultural communicative strategies do Chinese students adopt to deal with communicative difficulties in the UK?

Question 3: How does study abroad change the understanding culture of both current students and returnee students?

Research Question 1 investigates Chinese students' intercultural engagement and social practices in the UK, including any communicative obstacles they meet. Research Question 2 focuses on the strategies they adopt when facing such difficulties with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, to explore only a one-way adaptation to British culture would be insufficient to the task of building a holistic portrayal of the intercultural communicative experiences of overseas students. Therefore, Research Question 3 aims to explore how study abroad has impacted students' understanding of their culture of origin and the receiving culture. Specifically, this question is intended to help understand both current and returnee students' reflexive understandings of their culture of origin through self-reflection on their intercultural communicative experiences while studying in the UK and whether or not this changed their attitudes and behaviour of communication with their fellows.

To address three questions, I use a constructivist paradigm which allows me to examine how students' intercultural knowledge and skills are cultivated in social contexts and the extent to which study abroad experiences can shape their understanding of their home cultures. This study collects qualitative data on students' lived experiences through photography, photo-interviews and an online photo exhibition. By using participatory methods such as participant-led photography and photo interviews, the study aims to offer participants a degree of control on the data produced as part of project, enhancing their engagement and facilitating longer and more comprehensive communication (Gourlay, 2010).

The study involves two interviews with each participant, eight months apart, to gather changes in their developing ICC during the studying abroad period or following the post-study return to China. This latter focus was not a priority at the beginning of my research, but it emerged as a missing element while reading literature. I found it an invaluable added dimension to students' experiences. It was also something that directly related to my personal experiences as someone who studied abroad and then returned to China prior to starting this PhD. However, as can be seen in the next chapters, data from returnee students' experiences is not as rich as that from current students in the UK due to loss of participants in the long-term data collection. This will be discussed in depth in Chapter 8.

1.5 Personal position

My interest in the project was sparked by my personal experiences as an international student in the UK and, previously, a returnee student to my home country, as well as by my personal interest in intercultural communication while studying and working overseas. During my first study abroad experience from 2015 to 2016, I was excited to travel and experience a new culture while enrolled in a Master's programme in the UK. However, I also faced academic challenges that absorbed most of my time and caused my intercultural immersion to remain superficial. I attributed this difficult and stressful period to the language barrier resulting from lack of knowledge of everyday language usage and on my lack of familiarity with the new society. It was by chance that I received a job offer in Russia shortly after finishing my Master's degree, and, in order to have a deeper comprehension of different cultures, I began my first job as an English and Mandarin teacher in Moscow. It was there that I became aware of the cultural diversity in the world and that there are many other cultures outside of British and Chinese cultures. Taking 'smiling' as an example, it is common in British culture to greet strangers with a smile, yet this is uncommon in Chinese society. Chinese people may become ashamed or pretend not to see the smile as a normal reaction. It is even less common to smile back at strangers, in my experience, in Russia. Thus, I became confused by many social practices and wondered for a long time which pattern of behaviour I should adopt. However, as I became more involved in Russia's multicultural society, I discovered that although the Russians I met seemed to me to be indifferent, they were friendly towards their friends and family.

Beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries, human society shares universal traits such as kindness, caring and happiness. Through reflection like this and by remaining aware of my expectations, biases and reactions, I was able to adapt my behaviour to fit in with the social norms of the place I was visiting without becoming bogged down in self-doubt but rather strengthening my open-mindedness and respect for cultural diversity.

My research interest in returnee students' post-study situations was inspired by my experience of adjusting to life back home after three years spent abroad. The loss of part of my original culture and newly acquired Western cultural beliefs made me a more complex individual in my family, in the workplace and with friends. In addition to some social behaviour adaptation, I struggled with the rejection of some cultural values I had acquired during my study and work abroad period, like the importance of having an individual style and the values of personal achievement and of critical thinking. This led me to reflect deeply on my identity and on my intercultural encounters during the previous few years, and I became aware of the complexity of my own experiences and reactions as an ongoing cultural traveller and of the need to better understand the changing and fluid nature of cultural and social development. My 'insider' position as a returnee student and intercultural sojourner inspired me to research the subject of international students' intercultural experiences. It also helped me to comprehend the 'double absence' (Sayad, 2018) that many participants experience, being at the same time absent from and present in both the receiving and the home culture. My perceptions of my personal role influences my approach to research. On the one hand, I find it easier to establish trust and cultivate empathy with the participants. However, my insider position may potentially lead me to my data analysis being influenced by subjective assumptions and personal biases. This limitation arises from the studying groups to which I belong. Nevertheless, in contrast to the participants, I am aware of my status and adopt a more critical perspective on observing and analysing other students' experiences. A more detailed exploration of my reflections is provided in Chapter 4 (Methodology).

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis comprises nine chapters. Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter, which presents the contextual and research background, research questions, significance and purpose of the research, and the thesis structure. The literature review in Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual framework in relation to culture, culture in the Chinese context and interculturality, while Chapter 3 illustrates the conceptual and empirical literature review, involving models of interculture communicative competence (ICC) and relevant empirical studies. This also includes contextual literature about the Chinese educational system, the trend of study abroad and global English as a background of this study. In Chapter 4, I first discuss the research gap and my research questions before introducing constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology as the theoretical lenses that I use in my research design, alongside the specific research methods and process of this study.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present research findings around the main themes emerging from the data. Through their individual stories, I analyse their food practices and sense of belonging (Chapter 5), language practices and identity (Chapter 6), and intercultural activities (Chapter 7) to investigate their (re)adaptation process and reflections on culture of origin. Chapter 8 is the discussion chapter. Built around four broad themes that I identified in the data, in this chapter I discuss the participants' cultural understanding in relation to their development of cultural understanding, length of stay, linguistic factors and their evolving and shifting hybrid identity. Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the study, as I summarise the main findings and answer the research questions. In this chapter, I provide recommendations for future studies and discuss potential implications of the findings for UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to foster inclusivity in higher education. Moreover, I address Chinese local agencies collaborating with HEIs in China, emphasising the importance of enhancing their support mechanisms to assist students in (re)adapting to their culture of origin.

Chapter 2 Culture and Interculturality

2.1 Chapter introduction

As stated in the introduction chapter, this study explores the intercultural communicative practices of Chinese students in the UK and their reflections on their culture of origin through three research questions regarding intercultural challenges students come across, strategies they conduct; and changes of their cultural understanding throughout the whole journey. In order to address the research aims and answer research questions, I bring together the work of several theorists, each of whom helps me to make sense of some aspects of the questions, but only the combination of these different approaches and perspectives can help me make sense of the full picture. The first section (2.2) begins by discussing essentialist and non-essentialist views of culture, understandings of culture that are in constant tension and contradiction. On one hand, we have the widespread, essentialist (and essentialising) notion of culture, a presupposed entity that all people living in a specific area (often neatly bounded) are expected to share (Piller, 2017). On the other, we find Street's (1993) concept of 'culture as a verb' – i.e. as something we do, rather than something we have - and Bhabha's (1993) notion of 'third space' – i.e. of the hybrid, new space that is created through cultural encounters. Both these perspectives on culture highlight the fluid, socially constructed nature of culture, showing it as neither static nor fixed, but as continually evolving and a site of contestation, including for its own definition (Street, 1993).

Bringing together these two views of culture, is Holliday's (2016a) theory of cultural blocks and threads, which recognises, on one hand, the ubiquitous notion of (national) culture as a shared and fixed block of values, dispositions and practices, while, on the other, it recognises also the threads of commonalities across cultures that can help eliminate boundaries and enhance mutual respect. Holliday's theory usefully highlights the constant tension between these two views of culture, and the challenges we all experience when trying to move away from the block view of culture - which we are all trained to see - in order to focus on shared elements across cultures. Holliday's theory is primarily applied to address RQ1, which focuses on the challenges Chinese students encounter in intercultural

communication during their study abroad experiences. In section 2.2, I illustrate the conceptual framework of culture that sets the groundwork and parameters for the discussions that follow and for the research questions. I then highlight key themes related to culture in section 2.3 and cultural understanding in Chinese philosophy in section 2.4. Section 2.5 discusses two theoretical frameworks of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), specifically Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2006, 2009) models. These frameworks are applied to evaluate students' ICC development during and after their study abroad, including the challenges they experience, and their strategies and cultural reflections, aiming to address all three research questions. This section is integrated with Putnam's (1993) concept of social capital which provides a broader social context, one in which ICC can contribute to the building of trust, cooperation, and social cohesion in multicultural societies. The integration of ICC models and Putnam's social capital theory highlights the role of intercultural competence in supporting the creation of strong, inclusive communities where social capital can flourish. This addresses RQ2 and RQ3, which explore the impacts of students' ICC for building a sense of belonging to their preferred community through bridging and bonding capital.

2.2 Understanding culture: a conceptual framework

2.2.1 Essentialist and non-essentialist view of culture

Culture is related to all aspects of people's lives. However, researchers have not come to an agreement on the precise definition of culture. Piller (2017) notes that there are various understandings of the term. Culture can refer to a national asset (history, the arts), popular trends (folklore and customs), and things related to everyday life (language, money, news, behavioural rules etc.). It can also represent citizenship, or nationality if it is made equivalent to a nation. Yang (2020) argues that 'political culture' refers to a set of attitudes and practices that shapes people's behaviour, moral judgement and beliefs for political aims and is also connected with national identity. As described by Anderson (2006), the national community is not a 'real' one in the sense that it includes people who will never meet each other. However, citizens think of themselves as part of a community because of all the work that goes into creating imagined connections (through

education, language, etc.). Citizens who share the same nation's historical and cultural traditions, moral values, ideals, beliefs and national authority believe that they belong to a country as an imagined political community (ibid.). This essentialist view considers culture as something that is static and inherited – and shared by all those who live in a particular bounded area, such as a nation-state or a region – a view that may hinder communication across cultures. This view has been challenged by scholars, such as Street (1993) and Holliday (2016a, 2022), who adopt a non-essentialist stance.

Critiquing the essentialist point of view, Street (1993, p.25) posits that 'culture is a verb' and argue for a dynamic view of culture. Street notes that culture is not something people have but rather something people do, which shapes the way they act and interact accordingly. He argues that culture is forever shifting and changing due to an individual's prior beliefs and continuous social experiences. An individual's existing beliefs and self-perception play a vital role in how they interpret social events. When confronted with new ideas, individuals need to decide—either consciously or unconsciously—whether to retain, discard, or integrate these ideas with their previous beliefs. Furthermore, continuous learning experiences and the influence of one's social and the environment affect prior knowledge, either reinforcing, challenging, or filling gaps in understanding. This dynamic interplay of social influences creates an ever-changing perception of culture and interculturality, continuously reshaped through ongoing interaction.

But, in practice, this viewpoint has been challenged (ibid.). For instance, all rising subcultures and so-called 'approved' national cultures define culture as behaviour and beliefs that are often commonly known within a group or community. This attitude is relatively stable. However, in the 'third place' of combined cultures, there is a sense of in-between-ness that contributes to the complexity of social practices (Bhabha, 1993). Bhabha (ibid.) suggests that this is an in-between subject position where the cutting edge of translation and negotiation of cultures occurs - a new form of cultural meaning which blurs existing boundaries. In line with Bhabha, Anzaldúa (1987) expresses a similar theory, that this borderland, experienced as a border-crossing self, is vague and undetermined and due to the unfixed nature of this boundary, people who live in two realities are forced to live

in the interface of the two. Therefore, the multiplicity of self-identity in the cultural world is constantly increasing.

2.2.2 Holliday's cultural blocks and threads

Holliday's (2016a) theory offers a nuanced understanding of the complexity of culture, discussing understandings of culture as cultural blocks and threads. The image of blocks and threads depicts cultural travellers' perspectives on cultural differences where an understanding of culture as blocks is based on national boundaries between cultures and neat divisions between them, while an understanding of culture as threads is one that highlights the similarities between cultures and sees them as more connected, following a social constructive view. Holliday contends that the block view reveals a fixed concept of culture and rooted nations, which promotes the belief in a shared and homogeneous national culture, separating it from other cultures within other nations. The cultural identity of each individual is thus strongly linked to the country in which they were born, and the differences between cultures are the main focus of this understanding, which establishes boundaries and limits intercultural communication. In contrast to the block view of culture, viewing culture as threads provides a non-essentialist concept of cultural differences (Holliday, 2016a). It focuses on the various facets of past experiences of individuals and considers the similarities that people can share, thus facilitating connections. It has the power to strengthen shared experiences and unite people across the differences that the national block vision promotes (Holliday, 2020).

Holliday (2016a) observes that the essentialist block narrative of cultural differences continues to have an important impact due to a more established perception of the nation-state or national culture as the 'default signifier' of personal identity (MacDonald and O'Regan, 2012, p.559), even though cultural threads have great potential to overcome cultural barriers and encourage intercultural communication in the global world. He notes that block and thread ideas of culture do not necessarily have to be two extremes in opposition to one another. Rather, people can shift between block and thread views of culture, and during this process, a softer non-essentialising perspective can become a practical standpoint to depart from essentialism. Holliday (ibid.) contends that, since

national cultural boundaries remain uncrossable, the softer non-essentialist narrative acknowledges the huge variety within distinct cultures that are divided by national borders; rather than attempting to eliminate differences on the basis of national culture, seeking commonalities as a way of increasing respect for other cultures may offer a more realistically achievable goal of intercultural communication. The softer non-essentialist view acknowledges the objective existence of national cultural boundaries. However, it simultaneously steers clear of polarising perspectives and aligns with the claim that 'culture is a verb', as proposed by Street (1993). Holliday's concepts of cultural threads and blocks significantly contribute to understanding the challenges that Chinese students may face in intercultural contexts, as explored in RQ1. Each student's attitudes towards intercultural communication, their reactions to cultural differences and their reflections upon returning to their home culture are influenced by their own understanding and expectations of culture. If students understand cultures as separate blocks rather than threads, for example, their behaviour can be based on their Chinese identity and limited by perceptions of national boundaries.

After explaining cultural complexity as the foundation of the concept, I wish to introduce the important themes in cultural study and list them in order of their importance to this project, namely: cultural identity; culture and language; and cultural adaptation.

2.3 Themes in culture

In order to provide a relevant theoretical framework for my study, this section presents three important cultural study themes. I illustrate the connections between culture and identity (2.2.1), culture and language (2.2.2). The study abroad context and intercultural communication are explored as relevant to the above themes, which can be expressed well through students' perspectives and behaviour in the multicultural environment in this project. In addition, I analyse theories regarding cultural adaptation (2.2.3) to investigate how people adjust in a global context, considering the influencing variables of cultural shock and reverse cultural shock.

2.3.1 Cultural identity

Understanding a culture involves making meaning from social contents and practices, and the meaning-making process is not the same for each individual since it is linked to personal experience and the sense of self (Hua and Kramsch, 2016). Fiske (2010) points out that 'the people' is not a stable social category but keeps shifting into different formations at different times. Identity is not simply linked to national belonging but is also influenced by class, gender, age, rage, region, etc., or can cut across these categories or even ignore them. Fiske thinks that 'self-identity' is not a fixed or stable structure but rather a result of the social system and culture. According to Michalec (2013), identity represents combinations of the self's 'inner core' and 'outside' forces, ways of seeing, beliefs etc. The self internalises many of the meanings and values from the outside cultures, absorbing and hybridising it; making it part of the self through interactive connections with society. This identity is not permanent or fixed, but temporary and shifting, because the 'outside' culture in which identity is constructed becomes multiple and more complex. The negotiation of outside culture and self-identity contributes to the notion of cultural identity, which may foster a connection to a specific cultural group and a sense of belonging. In this thesis, I take identity as a person's sense of self and cultural affiliation. Thus, cultural identity becomes an open-ended and changeable existence that symbolises the social and cultural world, and one's inner self.

Kim (2018) further notes how sojourners may show two types of changes to their intercultural identity, pointing out that not everyone feels a change in their cultural identity. Those who have a strong sense of their cultural identity may be excited to return home, while those who have experienced cultural changes from moving from one country to another may have developed an intercultural or global identity that makes it easier for them to change their ways of thinking and performing. A further possibility is that returnees may experience less stress or shorter periods of reverse cultural shock if the home culture values and promotes intercultural harmony and integration. The next section discusses the relationship between language and culture, since culture is embedded in language and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) cannot be explored without

communicative skills and language proficiency. It is essential to identify the links between them and investigate the impacts of language in cultural understanding.

2.3.2 Culture and language

Culture and language are integral parts of a complex whole or unity, and a social constructionist view of culture is common within language research. Kramsch (2004) argues that language is a system of signs that is seen as having a cultural value because language is created by humans and constructed in social connections and interactions. Language thus represents and expresses culture, while, at the same time, culture affects and shapes the language which expresses it. Risager (2006) explores the link between culture and language in the communicative event. The term 'linguacultures' shows that English, as a lingua franca (ELF), serves as a communicative tool between people from different language backgrounds, meaning many cultures are embodied in the contexts where English is used (Jenkins, 2006). As a consequence, the relations between each type of English and the culture it is linked with is different in each case.

Pratt (2002) suggests that language learning is actually an exercise in 'cultural translation', which requires a 'translingual' and 'transcultural' competence to understand another culture on its own terms. This leads to an argument about whether language teachers should teach the language itself and/or the culture or the language as culture (Kramsch and Hua, 2016). However, the expectations for language teachers to teach critical language awareness, interpretive skills and historical consciousness do not match the reality, since the effectiveness of teacher training, teachers' own attitudes towards the target culture embodied in the taught language and the target cultural experience of teachers might be overlooked (Young and Sachdev, 2011). Owing to the cultural diversity and fluidity and complexity of experiences and contexts, culture should be more meaningfully taught by direct experience rather than in physical classrooms, and historical meanings, stereotypes of linguistic categories, cognitive models and over-generalisation of a whole people and their languages are all challenges in teaching language as culture (Byram and Kramsch, 2008). Thus, it is suggested that both language teachers and students need to hold goodwill and open-mindedness and to

overcome stereotypes and encourage communication and interaction in order to gain a holistic understanding of culture (ibid.).

2.3.3 Cultural adaptation

Cultural adaptation is a process by which people develop bicultural and multicultural identities and become empathetic to cultural differences (Chen et al., 2008). Jackson (2008) notes that cultural adaptation in the present trend of globalisation entails personal adaptations to the new cultural norms, behaviour and even beliefs of the receiving culture, requiring cultural sensitivity, comprehension and response. The U-curve proposed by Lysgaard (1955) and Kim's (2001) learning process of adaptation are the two basic approaches to comprehending cultural adaptation. According to Lysgaard's U-curve, cultural adaptation progresses from a high level of excitement, such as a honeymoon period through a steady drop brought on by cultural differences and difficulty with changing behaviours to acceptance of the new culture. Kim, on the other hand, views adaptation as a learning process that begins with stress due to a lack of knowledge about the new cultural norms, followed by experiencing the acquisition of social skills and cultural values for the purpose of participation and integration and ending with personal growth. Cultural adaptation for international students is more complicated, since they have to face language obstacles, adjust to new educational environments, form new social networks, deal with prejudice, overcome homesickness and solve various practical issues (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). These might establish 'blocks' that prevent international students from further intercultural engagement.

There are two influential factors in cultural adaptation, namely, cultural shock and reverse cultural shock. International students studying abroad will encounter cultural differences in academic and social life, which may cause cultural shock, and reverse cultural shock that can happen when sojourners returning home find that they have to re-adapt and re-adjust to their home culture. Cultural shock is a feeling of stress, anxiety and uncertainty caused by moving to new cultural and unfamiliar surroundings. Xia (2009) identifies two main reasons for cultural shock. First, the sense of uncertainty comes from the events that are dissimilar to the cultural values and principles people are familiar with, and people have to adapt to the new values, customs, behaviour and way of thinking. Secondly, the

unpredictable and uncontrollable situations that people have no prior expectation or knowledge of may cause psychological confusion and emotional discomfort, potentially resulting in a feeling of estrangement from the world that stands outside and acts upon the self (Conroy, 2009). Xia (2009) further argues that individuals need to familiarise themselves with the new environment to shorten the shock period, rather than attempt to avoid it, because it can be unpredictable. She suggests that the best method is to prepare students in pre-departure sessions, so that students familiarise themselves with the new environment before they go abroad. However, this begs the question of whether culture can be taught, which culture can be taught and how to avoid generalisations, stereotypes and cliches. This is discussed further in the contextual literature, which considers language teaching (see sections 3.4 and 3.5).

Unlike cultural shock, reverse cultural shock is an emotional reaction to relocation: the loss of familiar symbols in the country of study and the relocation back to one's home culture Szkudlarek (2010). Some studies have focused on international students' adaptation to interculturality when studying overseas (e.g., Pan, 2018; Zhu, 2016), but insufficient consideration has been given to how people who are immersed in a different culture for a certain period of time may suffer from losing their own cultural traditions, principles, behaviour and even language system, and how they may have trouble communicating with 'insiders'. For instance, a Chinese student who has spent time in an English-speaking country may become accustomed to English expressions (see Zhe in section 6.4 and Pang in 6.5.4). Consequently, English elements of speech may become incorporated into Chinese, resulting in a blend of the two languages; also in social behaviour, for example, the splitting of the bill is generally an accepted practice in a restaurant in Western society, whereas it is thought to be uncaring and distant in Chinese social relations. As W. Liu (2016) notes, the intercultural universal principles working for English and Chinese interactions are not necessarily suitable for interactions between 'returned' and native Chinese. This highlights the importance of studying how people adapt and adjust speech acts and behaviour towards interlocutors when communicating with cultural 'outsiders' who speak the same language. After presenting cultural theories raised by Western scholars, I demonstrate next how culture is understood and researched in the Chinese context.

2.4 Cultures in China

Previously, I demonstrated relevant cultural theories and discussions in the context of the Western world. In this section, I illustrate the concept of culture in the Chinese context and discuss how Chinese scholars understand Chinese culture by identifying cultural features in Chinese society. The aim is to help understand Chinese students' cultural backgrounds and notice the impact of their original culture on their behaviour and thoughts, since these can be reflected in their performance when dealing with intercultural issues. Specifically, this section follows the logic of previous culture discussions in Western scholarship, which is divided into four subsections - Chinese cultural identity and language, a collectivist-Confucianist culture, an individualist-Confucianist culture, and the reflexive and ethical 'self' in Confucianism - to provide a holistic understanding of culture in China and the cultural impacts on Chinese students.

2.4.1 Chinese cultural identity and language

The understanding of cultural identity within China is often equated to national identity, which indicates the sense of belonging to Chinese citizens or the Chinese ethnic group (Tan, 2017). Language variations within a country affect how people communicate and may influence how people see themselves and where they belong (Q. Zhou, 2020). For example, people may use a local or regional language to signify their identity as people from that region, and the language or regional language we speak has an impact on what others think of us (Nevile, 2015). The fact that one speaks a regional language or with a local accent also influences our social attitudes toward that speaker (Piller, 2017).

In China, Mandarin Chinese is the official language, widely used across the nation. Western linguists consider Chinese as a language family with different languages that may not be mutually understandable (Ramsey, 1989; Van Driem, 2007, 2008). However, in the Chinese domestic context, the Chinese language is seen as composed of Mandarin (*Putonghua*) in its standard form with the addition of six other dialects: Cantonese, Wu, Min, Hakka, Xiang and Gan (Yuan, 1989). As Han Chinese is the largest ethnic group of the overall Chinese population and the majority of this group speaks Mandarin as their native tongue, Mandarin is

promoted nationally as a way to eliminate dialect barriers and to improve communication (Yao et al., 2019). This is not inconsistent with people's use of traditional dialects, since dialects are still used in certain regions or informal situations. In this research, Mandarin is synonymous with the Chinese language, as combined with discussions on regional dialect, as presented in Chapter 6 in greater detail.

As a result of its large population, Han is the dominant culture in China because it is shared by the most people and thus exerts greater influence than any other Chinese ethnic group. However, a people's cultural identity is not decided exclusively by the dominant culture or the national official language but together with subcultures where language, cultural values, norms, rules for behaviour and people's identities are different (da Veiga and Martins, 2017). Local dialects are one of the ways people retain a connection with their local culture. Yin (2015) argues that speaking the same local language increases the sense of belonging, while speaking Mandarin with people from the same region may add psychological distancing, except when used for formal purposes. When communicating with Chinese people, it is common to see them use local dialects in informal and private contexts to maintain their cultural heritage and identity but speak the official language (i.e. Mandarin) in formal and public situations. The same occurs to Chinese people living abroad. Studies show that speaking Mandarin is an effective way for Chinese people living abroad to find a national bond and people prefer to speak Mandarin with other Chinese people when they live in a foreign country (Downes, 2017; L.S. Liu, 2017).

This brings an imbalanced position to regional Chinese dialects. Native dialect speakers in Wong and Xiao's (2010) study suggest that they feel more comfortable speaking dialects rather than speaking Mandarin, but they realise that Mandarin is a more worldly and scholarly language, and they are therefore willing to learn it. As L. Wei (1994) notes, each dialect group has its specific culture, customs, and history; dialect marks Chinese people's origins and kinships, while Mandarin plays a relatively small role to shape cultures with regional features. This is because Mandarin was originally a Beijing dialect (*guanhua)* which was used for administrative purposes by the imperial officials. The fact that it has been widely used across the country has led people to assume it represents all social classes and

regions, thus ignoring that Mandarin cannot represent everyone's linguistic affinity and cultural roots (Wong and Xiao, 2010). In this study, I look at Chinese students who are facing a multilingual world and how they find their identity in a Western culture with English as a global language. Mandarin, and the dialects they might speak as their home culture heritage, will have an impact on their social lives and sense of belonging in the UK. As A.W. He (2006) asserts, for dialect speakers cultural identity partly depends on the abilities to create coherence in a multilingual communicative world, and I discuss this in Chapter 6.

2.4.2 A collectivist-Confucianism culture

Confucianism, also known as Ruism, is a philosophy and way of life that had its roots in ancient China. It has been variously called a religion and a humanistic or rationalistic philosophy (Yao, 2010). Confucianism was derived from the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE), and it has long been considered the mainstream philosophy in the Chinese context throughout history. It is regarded as based on collectivism rather than individualism and obligations-orientated rather than rights-orientated (C. Wang, 2016). To be more specific, collectivist culture emphasises the group, and commitment and responsibility takes precedence over self-consideration (Gudykunst, 1998). For example, collectivist cultural values can be traced back from the worldview '*天人合一' (tian ren he yi)*, which maintains that all things, from nature to humans, are integrated parts of a unified whole. This basic understanding of the universe primes Chinese people for ways of thinking and behaving that emphasise wholeness and harmony. As the Chinese proverbs say, '*众志成城' (zhong zhi cheng cheng)*, or '*众人拾柴火焰高' (hong ren shi chai huo yan gao)*, which mean, respectively, that 'if united, people are as strong as a fortress' and 'the flame runs high if everyone adds wood to it'. This exemplifies how important social forces are in the creation of cultural values and understanding in the Chinese context (P. Yang, 2013). The opposite behaviour, such as 'standing-out' and 'showing personality', is regarded as breaking this wholeness and harmony, and they are not widely accepted attitudes in Chinese society. This differs from a Western culture that stresses the value of individuals and encourages them to show their personalities.

However, viewing Chinese and Western cultures in this way might perpetrate a block narrative (Holliday, 2016a) that can result in generalisations and cliches and which may prevent us from seeing the nuanced aspects of Chinese culture. Modern values have changed quite a bit due to globalisation and close connections with western cultures. More modern idioms such as, '*求同存异' (qiu tong cun yi)*, which means seeking harmony but not sameness, and '*与时俱进*'（*yu shi ju jin*), which means advancing with the times and improving through reforms, show that traditional Chinese culture has been influenced by Western culture and has begun to focus on individual differences and changes (Wang et al., 2016). Chinese students could improve their cultural capital and ICC by learning to see cultural threads that connect their original and the receiving cultures to integrate different values and adjust their social practices in the intercultural context.

As Husted and Allen (2008) point out, collectivist moral reasoning is more relationship-based and focuses on other's expectations and obedience to social norms. Emphasising the principles of 'sharing, reciprocity, caring and community', people with collectivist cultural backgrounds are more sensitive about behaviour that affects other members in the group, especially adverse impacts, since -broadly speaking - collectivist cultures pursue harmony in the community. Any behaviour that is not useful for all group members may be regarded as breaking up social norms that are followed by the majority. However, a collectivist perspective can also bring drawbacks in the form of fewer connections with outsiders and a loss of interest in exploring the external environment (Bhawuk, 2017).

2.4.3 An individualistic-Confucianism culture

According to Wang and Z.B. Liu (2010), growing individuality and some aspects of collectivism coexist in contemporary China. Individualism denotes values associated with the self and tends to focus on the advancement of individual interests to the exclusion of more collective ones. However, unlike the Western understanding of self that stresses individual separation and the primacy of the individual, in Confucianism individualism stresses the element integrated within a complex unity and its connection to the relevant environment. In other words, while both Chinese and Western philosophies admit that the individual is morally valuable, the West tends to view individualism in a disconnected, independent manner, whereas the

modern application of the term ‘individualism’ in the Chinese context emphasises the quality of a person that marks them as a single individual within a web of others and their integration into a social network. It does not simply equate to subjectivity (Brindley, 2010).

In this study, I view collectivism and individualism as characteristics of students’ social practices being guided by values rather than as markers of cultural differences, and the relative importance of each of them may influence how they behave and engage with their local community. For example, the sense among Chinese students of belonging to the Chinese community in the UK and their social behaviours reflect the collectivist and individualist aspects of cultural values, respectively. These are discussed in detail in section 5.3.1, which focuses on students’ food-based socialising, and section 7.5.2 about staying close to the original culture.

2.4.4 Reflexive and ethical ‘self’ in Confucianism

Confucianism underpins the pursuit of harmony within a community, stressing the collaboration of individuals inside a complex social network. The individual in Confucianism does not exist independently of others but is associated with their connections (Q. Zhu, 2020). However, harmony coexists with conflict within networks; therefore, it requires a citizen from a Confucian culture to be reflexive in social relations and critically see the connections between oneself and other members within the network.

The view of an ethical self from the perspective of the importance of social relations is considered a moral enhancement of self that indicates an ability to use a rational way to deal with ethical relations (Xiang, 2019). The formation of an ethical self includes recognition of self-identity, the reflexive self, and the sense of compassion that associates one’s self with others in social settings (Wang, 2016). In this process, cultural discourses play an important role in independently regulating one’s own behaviour and speech while communicating with others and help reconstruct a new Confucian cultural citizen within a diverse cultural society. Similar concepts have been put forward by Western scholars. Nuyen’s (2002) ‘ethical self’, for example, looks at the relationship between the self and his or her

community, and De Bary (1983) notes that the self is sustainably improved in ethical social practices and moral communication with other members in the community. Further details about the ethical self and Chinese students within social relations are presented in Chapters 6 and 7. These chapters specifically investigate students' self-positioning and identity formation as facilitated by language practices and intercultural engagements.

Having explained cultural theories in the Chinese context, the next chapter discusses the conceptual foundation for intercultural communication competence. It is supported by literature drawing on empirical research in the intercultural field and continues the discussion on culture from an intercultural perspective.

2.5 Understanding Intercultural Communication

As globalisation becomes more intense, involving people's everyday lives, becoming an effective global citizen requires that one is able to move between cultures, spanning the boundaries of languages, ethnicity and nationality and that one is able to communicate and interact across communities. Hence, as I will suggest, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is an extremely important factor for achieving this goal across various aspects of life, especially in higher education where people with different national backgrounds live and study together. The following sections critically review Byram's and Deardorff's ICC models of intercultural encounters. This is integrated by a discussion of Putnam's theory of social capital as cooperative framework that shares the same goal as ICC: fostering mutual respect, trust and cooperation among diverse communities.

2.5.1 Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication (IC) is verbal or non-verbal communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. Most scholars view IC as a process rather than a fixed event. For example, Gudykunst (2003) conceptualises the phenomenon of intercultural communication as a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures. Littlejohn and Foss (2010) assert that communication is difficult to define since this is an abstract term which, like most terms, possesses numerous meanings. In this

sense, the meaning shared through communication is ongoing and ever-changing since the interlocutors, contexts, languages, regions etc. contribute to the complexity of communication. Moreover, communication is also transactional, a back-and-forth process of negotiating meaning between speakers which relies on feedback (Harris and Nelson, 2007). This dynamic nature of culture increases the complexity of intercultural communication since humans' subjective understanding of cultural interrelations, and their strategies for navigating cultural differences, are co-constructed on the basis of intercultural social encounters, self-awareness, education, and continuous learning experiences. Essentialist beliefs about culture and national identity, on the other hand, can foster a sense of belonging and shared knowledge within a certain community, but may also limit communication with those outside the national group (R. Yang, 2020; Anderson, 2006). This essentialist concept of culture has been reflected by Holliday's (2016a) idea of cultural blocks that separate cultures with uncrossable national boundaries. However, the cultural threads, the other term proposed by Holliday, could lead people to find shared and similar meanings across more easily. The development of cultural threads follows the social constructive understanding of culture that considers the complex nuances, personal perspectives, and the contradictions inherent in cultural identity within the realm of intercultural communication.

A dynamic and constructivist view of culture brings more attention to the role of intercultural communication in helping both international and local students to achieve the inclusive goal of higher education. For international students, engaging in cross-cultural communication not only enhances their communicative skills but also strengthens their integration into a culturally diverse environment. For local students, interactions with international students can provide them with a global vision and the international experiences that can help them to become 'global citizens' (Franch, 2020). The mutual benefits of intercultural communication among students in international higher education are evident in the way participants' cultures, languages, and personal experiences intersect, shaped by broader social structures.

2.5.2 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is regarded as 'the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language' (Byram, 1997, p.71). Many studies focus on individuals and regard ICC as an individual's internal capacity. There are more than 300 constructs related to ICC (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009) including the following: compositional models (e.g., Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998), which list the relevant traits, such as characteristics and skills that compose being productive in competent interaction; the developmental model (e.g., King and Baxter Magolda, 2005), which stresses the dominant role of the time dimension in intercultural communication, specifying the stages of progression through which competence is formed; and the adaptative model (e.g., Kim, 2001), of which the core emphasis lies on the mutual alteration of actions, attitudes and understanding based on interaction with people from another culture, with the adaptation itself being a criterion of competence. However, these models face criticism from various angles, as pointed out by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009). For instance, compositional models emphasise components and skills, yet these components often remain abstract and lack a clear understanding of their interrelationships. Development models are strong in modelling systematic stages but fall short in identifying interpersonal traits. Adaptive models concentrate on the adaptation process but face criticism for potentially overlooking actual intercultural communication, raising questions about whether adaptation should be considered a criterion for intercultural competence. In the context of this project, I refer to an ICC model that combines Byram's (1997) model, which is used as a foundational component, with Deardorff's (2006, 2009) contextual understanding of educational settings. The aim of combining these two theories is to investigate the development of intercultural skills among Chinese students and delve into their cultural adaptive experiences. I will begin with a presentation of Byram's foundational ICC model as the basis of this project.

Byram's ICC model

Byram's (1997) model is the most recognised in the field, conceptualising intercultural communicative competence in research on foreign language teaching and dividing ICC into a set of *savoirs*, that is, intercultural skills:

1） *savoirs*, i.e., knowledge and knowing (of social groups and of societal and individuals' interaction)

2) *savoir être*, i.e., attitudes (curiosity and openness) and values

3) *savoir comprendre*, i.e., skills of interpreting and relating a document and/or an event of another culture

4) *savoir apprendre*, i.e., the skills of discovery and interaction (the ability to 'operate knowledge', attitudes and skills under the constraint of real-time communication and interaction)

5) *savoir s'engager*, i.e., critical cultural awareness defined as 'the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (Byram, 1997, p.53)

Byram (ibid.) argues that these competences will not only help intercultural speakers to achieve successful information exchange but also assist in building interpersonal relationships between speakers based on respect and mutual understanding. The first skill is '*knowledge' (savoirs)*, which involves knowledge about one's own culture and those of other individuals, serving as fundamental for successful interaction at both social and individual level. As Byram (1997, p. 36) states:

> If an individual knows about the ways in which their social identities have been acquired, how they are a prism through which other members of their group are perceived, and how they in turn perceive their interlocutors from another group, that awareness provides a basis for successful interaction.

The second skill in Byram's model is '*attitudes' (savoir être)*, which involves a 'willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality' (Byram, 1997, p.50). This skill can be seen at work when individuals are curious and open to other individuals from different cultural backgrounds and to engage in their lives. However, Byram (1997) also mentions a 'tourist approach' whereby individuals are interested in the unfamiliar context but

keep some distance from the Other. This kind of intercultural attitude towards the Other would result in a separation between one's self and the Other in the same context. Further details about Chinese students' 'tourist' attitudes to intercultural encounters are presented in Chapter 7. The third skill is that 'of *interpreting and relating' (savoir comprendre*), which is based on existing knowledge and willingness to engage with and discover other cultures. It is an 'ability to interpret a document from one country for someone from another, or to identify relationships between documents from different countries, [and it] is therefore dependent on knowledge of one's own and other environment' (Byram, 1997, p.37).

The third skill '*of discovery and interaction' (savoir apprendre*) is concerned with discovering new phenomena and eliciting meanings in a foreign environment during social interaction. This draws upon individuals' foreign language skills, sensitivity to others and existing knowledge and attitudes toward other cultures. The fifth skill, '*critical cultural awareness' (savoir s'engager*), is defined as 'an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (Byram, 1997, p.53). For example, individuals are encouraged to establish shared criteria and assessments for evaluating a cultural event and foster a capacity to negotiate cultural differences to manage conflicts. Individuals are also encouraged to demonstrate thoughtful reflection and critical analysis of the cultural meanings and behaviours they encounter. This skill encourages a more thorough comprehension and appreciation of various cultural viewpoints, which helps to foster more harmonious relationships in our globalised society.

All components in Byram's (1997) ICC model collectively shape the concept of 'intercultural speaker'. However, several critiques have been directed to this model in terms of the diverse aspects of ICC in recent years, and Byram's own stance has also evolved. The first critique relates to the way in which Byram describes cultural knowledge as 'social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction' (1997, p.51). This has been highlighted as an essentialist view of culture, since it offers a rather static and simplified notion of national culture. Critics note how this view overlooks the dynamic changes of

contemporary patterns of culture and the hybridity and complexity of culture and identity in a globalised world and how it also restricts the potential of multilingual and multicultural aspects of language learning (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005). In response to this critique, Byram (2008) introduces the concept of intercultural citizenship as a complement to his ICC definition, acknowledging the evolving nature of language, identity and culture. Resonating with cosmopolitanism (Guilherme, 2007), Byram argues that intercultural speakers become more appreciative of alternative ways of behaviour and develop an awareness of the limitations of national identity. As a result, they may gradually become more sophisticated, cosmopolitan members of an interconnected, global community (Wagner and Byram, 2017). Rather than perceiving cultural differences as a threat or fearing loss of national identity, some individuals may integrate both local and global dimensions into a cosmopolitan identity that is driven by an awareness of interdependence among people across the world (ibid.). The strength of intercultural citizenship lies in its focus on action in the world, action which takes place now. However, it does not promote critical evaluation of 'our' culture, as Byram (2013) notes, stating that 'citizenship education attempts to educate "good citizens," and good citizens do not "rock the boat"; they conform' (p.59).

Moreover, Byram's model has been critiqued for not reflecting how to deal with conflicts in intercultural communication. This is particularly important in engagement which involves the intercultural speaker's critical evaluation of both their own and others' perspectives (see Byram, 1997, pp.63-64). The aim of this critical evaluation is to achieve harmony and agreement in intercultural communication. However, this has been critiqued for not taking sufficiently into consideration the power relations between intercultural speakers, e.g., between native speakers and foreign speakers. While Byram acknowledges the power imbalance between native and foreign speakers, the model itself implies that foreign speakers determine the result of communication. This contradiction has also been highlighted by Kramsch (2011), who argues that the traditional ICC model does not reflect the fact that 'the self that is engaged in intercultural communication is a symbolic self that is constituted by symbolic systems like language as well as by systems of thought and their symbolic power' (p.354). Kramsch's comment indicates the more complicated skills needed for a language learner to navigate the nuanced symbols inherent in words, expressions and

discourse events from the target culture, thereby facilitating appropriate and effective communications. Chapter 6 presents the power imbalance observed in English communication during intercultural experiences among Chinese students.

Deardorff's ICC model

Deardorff's model (2006, 2009) is designed for the context of international education, and it considers the competence that international students need to achieve education in a foreign country (Janssen, 2019). Therefore, compared to Byram's model which focuses on the 'intercultural speaker' on a broader level, Deardorff's model has more relevant components to support a project that looks at international students' ICC development in cultural and educational exchanges.

Deardorff's ICC model (2006, 2009) is based on five elements: attitude, knowledge, skills and internal and external outcomes. These provide a framework that can be utilised to guide a curriculum that promotes intercultural competence and assessment of learning outcomes in educational settings. There are some similarities between Byram's and Deardorff's models. For example, both stress the importance of intercultural awareness that serves as the foundation and start of intercultural communication. Moreover, attitudes, knowledge and skills can lead to an 'internal outcome' (Deardorff, 2006) that consists of flexibility, adaptability and empathy. The 'internal outcome' entails an individual's adaptability to different communication styles and behaviour and adjustments to new cultural environments; it also includes the consideration of flexibility when selecting and using appropriate communication styles and behaviour. Moreover, it involves the development of cognitive flexibility, which can be a supplement for the understanding of 'critical cultural awareness' (*savoir s'engager*) in Byram's (1997) model, as Deardorff's internal outcome includes criticality that relies on adaptation and the propensity to adjust one's behaviour temporarily to suit social needs. The notion of 'internal outcome' can be a useful complement to Byram's model when examining Chinese students' internal motivations, flexibility and adaptations that are impacted by the acquired attitudes, knowledge and skills during cultural adaptation to the UK and returnees' readaptation to the original culture.

The appropriate and effective communication and behaviour in intercultural situations is the visible 'external outcome' of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009), which refers to behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately based on one's intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills to achieve one's goals to some degree. Unlike Byram, Deardorff's perspective extends beyond individual attributes to active participation in the local community and intentionally addresses both skills and attitudes. This approach aims to balance an overemphasis on results by also considering the underlying processes involved. In addition, Deardorff (2011) highlights the crucial role of relationship-building in forging international students' lasting personal bonds with the receiving society.

In sum, Byram (2013) asserts that the essence of intercultural competence (IC) practice is to acquire skills and attitudes for exploring any culture encountered, rather than focusing on whichever culture they discover. Deardorff's (2006, 2009) framework, on the other hand, reflects more specifically the dynamics of intercultural communication in educational settings. The combination of Byram's and Deardorff's models allow a greater insight into Chinese students' intercultural communicative adaptation processes than each model would do separately, and the application of these two models helps me to address the research questions which explore students' challenges, strategies, and cultural reflection throughout their study abroad experience. After describing ICC models, I will next present Putnam's theory of social capital in which ICC are valuable to facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit within a society. Considering students' social capitals in their IC exploration will provide further theoretical and practical basis for my doctoral research.

2.5.3 Putnam's theory of social capital

In reviewing the research on intercultural communicative processes experienced by international students, it emerges that students' adaptation processes and outcomes are significantly influenced by their own 'capital' as well as by factors in the external environment, such as social tolerance. Putnam (1993) posits that social capital is constituted by norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness among social networks, and that the nature of social capital is the relationship and association within groups or among communities. He further divides social capital

into bonding and bridging social capital to account for different types of trust and reciprocity. According to Putnam (ibid.), bonding social capital is functional to building relationships within social networks in which people are similar in some ways, such as in relation to social class, race or faith; therefore, the trust is naturally built along with bonding social capital due to the similar social background. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to the links between groups and communities, where social capital functions as a bridge to connect different networks and to build reciprocity and trustworthiness. This trust is earned.

Empirical studies have highlighted how international students develop both bonding and bridging social capital in intercultural environments. For example, Li and Chen (2014) note that the Chinese social platform Renren[1] plays a significant and positive role in maintaining home country social capital among Chinese students in the US, while Facebook, as an international social platform, performs better in building bridging social capital. Glass and Gesing (2018) illustrate how international students' sense of belonging to the university is influenced by campus organisations, finding that students who participated in activities that include diverse cultures developed both bonding and bridging social capital with students from other cultures, while those who only participated in home culture-related activities developed more bonding relations with their co-nationals.

Putnam's theory of social capital integrates Byram's and Deardoff's models in order to address RQ2 and RQ3, which explore how students develop strategies for engaging in intercultural situations and the subsequent impact on their cultural understanding. Relevant findings are detailed in Chapter 5, which discusses how students use bonding capital to engage in food socialisation with their national peers; and in Chapter 7, which illustrates their use of bridging capitals to establish connections with local communities. These findings highlight the significance of Putnam's theory in understanding international students' experiences in building connections within higher education settings. Putnam's definition provides a useful framework for understanding the decision-making patterns of Chinese students as

[1] The Renren Network (Chinese: 人人网; pinyin: Rénrénwǎng; lit. 'Everyone's Network') is a Chinese social networking service like Facebook, which was popular among college students.

they strengthen their ties and integrate into local society, while also maintaining connections with their compatriot communities abroad.

2.6 Summary

In this chapter, I provided the theoretical framework for the present research. This project aims to explore how Chinese students in the UK understand the host British culture, their original culture and interculturality through intercultural communicative practices. In order to address this research aim, I first discussed the essentialist and non-essentialist view of culture and the perspective I take when investigating cultural phenomena from Street's (1993) and Holliday's (2016a) theories, as well as the themes in cultural study, all with a view to providing a rationale for this study and the issues emerging from the data. At the end of the first section, I provided a brief analysis on features of culture in China to offer a contextual background to the research. I then visited the conceptual framework of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), combining the most widely recognised models by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006, 2009) in support of this research. At the end of this chapter, I analysed Putnam's (1993) theory of social capital as an integrated framework that shares the same goal as ICC: fostering social inclusion within diverse communities.

Chapter 3 Contextual and Empirical Literature Review

3.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter examines the sociocultural development of culture and interculturality in detail, looking for connections between cultural theories and social reality and Chinese students' intercultural communication. In order to develop a thorough grasp of participants' domestic education before they study abroad, this chapter includes the contextual literature regarding the Chinese educational system, English teaching in China, Chinese students' decisions to study abroad, and decisions made by returnees.

3.2 Educational issues in China

Understanding the Chinese education system is crucial for knowing participants' educational backgrounds before they study abroad. As the Chinese educational system has undergone continual pedagogical innovation since 2000, the goal of education has changed from increasing access to schooling by addressing the severe lack of qualified teachers and improving the quality of physical infrastructure (Paine, 1992) to raising the quality of teaching and learning (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Teaching as a process is being changed from being teacher-centred to student-centred, aiming at fostering students' capacities for creativity, innovation, collaboration, self-expression, etc. This aim has been strengthened by the burden reduction policy launched in 2013, aiming at reducing academic burden in primary and secondary schools and expanding after-school activities (Bhardwaj, 2019). However, the reality of high academic pressure in China is not changed significantly for two reasons: traditional attitudes to teaching and the ongoing pressure of exams (D. Wang, 2011).

The drawbacks of exam-oriented education, such as lack of space for independence and self-determination and the focus on memorisation rather than creativity or critical skills, are often mentioned by critics (Yung, 2020). Moreover, in exam-oriented teaching, knowledge to be taught is predetermined (ibid.), and students are therefore given limited space to use their imaginations and creativity as long as

they adhere to the guidelines. Consequently, on the one hand, the suppression of individualism and subjectivity in education encourages students' obedience to the authorities; on the other hand, ironically, it encourages a spirit of individual resistance, with students escaping from the academic burden by turning to pursue self-cultivation through more diverse education (Zhao, 2010). Therefore, engaging in education at a private school with an international curriculum or pursuing studies abroad have emerged as widely embraced approaches to fostering students' independent learning, individual characteristics and creativity. This strategy could help equip students with the skills needed to pursue socio-economic advantages, such as increased opportunities to secure a desirable job. Nevertheless, the education students received in China is quite dissimilar from that of a Western education system that focuses on independent learning and critical thinking. The contradiction in learning styles can bring challenges and struggles for students who choose to study abroad.

3.3 Study abroad

Study abroad is an opportunity to pursue an undergraduate or post-graduate degree from a university outside of one's home country (Zwart, 2013). A series of studies notice that investment in study abroad is a good one for both students and the receiving country. It is acknowledged that studying in a foreign country can promote students' global awareness and prepare them to become interculturally competent citizens. Malmgren and Galvin's (2008) study shows that students' study abroad experiences have a positive impact on their further, post-sojourn study. From the nation perspective, study abroad represents a commitment to more globalised and interconnected international relations. Pries (2001) notes that internationally mobile students create their 'transnational social space' in which they come across, exchange and produce renewable understanding and attitudes as well as promoting social skills that embrace 'here' and 'there'. As Portes (1997, p.812) indicates, many international mobile students 'live dual lives' in which they maintain their social bonds and cultural connections in both places, seeking education and careers across borders. However, Twombly et al. (2012) argue that the outcome of study abroad needs to be considered in context, relevant to students' personal characteristics, personal experiences and programme types. However, there are some issues such as the commercialisation of higher education

that can negatively affect the outcomes of study abroad for individuals and institutions, such as fostering the dissemination of knowledge, facilitating cultural exchanges and understanding and developing capacities beyond national boundaries, all of which are central to international education (Marginson, 2007). In much the same way, Stephenson (2002) uncovers three factors that influence students' degree of intercultural immersion: 1) individual differences, e.g., weak language skills vs competent language skills; 2) opportunities to interact with the host country, e.g., exposure to cultural differences that promote cultural questioning of both home and host cultures; and 3) programme types and their staff, e.g., shorter or longer programmes or living with foreigners or host nationals. All of these things should be taken into account before deciding to study abroad.

Scholars have also investigated the purposes of Chinese students' study abroad and find these are varied. W. Liu (2016) identifies that Chinese students' study abroad is largely motivated by the increasing level of domestic competition in higher education and accessing prestigious institutions that is a significant concern in the Chinese labour market. Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018) further confirm that prestigious institutions draw a significant number of Chinese students because the reputation of a university for increasing the competence for graduates entering the domestic job market. Moreover, study abroad benefits English language acquisition. The duration of study abroad plays a fundamental role in determining the success of English acquisition as a L2 learner. Freed (1995) states that L2 learning during study abroad is different from that of the foreign language classroom, as learners have sufficient exposure to the target language and extensive interactions with native speakers to get feedback for improvement. Freed (ibid.) also highlights the importance of length of stay in the target culture for the language learning outcomes. It has been found that learning L2 in a foreign setting has positive impact on fluency, pragmatic competence and lexical development but shows no significant improvements in grammatical skills when compared to the classroom settings (DuFon and Churchill, 2006). This positive correlation between length of stay and L2 development has also been supported by Jensen and Howard (2014), who point out that the development of complexity and accuracy in written skills can be achieved with a longer duration.

Besides academic and language concerns, social and cultural offerings have also stood out among Chinese students' choices of institutions, as these are concerned with self-realisation and lived cultural experience in a foreign country. Wu's (2020) research on study abroad experiences, for example, identifies the importance of cultural learning, such as acculturation and cultural values, for students' self-construction and notices the impact of a positive social life on students' career decision-making. Marginson (2014) claims that study abroad is a process of self-formation for students, arguing that study abroad shapes hybrid identities, as international students' identities are formed by their home country identity, host country identity and a large set of cosmopolitan options. Moreover, Marginson and Sawir (2011) put forward a concept of 'cultural fit', which assumes that the more the cultures of the students and the host institutions match, the more likely it is students will 'adjust' successfully in their academic endeavours. However, this may lead to an evaluation of culture from a block perspective (Holliday, 2016a), where learning styles within each culture are viewed as fixed and lacking commonalities. Consequently, students may feel forced to abandon their familiar learning methods to conform to those of another culture. This perspective can result in a challenging academic transition, as students may resist change. However, by prioritising individual needs and growth over emphasising perceived differences, students might be able to navigate various learning cultures more successfully, adapting as necessary to suit their own preferences.

3.3.1 Impacts on Chinese students' return decisions

The reasons for Chinese students' decisions regarding staying in the UK or returning to China after they graduate and acquire a qualification are varied. The domestic job market, the cultural impact and Chinese students' expectations for work and life after being immersed for a while in the West drive their decisions upon graduation (Yu, 2016). Yu (ibid.) points out that these push and pull variables dynamically change throughout study abroad, and the longer the students stay in the receiving country, the less likely they are to want to return to China because of their growing fear of what might happen if they return. However, N. Ruan's (2020) study of top-tier postgraduate students in the US, has found that the home-pull factors are strong and include a sense of belonging, competitive salary in some disciplines, parents' expectations regarding their children's return and the

successful development of peers in the home country. Yu (2016) notes that the home-pull factors are more likely to arise from the traditional collectivist dimension of Chinese culture. He illustrates that the sense of loneliness abroad and separation from their family for a long period of time can prompt students to return as soon as possible. Another motivation for students to return is their social connections with pre-departure friends, business partners and other acquaintances. These all appear to demonstrate that being in a collective group with someone they know is important for students with respect to their return to their home country.

On the other hand, there are a few factors that are pushing students not to go back to China. These students are more willing to seek careers in the UK or other Western countries. N. Ruan (2020) concludes that the open social atmosphere and inclusive attitudes in the receiving country, different work-life balance and advanced disciplinary development can pull Chinese students to stay in the US. Meanwhile, some students do not want to accept so-called mainstream values in China, e.g., linking life success with fame and wealth. Some students have lost their social capital, e.g., their connections with their previous friends or business partners after staying abroad. Consequently, rebuilding connections is demanding and difficult owing to the lack of common interests, topics and hobbies. Therefore, some people, driven by the pursuit of personal development career and individual dreams, will give up re-entering the social networks in China which can be challenging. However, N. Ruan (2020) also posits that language barriers and cultural differences are the main host-push factors that drive students to return. These findings are helpful for this project, demonstrating how students who stay in the UK for varying amounts of time experience conflicts in social practices, as the lack of connections with domestic culture and the familiarity with the UK society bear a certain relationship with their length of stay.

3.4 Global Englishes

Globalisation of technology and human knowledge requires knowledge being shared among nations, which is a result of active communication (Hurrell and Woods, 2018). People with different first languages seek to engage in global cooperation of scientific exploration or financial development and should prepare themselves with

global language skills to ensure the success of intercultural communication. In this case, English has become a dominant global language and is more important for global communication among people with different cultural and language backgrounds. Kachru (1985) argues that English has escaped from the control of English-speaking nations and developed into diverse English varieties in different regions, identifying three concentric circles of countries to depict the spread of English worldwide: inner, outer and expanding. Examples of inner circle countries include the UK and the US, where native English speakers are the majority population. The outer circle refers to countries such as India and Singapore where English has been spread due to colonisation. In the outer circle countries, English is mostly used as a lingua franca, and there exists variety of English usages. The expanding circle demonstrates those countries where English is not used as official language but it is widely used among non-native speakers for international communication across linguistic and national backgrounds.

English dominance affects not only social and financial events but also academia. There are an increasing number of academic programmes in higher educational institutions using English as a medium of instruction. This requires intensive English use by international students, both for study and social life, but as English may not be their native language, this can also cause barriers for students' intercultural communication and adaptation to study. The impact comes from phonetics, sociolinguistics and social psychology (MacFarlane and Stuart-Smith, 2012). With the increasing connectivity due to globalisation, the spread of English and its influence in international education has been under discussion for a long time. English is now used as a lingua franca (ELF) for people from diverse backgrounds to communicate with each other, and the World Englishes (WE) concept has also been discussed in recognition of these English varieties. However, both highlight a monolithic view of 'English only' and ignore the diversity of languages in a multicultural world, regarding language use only at the country level. National boundaries between languages, encouraged by ELF and WE, constrain the fluid and dynamic use of English as a global language, since English according to these two concepts is perceived as being exclusively owned by inner circle countries rather than being associated with a diverse array of global interactions (Pennycook, 2016). According to Rose et al. (2021), the usage of English has moved from being a language belonging to a minority native group to being a language with global

ownership, that is, Global Englishes (GE). Unlike ELF and WE, with reference to native norms GE takes multilingualism as the norm, aiming at integrating learners' linguistic repertoires and promoting communication among diverse multilingual-cultural backgrounds (ibid.).

3.4.1 Translanguaging

This change in the sociolinguistic use of English brings up changes in English language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), as language teaching pedagogy shifts the focus from grammatical accuracy and native-speaker standards onto the bilingual and multicultural use of linguistic repertoire, which is translanguaging. Vogel and García (2017) argue that by 'translanguaging' (i.e. using words from different languages in the same sentence), students are making full use of their linguistic repertoire for effective communication. It can deepen engagement in the bilingual conversation and strengthen the comprehension of complex context and texts. However, translanguaging has faced criticism for potentially threatening the traditional linguistic boundaries defined by nations. In response, Wei (2018) argues that translanguaging has never challenged the named languages. Rather, it emphasises that languages are historically defined entities shaped by political and ideological forces. Therefore, translanguaging highlights the creativity of multilingual individuals in transcending the boundaries between language varieties, enabling them to effectively use multiple semiotic and cognitive resources in communication.

Scholars have now investigated the importance of increasing speakers' linguistic repertoire in real communication, including individuals' first and second languages, creatively and actively to express meanings and develop multilingual competence in communication. For example, Blackledge and Creese (2017) note that Chinese people translanguage in daily shopping in the UK with wide-ranging semiotic repertoires, such as gestures and body language, to achieve successful interactions. In education, Alzahrani (2019) reports that use of L1 helps international students understand the content and generate ideas and that it does not weaken the quality of their writing. The research by Ou et al. (2023) delves into translanguaging within EMI (English medium instruction) programmes in China, recommending that international higher education institutions raise their awareness of the multilingual

resources available within their establishments. To facilitate this, the authors propose the development of innovative curricular programmes and activities designed to encourage multilingual students to actively contribute their knowledge and language skills. This, in turn, is expected to enhance student engagement and foster more effective communication.

However, the limitations of translanguaging should be noted in that it may cause L2 speakers to be stigmatised as deficient learners or result in language confusion for their L1 interlocutors (Othequy et al., 2015). In this project, Global Englishes and translanguaging theory are used to illustrate Chinese students' language choices in intercultural communicative practices, exploring their identity and sense of belonging in a multicultural environment. Further details can be noted in sections 6.4 and 6.5.

3.4.2 English language teaching in China

The debate on 'school English' and 'real-world' English has a long history. A study of learners' and teachers' perceptions of English as L2 shows that in some countries, like Finland, English teaching and learning have gone beyond acquiring accuracy in a single variety and focus on ensuring communication flow rather than normative accuracy (Ranta, 2010). Researchers in China have highlighted similar needs, but language teachers are still keen to teach a 'native standard' of English because they hope to prepare students for examinations (He, 2015). He (ibid.) also suggests that English learning resources in China are built around the standardised variety of English as a model of native-speaker English. But the question again is, who decides the standard of English? As discussed above, various English varieties exist in English-speaking countries, and many linguists agree that there is no such 'standard' English and that this is a construction. Widdowson (2012) notes that the motivation behind a standard form of English is to establish effective communicative conventions and a sense of common and national identity and security and to spread institutional rather than individual norms. This can be achieved in some situations, such as written English, teaching in school and university, and being heard on British radio or television (Hughes et al., 2013). However, the language is hardly perfect and consistent in spoken use (Milroy, 2001). As Milroy and Milroy (2012, p.19) note, standard English is 'an idea in the

mind rather than reality'. Thus, when they engage with 'native speakers', learners may discover that they do not understand them and that there is rarely a standard 'model' for non-native speakers to imitate in the real world.

Moreover, a prevalence of exam-oriented English language education in English expanding countries limits the socio-pragmatic content found in teaching resources and teaching. Ren and Han (2016) note that there is a wide gap between pragmatic learning and ELT textbook resources in China. They study university textbooks and highlight that, owing to the lack of pragmatic resources in the learning materials, Chinese English learners have insufficient knowledge of the speech act variations and communicative strategies employed. For example, students might know 'thanks' and 'thank you' but have no idea about 'cheers' or 'ta' as ways to express thanks. The lack of cultural and linguistic diversity in ELT resources has also been recognised. Marr (2005) illustrates how a lack of sociolinguistic awareness in L2 learning can lead to challenges when facing regional accents. In addition to an insufficient development in China of pragmatics competence in English, students experience a mismatch between the linguistic repertories they learn pre-departure and the English required by UK universities. Piller et al. (2020) highlight this mismatch between international students' linguistic repertoires, which include both spoken and written standards of English, and the language of schooling. Additionally, Piller et al. (ibid.) note that international students suffer from a double burden while at university; they have to learn the target language alongside the new content through the medium of that language, which might bring them more learning difficulties from the language perspective.

To address such a mismatch, Ren and Han (2016) appeal for greater attention to L2 learners' pragmatic competence in communication and suggest research in L2 teaching materials to raise learners' awareness of different English varieties in EFL contexts. Ramezanzadeh and Rezaei (2019) suggest the inclusion of localised English variety in L2 teaching. Moreover, Galloway (2017) argues that the ELT resources should cover native, non-native and learner's own culture to ensure a comprehensive input of sociolinguistic knowledge of English. As Baker (2012) claims, ELT in a globalised world not only relates to inner circle English-speaking countries but links to the diverse lingual-cultural background of the speakers. Thus, the relationship between language and culture should be considered in Global

Englishes for Language Teaching (GELT). Galloway (2017) suggests language teachers need to reconsider the notion of the target culture in GELT and integrate the learners' cultures and first languages as resources rather than hinderances or interference. In line with Galloway, Hall (2014) argues that current L2 teaching denies the pluralistic reality of English, further highlighting the notion of testing 'Englishing', which sees English as a dynamic and changing concept, and focusing on what people can do with it rather than how people use it. Hall denies the monolithic view of language teaching consistent with the discussion on global Englishes. Chapter 6 goes into further depth as to how the monolithic view of English affects Chinese students' intercultural communicative practices, which are based on language use, and their knowledge of culture.

3.4.3 Teaching ICC in China

The issue of cultivating intercultural communication competence (ICC) in China was raised as early as 2000 by the *National English Teaching Guide*, which was commissioned by the Chinese Ministry of Education and developed by the College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2011, pp.28-29), one of the goals of language teaching is to cultivate students' intercultural communication awareness and forge preliminary IC skills, so that students can gradually develop IC skills in the process of communicating across cultures. This is commendable, and the largest part of intercultural education investment has been put into schools, such as the internationally oriented English curriculum. However, the result is not satisfying. Firstly, over-emphasis on English language test performance causes students to lose interest in intercultural inquiry (Lam, 2002). Teachers and students focus on the language level but ignore the final goal, which is to promote intercultural abilities. Secondly, education injustice, such as economic gaps between city and countryside, investment into education, multicultural resources for learning and teaching facilities, could lead to the opportunities for students to be exposed to intercultural situations to be unequal (Y. Wu, 2020). Even though the internet, pop culture and advanced technology have paved a way for domestic students to experience various cultures, the chance for physical immersion, such as travel or face-to-face communication, is very limited for students in undeveloped areas of China (e.g., rural areas).

The *College English Teaching Guide (2020 edition)* developed by the Chinese College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee emphasises that intercultural education is one of the important tasks for university English courses. According to Zhou and Griffiths (2011), Chinese university students lack the necessary ICC knowledge and skills. Their study conducted in a university in Beijing shows students learning English think in Chinese and translate their thoughts into English, which prevents them from communicating effectively in an intercultural situation. Meanwhile, students expressed a preference for language teachers to prioritise instructions regarding cultural aspects, such as English idioms and sports, rather than focusing extensively on grammar and text structure. This, they believe, would contribute to a better understanding of Western culture. This study highlights issues with the current approach to ICC teaching. However, it is observed that the definition of ICC knowledge in the survey and the participants' responses in the interviews reveal a limitation in the study's ICC assessment. The assessment appears to adopt a static perspective of culture, concentrating primarily on English culture influenced by English-speaking nations. This narrow focus excludes consideration of cultures from non-English-speaking nations, thereby presenting an incomplete picture of interculturality.

This pertains to the teachers' awareness of ICC in the current language learning environment, and Gu's (2016) nationwide study on Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC presents similar findings, demonstrating that the majority of Chinese university-level EFL instructors have favourable attitudes towards ICC evaluation but prioritise linguistic proficiency over cultural awareness, which shows an imbalanced view between cultural and linguistic perspectives. Therefore, it becomes clear that insufficient training in ICC skills for students can result from teachers' inadequate perceptions of ICC and the teaching style used in Chinese universities. Additionally, the disparities in education and economic conditions across the nation may have contributed to exacerbating this situation. Wang and Dai (2023) highlight that individuals in remote or developing areas of China may have fewer opportunities for involvement in intercultural communication or access to training for handling IC differences compared to those in university education. This disparity contributes to differences in Chinese students' ICC skills, impacting their attitudes and performances when confronted with cultural differences.

3.5 Chinese international students and intercultural communication

3.5.1 Importance of ICC awareness in social context

ICC holds significant relevance for the social context, distinct from its academic use. In practical situations, individuals need to possess additional communicative skills beyond the academic realm, including the ability to initiate small talk, make jokes and engage in personal conversations - skills that may not be as commonplace in academic contexts (Liu, 2018). Piller (2017) notes that besides linguistic challenges, stereotyping and prejudice are the main issues that could be encountered in social interactions. Both stereotyping and prejudice refer to unjust judgments about a person or group that are based on a group's perceived negative traits, but prejudice also entails unjust behaviour and hostility towards a group because of these perceived traits. Jandt (2017, p.86) states that 'what we see, the most readily available image, is what we expect see' and when people's expectations about someone or something are not met, it can be easy for them to reject the information that does not confirm their assumptions. Stereotypes from movies, news and shared narratives can cause people to assume that a widely shared belief is true even when the information might be inaccurate or not apply to every single individual (Dovidio et al., 2010). Prejudice is often caused by overgeneralisation, which leads to misjudgement of people and, eventually, can prevent effective communication (Dang, 2016). Brown (2009) identifies verbal abuse that can cause a failure in intercultural communication among international students in the South of England. His research shows that verbal abuse and prejudice towards some groups based on assumptions around gender, social class, religious beliefs, customs, languages systems, etc., will lead to difficulties making friends, socialising and working with people from outside groups. Even if prejudice is not a problem, people will treat others differently based on the similarities of nationality, social class, personal experience, etc. (ibid.).

Moreover, as noted by Glass et al. (2014), the sense of community, belonging, social interactions and global perspective thinking (e.g., freedom of inquiry and critical thinking) also play vital roles in international students' intercultural

engagement. All of these relate to people's identity and social status, which are raised and hierarchically shaped by the social group they belong to. Bourdieu (1986) notes that social capital is unevenly distributed, and those who acquire and achieve social power, status and goodwill will accrue more social capital. He also argues that social capital is closely attached to class and other forms of stratification, which in turn are associated with various forms of benefit or advancement.

3.5.2 Crucial elements in Chinese students' ICC

Two crucial elements that influence Chinese students' intercultural interaction are their attitudes to the original culture in ICC and linguistic pressure from native speakers. The activities and experiences that participants come across may incorporate a sense of interculturality by fostering connections between individuals. This process encourages participants to explore an alternative perspective, offering students a unique lens through which to understand both themselves and 'Chinese culture', including its values (Jin, 2020). Jin's (ibid.) study on students of Mandarin in UK universities shows that studying overseas helps students become more transnationally sensitive, conscious of cultural variety and somewhat reflexive. The key to understanding students' intercultural awareness is negotiating the discourses related to their cultures of origin. However, J.E. Liu and Fang (2017) posit that home culture might be a challenge to the dominance of Anglophone cultures in English language teaching classrooms since it prevents language learners from accepting new cultures embedded in the target language. To respond to this, they call for the integration of the home and receiving cultures into the English language curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Furthermore, linguistic pressure from native English speakers can also block non-native speakers from engaging in IC (R'boul, 2021). R'boul (ibid.) notes that the difficulty comes from the internal stress created by language barriers, and the external stress that comes from the interactional roles and power differential carried by native speakers. Liu (2004) notes that Chinese students are more willing to chat with non-native speakers like Europeans and South Asians who share similar study abroad experiences and language levels. His study investigates Chinese students in Australia and finds that 'only one-third of Chinese students are actively

involved in interactions with the Australian students' and that the majority are 'inactive or incapable of communicating with the local students' (p.25). In line with Liu, God and Zhang (2019) state that international students struggle with finding similarities with local students and find it difficult to maintain a conversation. Hence, these difficulties that Chinese students encounter could cause the loss of direct contact with the local community and hinder deeper involvement in both academic and social aspects of life (Zhou and Todman, 2009).

3.5.3 Cultural shock

Holmes (2004) argues that one of the main reasons for the challenges Chinese students experience during study abroad is cultural shock and a lack of experience and knowledge of other cultures. As many Chinese overseas students do not have much prior experience of living in a Western country or communicating with foreign people, there can be a lack of understanding of how to communicate with people who are not Chinese. Furthermore, the dominance of collectivist values could lead to Chinese students preferring to fit in and not to stand out in a group, avoiding individual attention for the sake of a sense of 'security' (ibid.). Heng (2018, p.26) notes that 'being too outstanding was perceived [by Chinese students] as being individualistic, an act that was generally frowned upon in the comparatively more collectivistic Chinese society'. To address this issue, Hammond and Gao (2002) suggest dialectical learning for Chinese students, that is, 'the sustained, collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday experience' (p.232). However, while dialectical learning demonstrates the essence of Western education learning style by integrating study and daily interaction, it has a limited capacity to solve the original problem - unfamiliarity with the host culture.

Prayatni et al. (2020) state that intercultural communication is a difficult process because it can include misconstructions and a failure to achieve a common understanding. When it comes to IC with Chinese students, issues like linguistic difficulties, losing and saving face, politeness strategies and non-verbal communication styles play an important role. For example, J. Liu (2001) investigates the face-saving and politeness strategies used by Chinese students in American classrooms. Instead of classifying it as shyness, J. Liu (ibid.) indicates that silence is

a way in which Chinese students use these strategies to show intercultural respect and sensitivity, even though it may lead to misunderstandings and stereotypes, such as assumptions that they are not interested or that they do not want to be involved. Gao (2000) examines non-verbal behaviour and gestures that can cause misunderstandings for Chinese students in Australia. One of the participants in his study reported giving a thumbs up to praise an African student in a basketball match, but the African student was angry because he thought that gesture was insulting. This example shows that different cultural clues may disrupt intercultural communication. As Holliday (2020) argues, a block view of culture can place us in oppositional positions. Moreover, Xiao and Petraki (2007) analyse Chinese participants' feelings towards cultural differences and misunderstandings in intercultural interaction. They note that some participants paid little attention to miscommunication and developed strategies to clarify their behaviour or change the topic to reduce misunderstandings, emphasising more intercultural communicative knowledge and a higher level of tolerance towards cultural differences. On the other hand, some may feel disappointed and embarrassed when such incidents occur, and they feel themselves losing face and wanting to give up the conversation. This highlights that a lack of intercultural communication knowledge can lead to embarrassment and estrangement for participants, underscoring the importance of developing skills to navigate cultural boundaries and thereby enjoy smoother intercultural experiences (Holliday, 2020).

3.5.4 Chinese students' intercultural adaptation experiences

Chinese students appear to adjust themselves to new contexts by using several strategies to improve opportunities for achievement in both social and academic work (Gu et al., 2010). Research on international students' adaptations in Anglophone countries (e.g., Chen and Yang, 2015; Gu and Usinger, 2021; Tomin et al., 2016; Ye and Edwards, 2015) investigates behavioural adaptation within a cross-cultural understanding, and the increase in student's intercultural awareness and readiness for life issues, social problems and study life. Gu and Usinger (2021) find that most Chinese students have positive attitudes when facing challenges in a foreign environment, and strategies like remaining open-minded, improving their English, and making friends are used effectively to prevent stress, fear and uncertainty. Chen and Yang (2015) report that recent generations welcome social

network support more than traditional support, such as that of the family. Young people like to share their life stories through blogs, Facebook and other social media and gain empathy and support from those with similar experiences. In terms of academic life, Chinese researcher Y. Wu (2020) studies Chinese post-secondary students in Canada and points out that living and studying in Canada have improved students' cognitive, behavioural and affective competence in cross-cultural situations. To be more specific, she observes that participants have developed tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, enhanced self-management and executive abilities, and communicative skills in their social and study life. They have also improved empathy - showing greater ability to detect emotions in others - all of which demonstrate the potential physical and psychological benefits of being exposed to intercultural encounters.

Furthermore, the achievements of cultural adaptation depend not only on the students' attitudes to cultural differences and context but also the length of cultural immersion and pre-departure preparation. Several studies have shown that short study-abroad programmes have limited impact on improving international students' intercultural understanding and adaptation, especially those students who had few intercultural experiences before they studied abroad (e.g., Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Zhou and Todman, 2009). A study by Anderson et al. (2006) which looks at American students participating in a monthly, non-language acquisition programme in the UK, indicates that participants in the programme developed greater empathy and a more complex understanding of other cultures but their overall gains in intercultural sensitivity were weak due to the short duration and inadequate pre-departure preparation. Hoff (2008) points out that the growth of intercultural competence is significantly correlated with duration of immersion. Studies conducted by Goldstein (2022) and Coker et al. (2018) examining short-term study abroad programmes both reveal that the ICC outcomes achieved from the short period of immersion cannot approach those of study abroad programmes of longer duration, although the shorter immersion can achieve some, e.g., acquiring a broad general education, critical thinking and working effectively with others. Furthermore, Dwyer (2004) argues that the long-term study abroad programme allows students to have stronger relationships with the host-country nationals, which is believed to be an important factor in ICC development, while Ward et al. (2001) notice that in short-term programmes, people are more

likely to experience the initial stage of cultural adaptation, such as cultural shock and distressful emotions than in the long-term programme. In terms of pre-departure, a study by Santoro et al. (2015) looking at the Scottish context illustrates that student teachers suffered from lack of confidence and anxiety about the unfamiliar environment, fear of not being understood and different cultural norms and practices before studying abroad.

3.5.5 The function of self-reflection

Self-reflection is an important process for students to evaluate their own cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes in personal development (Grant, 2001), and the process of self-reflection is a 'conversation with oneself' (Bubyns, 2019, p.3). While many existing studies focus on acculturation theory and cultural issues, research on self-reflectivity regarding one's original culture has gained more attention in recent years (e.g., Pagano and Roselle, 2009; Savicki and Price, 2017). The concept of self-reflection links to the idea that identity is unfixed, composite and socially constructed, which implies that self-identity in intercultural exchanges is complex and keeps changing (Gidden, 1991). These considerations constitute the foundations for studies into the effects of self-reflection in intercultural adaptation. In research with Chinese doctoral students in the UK, Ye and Edwards (2015) find that through self-reflectivity, Chinese students experience two main changes of self-identity in relation to being Chinese and to being a student. Studying abroad encourages their reflection, self-exploration and self-critique. Ye and Edwards (ibid.) note first how, by developing the awareness of cultural differences, Chinese students started to adopt recognised social roles in situated contexts (such as, Chinese in the UK, overseas students, English L2 users) and, eventually, to emphasise intercultural adaptation and social inclusion when constructing self-identity. Secondly, their study demonstrates that Chinese students developed awareness in relation to self-respect and self-security, such as standing up against racial prejudice. By forming strong self-awareness through reflection, participants also fostered their creativity and confidence and ontological identity - a caring and sociable self. These findings suggest that Chinese students proactively used various coping strategies in meeting challenges and adapting to new social, cultural and academic environments, and showed how they

were working hard at different levels of reflection in the construction of self-identity.

3.5.6 Chinese students' returning life

According to Gu and Schweisfurth (2015), international students often remain in a 'transnational bubble' when living in a foreign country that, particularly at first, may lead them to experience depression, loneliness and a sense of separation. However, they soon become able to engage in locality using their familiar social manners picked up 'here' and 'there' that enables them to facilitate transnational consciousness. Much attention has been focused on international students who are studying in the receiving country. However, this specific transnational issue is not only unique to the ones 'who have gone' but also matters for those 'who have been': what aspects of overseas experiences have remained with returnee students and how these 'leftovers' impact on these students' engagement with their cultures of origin after returning from the overseas. Reverse cultural shock is one of the topics regarding student dealings with international students that is least discussed (Le and LaCost, 2017). In one of the more highly cited studies about the re-entry experience, Butcher (2002) researched 50 graduates from New Zealand universities from Hongkong, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand and discovered that returning students are more likely to experience difficulties in four areas: relationships with families, worldview changes, re-entry expectations and employment disappointment. Butcher (ibid.) notes that returnee students were not used to living under parents' 'roofs' due to their independent life training abroad, and most students did not expect reverse cultural shock and thought life would remain as it was when they left. High expectations regarding salary is another point that students might feel uncomfortable about as they felt their qualifications were not valued.

Similar findings are examined by Mooradian (2004), who notes that students found it harder to adjust to life back home than in their host country and notes that reverse cultural shock is not the same as cultural shock because it is unexpected. According to Mooradian (ibid.), the reverse adjustment happens in stages: the honeymoon stage, during which students felt happy to be returning home and were greeted by friends and family; the disappointment stage, during which students felt

that their home lives had changed and they faced difficulties; and the adjustment stage, when returnee became reaccustomed to how life was at home. Mooradian (ibid.) points out during the reverse adjustment, it should take around six months for returnees to become fully comfortable with home life. A more recent study by Le and LaCost (2017) looking at Vietnamese students who had returned from the US reports that most students made a real effort to fit into their 'old life'. Some students in the study reported that they felt trapped by their home life and the authors posit that this was caused by the sense of a misfit between the newly formed identity in the host country and their home country environment. Home culture becomes interlinked and global, it does not remain the same. Therefore, when mobile students come back to their home country, something has changed and it is no longer as familiar.

Overseas experiences in this sense serve two purposes. On the one hand, they serve as cultural and social ties between international returnee students and the receiving culture and society, which stimulates their desire to associate themselves with the receiving country and its culture. On the other hand, the more associated they feel with their previous experience overseas, the greater the sense of being different that they may feel when communicating with local people in their culture of origin (ibid.). As Gaw (2000) indicates, after one has sojourned or lived within another cultural context, there is the potential for re-entry shock when someone needs to re-adapt to his or her own home culture. In such cases, people's intercultural adaptation is not limited to adapting the home culture to the receiving culture, but the reverse situation matters and shapes one's intercultural competence. Presbitero (2016) investigates the relationships between cultural intelligence, reverse culture shock and intercultural adaptation and suggests that the higher one's cultural intelligence, as an intercultural competence, the better one copes with culture shock. Adaptation can be facilitated more quickly, the person experiences less discomfort and anxiety, and their sociocultural and psychological adaptation is more efficient. Presbitero also appeals for higher educational institutions to provide new international students with adequate training programmes to develop skills to manage reverse cultural shock, with the aim of helping students make a smooth transition back to their home countries.

3.6 Summary

This chapter reviewed the overall contextual literature on the Chinese educational system, students' choices regarding study abroad, language teaching in China and current literature on students' ICC. It could be highlighted that their main concern in ICC is English language ability, potentially overshadowing the significance of cultivating an awareness of cultural diversity and enhancing intercultural knowledge. This tendency may stem from the English teaching approach in China, which often neglects the teaching of culture. Further details are presented in the findings chapter. For example, some students' intercultural experiences are hindered by the psychological pressure associated with not speaking English fluently (e.g., section 6.3.1). Additionally, a lack of sufficient intercultural knowledge may lead to a mix of personal preferences concerning cultural differences among students (e.g., section 7.4). In the next chapter I turn to the research design and methodological approach adopted in this study.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodological framework of my research, the rationale for this choice and the research methods used for data collection. I first list the research questions that guide this project and the data collection. I then discuss the constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology that inform the methodological choices and provide the rationale for choosing an inductive approach, using photography, photo interviews and researcher's reflective journals as the data gathering methods. Finally, I provide information on strategies for participant recruitment, rapport building, and data collection and analysis. The methods I adopt help to answer the following research questions, as presented in section 1.4:

RQ1: What challenges do Chinese students encounter in intercultural communicative practices during study abroad?

RQ2: What intercultural communicative strategies do Chinese students adopt to deal with communicative difficulties in the UK?

RQ3: How does study abroad change the cultural understanding of both current students and returnee students?

4.2 Ontology/epistemology

This study adopts and blends social constructivist and interpretivist paradigms to ground the methodology because of the ways in which people make sense of and respond to their circumstances, which are shaped by social forces and people's interpretation and internalisation of them.

Social constructivism views cultural knowledge not as an object to be acquired but as something that is collectively identified, represented and interpreted through individuals' experiences and communication (Guilherme, 2002). From a constructivist perspective, then, knowledge is constructed using existing structures of foundation, that is, human's beliefs about realities built through social

interaction (Hollander and Gordon, 2006) and influenced by culture in a specific context and by personal reflections on experiences. To put it another way, there is no essential meaning in objects that is independent of consciousness. The complexity and ambiguity of the human mind and its constructive processes mean that lived experiences, subjective meanings and the sense of self are negotiated as the narratives of lived experiences unfold, on the basis of which narratives have been chosen, how they are presented and how they are interpreted. Therefore, this study reflects an interpretivist epistemological stance that acknowledges the significance of individual viewpoints and life experiences. Burnett and Lingam (2012) argue that an interpretivist lens can allow for the exploration of an individual's cross-cultural differences in greater depth because it offers a more flexible relationship between the researcher and participants and it helps the researcher understand others' subjective experiences. As Kramsch and Hua (2016) note, this understanding is based on situations that interlocutors interpret and make sense of based on their identities. In fact, it is a process of constructing social knowledge that is personally meaningful. The application of interpretivism, therefore, can help us understand the current educational environment for overseas students in the UK and the ways in which intercultural communicative (IC) strategies are produced, negotiated and transformed through students' construction and interpretation of their experiences. This can help us obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic structure of interactions in which human beliefs about cultures are built.

In line with this understanding, in this thesis I am mainly interested in investigating humans subjective understanding of the interrelations of cultures, strategies to handle cultural shock and how their knowledge and reactions to their culture of origin have been co-constructed through intercultural social encounters, self-recognition, education and ongoing learning experiences. According to Bourdieu (2011), an individual's cultural taste is related to acts of social positioning, language affectations, social attachments and occupational contacts, schooling and so on, so that their preference for social practice is somehow shaped by their social class belonging and by personal experiences reconciled with external social structures. This suggests that if a person's identity changes due to a change in their social status, their cultural tastes may also change. Moreover, Cobern (2012) states that an individual's prior conceptions and self-positioning contribute significantly

to their understanding of social events. When humans encounter new beliefs, which they need to navigate and integrate into an already existing pattern of beliefs, a (more or less conscious) decision has to be made about which beliefs to keep, abandon or merge and integrate. Another point that has to be noted is that humans' ongoing learning experiences, and their social and physical milieu, have an impact on their previous knowledge, which may be consistent with, or contrary to, their previous knowledge, or even fill in gaps in this 'knowing'. This interchange of social impacts contributes to creating a different understanding of culture and interculturality, and it keeps changing through an ongoing process.

As established in Chapter 1, this study aims to explore Chinese students' subjective engagement in intercultural communicative practices in the UK, and how Chinese returnee students think of their culture of origin after experiencing British culture and then returning to China. In order to address both RQ1 in relation to difficulties in intercultural communication and RQ2 about the strategies the students adopted, it is essential to understand that human attitudes towards intercultural issues, reactions to intercultural communications and strategies for cultural shock and adaptation are (re)constructed over time. These changes and (re)constructions come from ongoing interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds and from engagement in the host environment or even the original cultural environment after being immersed in 'foreign cultures' for a certain period. Since the goal of intercultural adaptation is to effectively adjust to the local environment from an 'outsider' perspective (Osborne, 1989), I believe that these dynamic and interactive features of individuals' intercultural adaptations and communicative experiences are best captured by drawing on a research paradigm that focuses on investigating interpersonal interactions, social preferences and dynamic self-constructions.

To address RQ3, which focuses on students' reflections on receiving and original cultures, I draw on the work of Piller (2016), which points out that culture is an ideological construct, one that is assigned to whole nations and ethnic groups. However, as globalisation causes the blurring of national boundaries and the divisions between diverse cultures, increasingly cross-cultural activities and interactions, and a plurality of identifications, bring about a more complex entanglement of mythologies, symbolisms and customs (Nygren, 1998). National

identity becomes complex since, on the one hand, it emphasises traditions that are fixed in repetitive, codified practices while, on the other, it engages with the changing external environments and events that come from global activities (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). The contest between new and old somehow shapes the cultural identities of a nation's citizens since collective experiences, memories, languages, ethics and religion beliefs bring about the constant movement of the understanding of traditional culture and practices. This is a continuous process that I believe can be best captured by the paradigm of social constructivism. Overall, the social constructivist framework, which sees knowledge as actively constructed and developed from the way people interact with culture and society (Allen, 2005), explains the dynamics of social interaction and is the appropriate paradigm for this study.

4.3 Methodology and methods

In this study, I explore international students' subjective understandings of their intercultural experiences and the practical strategies they adopt for dealing with cultural and communicative differences. I also explore how they (re)construct their understanding of their culture of origin and how this evolves. To do this, I decided to collect qualitative data and to adopt a multi-method approach to the data collection, which includes photography, participant-led photo interviews and an online exhibition. Before I describe the processes of data collection, I will discuss the reasons for collecting qualitative data for this project and how the need for active involvement of the participants grounded the choice of methods. I then define what participant-led photo interview consists of in this project. Following this, I briefly illustrate the use of photography and semi-structured interviews as data collection in this study and explain the benefits of this choice, the process of data collection and data analysis and interpretation issues. This is followed by a discussion of potential difficulties participants faced when asked to take photos in the context of the research project. Finally, I make suggestions to improve the effectiveness of photo and semi-structured interviews in order to maximise the techniques' benefits and minimise their shortcomings.

4.3.1 A qualitative approach

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena, in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p.2). For this study, I have chosen to collect qualitative data for three reasons. First, qualitative data gives relevance to Chinese students' subjective experiences and the social construction of their intercultural knowledge and experiences. Much of the research in this field is conducted by gathering qualitative data, with important results, such as Chinese students facing challenges and difficulties in the English environment (Gu et al., 2010; Holmes, 2004), emotional experiences (Lin, 2012; Zheng, 2015), language education (Liu, 2015), etc. In fact, qualitative approaches are best placed to effectively address the complex questions that relate to participants' subjective worlds in a given context.

Secondly, qualitative research looks for meanings that exist in, emerge from and are the result of contextual settings (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998), providing insights into individual feelings and emphasising the role of social settings in shaping them. From the participants' point of view, this study discovers their changes of view, beliefs and sense of themselves towards interculturality and their original culture, and I needed to explain how these phenomena were constructed. As a result, I participated in this study by getting to know participants and their individual narratives and by attempting to understand the potential patterns of shifts and dynamics in their sense of self. I believed that a qualitative approach that reflected my ontological and epistemological positions should be used in my research. In this sense, a qualitative approach would enable a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the data obtained (Becker, 1996).

Having explained the reasons for adopting a qualitative approach for data collection, I present the qualitative research methods I used before moving on to discuss each of them separately.

4.3.2 Participant-led photography

Participant-led photography is a visual method to explore an individual's reflective investigation of social experiences (Gourlay, 2010). Reavey and Johnson (2017) find that through interviews or written reflections about the images they have taken, participants can provide more comprehensive responses regarding subjectivity than they would through more conventional data collection methods. In order to explore Chinese students' intercultural engagement practices and their personal reflections on cultures, I chose to use participant-led photography as it can increase participants' involvement and their interest in contributing meaningful data. This method of data collection is appropriate to answer research questions for several reasons. Firstly, photography is seen as a pleasurable activity and can add fun to a research project (Punch, 2002). Because of the greater degree of flexibility and creativity it can offer, photography is proven to be a valuable tool that can not only provide a sense of ownership of the data but also enhance participants' engagement and retention (Richards, 2011). Secondly, data obtained from participant-led photography can be quite unpredictable, since images may be viewed and re-used, and when it is removed from its place of origin, images can be interpreted in a different way depending on the audience's values, thereby causing unpredictable consequences in terms of participants' values (Lomax, 2015). Thirdly, photography allows participants the freedom to provide data that they are interested in to the research. The power dynamics between the researcher and the participants have considerably shifted as a result of the participants taking the lead during the photography process (Holm, 2015). This gives participants the option to select a response without the researcher's direct influence or the associated pressure (ibid.).

However, there are limitations to participant-led photography as a data collection method that need full consideration. Participants may find taking pictures more demanding than solely attending interviews, which might limit the number of participants (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Moreover, although participants are able to decide what visual data they wish to provide for the research, showing photographs they took can be daunting for some people who are not used to putting their innermost thoughts and ideas out as images for all to see (Glaw et al., 2017). Furthermore, as argued by Fassetta (2016), some participants who take

photographs ‘on demand’ may begrudge having to do this in their free time. Thus, I was aware that the images that participants provided might not show their real feelings, which meant images could ‘lie’ to the supposed audience. Images can be used in conjunction with photo interviews to let participants explain what they wish to depict. Here, I drew on the advantages and shortcomings of participant-led photography. Next, I illustrate how the photo interviews were conducted for data collection in my study.

4.3.3 Photo interview

A photo interview is a type of qualitative interview in which interviewees discuss the images they captured with the researcher to generate data and knowledge (Epstein et al., 2006). Collier (1967) notes that, compared with the traditional interview, photographs can facilitate longer and more comprehensive communication, since images created by participants can help to enrich the narratives that they share with the researcher. In addition, photo interviews can increase validity and reliability because data obtained from photographs can be triangulated with data collected in interviews (Harper, 2002). The use of images can also support a more relaxed interaction during interviews, as participants have some control over what will be discussed in the interview and they know what the content of the interview will be (Noland, 2006). Some other advantages of photo interviews over traditional ones highlighted by relevant studies (e.g., Li and Xie, 2020; Meo, 2010) include the following: a) an increase in interviewees’ engagement and control over the information provided; b) a closer insight into what is considered important by interviewees; c) a shift of pressure away from the interviewees, which can help them feel less under scrutiny, as the focus is not on them but on the images; and d) help building trust between the interviewer and interviewees. This study also benefits from unexpected data that emerged from students’ photos, such as separating study from cultural engagement. These images function as an intermediate through which students’ lives are projected (Richards, 2011).

Photo interviews have been used in educational studies. Zenkov et al. (2012) conducted photo interviews with English language learners in middle grades to explore their perspectives on curricula, pedagogy and school in general. The visual

materials motivated students to learn English and to write, and allowed English language learners to move beyond their negative identities as writers. More importantly, their study found that the image-based strategies motivated students to become aware of their own potentials and abilities; students engaged more deeply with English writing tasks when they saw the learning resources in the school and classrooms through their own images. Similarly, Sensoy's (2011) study in a middle school with ESOL students shows that photo interviews can help the researcher understand how participants' schools and social lives shape their understanding of race, class and gender. Since these were abstract concepts, the author gave each student a photograph as a concrete example before they started taking their own, so that participants could practice thinking about the metaphorical aspects of representations and the role of visual discourse. Sensoy's study also shows the potential for photo interviews to achieve producing in-depth data. Moreover, photo interviews can be followed by online exhibitions, a stage in which participants share their own photos and perspectives with each other. This technique helps participants expand their views and understand the world from other people's eyes, in addition to helping researchers understand participants' perspectives in greater depth as they are further constructed and interpreted through interaction with others.

4.3.4 Online photo exhibition

The concept of an online photo exhibition is rooted in the idea of fostering participant engagement by encouraging the sharing of images and personal narratives. This innovative approach stems from a thoughtful reflection on the pedagogical power inherent in museums, aiming to inspire fresh perspectives and potential shifts in views. Bennett's (2013) assertion that museums are fundamentally designed to educate underscores the significance of exhibitions in shaping societal understanding. However, the visual literacy - codes of the artworks and images - has been understood as 'passive reception' rather than 'active viewing' (Burnham and Kai-Kee, 2011, p.47), while Clover (2017) contends that museums and exhibitions possess the power to inspire viewers to question assumptions about cultural production and knowledge. Consequently, participant involvement in a museum or exhibition can cultivate a sense of criticality and transform their relationship from passive and inert to active and engaging. This

transformation provides fertile ground for the creation of new knowledge, contributing to social and ecological change (Sandell and Nightingale, 2012).

Furthermore, through their reflections on others' images, participants have the potential to cultivate more positive self-images and identities (Mezirow, 1991). This transformative process arises from perceiving oneself as capable and competent, drawing inspiration from the projects of fellow participants. Fassetta's (2016) exploration of the use of photography in a research project involving young migrants in Ghana and Italy reveals that participants can enhance their understanding by comparing aspects of others' experiences with their own images, thoughts, or experiences. As emphasised by Clover (2017), delving into personal stories facilitates a deeper understanding of fellow participants, fostering meaningful relationships that extend beyond surface-level interactions. Joining a museum or exhibition becomes a conduit for engaging in a collective meaning-making process, promoting dialogue on meaningful topics. In the context of this project, the online exhibition serves as a bridge between the study's two cohorts — current Chinese international students and former international students who have returned to China. It offers current students' insights into potential experiences upon returning home and highlights the possible need for readjustment to their original culture, particularly for those enrolled in long-term programmes. This not only contributes to intercultural awareness but also prompts profound reflections on participants' original cultures, thereby addressing key research questions.

Having explained the methodology and the methods used in this project, and the reason for these choices, I will now move on to illustrate how data was collected in this project.

4.4 Participants, data collection and processes

As this study focuses on Chinese students' intercultural experience, cultural knowledge and behaviour, one-year of the research was spent tracking participants' intercultural activities, cognitive performance, awareness of cultural identity to investigate how these experiences shifted over a period of several months. Data collection was conducted twice over the course of an academic year, to gain insights into how Chinese participants' intercultural communicative

practices are co-constructed and how their reflections on Chinese culture are negotiated and transformed over time. Participants recruitment, data collection procedures, limitations are discussed in detail next.

4.4.1 Participants

Participant recruitment started in November 2021, following approval by the College of Social Sciences ethics committee. Two groups of participants were involved: 25 Chinese students studying in the UK during the time of the research; and 15 Chinese students who had finished their study and had returned to China (see Appendix 5 – Participants Information). Recruiting information was sent via the School email to the first group of students, while for the second group who I used Chinese social media, such as WeChat to spread the information and to contact potential participants. Once the contact with participants was established, I sent each of them a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form (in both Mandarin and English, see Appendix 2) via email or WeChat, so they could know the details of the project, what commitment it would require of them, and the rights they had as a participant.

4.4.2 Data Collection

As discussed earlier in Section 4.3, I collected data through participant-led photography, photo interviews and a final photo exhibition. Below I discuss in detail how this worked in the context of the project and the benefit and challenges of my choice of methods with reference to each of the two groups of participants.

I. Data collection: photography

The two groups of participants were taking photos with different briefs (see Appendix 3). Group 1: current students in the UK, were asked to take images of the obstacles they felt they were encountering in intercultural communication situations, both in professional and social contexts, and also images of any strategies for improvement they had found to work for them. Group 2: students who had completed the UK programme and returned to China, were asked to take photos of what they had found to be unfamiliar after going back to China and of

any new understanding of Chinese culture that they felt they had developed during their international study experience. All participants were invited to caption their photographs and to send photos and text to me via WeChat or email. I stored all images with their captions on OneDrive, mindful not to fill up participants' phones' memory with pictures taken for the project. Participants were given two weeks to take pictures, as this would allow them time in which to reflect and decide what they wanted to portray, and what they felt captured their cultural experience of a new context. Participants were made aware that, should they at any point have felt confused by the brief, they could get in touch with me to ask for clarifications. One participant asked if she could use pictures she already had in her phone, and I told her that this was absolutely fine as long as they were her own images and that she thought they would fit the theme.

A 30-min workshop was provided for each group to explain the process of taking photographs and the reasons for this choice. Each participant was asked to take 10 images that responded to the brief, which was provided to both groups in writing at the very start of the fieldwork and then again eight months later. I received a total of 518 images by the end of the fieldwork, of which 20 were selected as illustrative of broad themes or as exemplifying shared experiences and these are the ones used in this thesis. When it came to the quantity and variety of photographs, group 1 participants — i.e., those who were studying at the time of the research — generally showed stronger involvement with this method than group 2 participants— i.e., those who had returned to China. The majority of participants sent me the number of images I had suggested but, while three of the group 1 participants supplied with me more images than requested, two returnee participants from group 2 gave me fewer images than I had asked. Participants either took fresh photos based on their interpretation of the brief or looked through their existing pictures for appropriate ones, as advised. It is interesting to note that one of the current students only submitted two images, one of which was an internet download. This may indicate that photography is not equally appealing to all participants.

II. Data collection: photo interview

After they had taken their photographs, participants were invited to one-hour individual interviews with me. This process was done twice eight months apart. During the interview, they were asked to rank the 10 photographs they had taken from the most important to the least important and then asked to comment on their photographs, including explaining their ranking. Interview questions for the two groups of participants were different. The questions for group 1 generally focused on their intercultural experience in the UK and any cultural conflicts they had experienced while studying abroad; while questions for group 2 focused on participants' perceived impact of Western culture on their life after returning to China (see Appendix 4 for interview schedules). Following our conversation on the photographs, participants were asked follow-up questions to enrich the interview responses, clarify any points that were not clear, and to ensure that they could elaborate further on their narratives. Since I could relate to them as an 'insider', many participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences with me and, as a result, their interviews lasted longer than planned. I could hardly stop one returnee student, who was keen to talk about his experience of being back in China for nearly three hours. Arguably, this demonstrated that the interview was seen as giving people who were cultural sojourners a platform to voice their opinions about living across cultures.

The choice of language was crucial in a research project that looked at communication and intercultural understanding. In this study, all participants were from mainland China, so the language used was Mandarin Chinese or English, depending on the participants' choice. Their selection of language for the interview revealed their command of the English language as well as their attitudes towards language and national identity, all of which were strongly tied to their intercultural communicative practices and self-identity. Section 6.5 discusses these choices in detail.

III. Data collection: online photo exhibition

An exhibition was organised in July 2022 on the online platform Padlet. The images were shared in a password-protected page for two weeks, with considerations of safety and cost savings. For the exhibition, participants were invited to choose two images they had taken which they felt best represented their understanding of the

briefs and to make short captions to provide essential information for other students. Considering all participants were Chinese, the captions of the images were in Mandarin. All participants were free to make comments on other participants' images, engaging with other people's images to contrast ideas, highlight images that resonated with them, and/or identify similar choices. They were also able to 'react' to each other's images by liking them. To guarantee a safe space and avoid any issues, such as inappropriate responses, comments were moderated prior to being made available to the group. However, because the online exhibition was set up at the very end of the data collection process, it did not produce the rich collective narratives that I expected due to loss of participants, especially returnee students. However, online photo exhibition still presents significant potential for the analysis. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, a number of current students 'liked' photos of food taken by returnee students in China, arguably indicating potential homesickness for students who were away from home. In Chapter 7, I illustrated varying students' attitudes to 'visiting church' as an appreciation for religious culture, prompting discussion on whether specific cultural experiences can have enduring impacts on individuals. The online photo exhibition provided some collective narratives and left a space for discussion.

Having explained the process of data collection, next I present and discuss how I analysed the data as well as the challenges faced during the data analysis process.

4.4.3 Analysing the data

Thematic analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data. Widely used in qualitative research, thematic analysis moves beyond explicit words to identify implicit and explicit ideas within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach to analysis requires deep involvement and interpretation from the researcher, who needs to thoroughly immerse themselves in the data to look for patterns of meaning. According to Fetterman (2010), one of the advantages of thematic analysis is that it offers a cultural insight into people's lives within their communities, as participants' understanding of social events is shared across cultural contexts through an

inductive research approach. Data is first coded then grouped into 'themes', which reflect the subjective meaning and the cultural-contextual messages brought together from the data (Tuckett, 2005). The focus of this project on the social and cultural aspects of people's experiences in a foreign community meant that thematic analysis was the best approach to explore data about people's daily experience of cultural phenomena. The images are not interpreted separately but considered in conjunction with the narratives that participants made, to ensure the participants could tell what these images meant and why they had taken them.

Analysing the Images

I put each participant images into one word document with their pseudonyms and sample group. Since the images were connected to the interviews, I numbered the images in the document to identify which specific photographs had been addressed by referring to it during the student interview. During the interview, I noted key terms that participants had used to talk about the subject of the picture and the reasons why they had selected them. Werts et al. (2012) regard photos primarily as elicitation tools during interviews. In this way, the text and image were analysed as a whole unit with the visual and narrative parts supporting and adding to one another to create a more thorough account of the participants' personal experience (Fassetta, 2016). During the analysis, I connected students' images and narratives which led to the formation of categories and themes. Three themes - food habits, language practices, and cultural adaptation emerged from the categories that were formed.

Transcribing and translating

All the interviews were voice recorded, resulting in 60 hours of recording in total. The recordings from the two rounds of photo interviews were transcribed for analysis, and this resulted in 58 transcripts, 46 of which were in Mandarin and 12 in English. I was aware that translating the data into another language can distort the original emic perspectives underpinning the data (Chen, 2009), thus I only translated into English the quotes presented in my thesis, with a view of minimising loss or meaning or misrepresenting the original meanings during the translation process.

Coding

In this study, data was analysed using Nvivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software which helped me organise and code the large data set. The Mandarin transcript was uploaded to Nvivo 12 as well and was coded with English nodes (NVivo's name for 'codes') and headings. Having all the codes in the same language helped me to get an overview of all the codes. Relevant sentences and/or passages were coded in relation to the relevance held for the research questions and the broader aims and objectives of the study. The codes were defined through an iterative process of naming, renaming, deleting, merging, until I ended up with a rather large list of codes (See Figure 4-1). Broad themes were developed by grouping together codes, first organising them into smaller categories and then further grouping these into five wider themes. The themes bring together subjective meanings and demonstrate my understanding of how the participants constructed their knowledge (Tuckett, 2005) and their understanding of the intercultural experiences.

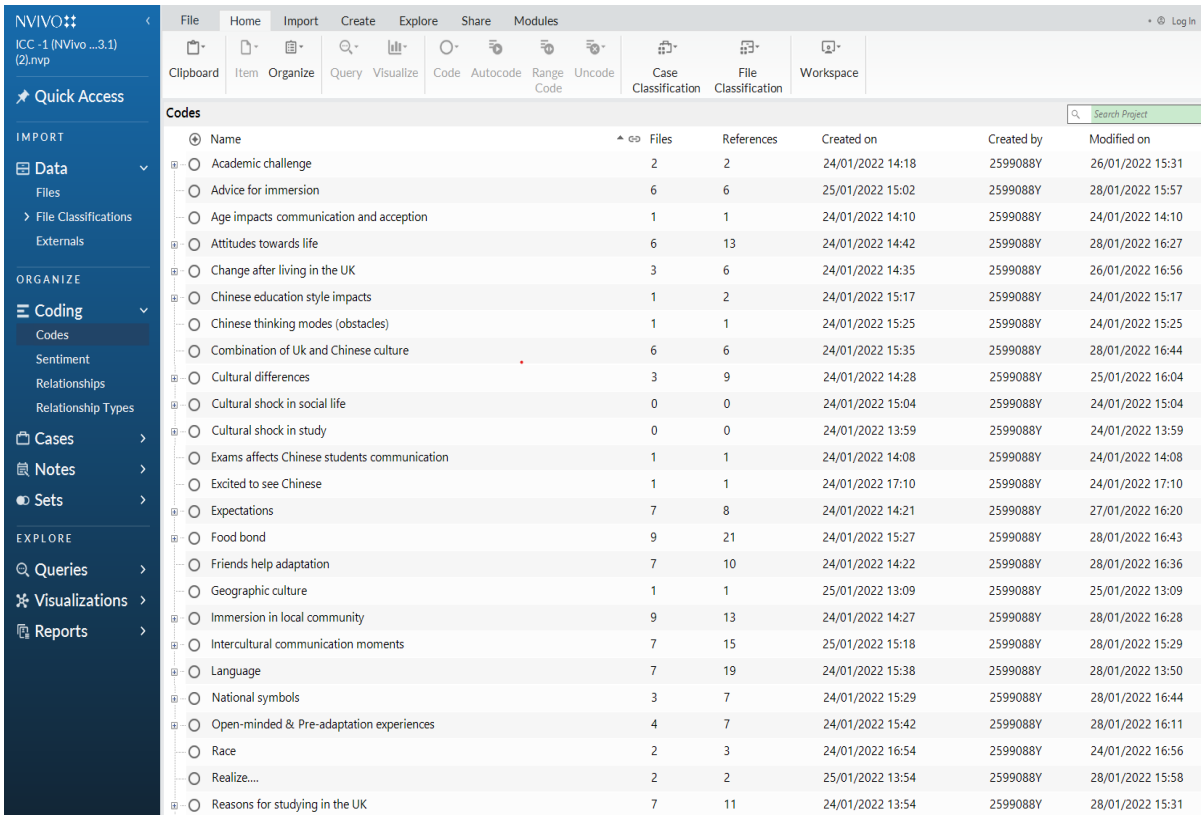

Figure 4-1 Screenshot of the coding process

Challenges

The procedure of analysing the data presented several challenges, starting with the huge amounts of data I had collected. After the initial analysis of the data, I had 125 codes, which I further categorised into 24 sub-themes before grouping them into three main themes. Coding, categorisation, and identification of themes all took a substantial time and energy commitment. Moreover, I realised that I was sometimes inserting biases and personal views into the analysis. For instance, I labelled a student's accounts of her encounters with other dialects or accents as ‘challenges’. My assumptions that coming across varieties of a language would create barriers led me to believe the student was having difficulty. However, this was rectified by the participant in the second round of interviews when the participant explained that she was proud of her capacity to communicate across borders of languages. As a consequence, I reassigned this part of the data to ‘intercultural flexibility’. Finally, the majority of the transcripts were written in Mandarin but coded in English, requiring critical interpretation to prevent bias in the results of the analysis. Since languages are not equivalent, I occasionally had to listen again to the recordings to acquire a clear comprehension of the participants' voices and emotions in order to code accurately.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Three key ethical considerations were at the forefront of this study during the data collection and analysis processes: confidentiality and privacy; ensuring informed consent; and researcher’s positionality. Each of these considerations will be briefly discussed below. The research process was based on the principles of ensuring that no harm would come to the participants as a result of being part of the study, that all possible care would be taken to guarantee care and respect for all participants at all times, and that the research process would be carried out in a transparent and open way.

4.5.1 Confidentiality and privacy

Before collecting data, I obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Advisory Committee of the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. The main ethical concern in my research was confidentiality and privacy as intercultural

communicative experiences can entail intimate and personal reflections that participants may wish not to share beyond the project. To address the confidentiality and privacy issues, the researcher needs to possess certain personal and professional attributes such as honesty and respectfulness to the participants in the study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2010), which I strived to demonstrate by highlighting the following aspects in my conversations with the participants and in my written communication with them: that participation was entirely voluntary; that consent would be ongoing and therefore participants could withdraw at any time without having to provide any justification; that taking part or withdrawing from the study would not affect their grades or any other aspect of their academic work; and that every precaution would be taken to maintain participants' anonymity. The participants were invited to read the information sheet (Appendix 1) before the interview to help them make an informed decision on whether to take part in the study. To ensure that no participant could be identified, with potential repercussions for their study or current work, I ensured anonymity for all participants' narratives and also for their images so that their privacy could be protected. Furthermore, I protected participants' privacy by promising only to ask questions relevant to the research.

4.5.2 Ensured informed consent

I obtained all the participants' signed consent when inviting them to participate before the first round of interviews. The informed consent (Appendix 2) included two key points: consent to share their photos for the use of this study and consent to their interviews being audio-recorded. Almost all participants were happy for their interviews and their photos to be used in the study, including sharing them in the 'online photo exhibition'. However, one participant hesitated to be recorded during the interview since she was concerned about her interview being used for other purposes not relevant to the research. I explained to her that she would be audio-recorded, rather than video-recorded, but she confirmed that she was not happy for me to go ahead. Therefore, I turned off the recording during her interview and took notes of the points she talked about. After the interview, I also asked her to look over the main points I had noted, in case of any missing information and/or misunderstanding on my part. Moreover, to ensure proper citation of the transcriptions, I sent all the transcripts with my notes to

participants after the interview so they could give me feedback and help me reduce any personal bias of mine in the interpretations and analysis process. In terms of the images, all images in this thesis in which people's faces were not blurred were used with explicit consent. Where this consent was not available, I did not use the images. For example, three images of strangers' happy faces were not used since we were unable to get their consent nor maintain their anonymity without blurring their features, which would have meant losing the meaning of the photo. I ensured that any photographs that portrayed people or places on which there was potential concern were not used in any public material (e.g., thesis, articles, online exhibition).

4.5.3 Researcher's positionality

The intervention effects of qualitative research can be disruptive because participants need to get used to having someone in their personal space who has a study objective (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). Hence, it is essential that the researcher remains aware of their own position and any potential impact this may have on participants. In this study, in addition to being a researcher, I was also seen as an 'insider' in the research context because I am a current Chinese student in the UK, as well as having previously been a returnee student who had gone back to China after a period abroad, carrying the features of the other cultures. Being an 'insider' in the research field helped me with the study in several ways. First, my Chinese student identity helped me build rapport with my participants, showing interest and empathy while listening to their stories and demonstrating care for their feelings. This made the sharing of intercultural communicative practices in the interviews much less intrusive. Secondly, undergraduate and Master's students tended to trust me and rely on my longer experience of studying abroad since I was seen as a senior student who had succeeded in completing a Master's degree, which motivated them to talk with me in order to get academic advice and emotional support. At the same time, PhD students saw me as their peer, someone who was facing the same academic challenges and understood their situation. Thirdly, access to potential participants was easier since I was familiar with the social media and places/spaces where they tended to gather. As such, the intervention effects of this study were lessened because of my natural 'insider' identity in the research context.

However, the insider status comes with its own limitations. Since I was familiar with the research context and students' reasons for studying abroad, participants might not share certain information with me for fear of being judged (Shah, 2004). For example, when talking about going to bars, female participants were keen to stress the fact that they were not drinking alcohol and to acknowledge how Chinese society disapproves of female drinking. This concern was not at all apparent in male participants' responses. Arguably, this shows that female participants were aware of my gender and my being from China, and thus keen to explicitly tell me that they had not been engaging in any drinking of alcohol. My assumption was that my gender, as a Chinese female researcher, might open the space for female participants as I was one of 'them'. However, I was also not one of 'them' and this could have led them to be more self-aware and concerned about being judged. To address this, I dedicated to developing rapport and mutual trust between myself and the participants by showing empathy towards their feelings and perspectives and by finding common ground through shared interests and experiences.

4.6 Summary

This chapter discussed the choice of methodology that was used for the research project. Starting from the research questions and purpose of the project, which were the foundation of the methodology discussion, the chapter presented the rationale for conducting a qualitative study. After that, the chapter discussed the research design, including participant recruitment, and how the chosen methods for data collection (i.e., photography, photo interview and online photo exhibition) were used. This chapter also presented the paradigms that grounded the choice of the methodology of this research, serving as the guidelines for the research design, data collection and analysis. The chapter ended with a discussion of the approach to thematic analysis and with ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 Constructions of Food Culture in Chinese Students' Intercultural Communicative Engagement

5.1 Chapter introduction

This is the first of the data analysis chapters presenting the findings. Impressed by the number of food pictures provided by participants during the photo interviews and the popularity of food-related pictures showcased at the online photo exhibition, this chapter presents Chinese people's food practices as part of their multicultural journey. It highlights that food serves as an invisible, unconscious but meaningful pathway for cultural adaptation among Chinese students studying abroad (R. He et al., 2024). This chapter specifically explores how food functions as a way to establish intercultural communicative engagement among Chinese students in the UK, and it also examines the reflections upon food and Chinese culture of those students who have returned to China after finishing their study abroad.

Grounded in the theoretical framework of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), engaging in intercultural communicative situations and acquiring the skills to navigate them is a complicated and fluid process, an interrelation of many factors and encounters. One striking factor noted during my research was the way in which food emerged in participants' images and photo interviews, appearing as an important theme for both the participants who were currently in the UK and those who have returned. A total of 24 participants (16 students studying in the UK and 8 returnee students) mentioned food as a crucial part of their intercultural experience. Responses from participants mostly focused on how food preferences influence their intercultural engagement as well as stimulate reflections on their culture of origin. Thus, in this chapter, I illustrate my findings and discuss how food is addressed by the participants in relation to their intercultural attitudes and knowledge. According to Byram (1997), intercultural attitudes such as respect, openness and curiosity are fundamental to ICC and can significantly enhance an individual's motivation to enhance their intercultural knowledge, which involves cultural self-awareness, deep cultural understanding and sociolinguistic awareness. These components pave the way for a transformation of internal skills towards

desired outcomes in intercultural performances, such as empathy, flexibility and adaptability (Deardorff, 2006). Participants' familiarity with food and food preferences serve as expressions of identity and emotional connections to their home culture, strengthening bonds within their home community (R. He et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the participants' engagement in food socialising with non-Chinese individuals demonstrated openness, curiosity and a willingness to cultivate mutual understanding with other cultures. Through these interactions, they deepened their knowledge of the receiving culture and enhanced intercultural adaptation. The discussion in this chapter includes the way in which food comes to stand as both a tangible and metaphoric expression of Chinese students' intercultural adjustment to the new environment, including both the Western and their original cultures.

Three main themes regarding the role of food in intercultural experiences emerged from the images and photo interviews: (i) food as a representative of cultural concepts that impact Chinese students' intercultural communicative engagement (sections 5.2, 5.3); (ii) food as a starting point to understand social class (5.4); and (iii) food as a 'tool' to channel people's reflections anon and understanding of their culture of origin (5.5). This chapter ends with a chapter summary (5.6).

5.2 Food and culture

Food serves more functions beyond survival or nourishment (Sikalidis, 2019). As an important part of cultural exploration, food plays a vital role in integrating the local social systems, living habits, conditions and so on (Beagan et al., 2015). Research into the function of food in tourism has gained a great deal of attention, focusing on how tourists experience a sense of the host society at first hand through the food they eat (Giampiccoli and Kalis, 2012). However, migrants, including international students[2], also regard eating as a significant part of experiencing a new country and their daily entertainment. Brown (2016), in her study of international students' adaptation to life in England, notes nearly all of the South-East Asian students in the study adopted rigidly mononational dietary

[2] International students in the UK are counted in the official figures under the heading of 'student migration', people entering in the UK on a student visa with a focus on higher education and further education (i.e., for longer term study in higher education rather than short term English language courses).

habits, often favouring cuisine from their home countries. However, some students embraced a multicultural approach to food, exploring not only local dishes but also those prepared by their international peers. Brown (ibid.) contends that students' food choices can serve as indicators of their motivation to learn and their willingness to embrace new experiences. Byram and Golubeva (2020) state that attitudes are the precondition for successful intercultural communication, and the attitudes of curiosity, openness and readiness are needed in order to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to others' living habits, beliefs, cultural values and social behaviours. This is an ability to 'decentre' which Byram et al. (2002) suggest is a fundamental skill required for understanding other cultures by figuratively standing in the positions of others. Brown et al.'s (2010) study about international students in England suggests that eating food from home provides students with emotional and physical substance, and food carries a strong attachment to their cultural identity while they try different foods in a foreign culture. Gilmour et al. (2020) show that food often serves two functions: social events and daily eating. These are distinguished in the discussion of the findings in this chapter, since participants engage in food practices either for social purposes or daily sustenance. Food is primarily served for satisfying biological needs. However, the function of food is not limited to filling one's belly and fighting hunger, but it also performs a social function, linking individual to individual, and the individual to the society (Fournier et al., 2016).

Food culture plays a particularly significant role in Chinese society. Guang et al. (2018) argue that Chinese food culture is the sum of spiritual and material wealth, proposing that history, geographical culture and art all integrate as spiritual wealth and thereby contribute to the Chinese eating culture and etiquette. For example, a customary dish for Chinese New Year's Eve involves a whole fish, traditionally placed in the centre of the table, that is not intended to be consumed until the following day. In Chinese culture, the word for fish, 'yu' 鱼 shares the same pronunciation as the word for surplus or extra, 'yu' 余, and this culinary tradition embodies the essence of the Chinese idiom 'nian nian you yu' 年年有余, which literally translates as 'year year have surplus'. It symbolises the wish for continuous abundance and prosperity in life, and the spiritual significance attributed to food is evident in Chinese eating customs. At the same time, due to the China's vast territory and abundant resources and varied sources of food, there are great

regional diversities in Chinese food culture, including differences between north and south and between coastal and inland areas (Yao and Su, 2019). With a significant food culture in Chinese society, it is not surprising that Chinese students refer to food to demonstrate their intercultural practices in the UK. Their experiences of food for socializing, and their daily food choices both reflect their attitudes and practices about cultural difference between the UK and China.

The following conversation occurred when a returnee participant Na (28, female) was asked what she thought about her overseas experience in Scotland. Her response surprised me because she turned the question around and asked me about my favourite food. She then used food as a metaphor to describe her feelings in a vivid way.

> Researcher: What do you think of your experience in Scotland?
>
> Na: (silence) Um … What is your favourite food?
>
> Researcher: Are you asking me? (surprised) Ummm … I like to eat seafood.
>
> Na: OK. Let's make an analogy. For example, there's all the seafood you like, and these delicacies are placed in front of you like mountains. But you don't know these are good things, you just eat them casually. Just like Zhu Bajie [an anthropomorphic pig in Chinese myth who was considered to be gluttonous and lazy] eating peaches. I didn't realise that I should savour it. I just devoured what was given to me, but I didn't taste the flavour until it was over. I felt a little bit like that.
>
> If you ask me how I felt about my life when studying abroad, it is exactly the same situation. Even if I had gone to the local church, for example, I would have had a taste of local culture. I had this idea every Christmas when I was there, but I did nothing in the end. Why didn't I go to church with my landlord at the weekend? I also want to ask myself.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Na compared the daily encounters (e.g., church) during her life in the UK to food as a material which is worth experiencing/tasting and compared the process of being immersed in and experiencing a different context to the process of indiscriminately swallowing without fully tasting (i.e., experiencing) and enjoying the options available to her. Arguably, this appears to convey a regret for the lack of intercultural experiences which, with hindsight, she realises she could have had, but also, perhaps more importantly, a lack of awareness of the fact that she was having intercultural experiences, as she was just 'eating' at random without slowing down to take them in fully. Na's case is in line with Montgomery's (2010) suggestion that students might overlook opportunities to cultivate intercultural competence when they do not fully engage with the social and cultural diversity fostered by international higher education.

Having been asked about her experiences in the UK, her first choice was to concretise the abstract question, and food became the best proxy as something that is consumed daily and thereby similar to everyday experiences. In this case, food is used as a metaphor, which appears to convey her interpretation of social practices in the UK that are potentially 'delicious' and good to taste, while the 'swallowing process' reflects the randomness, hurry and confusions of her UK experience. What she regretted here is that she might not have made the best use of the resources available to stimulate personal growth in interculturality while studying abroad, perhaps including her not developing many relations with the local community. Byram and Golubeva (2020) states that ICC indicates a sensitivity to the Other and without raising awareness of questioning one's own and others' values, fully appreciating intercultural sensitivity and relations is unlikely. Na's case suggests that the limited study period might not have improved her intercultural sensitivity during the study, but the whole experience of studying abroad opened her mind and broadened her vision as she developed her consciousness of being engaged in interculturality in order to understand and respect the cultural Other.

5.3 Food and socialising

5.3.1 Food socialising with Chinese people in the UK

Food plays a significant role in social events and community gatherings and carries social norms (Parasecoli, 2011). As Douglas (2003) contends in her seminal work *Purity and Danger*, food intricately intertwines with individuals' cultural identities, serving as a means through which they define and differentiate themselves from other societal groups. In alignment with this perspective, Pollan (2022) advocates for the idea that food and culinary practices embody distinct cultural identities, reflecting the unique traditions of cooking, preparation and consumption within various communities or cultures, often demonstrated by the term 'cuisine'. For instance, the use of chopsticks among Chinese people symbolises a profound aspect of Chinese culture, evoking a sense of national or cultural memory when engaging socially with individuals from different backgrounds. Despite the phenomenon of food globalisation facilitating the spread of chopstick use to Japanese and Korean dining customs, Chinese society continues to regard chopsticks as a symbolic representation of national identity. In this context, Chinese individuals often identify themselves as 'chopsticks-users' in contrast with the label 'knife-fork-users' used to describe Westerners. Thus, shared food preferences can foster a sense of community, as individuals bond over common culinary traditions and eating habits.

In the participants' photos and photo interviews, food is often associated with the gathering of a group of people for celebration and socialisation, while only few images present food in an individual, everyday situation. All participants mentioned their meal gatherings in intercultural interactions in the UK, with local or international students and fellow Chinese students. Other participants said eating with others can strengthen social bonding by connecting people together for a common purpose: the enjoyment of food. In the following conversation, Li (male, current PhD student) talks about his spare time activities in the UK and about the way in which eating with others helps his wellbeing.

Researcher: What do you often do in your spare time?

Li: Many things, like sports … and having meals with classmates and friends.

Researcher: Do you often have meals with friends?

Li: Not often. Most of the time I eat alone. I don't mind it, you know. But when it comes to the important days, I want to meet with people and eat together. At that time, I feel I am involved in a community and not alone anymore. We have similar experiences of studying abroad and we enjoy the mealtime together, not only eating but chatting and having someone with me. I think, um … my life isn't so bad. Hahaha.

(Original in Mandarin)

Figure 5-1. Chinese food gathering, indicating harmony and company. Image taken by Li.

Li's image (Figure 5-1) received seven 'likes' in the online exhibition and was the most liked among all the images, reflecting that Chinese food resonated with the international students, if through a sense of nostalgia and connection to their native cuisine or country. In this context, food acts as a powerful symbol of cultural identity, providing international students with a sense of belonging and

familiarity in an unfamiliar foreign environment. It serves as a beacon guiding them to find their 'home people' amidst the challenges of adapting to a new culture. This stresses the importance of national identification for some Chinese students during the early stages of their overseas lives, as they navigate their roles and identities in a multicultural world.

From the interview with Li, it could be seen how Li contrasted his daily eating habits, eating by himself, with his eagerness to have meals together with friends on special occasions, which could reduce his feelings of loneliness while abroad. Li expressed his sense that having company made him feel positive towards life: 'my life isn't so bad'. I did not ask a follow-up question about what caused his feeling, since I tried to avoid forcing him to dwell on unhappy experiences during the interview, but in this conversation, I assumed that no matter what he had experienced, being in the company of other Chinese students brought him comfort, relaxation and a sense of connection. This reflects the collectivist Confucianism culture that he was raised in, which stresses group power to overcome difficulties (P. Yang, 2013). The values of wholeness and harmony in the collectivist culture strengthen close connections and unify power and responsibility in a united group like the Chinese community in the UK. In the above case, Li obtained emotional support from the collectivist group to deal with loneliness and homesickness, which shows the significance of social surroundings in Chinese culture (ibid.). Furthermore, the same experiences of studying abroad that Li mentioned indicate that ordinary food consumption practices are often celebrated with others who have similar cultural and culinary capital (Bourdieu, 1987) so that they have similar hobbies, interests and cultural backgrounds to share in addition to their studies (Brown, 2009).

However, Wei (female, current student) notes that sometimes home food can trigger homesickness as it reminds people of the experience of being at home and with one's family. The conversation below occurred when Wei mentioned a Chinese restaurant in Glasgow.

Wei: Do you see a lot of Chinese restaurants in the West End?

Researcher: Yes, many. Do you often go there?

Wei: Only once. I ordered Kong Pao Chicken, which was my favourite dish when I was in China. But it was not as I expected, too salty, and not spicy at all. I miss Mom's cooking.

(Original in Mandarin)

In this case, Wei is disappointed with the authenticity of the food in Chinese restaurants in the UK and this dissatisfaction with the food triggers her homesickness. Crosby and Otnes (2010) note the relationship between food consumption and homesickness of college students, and they highlight three links between them. Firstly, food from home can trigger homesickness since it provokes thoughts of home, even though people may not suffer from it prior to having the food (at least consciously). Secondly, food can increase homesickness as it can be a powerful reminder of home and family. Thirdly, when compared to the quality of restaurant, people will miss the home-made food from their family. In the conversation above, the unsatisfactory flavour of Chinese food cooked in a UK restaurant stimulated a longing for the familiar flavour that was made at home, which instilled - or strengthened - Wei's homesickness. Finding a different flavour in the same dish seems to have increased her psychological distance from the local culture and hinder intercultural communication with people from other cultural backgrounds. As Brown et al. (2010) suggest, food shock is a phenomenon that is regarded as an excessive preoccupation with food, which often accompanies the experience of cultural shock when relocating to a country with a different food culture. R. He et al. (2024) observe that an overwhelming food shock may lead to strengthened patriotic attitudes that could trigger notable levels of cultural adaptative stress. Wei's personal experience provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon.

Similarly, the conversation below with Liu (male, current student) demonstrates that people would like to meet others for meals, not only for socialising but also for business purposes. These two purposes are not completely contradictory and can overlap. Liu is a Master's student at the School of Business, and he is expanding his network and plans to start his own business with the human resources network he built in Glasgow.

Researcher: What do you often do in your spare time?

Liu: I like to join in parties and any food events.

Researcher: What is a food event?

Liu: You know, when people often gather and have a meal together. I always go if I know there is a one. I am running my own business - making short videos to spread Chinese and Western cultures into each other. I need lots of people to join our team: copywriting, video editing, publicity and promotion, all of which need professional people. We also hope someone can invest in us, if interested.

Researcher: How did it go? Have you found anyone interested in your project?

Liu: I did! The video editor in my team I met at a Christmas gathering. He is from America. I told him about my work and it was surprising that we have the same ambitions about the short-video market! Then he joined me, and other people I met became participants in my video.

Researcher: Do you think a food gathering is a good place to talk about business?

Liu: Well, it can be. I mean, it's easier because it is relaxing. I started promoting my business with my flatmates in the dormitory when we met in the kitchen. We are from different countries, so everyone was eager to tell others about their cultural thing. If there is nothing in common, we can talk about food, right? Always a good topic and less awkward … But I talk to people not only to seek business partners, but also to find companies who share the same interests. I met several people that haven't joined in my team, but we became good friends.

(Original in Mandarin)

This extract shows that Liu is actively fostering intercultural friendship and building relations with other interlocutors, showing his open-mindedness to those who are from different national backgrounds. This also represents a site for him to make good use of opportunities to engage in the globalised, intercultural world. During the process of interaction, intercultural knowledge of one's own and others can be acquired within socialisation. The relational nature of intercultural knowledge, including meanings, beliefs, values and behaviours are linked to knowledge of the process of interaction (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005). This might be interrelated with the 'invisible learning' that is likely to be a rare 'treasure' (Elliot et al., 2020, p.4) that students could learn from the outside of the classroom but is flexible in terms of space (e.g., home, school, work/social place), source (e.g., TV, books, friends) and age (i.e., from cradle to grave) (Schugurensky, 2000). Liu mentioned that he could learn some 'cultural things' during intercultural communication, thereby engaging in these 'socially coordinated and embodied activities' (Neuman, 2019, p.79) beyond the formal classroom settings. Liu developed his intercultural knowledge of the process in the interaction and facilitated his information exchange techniques, which can include finding a topic of mutual interest to speakers, using turn-taking techniques as a communication skill or creating a sense of community among international students. All these techniques represent the ability to define new information about others through the skills involved in discovery and interaction as well as the ability to respond to particular aspects of interactions to meet various goals (Byram, 1997).

From Liu's response, it can also be noted that participants believe that community eating can provide a safe moment to expand their social network and that it is relaxing for people who do not know each other to start a conversation naturally. Meanwhile, it also provides a platform in which to meet knowledgeable and professional people and contribute to his own business. According to Ochs and Shohet (2006), there are two functions of mealtime: (1) apprenticeship, which means people learning from more knowledgeable groups through observation and direct participations; and (2) language socialisation, which means people share social experiences about social orders, norms and moral values through joining communicative practices which, in turn, help the construction of social knowledge. Both apprenticeship and language socialisation lead to information exchange across social classes, groups and generations. Thus, based on this understanding,

mealtime socialising can break the boundaries of age, career and beliefs and allow for people to communicate, even though there is no common interest or knowledge in the first place.

Aside from Ochs and Shohet, the Chinese scholar J. Ruan et al. (2024) demonstrate the functions of mealtime socialising for Chinese social relations in a more detailed way. As the author notes, in Chinese culture the focus during meals should be socialisation, rather than the meal itself. This can be seen in the Mandarin word '饭局' (fan ju) in which 'fan' means meal/rice and 'ju' means bureau and organisation. From the literal meaning, it can be noted that '饭局' (fan ju) is translated into 'meal gathering', which indicates professional or business objectives whereby people can promote guanxi (interpersonal relationships) to facilitate the achievement of business or work goals. In the case above, the participant believes mealtime can be a platform to build guanxi, exchange social resources and expand social networks with people in different careers or even in authority, along the lines of the mixed functions of community eating, reflecting the individual's role in the intricate human relations in Chinese society. As a Chinese student studying in the UK, Liu brought Chinese interpersonal skills to the UK and made full use of Chinese communication methods and contacts in the UK to pave the way for his future career, which is also a manifestation of his intercultural communicative competence.

5.3.2 Food socialising with non-Chinese people in the UK

Like people in most countries, Chinese people enjoy meeting friends at the dinner table, as the saying "it's hard to be true friends without eating together" encapsulates. In Chinese students' intercultural communicative practice in the UK, making friends and promoting interpersonal relationships can be achieved by sharing food and similar tastes and preferences. However, in some cases, this can also increase physical and psychological distance since encountering different cultures can highlight the different tastes and social habits, and some Chinese students are not used to local food. Thus, missing traditional food gatherings limits students' opportunities for intercultural communication with non-Chinese colleagues and their social networks, reducing the chances of the Chinese students

immersing themselves in different social practices and cultures. In this section, I will illustrate the positive and negative impacts that food culture has on Chinese students' intercultural engagement with non-Chinese peers. The following conversation shows how different food cuisine can promote the intercultural communication across various cultural backgrounds.

> Zhu (female, current student): I remember the first time I ate with a local friend was in a restaurant near the school. It was lunchtime and we decided to go out and grab some food. She asked me what I would like to eat, I said maybe fish and chips.
>
> Researcher: Do you like to eat fish and chips?
>
> Zhu: Not really. I know what it is but had never had it before. Actually, I guess it represents British food? So, I wanted to try it.
>
> Researcher: What did your friend say?
>
> Zhu: She was a bit surprised that I was interested in fish and chips. She thought I was keen on British food, so she introduced the way to make fish and chips, like using beef tallow. And she is a foodie, so we talked a lot about food.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Figure 5-2. Fish and chips as the first ‘taste’ of British culture. Image taken by Zhu.

In this extract, Zhu described her first mealtime with a non-Chinese friend, which was in a local restaurant. She suggested having local food, and it surprised her friend that she showed her interest in the local culture. During the meal, Zhu found that her friend had the same passion for food and cooking, so food became a shared topic for both of them which facilitated their conversation and the ongoing friendship. Mellor et al. (2010) note that food gatherings help build friendship and find that a dinner party is an acknowledged way for the middle class to set up social relations and life connections. Woolley and Fishbach (2017) study the impact of similar food consumption on friendship and point out that food products can facilitate trust and cooperation more than non-food products. Their study has proved that similarity in food serves as a stronger link for trust-building than other incidental similarities. Moreover, Nititham (2016) examines how food serves as a pathway for Filipinos migrants to immerse in Irish society and finds that food plays a vital role for migrants to identify notions of authenticity and socialisation in the Irish-dominant culture through day-to-day food practices. Through food gatherings, senses of belonging and familiarity have been facilitated to create sustainable

social relationships and integrate the Filipina migrants into ‘home-making’ in Ireland.

However, food socialising does not always work in a positive way in terms of intercultural communication and friendships across different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes, it increases the social distance between people because they cannot appreciate each other’s food preferences or cooking styles.

In this extract Jin (female, current undergraduate student) describes her friendship with her flatmate in the University studio where she lived.

> Jin: One of my flatmates is from South Korea. We sometimes meet in the shared kitchen, so we talk more than the others. We both eat rice, but my understanding of cooking rice is either dry rice made in the rice cooker, or porridge with more water. But I saw her boiling rice with a sliced ‘noodle thing’ and mixing them with kimchi … It surprised me. Um … She was very keen to let me try her food, but I don’t know if I want to. Ha ha ha.
>
> Researcher: Do you think it will impact your friendship because of your different food choices?
>
> Jin: I don’t think so. We are friends and still help each other if needed. But now, we seldom chat in the kitchen, because … um … I don’t want to be surprised about her cooking style, ha ha ha, and when I was cooking, there would be a lot of smoke in the kitchen, you know. Chinese cooking is more about frying, so … I think she tries not to be cooking at the same time as me.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Parasecoli (2011) notes that ingredients, dishes and practices carry meaning, and this meaning becomes particularly evident when confronting unfamiliar foodways. Drawing on literature around cultural materialism, food can be considered as a material artifact in social settings. As a semiotics of culture, food is associated with other knowing objects and crucial organisms in the existing community (Ipsen,

2006). Jin's extract indicates that they both express and construct categorical differences and sociocultural identity and dominance through food. Food that represents Chinese and Korean cuisine is considered as a system of signals that make communication meaningful, but it also displays a relationship between semiotic resources that connects food to a landscape known as a semiofoodscape according to Järlehed and Moriarty (2018). This is crucial in the context of migration since immigrants bring their own distinctive culinary style and must contend with a semiofoodscape in which food is scarce. This frequently results in a conflict between adherence to their own culinary grammar and the customs of the new culture. However, in the conversational setting between Jin and her flatmate, it is obvious that their own grammar of food is more powerful than the food conversation, which in fact reduces intercultural communication.

However, the diversity of food cultures can sometimes promote intercultural communication and increase mutual understanding of different social rules and norms. Feng (male, returnee Master's student) reported his experiences of being invited to a food gathering in someone's home:

> Feng: When I just arrived in Scotland, I was invited to visit my teacher's home. It is also a gather of all his students, around 8 people. I was quite surprised to be asked to bring one dish for the gathering. You know, in China, if you invite someone to visit you, food is provided by the host. But here I must bring my own food!
>
> Researcher: So, what did you bring for them?
>
> Feng: A whole pot of tea eggs. My landlord told me in the West people do not like to share food, but you know Chinese food is all shared! So, I made a whole pot of tea eggs. I thought each person can have their own.
>
> Researcher: What did they say?
>
> Feng: Some liked the flavour, and one person had four eggs! Some didn't.
>
> Researcher: How did you feel about bringing food?

Feng: Not bad. I understand it is tiring for the host to prepare all food for many people. And I could try many kinds of food. Home-made spaghetti is fantastic! People also praised my dish. I felt proud of Chinese food!

(Original in English)

Figure 5-3. Tea eggs: a typical Chinese savoury food commonly sold as a snack, in which a boiled egg is cracked slightly and then boiled again in tea, and sauce or spices. Image taken by Feng.

Feng's experience illustrates the ICC skill of discovering new cultural phenomena and practices, and effectively applying knowledge, attitudes and skills (Byram, 1997). Despite navigating real-time communication challenges and cultural differences, Feng successfully applied his communicative abilities, intercultural sensitivity and pre-existing knowledge to navigate an unfamiliar intercultural scenario. This exchange also shows a positive attitude towards the intercultural experience at this food gathering by acknowledging Western hosting etiquette and the individualised cultural ways of food sharing. In such a process, food is an effective tool for intercultural communication, through sharing each other's food culture and also increasing the recognition of one's culture of origin. However, the cultural difference between hosting etiquette in the UK and China reinforces the distinction between the highly individualised British culture and the collectivist

culture of Chinese communities, which puzzles those Chinese navigating their expectations regarding the host's hospitality and their welcome. As discussed in section 2.3.2, the collectivist Confucian culture places significant emphasis on interconnected relationships, highlighting the values of sharing and mutual care (Husted and Allen, 2008). Thus, Feng assumed that being invited to such an event in someone's home signified a close relationship with the host and expected to be provided with food as a guest. He was not aware of the Western individualistic culture which prioritises personal autonomy, leading to potential misunderstandings around the concept of a potluck gathering, where individuals are encouraged to contribute dishes to a communal meal, showing individuality.

However, in much of the Western world, the emotional and mixed functions of food gatherings do not appear in a professional relationship as often as in China (J. Ruan et al., 2024). J. Ruan et al. (ibid.) clarify the reason Chinese people tend to add emotional components to social relations, which start from one person and are pushed to another as interpersonal relationships build and eventually add to the social network. The characteristics of social relation formation dictate that Chinese would like to put more interpersonal emotions into relationships (J. Ruan, 2016), which is also a reflection of collectivist Confucian heritage cultural characteristics. Thus, in the case above, each guest bringing one dish suggests a contribution to the feast, but this is not what Chinese guests expected to do and may be considered distancing oneself from others, especially in a non-personal context.

5.4 Food and drink consumption: social class and gendered practices

5.4.1 Food and social class

Another symbolic function of food is to define social status - a person's position and the class they belong to in the social system - so food can be burdened with social meanings. According to Darmon and Drewnowski (2008), the quality of food is often associated with the consumers' socioeconomic status. High-quality diets, such as fresh vegetables, fish and low-fat products are usually linked to high socioeconomic status, whereas the nutrient-poor products like fast food are more often consumed by people from a lower socioeconomic status. According to

Bourdieu (1987), socioeconomic inequality can be observed from the materiality of society, which shapes people's tastes, and the choice of food or places to get food, for example, can reflect (and perform) class belonging. Bourdieu (ibid.) describes how more advantaged socioeconomic groups distinguish themselves from lower socioeconomic groups by demonstrating their 'taste' for 'higher' lifestyle attributes, such as music, art and culinary tastes, and based on Bourdieu's theory about different forms of capital (1987), food choice is closely linked to cultural capital since one's behaviour often stems from one's beliefs and cultural norms that other people in one's group follow. As noted by Fox (2003), beliefs about suitable places to buy 'good' food are stable from an early age and are often 'inherited' from the family habitus, and therefore they will not be easily affected by temporary changes in income or social networks that are linked to economic and social capital. Thus, food itself - as well as other objects and practices attached to food consumption - have inherited a sense of social hierarchy which may not be consciously bought into but is absorbed as part of the socialisation process. Some of the Chinese students who are studying in the UK appeared to get a sense of the UK's social class divisions, as they translated into food consumption, from observing their local supermarkets. The following conversation, for example, took place between the researcher and Min (male, current PhD student), who has experience of living in the UK and US.

> Researcher: Did you notice any cultural differences between the UK and China?
>
> Min: Yes, many … I also noticed the social class distribution is obvious in the UK.
>
> Researcher: How? I mean, how did you notice that?
>
> Min: Food types, qualities and prices vary in the local supermarkets. People from different socioeconomic backgrounds shop at different places. Some supermarkets, like Lidl, Morrison, Tesco are more friendly to students, I think, because the products are sold at a cheaper price.
>
> Researcher: Have you ever shopped at other supermarkets that you think are expensive?

Min: I go to Waitrose sometimes to buy products that are not sold in other stores, like venison. Here, each supermarket has a sale time every day and you can buy some bargains, but the 'bargains' in Waitrose can be more expensive than the full-price products in others. So, if the food in different supermarkets is the same quality, I prefer the cheaper one.

Researcher: Is this happening in China? I mean food indicating social class.

Min: Em … Not as obvious as here in the UK. How can I put it? There is, I mean, the supermarkets in the upper-class community, like the complex where I live in, often sell some special food, such as nice desserts, and the consumers are mostly people from high socioeconomic status, such as professors and businessmen. My mom works in the university, so …

(Original in Mandarin)

Figure 5-4. Class dimension in the UK supermarket. Image taken by Min.

This conversation demonstrates Min's intercultural sensitivity regarding a new culture as he uses food to illustrate social class distribution in the UK. Deardorff (2015) defines intercultural sensitivity as the capacity to recognise cultural differences and empathise with the perspectives of individuals from other cultures. The development of this sensitivity triggers the growth of ICC, and research suggests that students' prior exposure to and experiences with cultural diversity can influence the development of their intercultural sensitivity while abroad (Pedersen, 2010). Moreover, Min's observation of the class dimension suggests an unconscious competence, wherein he instinctively navigates and interprets cultural differences with minimal conscious effort (R. He et al., 2024). This process is self-directed and even unintentional, representing an invisible and unconscious pathway for cultural sojourners to understand and adapt to the target culture (Elliot et al., 2016). Rather than a visible way of learning, such as in classroom settings, unconscious competence may be influenced by the cultural capital cultivated through previous education or inherited from the family.

Min mentioned his family, saying that his mother works at the university, which is regarded as a high socioeconomic position in the Chinese context, and some awareness that, while not so prominent, similar class divisions are also present in China in relation to food consumption. For example, Chinese urban consumers with high incomes of levels of education becoming more concerned about the quality, price and brands of the food they buy, while comparable shifts have been noted in rural areas (Qiu, 2013). Ma (2015) identifies the socioeconomic stratification in culinary practices in China, noting that expensive and rare foods like bird's nest, shark's fin, and lobster are often connected with wealth and high social economic positions. This practice mostly relates to the lifestyle of the Chinese upper class. Johnston and Baumann (2007) argue that 'cuisine is a cultural realm where individuals can effectively engage in status display' (p.168). Similar observations regarding class dynamics and food practices have also emerged in discussions within Western contexts. Building upon this notion, Mellor et al. (2015) shed light on how the British middle class fosters friendships through home entertaining, highlighting that home dinner parties serve as opportunities for middle-class individuals to show their high-value cultural capital and use their social resources to exchange knowledge and information on various topics such as home tutoring, school selection or reliable builders. This form of social interaction reinforces

social ties while simultaneously excluding individuals with fewer social and cultural resources. Similarly, Beagan et al. (2015) explore dietary habits among the upper and middle class in Canada in their study 'Eating is not swallowing', observing that these social groups tend to adopt healthy, omnivorous and cosmopolitan eating habits, while fast food and pre-packaged or prepared meals are perceived as low-quality. Their adventurousness and willingness to embrace diverse cuisines serve as markers of symbolic boundaries, allowing them to display their cultural capital through food practices.

Among all the participants studying in the UK, Min is the only one who raised the topic of social class during the interview. His relatively privileged background allows him to inherit social and cultural capital from his parents, which resulted in his greater intercultural sensitive to class differences in UK society from the food perspective. Min's sensitivity or beliefs regarding social class are rooted in his cultural understanding and will guide his attitudes and communicative behaviour when interacting with people from different social statuses.

5.4.2 Food or alcohol?

Food gatherings serve a socialising function in many cultures, including in China, and Chinese students apply their understandings and expectations to interactions with people in the UK, often promoting intercultural exchanges. However, some participants note how alcohol consumption is an even more popular choice for social interaction than food consumption in the UK, as people like to meet in a bar and have a drink to socialise. This is an unfamiliar moment for many Chinese students, since alcohol or drinking has negative associations, such as being an alcoholic or a drunkard, as these extracts illustrate:

> Before I went to the bar, I thought bad guys would go there, they would be heavily drunk, okay? They would be crazy. (Zhou, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin)

> When you talked about a bar, it made me think about a nightclub with drunk people and a noisy and smoky environment. (Li, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin)

> I tend to think the pub culture is quite important here and it's an important part of university life, actually, or social life. Maybe, for Chinese students, we don't have this culture or sometimes we were taught not to visit these kinds of places, as it's not a thing a good student or good people do, right? (Ni, female, current PhD student, original in Mandarin)

What participants said about their ideas regarding bars and alcohol were full of negative meanings, and this is relevant to a common narrative in China; that bars are not places that 'good people' go to. In addition, students related the pub culture in the UK to the one in China, which shows a lack of intercultural knowledge regarding pub culture in the UK and its socialising function in the local society. Some students might misunderstand the nature of pubs in the UK, perceiving them as chaotic places, similar to the perception of them in China. Moreover, it is important to note that in the Chinese context, pubs are often seen as male-dominated spaces (Jin and Whitson, 2014). There exists a stereotype stemming from Confucian culture about women's presence in male-dominated public spheres (Leung, 2003). Despite the increasing popularity of pubs for leisure activities in China and evolving attitudes towards pub culture due to globalisation, there remains reluctance among 'traditional Chinese girls' to fully embrace pubs due to their cultural upbringing (Jin and Whitson, 2014).

This experience demonstrates that when international students are exposed to new cultures, there is a risk that this exposure may invoke stereotypes or develop prejudices towards specific behaviour or social groups because the new cultural meanings can conflict with existing beliefs. To reduce this risk, developing critical cultural awareness, which represents an advanced component of ICC, becomes essential, requiring significant time and effort to cultivate. Without this awareness of questioning one's own values, people may resort to value-laden interpretations and biased perspectives, ultimately hindering a deeper understanding of and respect for cultural diversity (Byram and Golubeva, 2020).

However, it is interesting to note that only female participants mentioned pubs, bars and alcohol while no male participants raised this topic. In China, alcohol consumption is generally not encouraged for women, since it is related to building

business relationships or being drunk, but it is widely accepted for men in the traditional Chinese culture (Cochrane et al., 2003). A study in the US notes that most international students feel uncomfortable with the drinking culture, preferring to order food from restaurants, visit supermarkets and move off campus as acculturation strategies (Yan and Fitzpatrick, 2016). In the case of the alcohol culture in Chinese society, drinking behaviour as an acculturation strategy is more accepted by and acceptable for male rather than female Chinese students. This perception of drinking culture has an impact on their attitudes to alcohol consumption in the intercultural communication spaces in the West. According to Riley and Cavanaugh (2017, p.8), as people move around the globe, they tend to 'learn to attach those foods and speech patterns to those people, places, and times, constructing symbolic and eventually iconicized stereotypes of who people are'. Chinese female students' responses demonstrate that, owing to the lack of intercultural knowledge and mutual understanding, they relate pub culture in the West to the Chinese drinking culture with the stereotypes regarding pubs and the people who are fond of them constructed accordingly.

Gendered norms from the country of origin will influence new arrivals' reactions to local practices, as Li (female, current Master's student) notes:

> I felt a bit surprised to be invited to a bar. I don't like the environment. So, I suggested meeting in a café.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

However, this reluctance to engage in 'pub culture' was not absolute among female students. Some felt that alcohol consumption in the UK may serve the same function as food consumption in China: an opportunity for people to gather, meet and talk. Dan (female, returnee PhD student) is a representative of students who are more open to the new culture, and she accepted pub and alcohol culture in the UK as part of sociality.

> Dan: I think I just embrace everything here, especially during my PhD, and I visit there [the pub] quite often. So, even some soft drinks would be fine.

Researcher: How did you start exploring pub culture?

Dan: Oh, I knew pub culture is quite popular here in the UK, so I was interested in knowing how it looked like. Then occasionally I went with a German classmate, and I found it is just a place where people can chat and have drinks and snacks. Very relaxed. And then I started going there.

(Original in English)

Dan's extract shows that her journey into pub culture started with her own motivation of exploring pubs and having a company she knew. In this case, Dan was more open-minded about the unfamiliar cultural elements in a new environment than others who held strong stereotypes regarding pubs and drinking that were impacted by their original culture. Moreover, she went to the pub with a person she knew, which indicates familiar company that share the same interests, especially when it includes a cultural insider, can have a positive impact on sojourners' intercultural immersion, since any uncertainty or fear of the unknown situation can be relieved. Some participants who mentioned pub culture said they were embracing or rejecting it, while Sierra (female, returnee Master's student) said she was 'forced' to participate but was amazed at the 'romantic' atmosphere that some alcohol facilitated. She shared her experience of visiting the London Eye and being randomly distributed into one of the pods, so she 'had to' enjoy champagne and communicate with some people she didn't know.

Sierra: I remember the night I met some strangers on the London Eye. We drank champagne and enjoyed the night view together, which made me feel very comfortable and romantic. I couldn't imagine that I could drink alcohol with a group of strangers before!

Researcher: Why? Did you go alone?

Sierra: Drinking with strangers is unsafe for girls! I never did this in China. I was with friends, but we were randomly assigned to different pods on the London Eye. I wanted to be with my friends. You know, in China we would choose, but it just happened in a different way here … It

was a great experience, because I didn't feel alienation but kindness, comfort and enthusiasm from others who were in the same pod with me. Ah, and the anxiety was very low. I felt I got out of my comfort zone and the degree of accepting new things was getting higher!

(Original in Mandarin)

Figure 5-5. Drinking champagne and enjoying the night view together with strangers on the London Eye. Image taken by Sierra.

The online photo exhibition showed that Figure 5-5 aroused the interest of and inspired comments from more female participants, since several female participants commented below the picture with the expressions like 'beautiful' and 'love it' but no male participants left any comments. This might partly be explained by the atmosphere in the image being more attractive to women, and another reason might be the champagne being served in nice goblets. This was triggered by my assumption as a female. This demonstrated that Chinese women are less likely than men to engage in the previously mentioned alcohol culture, and

that as a result male participants might not feel the picture was as attractive since alcohol culture is normal in their lives. The women's comments showed that the open cultural environment in the UK allowed some Chinese students to have a variety of life experiences and helped them to develop intercultural awareness and respect for diversity.

According to Barrena and Sánchez (2013), the hedonic connotations of eating, drinking or shopping means consumers can relate these activities to freedom, happiness, excitement and knowledge acquisition. In the situation above, Sierra enjoyed drinking with strangers on the London Eye and this brought her joy, a sense of leisure and a new knowledge of herself as someone able to enjoy time in close proximity with strangers. Her worries about safety were soon replaced by amazement at the fact that she was 'enjoying talking and alcohol' with strangers. Byram (1997) notes that the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre*) involve discovering phenomena through social interaction in a foreign environment. Unlike other students who might rely on stereotypical views of alcohol, interpreting its meaning through prior knowledge rather than direct contact or experience, Sierra acquired new intercultural knowledge through an 'instrumental way' of learning, which allowed her to gain insights into the local culture via close insights (Byram and Golubeva, 2020). Furthermore, Sierra's experience fostered a 'critical cultural awareness' (*savoir s'engager*). She underwent a shift in perspective, moving away from her initial reluctance to drink with strangers and embracing the 'British' way of socialising. Her evaluation of cultural events and her ability to negotiate cultural differences reflected a nuanced process of adaptation in managing cultural conflicts. Sierra's experience showed her adjusting to an intercultural moment with an open-minded attitude even if under 'compulsion'. However, it was the chance 'compulsive' situation that pushed her to find a way to communicate with people she did not know and to adapt to an unfamiliar situation.

Many students reported that they preferred to communicate with Chinese students if they were around, because of familiarity, but this limits their chance of developing ICC about different cultures. As Qun et al. (2018) state, the cultural learning process can be active learning in class or forced assimilation in the community. For students who are not confident or brave enough to actively engage

in foreign culture, the passive integration can be an alternative to learn about the social skills needed for the new culture (M. Yang et al., 2011).

5.5 Food and cultural reflection

5.5.1 Returnee students miss UK through food

Food is one of the most important themes that emerged from the interviews with both current students in the UK and returnees. For returnee students who have graduated and returned to China, food sometimes appeared to be mentioned as a kind of 'proxy' for their nostalgia for life in the UK. Some returnee participants, especially those who returned recently (i.e., a year ago or less) expressed a desire to find familiar British food in China. In the following conversation, Jie (female, returnee PhD student) recounts her disappointment about Starbucks in China, saying that the flavour is different from the UK Starbucks.

> Jie: I don't think I like drinking Starbucks, but when I saw it, I still went in. Then I bought some things that had very similar content, but it was different. I am not enough of an expert to say what is different, but I know, it is different … I expected it to be the same flavour as I had in the UK.
>
> Researcher: Did you go to Starbucks when you were in the UK?
>
> Jie: Seldom. I bought a drink occasionally, not regularly.
>
> Researcher: What did you think when you saw Starbucks in China?
>
> Jie: A somewhat familiar thing, although I don't like it very much. This is an emotional connection with the UK and makes me think of life in the UK.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

International students' dietary habits are a part of their cultural adaptation since traditional food ingredients with authentic tastes are not readily available in a

foreign country. It is a similar process for returnee students having to re-adapt to the flavour of Western drinks in China rather than in its original context. Research indicates that traditional foods can help alleviate homesickness and maintain cultural identity (Yen et al., 2018), and Jie regarded Starbucks as a cultural symbol that connects her with the life she had in Britain. Her nostalgia for the UK pushed her to go to a place that she was not even keen on while in Britain. By hoping to find the same flavour of coffee, Jie was recalling her overseas life and strengthening her identity as an overseas student who had an authentic taste of the culture. Starbucks in Jie's experience represents her self-consciousness as being different from the Chinese locals who had never gone abroad.

5.5.2 Food preference and cultural identity

Several participants mentioned that they only eat with people at festivals or other celebratory occasions. In most cases, students in the UK eat their daily meals alone. The findings show that most of the participants prefer to cook food at home on their own or eat in Chinese restaurants, while some may have a taste of local food from time to time. This indicates that some embrace the new culture while also maintaining home cultural customs, hinting at the existence of two selves (Brown et al., 2010). I asked all participants who mentioned food in their interviews why they thought that their taste for Chinese food had not changed during their stay. The responses were mostly about lifelong habits and home flavours, which carries an implication regarding the strength of their origins. Participant Chengua (male, returnee Master's student) poignantly contrasted the unchangeable nature of the taste of food with the ways in which their personality and hobbies had been influenced by living in the UK.

> Researcher: How do you see the impact of your overseas experience on you?
>
> Chengua: Ah … I think I have changed a lot and have many characteristics of different countries. Not only Chinese.
>
> Researcher: What do you mean by 'not only Chinese'?

> Chengua: I think I have an American schedule, British manners, Russian temper, Japanese hobby, and … (silence) … Chinese taste, never changed. Ha ha ha.
>
> Researcher: Why didn't your taste change?
>
> Chengua: It's just hard to change a lifelong habit, and I think the preference for taste has been developed before I was born. I could eat spicy food in childhood and both my parents like it. It is in my genes. No matter where I went, I could try local restaurants, but by the end it was Chinese food. It is the home taste.
>
> (Original in English)

Chengua proudly emphasised his 'international' credentials by incorporating a range of social characteristics from different countries and cultures. He hesitated before saying 'Chinese taste' in order to think about his connection with his home country. He then mentioned taste to suggest that eating and food are an important part of his identity, together with working ethos, temperament and hobbies. While the socially oriented components are international, it is food that Chengua links to the affective, intimate domains of home and family. There is a Chinese saying, 'Fallen leaves return to their roots', and, in this case, family appears to stand for Chengua's roots, which he can return to through the medium of flavours from home. No matter how much he has become 'international' and how much his identity has changed through his experiences of living abroad, his taste preference for Chinese flavours are part of his very embodiment and his history 'even before he was born', signalling his connection to China. A similar statement was made by Fan (female, returnee Master's student):

> Being abroad has made me feel Chinese identity more deeply because I feel that I am a minority here, and I want to find my roots. The process of cooking Chinese food makes me feel that I am exploring my roots, and I am more aware of where I come from.
>
> (Original in English)

Jinyi (female, returnee Master's student) mentioned that she insisted on eating Chinese food because the Chinese cooking style is healthier:

> Jinyi: Most of the time I cook Chinese food by myself, even not as tasty as the food takeaway. I think Chinese food is healthier. It's funny that I didn't realise this until I came here. I don't like the cheese food; it's too oily.
>
> Researcher: Not all Western food has cheese …
>
> Jinyi: I know, but delicious food is relatively high in calories, like fried food. Healthy food, like salad is not delicious for me. Chinese food is a 'happy medium'.
>
> (Original in English)

Campbell et al. (2016) show that stereotypes can prevent people accepting new things. As humans, we stress the importance of food from the health and longevity perspectives, while in contemporary culture, food carries the function of beauty, especially for young women. However, Jinyi's opinion about Western food containing a high number of calories is a one-sided reading since people can maintain a healthy diet with a variety of high-quality food in their localities, and it depends on individual preferences and social status rather than the nature of the food. However, it was her understanding of food and stereotypes around it that caused some misunderstanding about different food cultures, which needed time and practice to avoid. However, comparing different types of food, Jinyi realised that it was important to have a healthy diet and to cherish the health aspect of living on Chinese food, which represents her recognition of Chinese culture.

According to Choo (2004), cross-cultural food practices can be divided into two categories: one accepting local food in the receiving environment, which suggests some integration and adaptation process; and the other maintaining traditional food from the original culture, which invokes memory and indicates a connection to the home culture that the migrants have moved away from. It is not an either-or choice, but students' preferences may indicate whether they are more receptive to the new culture or more attached to the old.

Zhou (female, returnee PhD student) mentioned her food links to the home culture.

> Zhou: I made myself dumplings on New Year's Eve. I think this is what Chinese people should eat to celebrate the new year. When I was in China, I never tried to make it because the whole process is tricky … sometimes I bought it in the shop … save my time. But when I came here, I was surprised I could enjoy making them at home.
>
> Zhou: (Silence) … Have you heard 'Don't cherish when you get it but grab it hard when you lose it'? More or less this.
>
> Researcher: How about local food? Have you ever tried it?
>
> Zhou: Of course, but I ate very little local food in the first few months when I first arrived in the UK, but now I buy some unfamiliar ingredients. I just started trying different flavours, to change the taste, some are not bad.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Zhou showed her process of adapting to the culture, which can also be seen happening through food. From initial rejection to gradual acceptance, the adaptation process is often related to the length of cultural immersion. Beoku-Betts (1995) states that people have a strong desire to preserve their original culture through food practices, especially when one's culture is not dominant in that society. In other words, food from home offers a way to keep in touch with one's roots. Several respondents reported that Chinese food with flavours from home can bring them satisfaction, both physically and emotionally, and help combat loneliness and sadness. However, it is interesting to note that the participants who mentioned this have mostly not been abroad before, stayed in the UK for a short period or are of a comparatively younger age. As noted by Hammer et al. (2003), the length of immersion affects students' intercultural sensitivity, which means those who stay in the host culture longer are more likely to develop the social and affective skills that can help them to understand and appreciate cultural differences. For those who stayed in the UK for a short time or are at the early stage of cultural adaptation, experiencing emotions such as denial or defence

against cultural differences, it may take longer to accept and integrate cultural differences.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I examined how food functions to construct the participants' intercultural engagement in the UK in an invisible and unconscious way. The findings regarding food culture were presented in three specific intercultural aspects: food culture promoting Chinese students intercultural socialising in the UK; social class distinctions reflected in food affecting Chinese students' perceptions of intercultural communication in the UK society; and the reflections on the Chinese culture and the strength of Chinese cultural identity. In the first section, I analysed the importance of food culture in the Chinese context and explained the reasons why Chinese people are more likely to use food as a starting point to explore a new culture. I then demonstrated how food encouraged their socialising with both Chinese peers and non-Chinese people. Participants presented photos of their Chinese food gatherings in the UK which aimed to convey their feelings of harmony, familiarity and being involved. These Confucian principles are embedded in Chinese students' attitudes and behaviours and strengthened in the UK context. In the second section, I illustrated two relevant issues about food culture in the UK - social hierarchy and alcohol culture - to demonstrate how Chinese students understood UK society from the perspective of eating and drinking. Photos and the 'likes' that participants added at the online photo exhibition indicated a slight gender difference in students' attitudes in that female participants demonstrated a greater degree of enthusiasm towards drinking when socialising than the male students. The third section showed that participants could gain a sense of belonging from Chinese food gatherings which strengthened their emotional connection and recognition of their culture of origin.

In the next chapter, I will examine the participants' responses to language in intercultural communication with a view to revealing how their attitudes and behaviour are affected by English, Mandarin and their home dialects, as well as the impacts of the related socio-cultural factors on these issues.

Chapter 6 Language and Intercultural Communication

6.1 Chapter introduction

In Chapter 5, I presented participants' intercultural attitudes and reactions to cultural differences as expressed through their food practices in the UK, which was guided by their knowledge about both the receiving and home cultures. In this chapter, I continue my investigation of participants' intercultural communicative experiences from the perspective of language, a theme that emerged clearly through the conversations with students who were in the UK and with those who had returned to China after a period of study in Britain. Briefly, this theme is further subdivided into three: language use and understanding, language and identity, and language inequality. As in Chapter 5, this chapter also aims to answer two of the research questions that were identified in Chapter 1:

Question 1: What challenges do Chinese students encounter in intercultural communicative practices during study abroad?

Question 2: What intercultural communicative strategies do Chinese students adopt to deal with communicative difficulties in the UK?

Language skill is a vital component of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as it facilitates effective and appropriate communication behaviours to convey information meaningfully (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). This perspective indicates that individuals with ICC should be able to transfer their own ideas and fulfil their own communication goals through reasonable and sufficient language proficiency. In this project, participants' language practice is related to Mandarin as their first language and English as the second. With the current students' group, the conversation about language during the interviews started with the question, 'How do you feel about your study abroad experience?' Most students presented their challenges with English skills and concluded that they should have come with better English, while the returnee group had more trouble with the content and quality of the conversation with Chinese locals rather than the language itself. This chapter is structured as follows. In section 6.2, I illustrate language issues, such as accent and humour, that Chinese students had encountered while in the UK and

how they perceived the role of language in constructing their intercultural experience, both in relation to their studies and social lives. Section 6.3 provides the consequences of language barriers for students, while section 6.4 illustrates returnee students' language adaptations on returning to China, followed by section 6.5 which explains the relation between language and identity among Chinese students. The findings in these sections consider the perspectives of both current and returnee students, to provide a comprehensive picture of language issues in intercultural communication for Chinese students in the UK at two different stages of an international experience. The chapter then ends with a summary (section 6.6).

6.2 Language barriers in intercultural communication

This section illustrates reflections on English usage among Chinese students studying and living in the UK. It also presents returnee students' experiences of language readaptation once back in China. It discusses the communicative issues that Chinese students encountered while in the UK and upon their return home. The section is articulated in three sub-sections, namely: regional accents, practical English and sense of humour.

6.2.1 Regional accents in intercultural communication

Studies have shown that language barriers, such as regional accents, can limit the success of intercultural communication among people from different linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Ching et al., 2017; W. Wu and Hammond, 2011). The native-speaker orientation of English language education and Mandarin as a standard, official language in China involves negative attitudes of prejudice and discrimination regarding regional English accents and the target culture. Speaking with an accent can cause significant stigmatisation for the speaker (Thorne, 2005); it can also interrupt communication and may slow down information processing for the listener (Floccia et al., 2006). Sociolinguists argue that accent and speech entail broader power structures that are consistent with social-economic stratifications (Donnelly et al., 2021). These factors all relate to the linguistic stereotypes regarding accents that Chinese students hold as second language learners who insist on 'standard, native-like English'. Moreover, non-native

speakers in the receiving country might experience (regional) accents as exclusionary and lacking in social belonging, perceiving them as communication challenges, which may be suggestive of a particular relationship between language and identity (Gluszek et al., 2011).

The data collected from students currently studying in the UK suggests that, starting with their arrival, participants were suddenly immersed in situations in which the use of English was required, and they had to quickly come to terms with the need to use the language for most of their everyday tasks. They experienced a shift from knowing about English to living in the language. English is an unavoidable element in their study-abroad life and a number of participants mentioned that they met some unexpected language barriers such as accent, slang and speed of talking, which increased the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty due to emotional stress, something that eventually reduced their passion for and confidence in speaking in English. For example, some felt confused about the accent, which prevented them from communicating with local people:

> When talking with local people, oh, I can't understand Scottish English. The Glaswegian accent is an obstacle for me here. It’s not a single word that I don’t understand but a whole sentence in that I can hardly recognise a familiar sound.
>
> (Zhou, male, current Master’s student, original in Mandarin)

Zhou noted that the accent prevented him from understanding local people. As Nickolayev et al. (2015) posit, communication has three components: information processing, interaction and situational adaptation. The extract above demonstrates how the speakers’ accents can hinder the listeners’ (i.e., Chinese students) comprehension and information-processing during interactions. For non-native speakers, regional English, which is different from the ‘standard English’ they were taught, can be quite different from what they expected, and they may voice their disagreement and disappointment at the target language, as well as demotivation and confusion at the early stage (Marr, 2005). Zarrinabadi and Khodarahmi (2017) investigate how L2 learners’ perceptions of accent can affect their willingness to communicate, demonstrating that accent can reduce L2 speakers’ communicative

competence and self-confidence in communicating with L2. Zhou's comment, 'I can hardly recognise a familiar sound', shows that his confidence in speaking English decreased and shyness increased because of being confronted by an accent he was not familiar with. This is further supported by Gluszek and Dovidio (2010), who highlight that listeners may experience stigma as a result of losing control over the conversation, their out-group identity and the interference of accents within communication.

The extract below demonstrates Jin's (female, current undergraduate student) attitudes towards 'good' English when experiencing accents.

> Researcher: How do you see your communication with local people?
>
> Jin: When I was a child when I watched Harry Potter, I thought learning English meant imitating them [the actors]. The London accent does sound very upper-class, but after I went to Glasgow, I noticed the Scottish accent, and it is still English. Then I realised even in London, accents are everywhere, not as 'good' as I think. So, high-end and very down-to-earth.
>
> Researcher: Have you ever had a language problem in communicating with the locals?
>
> Jin: In the beginning, yes. The Scottish accent is heavy. Sometimes I may think that body language is the best way [Jin demonstrated speaking with a Scottish accent accompanying this with body language]. I was very puzzled sometimes.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Jin reported her admiration of London speech in the beginning, and this perception of a London accent has been examined in Marr's (2005) study with Chinese students in London. The study notes that students are surprised to experience 'language shock' as they expect London speech to present a 'prestigious' English model, in line with the way in which Beijing Chinese-Mandarin works, as discussed in section 2.3.1. Bernstein (1964) notes that the speech systems and linguistic codes in a

society are reflections of social relationships and social structures. The language use can reflect the power relations in the social structure through which the dominant language shows the strength of the group of speakers (R'boul, 2021). For instance, in Chinese contexts where Mandarin dominates, it not only reflects the dominance of the Han ethnic group but also operates within a restricted coding system (Bernstein, 1964). This restriction significantly reduces the range of syntactic alternatives available. As Dong and Blommaert (2009) state, the spread of Mandarin helps eliminate geographical boundaries, but it prevents other varieties from becoming recognised languages, while in the UK, which is characterised by linguistic diversity that prevails in an elaborated coding system, speakers have access to syntactic alternatives, reflecting a more nuanced social structure (Bernstein, 1964). However, the accent attitude is firmly rooted within a social system, rank and education, which leads to Jin's disappointment in hearing a range of accents and deciding that the English that people use in London is not as pure and exclusive as she thought.

The complexity of navigating between these diverse linguistic landscapes is evident in the above situation encountered by international students. This transition from a restricted to an elaborated coding system demands heightened intercultural awareness, knowledge of regional accents and language diversity, and intercultural skills of constructing and planning speech. Importantly, these skills are not necessarily developed as a result of speakers' innate intelligence but profoundly influenced by sociological constraints acting upon the speaker.

6.2.2 Practical usage of English

In addition to the linguistic issue of accent, some participants realised that the most difficult part in communicating across cultures is the practical use of English, and they came to realise that it is different from what has been taught in school. As Chen (male, current Master's student) notes:

> Although everyone may have high IELTS scores, it doesn't guarantee a successful and smooth study in the UK. What you hear and say is about the practical application of English in life, and this is quite different from what we learned at school.

(Original in Mandarin)

As Junliang (male, current Master's student) says,

> IELTS is test-oriented. Chinese students are good at memorising answers. Students were given a bunch of speaking topics and what you need to do is to memorise the 'good answers' that are already prepared. It is easy to get high scores, but real communication is totally different.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is the entrance language test for non-English applicants that is recognised by British universities. The IELTS training course is exam-oriented in China, aiming at helping students getting higher scores rather than practical communicative skills. Chen, as well as several other participants, noticed that the English used in the test is not the same as that which is used in daily life. Xiang (male, returnee PhD student) described his experience of feeling awkward when talking with a waiter in a restaurant and not being able to understand the question:

> I remember once I was in Cambridge, going into a restaurant. A waiter came to me and asked: 'Are you being serviced?' He repeated four, five times, and I finally got the meaning from his gesture and eyes since he was looking at the table. I felt very bad because I couldn't understand the sentence. This was not taught in school … The English teaching system in China remains the same as for my little brother who is 17 years younger than me. I show him the word 'Dept.' and he doesn't know what it is. But he knows the word 'department'. I told him 'Dept.' is the acronym of 'department' … So, you see, unless you are in the real set, you will never know how English is used in practice.
>
> (Original in English)

Byram (1997) states that real-time interaction is essential for improving the skills of discovery and interaction, since the ability to practice knowledge, attitudes and skills requires extensive real-time communication. Xiang's comment demonstrates

that students are not given sufficient pragmatics knowledge in their L2 learning experience, and he was aware of this. The exam-oriented language teaching in China was blamed for not preparing students with the appropriate practical English skills to be fluent English speakers in intercultural situations (Ren and Han, 2016).

6.2.3 Sense of humour

The different configuration/realisation of a sense of humour is the third cultural element that impacts Chinese students' comprehension in English communication. Success in communication requires both interlocutors to harbour the same assumptions and expectations of the conversation (Reimann, 2010). Some assumptions are not based on the situation but on broader cultural references, and these can be opaque and hard to explain to the outsider while they are taken for granted by the insider (Mullan and Béal, 2021). Humour has several functions in conversation; it helps build cultural identity, reinforce social norms and strengthen power relations in conversation (Huber and Brown, 2017). Thus, interlocutors are looking for similarities between the individual and the other, building familiarity through similar beliefs, values, experiences and/or personalities. However, if the humour is not grasped by each individual, it means the enjoyment of sharing similar attitudes is not spread successfully, and it can cause unexpected and unpleasant emotions (Jiang et al., 2011). However, it should be highlighted that humour is developed in certain social groups or contexts. Olsson et al. (2002) note that people may have a sense of humour that cannot be appreciated by others because it is hard to define humour and people have different ideas of what constitutes humour, based on their cultural backgrounds (ibid.). According to Reimann (2010), understanding humour relies on understanding of language, communication strategies, cultural beliefs and values in the target context and, most importantly, the awareness of the context and a shared understanding of the 'funny' elements in this context. All of this requires a long-term immersion in the context, through which familiarity can be developed and decrease the sensitivity to cultural differences (Chinn, 2006).

For students who were in the UK for a short time, humour can be tricky to understand/respond to, and some participants mentioned that difficulties in

grasping British humour hindered their communication with local people, as the following extract illustrates:

> Although there are many foreign friends around, we can't completely understand each other, and even if we really understand each other, there are still some, because of cultural differences, some jokes that might not be understood. In fact, I communicate with my classmates every day, and there is no problem in English communication, but when it comes to jokes, I think it is all a problem. Sometimes they really say something that makes the others laugh. And I don't quite understand why.
>
> (Yu, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin)

Yu pointed out that she could communicate with her foreign friends but their sense of humour was hard for her to grasp at times, making her perceive humour as an obstacle to full communication and inclusion. Yu attributed this to the difference between cultures leading to different interpretations of humour and how humour is used in the culture. This reflects what Byram (1997) notes as 'intercultural knowledge', that is, not only knowing about a specific culture or country but developing an understanding of how social groupings and identities work and how they are involved in intercultural interaction. Sociolinguistic proficiency is required to comprehend what makes others laugh and what it means to those who identify with other identities. Jaroenkitboworn (2015) investigates EFL Thai students and notices that students' humour competence impacts their reactions to the subtleties of intercultural communication, and this includes grammatical and discourse competency, communicative patterns, and the established rules of language use inside one culture (Attardo, 1997). A study conducted by Alexandru (2012) notes that humour has been taken as lacking seriousness for (many) EFL professors, teachers and students in intercultural communication. It is, however, one of the most difficult skills/capacities to master in ICC since humour competence is a complex combination of linguistic, communicative and cultural competence. Appreciating humour in a foreign language can demonstrate a cultural 'insider' position that can increase reciprocity in the interaction, and it is an important skill

for cultural sojourners to develop a sense of intercultural citizenship of being involved in both local and national communities (Wagner and Byram, 2017).

However, to increase humour competence so as to increase mobility in intercultural communication is not an easy journey. Yu further explained the consequences of this in relation to intercultural encounters:

> Researcher: How do you feel then?
>
> Yu: I am very embarrassed. So, I'm not going to social gatherings with them. (Original in Mandarin)

Feeling awkward and embarrassed prevented Yu from socialising with her foreign peers. Even though she was confident about her English skills and successful in exchanging information, not being able to navigate the nuances of humour became an obstacle to socialisation.

Reflecting on why jokes may not be grasped easily, participants had some explanations:

> I think it's the way of talking and how to say it. I feel that the environment I grew up in is different, and then the way people communicate is also different, and then the things of interest may be different. So, many factors are different.
>
> (Yu, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin)
>
> British people are more interested in some topics which I may not know very well. If they talk about a meme that everyone knows, but I don't know what it is. There is many British humour, all of which are 'dark humour'. I don't think it's funny, but a bit cold.
>
> (Fan, male, returnee Master's student, original in English)

Yu and Fan thought that the environment, communicative styles and shared interests all contributed to the success (and failure) of communication when

humour is involved. Reimann (2010) claims that shared knowledge, cultural backgrounds and personal acquaintance with convention and rules of engagement can all affect individuals' interpretations of humour. Moreover, Reimann (ibid.) states that the length of immersion in the target culture and the advanced discourse awareness this entails are other factors that influence the degree of shared background knowledge which facilitates understanding the subtleties of humour. Yu and Fan are both Master's students who have been in the UK for less than a year and this may explain their difficulties in understanding the nuances of humour in a different culture. This point also comes through in what Hu (female, returnee Master's student), one of the returnee students, told me in our interviews:

> Mainly, I don't have much contact with foreign countries. Anyway, I didn't stay in the UK for a long time. I was just studying there. We Chinese still prefer to be together. Sometimes I talk to them [foreign peers], and they share some dark humour. If you don't have a relatively deep cultural background, you may not understand them.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Hu highlighted that, due to the short period of time she spent in the UK, she did not develop a deep connection with the local culture nor make many friends. She noted the same problem highlighted by current students, namely that culture-driven humour might be an obstacle to engaging in intercultural communication. The examples above reflect that due to fewer linguistic resources and less cultural competence, Chinese students are at a disadvantage in intercultural dialogue and they instead assert their own identities and resist undesirable positionings as English L2 users. Thus, even for proficient L2 speakers, who are at ease in everyday conversation, access to deeper levels of intercultural contact and language resources might be restricted (Bell, 2006).

6.3 Impacts of having language barriers

6.3.1 Negative impact - emotional issues

Language barriers can have consequences for Chinese students. According to participants, language barriers have triggered some negative feelings that highlighted their fears and concerns in relation to communicating in English. Some students might feel upset and decide to reduce their exposure to intercultural communication, and this could be one of the reasons for Chinese students often remaining in their own language groups.

Fen (female, current Master's student) showed me a picture of her at a moment in a party where she felt bored and lonely as she could not speak English fluently and was consequently unable to meet non-Chinese friends.

Figure 6-1. Loneliness in liveliness. Photo taken by Fen.

> Fen: I used to like to go to this kind of party because I wanted to make new friends, but it turned out that it was still Chinese people chatting with Chinese people, and I couldn't have in-depth conversations with foreign [non-Chinese] students because they spoke really fast and I couldn't catch up, and I didn't understand what they were talking about. So, it ended up with them [proficient English speakers] talking and I nodded to pretend I understood and agreed … I felt uncomfortable not being able to speak fluently and express my opinions. So, I might talk to other Chinese students instead, but it was not my purpose for being there. I was like that guy in the party, so I didn't keep going to this kind of event.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Fen's extract demonstrates that such language barriers impact some students' social inclusion with other English speakers. The school event was organised by the university with the aim to provide opportunities for students to get to know each other and build friendships and social connections. In this transnational setting, effective intercultural communication can be impeded by practical communication challenges, including accents, humour and the sociolinguistic nuances of English, which would ideally be developed within the framework of shared cultural understanding. Without this foundation, successful intercultural communication may be compromised, potentially resulting in the exclusion of L2 speakers and a situation described as being dominated by English speakers, as Fen noted. Since Chinese students are not as proficient in English as other English speakers are, nor as familiar with their cultural norms, many of them do not feel that they are on an equal communication footing with these culturally distant international students (Ou and Gu, 2021). This sense of imbalance may gradually diminish as their language proficiency and communication skills improve, as observed among undergraduate and PhD students. However, evidence of such improvements has barely been noticed among Master's students, who typically undergo shorter programmes.

In addition, M.S. Kim (2017) notes that speaking in a foreign language can lead to cognitive stress and anxiety. Some participants reported that they wanted to escape the situation, avoid communication or remain silent in the face of embarrassing moments that they faced in communication. As noted by Ying and Fan,

> Once I was trying figure out how to withdraw money from the ATM. I just stood beside the ATM and one of neighbours in my building came around and said something to me. I think he was telling me how to use this machine, but I didn't understand what he said. And I just nodded to pretend that I understood. Sometimes I would ask them to repeat, like 'Pardon', but I would ask them to repeat for just once. After asking twice I feel ashamed to ask.
>
> (Ying, current PhD student, original in English)
>
> And then the accent was so difficult. And for me, I just felt very embarrassed when people repeated twice or three times. And I decided to avoid looking at him and thought, 'Could you just leave me alone?'
>
> (Fan, male, returnee Master's student, original in English)

Both Ying and Fan reported that they were willing to ask for explanations once but felt ashamed about not understanding others after asking them to repeat several times. Galmiche (2017) notes that shame in L2 learners is bound up with L2 identity construction, self-worth and self-esteem. L2 learners' shame in intercultural interaction involves negative self-appraisal that the linguistic self is flawed and incompetent. It can also lead to L2-related anxiety and L2 learners might avoid such shame-inducing activities. Ying responded by nodding and pretending to understand while Fan avoided eye contact and wished the other person would leave, which indicates a negative image of self. Zheng and Gao (2017) note that, in case of communicative difficulties, the listener can decide whether and how to respond, and one way is to confirm understanding even if the utterance has not been understood. These are 'escaping behaviours' which might mislead the interlocutor to think that the message was understood or that they did not want help, whereas the reason for the behaviour is shyness about the lack of language

(communicative) ability and/or a wish to save 'face' by ending the conversation quickly.

Although many students believed it was their English incompetence, Yang (male, current Master's student) said it was fear and lack of confidence that hindered communication.

> I have been here for more than a year, and at the beginning I thought that the most difficult thing is the language, because personally, I am not good at English. But now, I think it may be the easiest part. I don't think it's the language that's difficult, but the mental barriers are. Many of the difficulties are our own imaginations, and there is nothing actually. As for language, I think if you are really immersed in learning, it should be quite fast and one should be able to adapt soon.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Yang suggested that it was a mental barrier, rather than the language itself, which contributed to his challenges. This shows a development of Yang's intercultural sensitivity, and the power of emotions, anxiety, and confidence - and their influence on communication. Similar results about how linguistic barriers can have negative impacts on international students' attitudes towards interculturality has been discussed in M. Liu (2019) and Mak et al. (2014). Yang's extract also illustrates his development of open-mindedness and empathy in understanding the beliefs and values of the receiving culture. He transcended the stereotype that 'language impedes intercultural communication' and instead cultivated cognitive flexibility, allowing him to alter and adapt his way of thinking according to the context (Deardorff, 2009). This requires that students are flexible using their integrated skills, such as communicative and language skills and social flexibility, to counter intercultural difficulties. Further recommendations on language preparation for ICC development including exposure to a range of accents have been presented in section 9.7.2.

6.3.2 Positive impacts

As noted by Derwing and Munro (2009), learning not to treat accents as an obstacle to communication is fundamental for L2 speakers, as facing accent variations is unavoidable. While some of the participants considered accent an obstacle of intercultural communication, others recognised the benefits of hearing a diversity of accents and global Englishes. For example, Sierra (female, returnee Master's student) notes that getting used to different accents helped her appreciate the diversity of English and built her confidence in speaking English with greater flexibility.

> During the undergraduate years, we had a teacher with an Indian accent, which was difficult to understand. So I had to share notes with classmates after his class - in case of any misunderstanding. When we first went abroad, we might think that there are only British and American accents when speaking, but we didn't expect that there are all kinds of accents from all over the world. Realising this difference will be helpful for you to speak English, as you are more flexible and not strict with the 'standard' English … How does it affect my English? Well, after I came here [to Scotland], I notice *er* is pronounced differently. The voice is lower, like the word *father* with [ər]. Sometimes I will also change it myself; it makes more sense and [is] interesting.
>
> (Original in English)

Sierra reported that she realised the diversity of English after speaking to people from different cultural backgrounds. Gaining awareness of a range of English varieties made her feel less concerned about sounding native-like and more able to be flexible and confident when speaking English. Her comment shows the change in her attitude from 'resistance' to 'openness' toward accents (and to people with different accents) by using strategies to overcome difficulties. In this way, she developed her overall English ability and sensitivity to the language's diversity. Moreover, scholars note that raising awareness of Global Englishes can have several benefits for L2 learners: enhancing learners' understanding of a plurality of *Englishes* and learning English in a more practical and pragmatic way; greater

appreciation of the value of their first language and not seeing L1 as a barrier; and a critical understanding of 'native standard' English (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Fang and Ren, 2018). Moreover, Galloway and Rose (2018) state that understanding differences in each English variety enables L2 learners to 'reflect on the linguistic history of a nation in order to understand the processes that helped shape the English spoken there' (p.10).

Sierra highlighted that she would change her pronunciation to meet the local accent, which reflects her emphasis on lingua-cultural identity. This finding echoes a similar one in Sung's (2016) research with L2 speakers, in which learners' desire to speak in a native or local accent is driven by identity-related reasons, and this can happen naturally due to exposure to the local speech. Similarly, Clarke and Garrett (2004) suggest that human speech processing is flexible and can rapidly accommodate phonetical deviations in sociolinguistic contexts. Compared with other students who regard accent as an obstacle to intercultural communication, one student stated that accent can be considered an interesting point to explore in L2 learning, and that it provides an opportunity to meet new people and increase interpersonal relationships with locals.

> I think language is not a challenge for Chinese students who can start their education in the UK, because if have passed IELTS test, you have reached a certain level. If you can start, then you can continue with your gestures and other approaches, if you are willing to practice. There are many activities in the university to meet people and practice English. I live in the student flat, and there is an accommodation manager who is local and speaks with accent. Every time when I go downstairs, I talk to her. I want to improve my listening. If I can understand English with accent, then I won't have problems with non-accent English.
>
> (Kai, male, current PhD student, original in English)

Kai was a third-year PhD student at the University of Glasgow, and he had been living in the UK since his Master's programme. With more than four years' living experience, Kai indicated that language proficiency should not be the main problem for Chinese students' intercultural communication because the study

aboard experience can provide many chances to improve English. He holds a positive attitude to the 'barrier' and has developed strategies to hone his language skills. This can be explained by the intercultural competence developed during his overseas experiences since the Master's programme, which made his strategies dealing with cultural differences, e.g., language barriers, more developed than other participants who stayed abroad for a shorter period of time. It should be noted that, compared to other participants doing a Master's degree, who are in the UK for a shorter term, Kai has had more time to turn his attention from classroom English to social English settings.

6.4 Returnee students' language adaptation upon arrival

Unlike current students in the UK who are struggling with language barriers due to linguistic incompetence, a few returnee students who picked up the language issue stressed the lack of shared topics in communication since study abroad made them lose their common knowledge of the home culture. A fluent Mandarin speaker, Xuan (female, Master's student), who has been living in the UK for 17 years with her family, reported that she developed hobbies and interests which hinder her ability to develop more in-depth conversation with locals in China.

> I don't have problems with the language. I feel lucky that I never gave up Chinese, so I can communicate well with locals … Most of my friends are Chinese and they had study abroad experience. I found we have more shared topics and hobbies. But with others who have never lived outside China, it's hard to find a shared topic. They know some pop stars but I don't know them, things like that. So, the conversation ends very quickly.
>
> (Original in English)

According to Ziegler and Golbeck (2007), shared values, similar personal characteristics and common experiences can help build trust between interlocutors. This has been supported by Cheng et al. (2017), who noted that shared interests help connect people into social 'in-groups' and that individuals with similar experiences and outlooks enjoy more reciprocal trust, build stronger

mutual relationships and tend to communicate more in turn. Xuan reported that she preferred to communicate with people who shared the same experiences of living overseas, which reflected her closer relations to the social culture in the UK, whereas, after living away from China for many years, she experienced some cultural distance from the Chinese locals, and even though she spoke native-level Chinese (Mandarin), the lack of a shared background led to low-quality interactions. Her case shows that language proficiency may not guarantee successful intercultural communication without common knowledge among interlocutors.

Van Ek (1993) raises the attention to interlocutors' socio-cultural competence and social competence and helps explain the communicative barriers between native speakers, where one of them has 'lost' parts of their culture of origin. According to van Ek (ibid.), socio-cultural competence presupposes a certain degree of familiarity within a certain context and refers to an ability to understand a particular reference frame of a language. Xuan had left China for more than 10 years, and she might have remained connected to her culture of origin but, as culture is dynamic and fluid, she has not updated her knowledge of her home culture (e.g., pop culture). Her socio-cultural competence is not strong as required for successful communication with Chinese locals. Moreover, van Ek's social competence involves both the motivation and the skill to interact with others. Xuan's extract did not express her strong will to engage with Chinese locals, so she felt alright about staying in her friend zone, among peers who had lived overseas. This, in turn, stresses the importance of shared cultural knowledge in IC. Xuan is unique as she was the only person who left China long term. The reason for including her in this study is that she has brought further insight into the returnee's re-adaptive experiences from the cultural standpoint since her lack of shared cultural knowledge is more pronounced than other returnees with shorter overseas stays. This could be linked to the current students' cultural shock in the UK. Further details about Xuan's case are elaborated in sections 6.5.2, 7.5.3 and 7.5.4.

Other returnee students who stayed in the UK for study and returned to China soon afterwards reported that they experienced confusion such as 'adapting English grammar to Chinese' or 'mixing Chinese and English in daily expressions' from time to time.

> When I arrived at the airport from the UK, I found that it was very strange that everyone spoke Chinese. You know, it was indeed a bit strange, and I suddenly could understand them, even though they were whispering. And then it took a week or two to get used to it … My girlfriend noticed that I liked to put a suffix at the end of the sentence, such as *what were you doing yesterday*, you know. And she said, 'Why do you speak like that?'
>
> (Hu, male, returnee Master's student)
>
> My boyfriend and I sometimes speak in English because I suddenly can't remember the Chinese or think the English is more accurate. He graduated in Canada, so he can understand the situation.
>
> (Zhe, female, returnee undergraduate student)

Hu and Zhe were both returnee students who have stayed in the UK for one and four years, respectively, and English-speaking habits have impacted their daily speech on returning to China. The grammatical and pragmatical feature of Chinglish[3] reflected their unconscious mixing of two languages to achieve ease and simplicity of expression (Yun and Jia, 2003). Some authors call this 'translanguaging', which incorporates the dynamic nature of language use that indicates the constant change between languages through meaning-making activities (García and Wei, 2014). Moreover, 'translanguaging' goes beyond the internalised system of language competence and transcends material surroundings to emphasise the integrated nature of an individual's linguistic repertoire, semiotics and practical situations, which is more appropriate for the current multilingual world (Rose and Galloway, 2019). Linguistic competence not only refines sensitivity and adaptability in language usage but also cultivates a deeper cultural awareness (Byram, 2012). This enhanced competence allows translanguaging users to benefit from their linguistic repertoire in managing

[3]Chinglish: a combination of Chinese and English, especially a style of English employed by Chinese speakers that includes certain Chinese vocabulary or constructions.

intercultural tensions and achieving a deeper level of cultural immersion (Eren, 2022).

6.5 Language and sense of belonging

6.5.1 Introduction

Language has been found to play an important role in creating a sense of intimacy among co-national group members (Gu, 2011). Language use among international students is more complicated than among domestic students who are studying in their own country, because they are immersed in a multilingual environment. The intimacy Chinese students are building in the UK in relation to local and Chinese communities in the UK is twofold: a sense of belonging to the culture of origin, and connection to the host culture (ibid.). This section discusses Chinese students' language choices in daily encounters and how their language choices link to their sense of belonging to the Chinese or local community.

The everyday priorities of studying and living in the UK incentivise Chinese students' use of English, and it is widely accepted that increasing exposure to L2 correlates positively with the promotion of L2 learning (Derwing and Munro, 2009). However, research has also provided evidence that some students resort to using more L1 in the study abroad context than they anticipated (Badstübner and Ecke, 2009) and that international students' use of L1 or L2 changes over time during their study abroad period, as a consequence of speakers' changing language proficiency, adaptation to the new environment, cultural differences, familiarity and contextual needs, etc. For example, García-Amaya's (2017) study with British Spanish learners demonstrates that learners' use of L2 substantially improved during the first part of their study abroad but diminished during the second, as students tended to increase their L1 use with their fellow nationals and friends in everyday lives. In McManus' (2019) study, British students majoring in French tended to favour using English (L1) within social networks and preferred to use French in work/university-related contexts during their studies. These examples suggest that international students' use of English demonstrates diverse patterns which might link to their language skills and purposes during communication.

6.5.2 Interview language: L1 or L2?

While facing the complexities of intercultural communication with people from different language backgrounds, the analysis of the data from the interviews shows that the connection to their home culture and L1 serves as an emotional link to other Chinese or 'home' students, while using English (L2), firstly, serves academic or professional purposes, and, secondly, suggests the speaker's English proficiency and intercultural competence which, in turn, promotes students' further adaptation and integration into the local community. The data suggests that, rather than sticking to one language in one context, students use translanguaging to expand their linguistic repertoire and for smooth and effective communication. The participants in this research were all bilingual or multilingual young people. They were given discretion to decide which language was used in the interviews. Seven current students and five returnees chose to speak English during the interviews, while the rest chose Mandarin for theirs.

While gathering information on participants' socioeconomic backgrounds was not part of the study, some information emerged during the interviews (albeit not for all participants). This information indicates that the degree level (i.e., undergraduate, Master's degree or PhD) in which the participants were enrolled did not significantly correlate with their language choice for the interview. However, having studied on a language-related programme or other humanity subjects appeared to have ensured a relatively high proficiency in English and familiarity with discussing human-related issues in English, which arguably gave participants more ease and confidence to choose L2 for the interview. In addition, other aspects of language use during the interview, such as confidence in speaking, breadth of topics, reflexivity and richer accounts of personal experience, suggest that those who had experience of living abroad aside from studying (e.g., Fan, Xuan) and those whose family members had experience of living overseas (e.g., Ying and Zhe) saw English as a more 'neutral' communication tool, loosening the links between language and nation.

The following extract exemplifies why some participants chose to do their interviews in English:

Researcher: Which language do you feel comfortable using for the interview?

Guo: English or Mandarin is OK. Which one is more convenient for your research?

Researcher: Both are fine. It's up to you.

Guo: Then maybe English, as you are doing research in English.

(Guo, male, current PhD student, original in English)

As can be seen from the extract, Guo chose English as the more convenient language for me. This was possible because of his confidence in his English proficiency and of his ability to master the language during the interview. As a fourth-year PhD student in Linguistics (Translation) in the UK, Guo was able to express himself freely in English without any obstacles. Moreover, he said 'I don't mind', which, arguably, expressed a neutral attitude towards the use of either English or Mandarin for the interview. His long-term study in English and overseas experience offered him a belonging to intercultural citizenship that enabled him to communicate across languages both practically and consciously. The direct relation between language and nation state allowed these students to see themselves as global citizens who can operate in different languages according to context. Argued by Jackson (2011), intercultural citizenship refers to the admission of the reality of complex and multiple identities in the globalised world, and language education promotes the development of a cosmopolitan worldview by heightening students' linguistic and cultural awareness of their local, state and world communities (ibid.).

In this way, language learners can develop a sense of belonging and identity beyond their own nations, embracing the outside world and developing intercultural citizenship. In addition, Guo's relaxing tone showed that he was pleased with giving others the choice rather than being given it himself. Arguably, this also indicates his pride in being 'a citizen of the world', able to operate in different languages. According to Phillips and Smith (2008), the cosmopolitan outlook is tightly related to higher education and income, which have been projected by

Guo's education background and overseas study experience. Meanwhile, as a researcher who is also flexible in both languages, I appreciated that he considered my needs and this contributed to a pleasant conversation, facilitated by our shared belief in our 'cosmopolitan identity' and the ability to use either language for the task. More findings on participants' cosmopolitan identities are presented in section 7.5.4 in the next chapter.

The extracts above highlight that competent language skills and a cosmopolitan identity trigger students' motivation to speak English in the interviews. The following student (Ying, female, current PhD student) gave a different reason for choosing to do the interview in English.

> Ying: I can speak in English. It's a good practice for my speaking, and I need the skill for my study.
>
> (Original in English)

Durkin (2008) highlights that, since English is the medium of study, for international students speaking English becomes a habit in study/research-related situations, as well as proof of their academic achievement. Ying's comment showed her awareness of practicing English as a necessity for her programme, and she adopted an instrumental approach to the interview, viewing it as a further opportunity to practice her English. This is obviously different from Guo who regarded English as a communicative tool that can be chosen as an alternative to the first language, while Ying was still on the way to developing this skill. A difference in their language awareness and abilities can be noted here to evaluate their ICC levels from the perspective of awareness of skills. Some students chose English, while most participants chose Mandarin as the interview language: for example, Liang (male, current PhD student) in the following extract:

> Researcher: Which language do you feel comfortable in for the interview?
>
> Liang: Mandarin … Uh, English is OK, but Mandarin is easier to express ideas in, and I can talk more.

(Original in Mandarin)

Liang was a PhD student in Engineering and had overseas study experience from a Master's degree. He felt that Mandarin, as his first language allowed him to communicate more fully, which demonstrates that, for some students, even those who have an acceptable level of English proficiency for studying in the UK, still preferred to use their first language to express their thoughts, ideas and emotions. This is supported by a number studies (e.g., Dewaele, 2004; Webb et al., 2012) which highlight how, compared to L1, L2 may result in slower and less intense emotional expressions due to self-perceived language proficiency, which means that speakers' self-identity as an L2 English user increases their cognitive control over emotional regulation, which can cause the consideration of L1 as emotional expressiveness and L2 as emotional distance in terms of expression. There may also be a reason in the fact that Liang is a science major, which does not require a level of English as high as is evident in humanities disciplines. As Peacock and Ho (2003) found when evaluating L2 learning strategies across eight disciplines in a university in Hong Kong, computing students use the fewest strategies, and English students the most. In their study, it has been found that science students, e.g., in computing, engineering and building, were not interested in English and they did not see English as a priority. This reflects the view that students' attitudes towards L2 impacts their proficiency and learning process (ibid.).

Neokleous (2017) notes L1 use can boost speakers' confidence and provide a sense of security. However, scholars have questioned these arguments from the perspective that language preference changes according to the purposes it serves, noting that language proficiency is not the only reason for people's language choices. Kuzmina and Weekes (2017) suggest that people who are proficient in two or more languages will choose languages according to context and purpose, which means that language choice is partially driven by cognitive control. Language input affects output. Moreover, language input in a specific context will lead the speaker to use the same language in their response (Gass and Mackey, 2014). For example, international students use English to talk about academic and course-related issues, but choose their native language for life-related topics (ibid.). This echoes the behaviour of some participants who regarded the interview as a chat with another Chinese person, and, as I started conversation with Mandarin, participants

might have been impacted by the atmosphere I created with the first language and then felt unwilling to change the language, especially if they were weak at English.

Besides the familiarity of their first language, some students showed a clear link between language and their (and my) Chinese identity, for example Ru and Lin:

> Ru: Of course Mandarin. Why do I have to speak English with Chinese people?
>
> (Ru, female, returnee undergraduate student, original in Mandarin):
>
> Lin: I think English is for chatting with foreigners. Chinese (language) should be spoken between Chinese (people).
>
> (Lin, male, current undergraduate student, original in Mandarin)

These responses indicated that both participants felt it was more natural to speak Mandarin with another Mandarin speaker which suggested that these students perceived language closely bound to countries. The idea that a 'certain language links to a particular country' is driven by socio-political awareness and is 'constructed, maintained and regulated' (Otheguy et al., 2015, p.286). This belief does not consider the dynamic and fluid process of language use in the global world nor the meaning-making function of language practice in interaction, but it reflects the language ideology of a country that can be traced in the way bilingual or multilingual speakers behave (Rasman, 2018).

In addition, Lin's comment expanded this idea to all Chinese people, suggesting the need to foreground national Chinese identity in an international context. According to Han (2010), national identity manifests a sense of belonging to the ethnic group, and this arose from the self-reviews and reflective activities (e.g., interview questions) in this study and showed individuals' self-categorisation. Participants who believed that language has a connection to their national identity considered a foreign language as being outside of their group, almost as a 'foreign body', which suggests distance and even resistance. This echoes Maeder-Qian's (2017) study of Chinese students in Germany, which demonstrates that - no matter what their interculturality levels are - most participants foregrounded their Chinese identity

against other intercultural identities. Three reasons contributed to this: (1) students who arrive in a foreign culture later in life can find it more difficult to negotiate new cultural identities than younger ones do; (2) with the increasing impact of China globally, students are more confident in their home culture and strength; and (3) as Chinese students constitute the largest international student group, it is easier for them to socialise with other co-nationals (ibid.). The participants in this study basically meet the above characteristics, so it can be understood that their self-identity is closely connected with their national identity and their first language.

6.5.3 Language encounters on the street

Figure 6-2. Kung Fu lesson ad in Inverness. Image taken by Fan.

Discussing an image he had taken for the research, Fan told me about his excitement to see Chinese characters on a UK street (Figure 6-2) and felt pride in his Chinese culture. He said 'the characters on the ad for *Huang Feihong* [a Chinese martial artist, physician, and folk hero] showed that this person knows China and he must have been to China!' A similar focus on Chinese identity can also be noted in Jin's (female, current undergraduate student) comment when she described her experience with the slogan 'People Make Glasgow[4]' (Figure 6-3):

Figure 6-3. Slogan: People make Glasgow. Image taken by Jin.

[4] 'People make Glasgow' is the official slogan of the Glasgow City Council's tourism promotion campaign. It reflects the Glaswegian character: kindness, confidence and a sense of pride.

> I was impressed by the slogan ‘People make Glasgow’. I think they [people in Glasgow] are very united and enthusiastic, and they are working hard to make Glasgow better. For example, during the epidemic, basically, Scotland was the first to require masks without [Westminster] governmental requirements. It's just that they know that China’s policy works, and they said that they are trying to make the city better, and basically all of them are very nice. Everyone is friendly and they are very enthusiastic to help us [international/Chinese students].
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Jin’s comment suggests that she admired Glasgow residents’ love and passion about the city where they live and that they directly express these feelings of pride. However, the word she used to refer to Glasgow people is ‘they’ rather than ‘we’, which indicated that she had not (yet) considered herself as a part of the city’s residents, although she told me that she loved studying in Glasgow and was reluctant to leave the city as she appreciated the local culture and people. The contradictory feelings faced by international students became more evident when they engaged in intercultural activities, when they showed both appreciation and willingness to approach the receiving culture whilst at the same time experiencing disconnection and estrangement from it owing to a lack of sense of belonging from time to time. According to Navarrete and Jenkins (2011), intercultural experience functions as a socialisation experience for the students since it has the potential to expand their social repertoire of behaviour and to increase their sense of attachment to the host culture. However, when the encounters in the receiving culture differ substantially from those in the home culture, the conflicting framings might cause confusion which may then result in alienation and withdrawal. This was noted in Ni’s (female, current PhD student) extract when she talked about the governmental policy during the pandemic:

> I originally liked the education, environment and atmosphere of freedom in the UK, so after I completed my Master's degree in Sheffield, I worked for a few years and then chose to come back to study for a PhD. However, the UK's epidemic prevention and control policy disappointed me. In comparison with China, the UK did not protect people's lives. I

was staying in a dormitory with no medical services and no supplies. This was much worse than getting treatment in China. They [the UK government] didn't care about their own people, let alone me. I felt deserted. So, at that time I decided that I must return to my home country in the future.

(Original in Mandarin)

The pandemic had direct impacts on some participants whose study period came along during 2020-2021. While the pandemic was a harsh time for international students' cultural adaptation because of the loss of cultural contacts, strained social networks and psychological distress during this special moment can easily trigger homesickness in students (Hua and Gao, 2021). As Byram (2003) notes, the confusions surrounding different cultural norms may occur after the initial phase of 'cultural immersion' when students tend to believe that they will become 'one of them'. They are developing 'proficiency in self-expression and in fulfilling their various social needs in the host culture' (Y.Y.Kim, 2005, p.391) and this can feel exhilarating at first. However, when encountering conflicting values and frames, individuals may experience a sense of boundary and of 'otherness', increasing their need to affirm their belonging to the home culture. The tension between belonging and alienation are affected by students' age, length of stay, personal experiences, etc. (Gu et al., 2010). By shifting between their identities as an insider or outsider, international students are trying to position themselves within the mobile reality of study abroad.

6.5.4 Mediating between cultures

Rather than sticking to their home culture through language practice, some students shifted between languages and cultures based on different contexts, which indicates that they were adapting their subject positions to contextual needs. Moreover, Cortazzi et al. (2011) report that students may draw on the foreign language for some specific vocabulary that has no equivalent in their first language, regardless of how proficient they are. For instance, several students I interviewed mentioned that they mixed languages in their daily speaking. It can be noted in Pang's interview (male, returnee PhD student) that he switched between

Mandarin and English from time to time when talking to me about Westerners' and Chinese people's views on history and politics:

> 我和一个美国人聊天，他就说中国人 [*I talked with an American, and he said Chinese are*] so brainwashed, you are so indoctrinated. 我就把中国在二战和一战中的贡献跟他说 [*I told him about China's contributions to World Wars I & II*]，他非常[he was very] shocked...但是一旦谈到他的国家文化或者制度中的时候 [*But once it came to the culture or system of his country*]，他好像从没想过说有[*He never seemed to have thought of that*] your state-owned media. It's not just China that has monopoly.
>
> (Original in English and Mandarin)

Pang's interview showed his flexibility in switching between English and Mandarin, as English was used for particular expressions that are not common in Mandarin. Moreover, as evaluating politics and making critiques of them are not usually topics Chinese people discuss, and they do not commonly appear in daily conversation, arguably his critical discussion of political topics might have been acquired during his overseas experience, in discussions with people from the West. As English was the language of the input for these topics, the output is in the original language the topics were discussed. Pang's choice of using English to talk about challenging topics chimes with Durkin's (2008) suggestion that choosing one's second language in an interview may help L2 participants express views better in a foreign cultural context, allowing them to be more critical and evaluative, and potentially ensuring greater openness and freedom to talk about sensitive topics that are not appropriate for discussion in one's first language. Moreover, in this extract Pang used Mandarin and English to ensure a smooth flow of communication with me. From a linguistic perspective, it shows his translingual practice, one in which the complexity of communication requires a full use of his linguistic repertoire (Rose et al., 2021).

In addition, as discussed before, each language has different symbolic meanings and can indicate belonging to a particular group. From the sociolinguistic perspective, language, culture and power are intertwined (Hinds et al., 2014).

Byram argues that '[w]hen individuals interact, they bring to the situation their own identities and cultures' (p.39). By choosing a particular language in a particular situation, bilinguals or multilinguals express who they are and where they stand when interacting with their surroundings. Pang used English to convey the speech of Americans criticizing China and, at the same time, he used Mandarin to express his views on China and to defend it from criticism. It can be noted that for bilingual people, translanguaging occurs naturally, and language is chosen consciously or unconsciously according to their speaking habits and particular situations. Pang's translanguaging highlights his communicative repertoire, one that not only includes language but also communicative and social skills in an intercultural interaction.

Pang demonstrated his translanguaging abilities during the interview, while Fan (male, returnee Master's student) talked about his daily life experience of language shifting.

> Fan: I speak Mandarin when I talk to Chinese friends, of course. But when some foreign classmates are around, I will switch to English so that everyone can be involved. I don't want to 'isolate' us [Chinese students].
>
> Researcher: When did you start behaving like this?
>
> Fan: I don't remember. But in the beginning, I spoke Chinese to Chinese people and didn't pay much attention to the foreign friends around me, but then I experienced a bit of embarrassment when others spoke their own language and I couldn't understand them, including when I was traveling abroad, I didn't understand any other language except English, and it made me realise that language has its own password. At the same time, I realised that I need to respect and honour everyone in the conversation, so I changed and used a language that everyone can understand to communicate.
>
> Researcher: Do you feel alright to speak English to Chinese people?
>
> Fan: It depends on the needs. I think in a group with various language backgrounds, there is no need to emphasise the language of one's own

country. If the language ability is available, the main purpose is to communicate with everyone.

(Original in English)

Fan was a Master's student in business, and he had travelled around the world since adolescence with his family. His comment showed that in his language practices, he adopted code-switching to make full use of his linguistic repertoire to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, which is defined as 'alternating use of two or more codes within one conversational episode' (Auer, 2013, p.1). The difference between code-switching and translanguaging is that the former indicates a need and requirement in the conversation to change utterance codes, while the latter is a natural phenomenon and sometimes occurs unconsciously (Galante, 2020). Nevertheless, Fan showed his bilingual competence in a functional practice, and he also used his linguistic abilities to position himself in different contexts. Fan studied and travelled abroad extensively before arriving to the UK, and this would not have happened without his family's support, financially and emotionally. As his parents are doctors (a highly recognised profession in China) with doctoral degrees, Fan belonged to the Chinese middle class, in all likelihood enjoying the different forms of capital this entails. This also means that, having travelled prior to his arrival in the UK, he had more and earlier opportunities to understand the role of language in communication compared to other international students who arrived with fewer experiences of interacting in intercultural contexts. The mixture of cultural identities among international students who are crossing cultural and geographical boundaries has already been explored by researchers. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) argue that the intercultural speaker is a mediator between cultures, able to negotiate in both, developing multiple identities that have the potential to combine different aspects of multiple cultures in everyday practice. This may indicate that interactants' behaviour may not be always compatible and can differ as a result of the dominant cultural identity. Gong et al. (2013) illustrate Mainland Chinese students' identities while studying at the university in Hong Kong by observing their Mandarin and Cantonese linguistic practices. By investigating their translanguaging behaviour, Gong et al. (ibid.) notice that most participants held a mixed Hong Kong and

Mainland identity, although many of them tended to stick to Mainland Chinese cultural and social habits.

6.5.5 Home identity and dialect

In addition to students' national or global identities as expressed through speaking Mandarin or English, this study also noted the home identity of Chinese students was constructed by speaking Chinese dialects in the UK. This home identity reflected a stronger emotional link to a sense of belonging to a specific group within the overall Chinese student group. The following extract from an interview with Shuai (male, current Master's student) makes a useful comparison with the experiences of returnee students who are flexible in their language shifting. Shuai showed me a screenshot of a translation app on his phone to describe his challenges when studying in the UK.

Figure 6-4. A screenshot of a Chinese translation app. Image taken by Shuai.

Due to his low English proficiency, Shuai needed to use a translation app for his study and daily communication. Shuai was the only participant who mentioned using a translation app, and I would argue that his frankness regarding this is a way for him to affirm his identity as a non-native speaker. In addition, Shuai made a telling language shift during the interview. He started with Mandarin but suddenly switched to the Anhui dialect[5] (a variety of Chinese spoken in the Anhui province) when he noticed we come from the same area in China. The dialect conversation

[5] Anhui is an eastern landlocked province of China. The languages spoken within the province include Jianghuai Mandarin and Wu Chinese.

established closeness and a shared identity as real ‘home people’. The extract is shown below.

Shuai: Are you from Anhui [a province in the middle of China]?

Researcher: Yes! How do you know that?

Shuai: I am from there, too! I noticed your accent is quite familiar, so I guessed.

[Conversation in Anhui dialect for icebreaking]

Researcher: [Anhui dialect] OK, let’s start the interview, which language would you like to use? Mandarin or dialect?

Shuai: Well, should I speak Mandarin?

Researcher: It’s up to you. Which makes you feel comfortable?

Shuai: Uhm … let’s go for Mandarin. It’s more formal than dialect.

(Original in Mandarin and Anhui dialect)

In section 6.2.1, concerning regional accents, I noted that Mandarin is promoted by the Chinese government for official use across the nation in contrast to dialects. Shuai decided to use Mandarin for the rest of the interview since, as he said, he believed that it was more appropriate for a formal interview. Moreover, we could observe how Shuai switched between Chinese [national identity] to Anhui resident [home identity]. Several studies focus on Chinese students’ national identity as their ‘home’ identity in contrast to their ‘immigrant’ identity (e.g., Pan et al., 2021; Q. Liu and Turner, 2018) but they ignore that, at the individual level, each Chinese student is likely to have a real home identity within China that is more ‘home’ than being a Chinese person (Diao, 2017). Dialect is seen as salient to speakers’ identity and has important connections to family histories, places of origin and people’s experiences outside of China (Hua and Wei, 2014). Shuai affirmed his home identity by speaking dialect with me. By doing this, he

established commonality and a connection with me through a shared identity. His switch from dialect to Mandarin is driven by the dominant language carrying greater importance in formal matters, but this example indicates that rather than just looking at international students' national identity in the intercultural context, more attention should be given to the (hidden) 'home identity' embedded in students' dialects. It is an important point for inclusion for international higher education as universities in the West treat all Chinese students as one big homogeneous group, while the Chinese student population is quite internally diverse.

In contrast with Shuai, Ming (female, Master's student), who was also a current student, was flexible about shifting her language and accent according to contexts. This flexibility is due to her frequent back-and-forth experience during her study in the UK.

> Ming: I went abroad and returned to China several times, and I feel I am more flexible about using languages. In Scotland I can speak Scottish English, and in England my accent can be closer to the London accent. In Chinese is the same. For example, there is a bubble tea store in front of the university. The owner is from Dalian [north-eastern city in China]. I spoke north-eastern accent with him, and he was happy and gave me a discount. After returning to China, once in the Beijing subway, a woman said that my suitcase stood in the way of others, then I responded in Beijing dialect that I was trying to move it but it was too heavy, and she heard my accent and eased her attitude immediately. Locals also listen to accents then determine their attitude towards you.
>
> Researcher: Do you think you have language talents?
>
> Ming: Oh, yeah, maybe. (smile) I do think accent helps me to be considered part of them [local people] and treat me as an insider not an outsider.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

In her extract, Ming was proud of her ability to pick up accents and apply them flexibly and appropriately to different contexts and situations. By speaking in a local accent, Ming expressed some part of her identity which helped her to fit in and become part of the in-group. This showed the inclusivity and associated intercultural behaviour that are part of Y.Y Kim's (2009) concept of intercultural identity. Through Ming's adeptness at shifting between accents, she showcased her inclusive identity orientation, one which could accommodate various language/dialect practices representing diverse regional cultures (ibid.). Ming's tendency to categorise herself as an in-group member further stressed a constructive intercultural engagement practice that is supported by language proficiency. The accent plays the role of a signalising social identity that can increase her closeness to others. More broadly, this suggests the involvement of social psychological factors in the dynamic interaction between the evolution of culture and linguistics (Holtgraves and Kashima, 2008; Kashima et al., 2014).

6.6 Summary

In this chapter, I illustrated language barriers in Chinese students' intercultural communication in the UK as well as those of returnee students back in China also suffering from language readaptation, that is, shifting from English to Mandarin. The first section argued there are three elements in English - accent, practical use and humour - that hindered students' confidence and courage when interacting with non-Chinese people, which might also lead to some psychological issues that even went beyond the language barrier itself. I then drew on the literature and highlighted the sociolinguistic and social-cultural competence of L2 learners and the need to raise L2 learners' awareness of the diversity in English and World Englishes. The second section describes how Chinese students (returnees) adapted their language to different contexts and for different purposes, and their flexibility in shifting between languages to show localism in daily encounters. The analysis showed that some students, by highlighting Mandarin Chinese use in everyday practice, were strengthening the awareness of their core identity as Chinese, while others, affected by the length of their stay in the UK and their previous experience abroad or as returnees, showed a more flexible identity shift in their social practices, which demonstrated various levels of intercultural integration and attitudes towards cultural and language differences.

The next chapter describes the Chinese students' experiences of intercultural activities and encounters during study abroad and on returning home which show dynamic constructions of their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the receiving and original cultures.

Chapter 7 Chinese Students' Intercultural Experiences and Reflections on Interculturality

7.1 Chapter introduction

Both while studying in the UK and after returning to China, Chinese students have engaged in various intercultural activities. These experiences have consequences for the students' emotions, for their understanding of the multicultural world that is/was a crucial part of their study abroad experience, and for their reflections on their culture of origin. By engaging with the complexity of these encounters in an internationalised space, students' views of the self may be broadened, and they can become more self-aware, more aware of their fellow nationals and of people from other cultural backgrounds. Moreover, they can become more attuned to the myriad ways in which intercultural knowledge and skills are constructed and shaped in relation to others (Holmes, 2014). Deardorff (2008) argues that reflection applied to social interaction underlies intercultural communication. Students interacting with other people in intercultural settings - which include different cultural backgrounds, languages, accents - can learn to observe the world through other people's eyes (Gillespie, 2018). Students can reflect on what they are doing or saying and on the impact this has on others' behaviour and, as a consequence, adapt their communicative behaviour accordingly. As argued by Byram and Golubeva (2020), unless a person adopts a new perspective, their behaviour in intercultural contexts is restricted to a single angle. Interaction with the world is necessary to give a person a different perspective from which they can view their actions. This can help build relations and a supportive environment for all members of society to come together and improve the effectiveness of intercultural interactions (Portalla and Chen, 2010).

The Chinese students in my project are clearly exposed to a multicultural world in which they need to deal with more complex communicative issues than was the case prior to their study abroad experience. The unfamiliar situations they encounter provide students with chances to communicate with people from different cultural and social backgrounds and thus increase opportunities for social role-taking, reflecting on themselves and on specific situations through the perspectives of other people. As Gillespie (2018) argues, reflections on social

interaction are consciously projecting the self into another social role and position, so it is a subjective action that is driven by someone's inner self, that is, a personal choice. Returnee students - who have multicultural experiences that are different from locals who have never been abroad - have experienced going through this shift. The ability to position oneself in an unfamiliar social context, to be mindful of cultural diversity and to navigate new social mores, is essential to achieve successful intercultural communication and so to gain cultural and social capital (Sammut and Gaskell, 2010), although making friends, having fun and feeling relaxed are also important in and of themselves for people's wellbeing. Meanwhile, it is also necessary for returnee students to have the capability to reposition themselves in the 'familiar' social context, one they may assume they are used to and will easily slot back into, but which may come into conflict with their newly gained social norms and behaviour.

Drawing from Holliday's (2016a, 2022) idea of cultural blocks and threads, I organised the contexts and topics of the students' intercultural experience and reflections into four phases that I termed as follows: (i) honeymoon; (ii) academic challenges; (iii) social struggling; and (iv) adjusting. The word 'phase' is a term that is already in the academic conversation, referring to separate periods. As discussed in detail on section 2.1.3, Holliday (2016a) claims that viewing culture differences as blocks indicates an essentialised concept of national cultures as separate, bounded experiences and as the prime units of cultural identity. Viewing culture as threads suggests an attention to current similarities and to past experiences that are shared. Views of culture as 'threads' have the power to cross the borders that 'blocks' create, since they strengthen connections and unite people across national differences. Holliday's theory is applied in this chapter to analyse the four phases that Chinese students undergo in relation to their intercultural attitudes and behaviours. These highlight how participants appear to switch between notions of culture as threads and as blocks during their experience and upon return to China. However, I wish to stress that the four phases listed above can recur cyclically, and that the phases I identified do not constitute a linear process. While some students experienced challenges at first, followed by the warmth and satisfaction of a honeymoon state as they learned to overcome obstacles, others went through the latter two stages simultaneously, battling with discomfort while undergoing the dynamic process of change in their cultural

adaptation, a constant switch between blocks and threads approaches to their ongoing cultural experiences. The data from my study shows a shift in students' views on culture from a focus on national identity and geographical boundaries (blocks) to a focus on culture as a meaning-making process in which commonalities are created (threads) to establish intercultural links with the self and others.

As I discussed earlier, due to the loss of participants in the longitudinal study, the data used in this chapter came from the 18 participants who attended both the first and the second interviews. Thus, I specify whether the extracts I use in this chapter come from the first or second interview, to illustrate the changes that the data shows in the students' cultural understanding over time. The comparison between interviews at different stages highlights students' experiences of loneliness and belonging, and their reflections on cultural diversity, which were particularly evident in the returnee students' narratives. Some participants, moreover, appeared to consider themselves as having developed more sophisticated worldviews, and as having their 'global citizen' identity strengthened. These tend to be, perhaps unsurprisingly, students who are (or were) abroad for longer amounts of time, as undergraduates or doctoral students. Students on shorter study abroad experiences (i.e., Master's degree students) seem not to go through such significant changes in their (inter)cultural understanding, likely as a result of their more limited experiences in the time they were abroad. This suggests that the length of exposure to new cultural experiences is an important factor and that, consequently, activities organised to facilitate intercultural engagement need to be carefully tailored with this in mind.

It is also important to note that students experienced a common switch between the block to the thread view of cultural differences, which is not being threatened by cultural diversity and loss of national identity. Rather, some students developed the skills to integrate their home, local and global cultures to (re)build a sense of self. By experiencing increasing complexity, students can hone their coping strategies to deal with diversified and multifaceted experiences. Through this process, students became more sensitive to the diverse, complex and adaptable aspects of cultural identities during intercultural encounters, as also noted by Guilherme (2002), showcasing an ongoing process of dynamic adjustment.

7.2 Honeymoon

A ‘honeymoon period’ (Lysgaard, 1955) is common in cultural integration for most participants, especially those who did not have much experience of cultural immersion before arriving in the UK. This trend reflects Lysgaard’s (ibid.) acculturation theory, according to which, during the honeymoon period, students are fascinated by the new aspects of life and find locals hospitable and friendly. At the same time, the realisation of similarities between home and the receiving country can make people feel comfortable and relaxed. While the initial excitement about the new environment and new cultural encounters are dominant emotions during the honeymoon period, a degree of uncertainty and anxiety caused by unfamiliarity stills remains, and this contributes to some students’ hesitation to engage with the new (An et al., 2022).

The interviews with recently arrived students show that a few participants kept an open mind so as to explore new cultural elements that interested them. Returnee students who have been away from their homes also demonstrated similar feelings by being excited to see home again and by the changes they encountered on return. The photos taken by participants at the start of their stay in the UK show images of nature, architecture, the classroom, food, street events, etc., which appear to indicate a particular attraction towards new/different cultural elements of their experience during this first phase.

Figure 7-1. Statues with a traffic cone in the park. Photo taken by Yao.

When discussing her images, Yao (female, current undergraduate student) told me that she found this interesting as a sign of a different cultural approach to humour:

> I don't know why a traffic cone is put on the statue's head, but I guess it is Scottish humour?
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the first interview)

Figure 7-2. ‘Feeling new’ - parade in the street. Photo taken by Qing.

Qing (female, current Master’s student) showed this image taken upon her arrival in the UK. She expressed curiosity about the new society by taking pictures of many things not seen before.

> When I saw the parade at that time, I thought it was very interesting since I never saw this in China. When we were in the parade at the time … we really wanted to participate … but had no reason to do that. I mean, I wanted to try how it felt walking in street in that way (smile), but I did not have a position for this.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the first interview)

During the honeymoon period, some students were enthused by the new/different and spent a lot of time exploring. The majority of their encounters were classified as ‘foreign’ and ‘exotic’, and the students made some generalisations (e.g., section

6.2.3 - ‘Scottish humour’) indicating a view of culture as blocks - i.e., as discrete, homogeneous and bounded - that was predominant in their understanding of culture at the start of their stay and therefore guided their practices. The link between culture and nation was thus strengthened, and it continued to inform students, but it also moderately discouraged students from exploring culture in greater depth because the label ‘foreign’ explained all differences. For instance, Qing was thrilled to see the parade on the street because she had never seen one before, while Yao was intrigued by the traffic cone on the statue's head but did not attempt to figure out why it was there. Both had a desire to experience and actively sought out things that were exotic, unusual, different and new, displaying a ‘tourist’ attitude during the start of their study abroad period. This may emphasise a block idea during this phase of culture as something that is ‘out there’ and can be consumed as a spectacle to which one does not take part and the view of culture as equivalent to nation.

Academics have already linked tourism and foreign education, referring to this as ‘educational tourism’ (e.g., Brown, 2009; Pitman et al., 2010), a way for young people to combine education and travel. Pitman et al. (2010) assert that travel is essential for education because it enables students to gain direct experience of a country’s history, art, food and culture. While engaging the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning, students can travel and get to know the local culture (Crouch, 2000). The excerpts from Yao and Qing demonstrate how they too acted like tourists, forging cognitive and emotional ties to the host region by taking in the sights and sounds of the community. International students who are on educational journeys expand their horizons to advance both their studies and personal growth through travel. However, when reality conflicts with their personal beliefs and ideas, students need to take other perspectives into account. They must either accept or make room for new possibilities. As Qing stated, she was interested in joining the procession but had no compelling reasons to do so. Her conflicted feelings about the circumstances (wanting to take part but not knowing how) encapsulated the battle of the foreign sojourners. She therefore chose to stand back and observe the parade from the viewpoint of a traveller.

Certainly, there are various factors contributing to the reluctance to explore cultural moments. Indifference may play a role, particularly among students

primarily motivated by qualifications or with limited time abroad focused solely on academic studies. However, it is important to acknowledge that some other students view these cultural experiences as opportunities for personal growth and discovery. As highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6, discussions on food and language engagement identified how certain students actively embraced these cultural moments, using them as opportunities for reflection and exploration. Considering this aspect reminds us that the adaptation process is not neat and the initial 'honeymoon' phase may lead to diverse outcomes based on individual differences.

International students benefit when tourism is integrated into education, and Asgari and Borzooei (2013), for example, advocate for a model that can assess what international students achieve as educational tourists and support the idea of viewing international sojourners as tourists. The authors also consider combining the tourist and educational sectors to meet the diverse needs of international students, including incorporating global perspectives, identity and recognition. International education is referred to by Brown (2009) as 'long-stay tourism', and he calls for greater research into how long-stay tourism affects travellers' self-concept and intercultural understanding. As argued by Mezirow's (1991) transformation learning theory - which looks at adults' constructive learning through life experience and reflection - those who have had significant life changes may encounter a 'disorienting dilemma', in which case they must engage in critical evaluation and revise their ideas from the perspective of new knowledge. Transformative theory can also explain the switch from a view of cultures as blocks to a view as culture as threads, which involves the adjustment of thinking based on new information. To use transformative theory to guide my project, I investigated whether students were evaluating their past ideas and understanding and shifting their cultural view through critical reflection in the light of new information. The initial honeymoon phase of students' cultural immersion can allow a tourist approach, one that is less constrictive and more fun, since the pressure of attaining a qualification has not yet kicked in. This is the phase in which students acquire new knowledge and make room for new insights.

Similarly, some of the students who had returned home seemed to experience a similar sense of novelty. Returnee students reported feeling more the changes that had occurred in the past, while they were away, as opposed to current students

who perceive novelty as entirely grounded in the ‘now’. Returnee students also indicated that they were considered strange by locals when they expressed surprise at something that others considered to be ‘normal’. By way of example, the images below were taken by Chang, a returnee student who studied in the UK for five years to earn a PhD and then returned to China to work. The images depict street views with some cartoon statues, which Chang had not come across while abroad.

Figure 7-3. Cartoon sculptures on the street in a city in China. Image taken by Chang.

Figure 7-4. Sun Wukong, the tourism ambassador for the city of Wuzhishan, China. This is a character in the Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, a monkey trapped under Wuzhishan Mountain, which bears the same name as the city. Image taken by Chang.

> I was excited to see many cartoon sculptures on the street. It is like a decoration of the city. Very cute, and I didn't see these abroad. I was wondering if there were any children's celebrations, but people said 'No, they [the cartoon sculptures] were here for a long time, nothing special, just cute.' And they [people] asked me, 'Don't you think it's cute?' I said yes, but I don't understand why people pursue cuteness when decorating

a city. I guess this may be related to the child-oriented popular aesthetic in China.

(Original in Mandarin, extract from the first interview)

Returnee students seemed to experience a honeymoon period upon their return. Long-term separation from one's home environment and exposure to new cultural relationships and social behaviours can alter one's perspective on life, which has effects on both the individual and the community in which they were raised (Brown, 2009). Chang was excited about newly decorated sculptures in her home country that arrived during their absence, but this 'excitement' might not have been shared by the locals; therefore, she was questioned about the recognition of the default aesthetic pursuit of cuteness within China. Brown (ibid.) also notices that the 'tourist' trip for international students and extended 'tourist' trip for returnees can have an impact on people's self-concept and intercultural awareness. This alteration might conflict with the home culture, and he argues that, if the home society does not tolerate these changes, it can cause frustration for returnees.

Many reasons contribute to the tourist mode that current international students adopt, including maximising the outcome from financial, emotional and time investments, as this comment by Yung (male, returnee Master's student) suggests:

Yung: I spent a lot coming to this country, the tuition is expensive, and I took many tests … so I want to look around to make it worthwhile. After all, it's a foreign country, and I wanted to see how it's different from our country.

Researcher: What did you do then?

Yung: I joined the Chinese Students' Association and they have branches in other cities and universities in the UK. So, I visited many cities and universities while attending the university events organised by the Association.

(Original in Mandarin)

Yung observed that studying abroad is not an easy choice for many, due to the high expenditure and long time away from home that it entails. Having invested so much money and effort, some students, like Yung, felt that they needed to get as much as possible out of the experience. In addition to obtaining a degree, observing the society, culture and local people are also important aspects of Yung's belief that his tuition fees should be rewarded. Students tended to deal with cultural diversity more positively at this stage, also joining events such as their university's Welcome Week, social events and recreational activities to enhance their quality of life in the UK. Social networks enable students to develop significant interactions with their peers; however, some international students in the UK suffered from homesickness on their first arrival, as this might have been the first time they had left their family and familiar people and places. Thus, even though they showed excitement towards the new environment, they wanted to explore the new from a safe place, and that was from the safety of a group of people who were in a similar situation - i.e., other international students. The 'honeymoon' was a common initial phase of cultural integration which started with curiosity and willingness to obtain new information and understanding but still posed challenges to some students, in particular once the appeal of the new had faded.

7.3 Academic challenges

The challenge phase is marked by uncertainties and a feeling of unease because students typically feel conflicted between integrating into their new situation and their original understanding. Findings suggest that the main challenges emerging after the 'honeymoon' phase stemmed from students' academic tasks. An et al. (2022) claim that, after a honeymoon period in which integration is the goal, marginalisation and separation can become overwhelming, as students engage further in intercultural interactions. The feeling of being challenged can be strengthened by 'cultural shock', which is the state of discomfort that may be experienced by intercultural travellers in an unfamiliar environment (Flanja, 2009). Cultural shock can also stem from the block view of culture, since this perception of cultural boundaries as 'uncrossable' can increase feelings of disorientation and discomfort during the adaptation process (Amadasi and Holliday, 2017). Whether caused by uneasy feelings or anxiety, in this study cultural shock refers to

emotional disorientation in a new setting, whereby students need to make up for this by learning and adapting to others' behavioural rules to achieve effective communication. The demands of studying are perhaps the first challenge linked to cultural shock during students' stay in the UK, as they might not share the same sets of rules and values as the receiving educational culture and may struggle to find connections between this and their domestic educational experience.

Based on my findings, Master's degree students, when compared with undergraduates and doctoral students, disclosed experiencing less positive feelings towards their studies, as indicated in their reactions to two interview questions: 'What do you do to adapt to your life here?' and 'What challenges have you experienced in your cultural adaptation?' In answer to the first question, Master's degree students showed more willingness to talk about some social events and places they went to, such as clubs and churches and travelling experiences that they found highly interesting. However, few students mentioned study in answer to this question. For students in longer term programmes (e.g., undergraduate or doctoral) this distinction between social life and study is not as apparent, and I found this difference quite telling. Given that the majority of participants studying towards a Masters' degree did not discuss their study experiences until I brought up the subject in the second interview, it can be argued that academic adaptation is not equated with cultural immersion or adaptation to life in the UK, showing a potential decoupling of 'study' from 'life' or 'culture'. Students' images contributed to this finding, since pictures represent moments or places that students are happy to share, but it is hard to find anything related to their academic lives (see Figure 7-5). It could be reasonable that students did not have any because they might be shy about taking pictures of themselves in class, or they did not want to share these images with others. If the former reason holds true, it could be argued that academic life was not raised by participants during the interviews either until I brought it up. If it is the latter, students' reluctance to share study-related images may indicate a perceived separation between their academic and social lives in terms of cultural immersion.

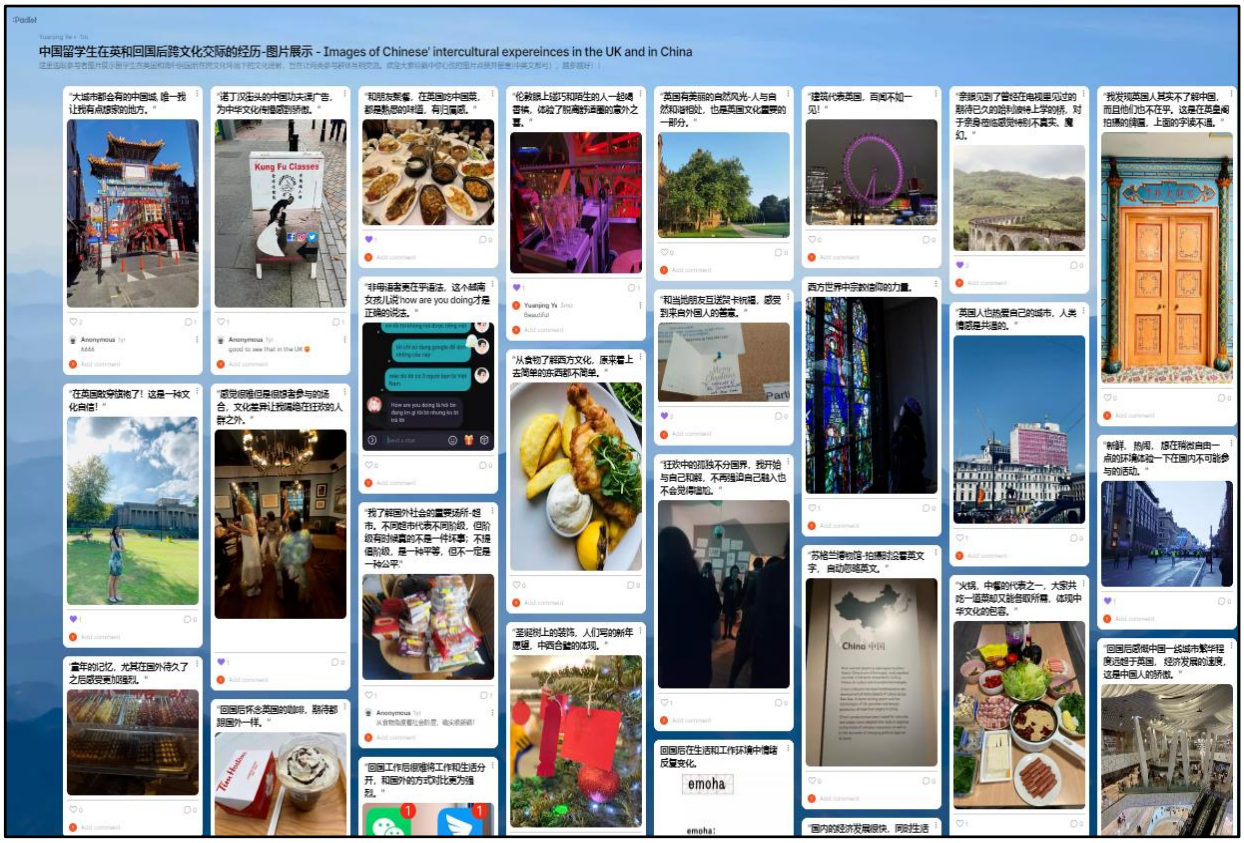

Figure 7-5. Screenshot of online photo exhibition. Images mostly portrayed students' social lives rather than academic study.

However, to illustrate cultural adaptation, one Master's student (Jin, female, Master's current student) did offer a picture of her graduation ceremony, which suggests that the degree ceremony brought happiness and a sense of achievement. In her picture (Figure 7-6), she was keen to link this to the Harry Potter book series, inserting herself into a popular fantasy view of higher education. This also highlights a common phenomenon of the block view of culture, where individuals might easily connect culture with external materials, such as global media, resulting in a superficial understanding.

Figure 7-6. British-style graduation photo, taken by Jin.

> Here's a photo of my graduation, modelled after Harry Potter. Still very happy, finally successfully graduated.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview. The participant agreed for me to use this image without blurring her features).

I need to acknowledge that, by asking participants whether they had experienced any 'challenges' I am likely to have directed students' responses towards difficult memories rather than towards 'cultural adaptation' as a neutral concept. However, the findings still echo empirical studies on the context of international students'

intercultural adaptation while studying abroad. For example, Zhou and Todman (2009) argue that, compared to cross-cultural travellers, most of the significant challenges for international students stem from their unfamiliar academic environment. Heng (2018) notes that Chinese students in US higher education have encountered unfamiliar pedagogy, such as learning to think like Westerners and understanding new classroom expectations. Students in Heng's (ibid.) study were not accustomed to the professor's expectations that they participate in class discussions, and they had not been exposed to open-ended teaching strategies such as 'there are no right or wrong answers' or 'students must direct their own learning'. Similarly, H.P. Wu et al. (2015) note that international students in higher education experienced social isolation, and frequently missed speaking opportunities in class because they believed interrupting professors' lectures was impolite. As a result, they waited for permission to speak and lost the chances of expressing their ideas. Likewise, most students in my project experienced challenges in their studies because of the differences between assessment and scoring systems in the UK and China, and this became the first cultural shock for most students in their educational journey. This was not as obvious in the honeymoon period, since students had not had a chance to be exposed to academic tasks, but as this challenge arose when teaching was underway, some students reported mental and physical discomfort which led to frustration and lack of confidence. For example, Qi (returnee Master's student) said she was frustrated with the number of long essays as assignments:

> I studied City Design for my undergraduate degree in China and never wrote an English assignment. But here I have long essays with 2000-4000 words for each of my courses now. And it was really intense, so I had a crazy 'deadline' week. Now I understand why the due date is called a 'dead line'. My first assignment got lower than 60. I was desperate, but then they [classmates] told me it is not a failing score here and never to pursue a 90 plus … But still, I am struggling to achieve a higher score.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the first interview)

In this case, the challenges were caused by the different educational expectations, and students had to demonstrate their learning through linguistic skills they did not feel they mastered. Different academic expectations mean that students can come to see academic requirements as unsurmountable barriers rather than develop coping strategies to 'travel' through different educational settings and deal with cultural conflicts and life changes. Unless they actively strive to acquire new coping skills and develop the ability to weave cultural 'threads' that can help them survive and thrive, a negative loop can be set in motion into which students feel trapped.

In my findings, several participants' emotional dynamics were showing shifts at this point, indicating that their attitudes and feelings toward the new context can alter from a desire to engage and curiosity to confusion and hesitancy as a result of academic demands they feel unequipped to meet. For example, some students mentioned academic writing and independent learning as challenges, something new with which they are unfamiliar, as the following extracts exemplify:

> Independent learning and academic literacy skills are very challenging for me, um, like writing, referencing and speed reading, because I am not familiar with these contexts and have not been trained in English, so it caused anxiety in the beginning.
>
> (Qing, female, Master's current student, original in English)
>
> The challenge is the different teaching and learning styles. In China it is test-oriented, so students have to remember what is taught, but here students have options to choose and learn independently. It is difficult for me as I have not been taught like that.
>
> (Huang, female, Master's current student, original in Mandarin)

These extracts show that these challenges in academic study bothered students, and most mentioned these as a big issue at the early immersion stage. As Heng (2018) discusses, international Chinese students can struggle with communication skills related to classroom discussion, argumentative writing and critical thinking. Other authors argue that Western learning styles conflict with the Confucian

heritage educational culture, which can result in students showing reluctance to speak up, reliance on memorisation, lack of criticality and respect of teachers' authority (Durkin, 2011; Y. Turner, 2013). However, Tan (2015) critiques the view of Confucian philosophy as encouraging rote learning (memorisation but lack of understanding); instead, the author shows how *Si*, a Confucian form of learning, encourages critical reflection even though it is based on memorisation. He argues that *Si* enables students to take ownership of their own leaning and that it encourages deep understanding, logical thinking and knowledge application ability. This can be seen as a thread that intersects educational cultures across geographical boundaries between China and the UK.

However, these commonalities are overlooked by many Chinese students in favour of an essentialised notion of culture, which sees Confucian and British education as two irreconcilable blocks and is of limited help to assist them studying abroad and in their cultural adaptation. This dynamic can also be explained through Bourdieu's (1979) concept of symbolic violence, which puts international students in an inferior position in the Western-dominant cultural environment, creating an unbalanced power relation in international educational contexts. Moreover, as argued by Marginson (2012), international students inhabit a 'limbo', which means that they can attend university feeling 'uncertain, vulnerable and de-powered' (p.498). Because of their 'non-citizen outsider' status and the rising marketisation of higher education, which supports the recruitment of international students but may decrease considerations of diversity, the barriers to cultural integration are reinforced.

On a one-year Masters programme, both Qing and Huang had a much shorter time in the UK than undergraduates and doctoral students enjoyed, having to meet the demands of several assignments in essay format, which required the writing of thousands of words; something they said was beyond their capacities. As the assessment systems are different in the UK and in China, students can be disappointed by the low scores they receive for their assignments, and, for some, this can result in abandoning the pursue of broader goals - e.g., developing global views, intercultural tastes, language abilities - to focus only on the pursuit of the degree:

> I thought I was studying hard, but the first time I got a score of 57 or so, which is a failure in China. I have never got such a low score in my life. Afterwards, I spent every day studying in the library and looking for help from classmates. But I never reached 70. Then I realised I can't expect a high score but a pass grade.
>
> (Yang, male, Master returnee student, original in Mandarin)

Yang graduated from a '*Double First Class*' university[6] in China, suggesting his aptitude for and success in the Chinese educational system. Yet, because of the low grades he received at his UK HE institution, his expectations were dropped to 'a pass grade', which, arguably, may have affected his identity as a high achieving student. As highlighted by Zhou and Todman (2009), experiencing fewer academic challenges or achieving academic success can significantly enhance students' satisfaction with their overall social life and intercultural integration. Conversely, encountering more academic difficulties might negatively impact students' self-esteem and ultimately restrict their motivation to actively cultivate intercultural competencies. Yang's extract reflects that he might be compelled to give up his hope to achieve a higher score, and his tone of disappointment when discussing his academic performance may also hint at a loss of interest in exploration, opting instead to focus on meeting qualification requirements, which had been his initial goal of studying abroad.

To summarise, many Master's students reported feeling less satisfied with their time spent studying in the UK because of the tough nature of their academic adaptation. Qing's excerpt, in which she described how she was first drawn to the exotic atmosphere upon her arrival but felt challenged when it came to studying, can be used to illustrate how students' emotions and attitudes move from 'honeymoon' to 'challenges' during the intercultural practices. I could tell from her emotional shifts during our conversations that she was glad to talk about her 'travel' experience but found it challenging to learn and felt helpless when trying to complete her studies. Although she claimed that this difficulty subsided subsequently with the learning support from the university, it was still something

[6] The *'Double First Class'* universities are elite academic institutions that admit students through an extremely competitive process, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination ('Gaokao').

she perceived as something separate from her social life. The second stage in a student's process of cultural adaptation is the challenge phase, a time when the honeymoon phase starts to fade and difficulties become more prominent. The struggle stage, which can make students more uncomfortable as their multicultural journey deepens, is illustrated in the following section.

7.4 Social struggling

Socialisation is the second area in which participants appear to have experienced cultural shock. This is arguably even more impactful than the shock experienced in their study lives because while students' academic skills might improve with thorough, frequent academic practice in class and assignments, social skills are less structured and predictable. As noted earlier, Flanja (2009) argues that cultural shock is the state of discomfort in an unfamiliar environment, and further notes that it is caused by contact-induced stress, including peoples' ability to face intercultural communicative challenges. The skills needed for socialisation are more diverse than those required by academic tasks and include not only language and communicative skills but also becoming part of a 'discourse community', which is shaped by the possible meanings constructed by individuals within a symbolic system (Kramsch, 2011). As argued by Gullekson and Vancouver (2010), socialising largely depends on subjective feelings rather than objective rules since this can be driven by personal motivation. In this section, I will draw on photos participants have taken at parties - as parties were the main opportunity for socialisation they talked about - to illustrate and discuss the ongoing emotional changes as the students adapted to different ways of being with others.

Parties are often organised by HEIs to give international students opportunities to meet and get to know peers in similar situations, and photos from these events were provided by several participants as a response to the photo brief 'a situation where you find hard to fit in'. As one of the intercultural activities Chinese students encountered on the UK campus, these parties were mentioned by several participants as situations in which they had noticed cultural differences and where they had struggled to fit in. The following picture was provided by a current student, Yuli, who highlighted a strong contrast between himself and others at the party.

Figure 7-7. Feeling isolated in a party. Photo taken by Yuli.

Describing the picture above (Figure 7-7), Yuli (male, current student) pointed out that people at the party were excited and danced, while he was sitting aside alone and observing them. In the following extract Yuli told me how he felt at the party and why he felt this way.

> Yuli: I haven't attended any parties with my classmates. This time I went with my (Chinese) girlfriend to join her friends after their art exhibition. At the party people danced and drank. I felt that it was difficult to integrate into the music. First of all, I am not familiar with the music they are very familiar with, which is mostly Indian or

European. I didn't listen to many pop songs here before I came to the UK, so I don't know most of them. And when they sang and danced, I felt as if I don't know anything. Then I chatted at the party and I couldn't keep up with my language when talking about some deep issues. and it was hard to catch up.

Researcher: Why do you think it happened, besides the language issues?

Yuli: First, I think Chinese people are shy. At parties Chinese people don't dance, only foreigners [non-Chinese]. In China people can meet for dinner or sing with *KTV*[7] but hardly move or dance in public. Chinese people pay more attention to not being frivolous in public. I admired those people who can relax but Chinese people always have a higher limit anyway, so they will not let themselves be lower than the line.

Researcher: Did you want to join them?

Yuli: I really wanted to participate. It was embarrassing. But I feel that the gap is still quite big, and it needs some adaptation and some more opportunities to sing like this.

(Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

First, Yuli noticed different approaches to socialising and said he could not fit into the situation. He pointed out that the lack of common tastes/knowledge in music and cultural norms contributed to his inability to join the conversation and be part of the occasion, and that his lack of English skills made him feel he could not talk about deeper issues, such as social or political topics. Similar issues were mentioned by several participants, further highlighting the role that language and cultural background play in intercultural communication, as discussed in Chapter 6. Secondly, Yuli's comment shows a difference in partying practices and expectations

[7] *KTV* is an Asian term for karaoke, which is a form of interactive musical entertainment in China.

between the ones he is used to and those of other partygoers (e.g., loud music), and this difference in socialising practices contributed to his discomfort in the social event. However, some scholars have argued that physical activities, including dancing, can improve international students' intercultural integration (e.g., Fadillaha and Jandevib, 2021; Lee, 2020). Mediated by music and the cheerful atmosphere, physical movement in response to music can reduce people's focus on differences and therefore their embarrassment.

However, Yuli's experience contrasts with this and shows that social events involving dance may not be seen as appropriate ways to mix with others. Instead, this might create a situation that strengthens students' feelings of isolation due to different cultural practices and expectations of what counts as appropriate behaviour. His sense of isolation appeared to stem from a perception of cultural practices as fixed and homogeneous, according to a block view of culture. He regarded the party as a foreign social event which had no connections to his 'Chinese' experience of socialising, and thus assumed that this was not a place for him as a Chinese person. In China there are many partygoers, but perhaps this was not his personal experience. No culture survives in isolation, as Ingrid Piller (2017) points out, and people come in a variety of cultural mixtures, each combination slightly different from the others. Holliday (2021) uses the term 'small culture' to refer to the cohesive behaviour within social groupings and 'big culture' to indicate national culture. Holliday (ibid.) argues that 'small culture' can help individuals see more clearly the coordinated behaviour within social groupings than 'big culture' does. Students like Yuli, who explained contingent and subjective differences as broad cultural differences between nations and countries, may be creating the cultural boundaries they are experiencing. This is a significant issue that needs to be addressed in order to help students develop an appropriate cultural knowledge understanding. Further recommendations for the organisation of intercultural events on campus and curriculum design that take this on board will be presented in the concluding chapter.

Jing (female, current PhD student) shared what appears to amount to cultural shock when discussing the experience of sharing a mixed gender room in a youth hostel while travelling, which prevented her from socialising

in that environment. She called it an ‘adventure’, but her words made it clear that she felt very uncomfortable and also unsafe.

> I booked a hostel when I travelled to London. After I went there, I found out that I booked a mixed-gender room by accident. I stayed for two nights. I didn’t join any socialising activities. I came back late and left early in the morning, so as not to stay in that room. The environment was very strange since men and women were living in one huge room, and I was travelling alone at the time, so I was very scared. I can’t imagine booking a mixed-gender room in a hostel in China.
>
> (Original in Mandarin)

Jing’s extract demonstrates that cultural differences in relation to what is acceptable in a hospitality context prevented her from engaging in intercultural communication. She expected that the hostel in London would follow the same social rules as in China, where dorms are always separated by gender and had not checked to see what the sleeping arrangements were. Finding herself in mixed-gender accommodation caused quite a shock because it was completely unexpected. Xia (2009) asserts that unpredictable and uncontrollable circumstances are more likely to lead to tension, which can have a significant impact on the psychological health of intercultural travellers. Travellers might not know how to respond in an unpredictable scenario, which may cause an intense emotion that can lead to the rejection of the whole situation and, in some cases, to avoidance or silence as a self-protection tactic. Jing's refusal to communicate in that setting demonstrated both her apprehension about her surroundings and her wish to defend herself.

This section presented students’ struggles in cultural differences in the UK. Cultural shock in related to socialising and gender have brought Yuli and Jing discomfort and distress in an unfamiliar environment. The next section will illustrate students’ reflections on different cultural encounters and how these have impacted their attitudes and understanding about their original culture.

7.5 Adjusting

The phase in which the Chinese students started considering what they had encountered and began redefining their identities in intercultural situations is described in this study as adjusting. The students' adjustments occurred after some reflections on themselves and their positions within the multicultural surroundings. Deardorff (2006) notes that reflection is vital for the development of an individual's intercultural competence. Through effective reflection, students' attitudes, personal opinions, personalities, and their relations to others can be explored. Reflection might trigger 'critical cultural awareness' *(savoir s'engager* – knowing how to engage), which includes a critique of our own culture and community as well as that of others (Byram, 1997). It should be noted that this was a recurring thread throughout the data, regardless of which phase of the intercultural journey abroad it referred to or whether former international students were now back in China. During our interviews, several students looked back on their experiences and at how they had found coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges and struggles in their lives. Adjusting is a reflective process that is typically sparked by interactions and emotional shifts, showing how students' cognitive abilities have grown through intercultural experiences.

In contrast to the challenge and struggle phases, the adjusting phase features more narratives that refer to culture as threads, as students look for connections between their original culture and the new one, after realising that, while there are cultural differences, there are also similarities. It should be emphasised that the view of culture as threads that is apparent in the adjusting phase is different from the view of culture as threads that I discussed as part of the honeymoon period (see section 7.2), when students were not yet confronted by as many cultural differences and when differences still had the attraction of the 'exotic'. The expansion of the thread view during the reflection phase is fostered by the increased critical awareness cultivated through intercultural experiences. Students' intercultural experiences enable them to critically evaluate cultural elements and enrich their understanding of their own original culture, thereby realising the commonalities shared among various cultures in a deeper way. This reflects the evolution of students' ICC, which transcends cultural boundaries rooted in essentialist perspectives.

My findings indicate that adjusting may also occur during other phases of Chinese students' intercultural journeys and also once they have returned, indicating a continuous, spontaneous transition of cultural understanding between views of cultures as blocks and threads (Holliday, 2016a). It is observed in Holliday (ibid.) that the block view draws on essentialist cultural discourses, while the thread mode is associated with critical cosmopolitan discourse, which some students appear to be developing during the reflection phase. However, Holliday (2016a) also notes that the cultural block view is commonly employed by many individuals when discussing culture, and thus even students who are aware of similarities may constantly weave in and out of block and thread narratives of culture.

From interviews, it is interesting to note that almost half of the students stopped pushing themselves to integrate into the new culture and let life continue by focusing primarily on study and travelling; the other half, however, realised it was time to make changes and to step out of their comfort zones. In the latter group, a few students developed capacities to merge new and traditional cultural practices, in the process finding new understandings of their culture of origin. I have therefore articulated this section on reflection according to each of these strategies, which are discussed separately below. However, no matter which approach to reflection the students took, challenges always existed. These reflected a balanced coexistence of aggression and compromise: a dynamic movement constantly switching from one to another and repeatedly alternating between success and failure (An et al., 2022).

7.5.1 Finding community in the UK

Findings show that some students looked for opportunities beyond campus to expand their interaction with the host community, such as going to pubs, cafes or churches. Some participants pointed out how they were excited about these places at the beginning of their immersion experiences:

> I like to go to pubs with friends on weekends. The locals like to go, and I think in pubs I can see the British way of socialising and life after getting off work … I do not dare to go alone; I go with friends. They have been to the pub before.

(Qi, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

I was introduced to the church by a friend. In fact, I didn't understand the preaching at first, but the atmosphere was very good and many local elderly people were very friendly. I often communicated with them. I went there for a while and understood that those values such as 'sharing, giving, forgiving' were very important in our society, and I also realised that this is not only in the religion but also needs to be valued in our normal society. Since I had these in my mind, I don't think it is necessary to visit church for 'knowing'. And also I was not a Christian, so I didn't have the motivation to keep going.

(Yang, male, current Master's student, original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

Participants were interested in pubs and churches because they are cultural landmarks in the UK that are mentioned in Chinese English language textbooks. Pubs were seen as 'exotic' as pubs in China are not places where 'respectable' people go. Churches, on the other hand, were seen as interesting as the majority of participants in my project did not hold religious beliefs, apart from one student who was a practising Catholic and so attended church on a regular basis. The students' attitudes towards pubs and churches as sites of cultural practices are an indication of their curiosity as a motivation to visit these places as exotic and different. This kind of motivation was not long-lasting, and they eventually ended up quitting after a few visits. Out of the seven students who expressed interest in going to pubs and churches in the first interview, five reported during the second interview, eight months later, that they seldom went anymore. This could be observed from the online photo exhibition as two comments were made on one image taken in the church, indicating a loss of interest in visiting them as the time went by (Figure 7-8).

Figure 7-8. Screenshot of online photo exhibition - [Title] The power of religious belief in the western world. [Translated] comments: 1) I love the painting on the window. Is this a story from the Bible? 2) I have been too and didn't understand what they were saying. Maybe preaching? I didn't go anymore. 3) Religion is very powerful in the Western world, but I am not religious and my friends are not interested, so I don't go often.

The comments made by students under the images of the church window in the online exhibition are in line with Yang's (male, current Master's student) comments during our interview:

> After visiting the church several times, I got to know what people do there, such as listening to a sermon, singing songs, reading Bibles, meeting friends, etc. Then I lost interest in going there every weekend. I think maybe there is no religious belief to support me.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

According to Yang's remark and his decline in interest in these places, their 'exoticism' was only fleeting, and he ultimately made the decision to give up. What is crucial in this transition is the presence of cultural threads - commonalities or shared meanings between the original and receiving cultures - that can facilitate ongoing exploration (Holliday, 2016b), and Yang's chosen thread for interconnecting cultures is 'religious belief'. While this demonstrates his acknowledgment of his non-religious stance and the differences in religious practices across cultures, his understanding of religion remained superficial, limited to mere observations of religious rituals, and this superficial understanding might not be sufficient to stimulate a deeper level of cultural exploration and self-reflection. Yang's comments show how he adopted an educational tourist approach to his experience in the UK at the start of the study abroad period. However, he later came to reflect on this through less 'exoticising' lenses and to see churchgoing simply as a practice of faith that he did not share rather than a quaint example of difference. However, while he may not have enjoyed church, arguably, Yang and other students like him could benefit from other, long-term opportunities to develop their ICC, such as knowledge, skills and critical thinking. This may be facilitated by extending the programme duration, offering more opportunities for establishing connections with both individuals and the local community (Fu, 2015).

Only two students continued going to church. One was a practising Catholic, so wherever she was, this was part of her practice; another was Ru (female, current undergraduate student) who went to church with her elderly landlord and for whom churchgoing was a way to connect with a person she saw as a grandfather figure.

> My landlord, I call him Grandpa, is very kind. He sponsored many international students studying in the UK. I live in his house without

> paying rent. I went to church with him every weekend, and I also met his friends, and they were all very kind to me. Sometimes I didn't understand the content of the preaching; my landlord explained it to me patiently, and I often participated in the charity fundraising activities held by the church. If it weren't for Grandpa, I probably wouldn't be so interested in church activities.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

Ru's extract reflects norms of reciprocity that would appear to be examples of Putnam's (1993) theory of bonding and bridging social capital (see section 2.2.5). Putnam contends that social networks produce value that benefits people through reciprocity, trust, information and collaboration, and these rely on bridging and bonding forms of social capital. The bridging social capital Ru developed helped her foster inter-group reciprocity, which encourages connections between various people and increases mutual support in community. Compared to other students, however, Ru was unique. Her 'landlord grandpa', a man who gave her a lot of care while she was living in the UK, was the one who introduced her to church culture. Because of her trust in and respect for the landlord, as well as gratitude for being cared for, Ru visited church regularly. I once went to church with Ru, who attentively listened to the sermon, took notes, and kindly introduced me to her British friends. She seemed to genuinely care about being friends with members of the church and to be part of the community, unlike Qi and Yang, who only briefly made connections to this aspect of local culture but did not delve any deeper into it.

Junliang (male, current Master's student) was another student who built close connections with the local community. However, unlike Ru, who was motivated by her landlord from the social perspective, Junliang's cultural links with the local community was motivated by the programme he studied in, which involved a number of hours of internship as part of the graduation criteria. He said this part was the most meaningful task he accomplished as part of his study and that this helped him improve his understanding of British culture and general intercultural knowledge.

Junliang: I am in an MEd [Master's in Education] programme, focusing on education and psychology. This programme involves an internship of 480 hours throughout the year. Students can choose to work in a consulting centre or a nursing home, all different places, and we need to have regular meetings with our supervisors to report what we have done. Although it is not paid … I don't mind because the experience is more valuable. By chatting with local people, I improved my English, knew the way they think, local culture, etc. This is the most meaningful part in my study abroad. The MSc does not require an internship; they take a class and go, they [students in MSc] learned less than us [MEd students].

Researcher: What makes a difference between these two programmes?

Junliang: One is more academic, one is more practical. The latter has higher requirements. Most of my classmates in MEd have either a Bachelor's degree in English-speaking countries or work experience, while more MSc students are Chinese domestic undergraduate students without any work experience.

Researcher: Why did you choose an MEd rather than an MSc?

Junliang: I got my Bachelor's in Singapore and I knew what class teaching was like and it was not that interesting. You just spoke Mandarin with Chinese students, and there was not much English skill improvement. So, when doing a Master's, I chose the MEd due to the internship so that I could be 'forced' to communicate with locals.

(Original in Mandarin)

The programme Junliang took therefore includes work experience with social groups, while other programmes are more based on classroom teaching. As Junliang said, students were 'forced' to leave the classroom and apply 'knowledge' to solve social practical issues. This compulsory approach of pushing students to learn from the local community and the real world enabled them to acquire first-hand social knowledge and to get a taste of cultural diversity. International internships, according to van Wijk et al. (2008), involve understanding global culture, which is

characterised by a continuous flow of ideas and knowledge mediated through individuals. This can compensate for the drawbacks of university education, which is hampered by numerous programmatic demands and inadequate resources for engagement in life outside academia. This echoes Junliang's reflections about the more homogeneous learning environment in Singapore, which he thought had no significant value for his development of intercultural linguistic competence. This suggests that internships can be used as an effective mechanism to support intercultural learning, as they can boost students' educational opportunities, and regular exposure to cultural diversity, promoting the growth of fundamental ICC qualities like empathy, openness and flexibility (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).

In Junliang's case, however, his prior international experience in Singapore may have enhanced his social and cultural competence, allowing him to recognise the significance of cultural immersion when studying overseas. By selecting a suitable plan with the specific aim of enhancing cultural engagement, he made the most of his study experience in the UK and demonstrated the important influence of students' prior knowledge and experiences on their approach to intercultural engagement. This finding stands in stark contrast to participants who, when faced with hardship and stress, found it impossible to adapt to the new cultural environment and instead became considerably more patriotic and 'home-group' oriented, similarly to what was observed by Jackson (2008), who - similarly to my research - looked at Hong Kong students' development of intercultural sensitivity during a study abroad programme. The author discovered that some students in the programme even demonstrated defensive or denial tendencies, suggesting a belief in the superiority of their own culture over others. Junliang's experience illustrates that individuals who have encountered more complex and sophisticated cultural differences tend to demonstrate increased competence in intercultural relations and a greater likelihood of developing critical awareness to make appropriate choices for themselves (Intercultural Communication Institute, 2004). Nevertheless, individuals with lower levels of intercultural knowledge and sensitivity may show less flexibility and be more afraid to venture into the unknown.

7.5.2 Staying close to the original culture

Compared to those students who had tried to find communities in UK society with various levels of engagement, a significant number of students tended to stay closer to their culture of origin. This is particularly evident in interviews with undergraduate and PhD students, who stayed for a longer period than Master's students with their one-year programmes. Over time, these students expressed an increasing recognition of their original culture. For example, Yao, an undergraduate student, strengthened her sense of belonging to traditional Chinese culture through engaging in the 'exotic' environment of the UK. This was observable particularly in her second interview, which reflected how she combined Chinese and Western cultures. Rather than focusing on the differences between cultures, she integrated cultural elements to find self-confidence, a new way to ensure her own happiness and wellbeing.

Figure 7-9. Wearing *Qipao* to show Chinese beauty in the UK. Image taken by Yao's friend. (The participant agreed for me to use this image without blurring her features).

> I dared to wear *Qipao*[8]. I didn't wear it before because I was not very confident about my figure. According to the Chinese concept, Qipao is worn by slender women. But in the UK there is a lot of tolerance for

[8] *Qipao*, also known as Cheongsam, was one of the national dresses of the Republic of China in the 1920s, signifying a generalised national identification rather than a particular ethnic or ancestor identity. The Qipao continues to be the national costume of China, and it continues to evolve with times as it responds to contemporary modern life.

female figures, and I feel more confident about myself, no matter what my shape looks like.

(Yao, female, current student, extract from the second interview, original in Mandarin)

This is Yao's second interview, and it is interesting to note that, at this point, she started putting herself in the picture (Figure 7-9) rather than only taking photos of her surroundings (e.g., nature or architecture) as she had done at the time of her first interview. For example, the first picture in this chapter, which was of a statue (Figure 7-10), was provided by Yao during her 'honeymoon' phase, as well as the following images.

Figure 7-10. Chinatown in London. "Full of New Year flavour and red lanterns hanging high. Miss home." Image taken by Yao.

Figure 7-11. Church culture. Yao was impressed by the complex interior design and historical heritage. Image taken by Yao.

This transition arguably indicates an increase in confidence in herself as a Chinese person in the UK, proud to display her culture of origin. Conroy (2009) observes that globalisation has brought new forms of consumption, such as global fashions, global food and global musical forms, into everyday life, increasing people's exposure to the new while posing the risk of detachment from one's own historical and cultural identity. At the same time the impulse to align the alien, the strange and the different with one's own frames of reference and perception carries the danger of domesticating the other and, in doing so, reducing its particularity, hollowing out its meaning and diminishing its claim on our attention. This concern

with the hi-jacking or domestication of the cultural Other is related to students appearing to be persuaded to (re-)establish their desires and sense of self within the traditional material culture while reframing it in and for a new context, thereby reducing concerns about national cultural amnesia. As a case in point, the contemporary Chinese *Qipao* serves the purpose of cultivating a sense of rooted and coherent identity among the Chinese, addressing the potential cultural and personal sense of estrangement resulting from globalisation. Yao's growing cultural confidence is also a reflection of a growing trend among the younger Chinese population to appropriate and reintegrate traditional clothing with their own youth culture, a trend that Yao appeared to embrace in her use of the *Qipao*.

According to Tsui (2013), the move from wearing clothing in a foreign style to wearing local traditional clothing would suggest that the younger generation's conception of China is changing. The growing Chinese economy and political standing in the world, which boosts Chinese fashion designers and consumers' confidence and conviction in national products and traditions, are the main drivers of this sense of nationalism. Tsui (ibid.) further argues that the concept of Chinese nationalism has shifted from symbols which are superficial and exterior Chinese products to the uniqueness of 'Chineseness', which refers to an indirect, hidden form of Chinese spirituality. This indicates modernisation and hybridisation of Chinese traditional and global fashions and, moreover, reflects a subtle tension between nationalism and globalisation in Chinese society. Yao's reflections suggest that she was searching for cultural threads - values of beauty - to connect different cultures. Moreover, as Yao told me later in our interview, her interest in Chinese traditional culture started prior to her study abroad, but being abroad reinforced her resolve to embrace it and even display it through her choice of clothing:

> Yao: I am currently taking some Chinese *Guoxue*[9] (National Studies) courses online. I think Chinese people need to understand Chinese history, values and culture. After going abroad, I feel that these are very important. As young people of the new generation, we must have

[9] *Guoxue* courses refer to a kind of cultural course set up for students to understand traditional culture, increase their emotional attachment to China. It is supported by society to promote Chinese culture, and some schools offer this course as an elective course.

sufficient cultural and personal self-confidence. I want to make myself become a representative of Chinese culture.

Researcher: Did you take it when you were in China or did you start it in the UK?

Yao: I started the course in China. I was very interested in Chinese culture so I wanted to learn more. When I came abroad, I realised that to know my own culture is very important, so I continued with it.

Researcher: How did you realise that to know your own culture is important when you are in the UK?

Yao: Well, after I came to the UK, I learned a lot about Western culture, and I found that it has something in common with Chinese culture, or it is different. In this comparison, I found that my understanding of my own culture was shallow, and I wanted to explain Chinese things to my non-Chinese friends when they asked about it, but I never went in-depth. So, I think Chinese people really need to understand our own culture fundamentally first, then we will be able communicate and learn about others.

(Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

By noticing cultural diversity in her encounters, Yao said that she realised the importance of keeping her cultural roots and of strengthening her national identity, expressed through her choice of clothing. The similarities and contrasts between herself as a Chinese person and non-Chinese others were implied in her comment regarding commonalities and differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Her perception of herself as distinct from the UK's majority population in terms of appearance, nationality, behaviour and thinking seems to have reinforced her recognition of her Chinese identity. This presents a block narrative of culture where she positioned herself as part of an exclusive social group within UK society. She justified her interest in the *Guoxue* course not as a personal preference due to her own values and beliefs but rather as something linked to her cultural and national belonging. However, as Hunter et al. (2006) note, one of the cores of

intercultural competence is to 'understand his or her own cultural box before stepping into someone else's' (p.279) and thus Yao's emphasis on her 'Chineseness' is not at odds with a developing intercultural competence. In fact, Yao's extract also showed a thread notion of culture in that she introduced Chinese culture to others who were not familiar with it by finding commonalities between cultures and building connections between herself and people from other cultural backgrounds. This complexity is triggered by an individual's positioning and opportunities arising in interactions. One important characteristic of the switch between block and thread views of culture is people's ability to creatively build, re-design and switch roles and mix them at different moments in the same communication event to accomplish different purposes (Amadasi and Holliday, 2017). Switching from a block to a thread view, however, tends to challenge assumptions about pre-existing cultural ideas and habits and promotes discussion of the complexity involved in establishing cultural understanding (ibid.).

Among all the participants, I observed that most Master's students were less driven and achieved less in terms of cultural engagement. In contrast to PhD and undergraduate students, many Master's students reported that they were not really focusing on cultural diversity and, rather, wanted to concentrate on their studies:

> I think China and the UK are different. So, let it be. I don't want to change myself to become someone else, and I don't have much time to think about these things because academic achievement is my priority. I may travel more after I graduate to taste different cultures.
>
> (Qi, female, returnee Master's student, original in Mandarin)
>
> I think I adapted well to the local society, like living well, but my understanding of the local culture did not improve that much. Maybe I don't know what the local culture is, as I still lived in the same circle as before - Chinese life - because there were a lot of Chinese there.
>
> (Qing, female, current Master's student, original in Mandarin)

These extracts from interviews with Qi and Qing suggest that they came to a more detached approach to their life in the UK, remaining mainly within the Chinese

community and prioritising academic achievement rather than pushing themselves to engage with the host culture. Christidis (2021) notes that international students often choose to stay in their comfort zones since they want to maintain their core values, i.e., common values shared by national fellows. This reflects the skill of 'interpreting and relating' in Byram's (1997) ICC model, which emphasises the ability to mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena. Both Qi and Qing show a tendency to 'keep neutral' that does not facilitate their exposure to multicultural experiences. This may be linked to the pursuit of 'harmony', which is important in Confucian culture, seeking to avoid potential conflicts (see section 2.3.2). However, this approach represents a passive form of cultural adaptation and mediation, one that relies on remaining somewhat detached from the local community and can arguably only be sustained with no or few repercussions on their wellbeing by students who are on short-term programmes.

However, the detachment and estrangement of students from the receiving culture or cultural aspects within the global economy can have positive impacts for preserving their national identity, deeply intertwined with their historical roots. As already suggested, globalisation brings with it the possibility of cultural amnesia and detachment from home cultural frameworks, potentially resulting in individuals losing touch with their history, heritage and the native context necessary for self-recognition. Opting to distance themselves from the local community and the dominant culture in the receiving society, as exemplified by Yao, Qi and Qing, appears to have served to revive some students' sense of a grounded and coherent identity. This choice presses them towards a third perspective, prompting them to confront their own sense of strangeness when confronted with the forces of globalisation (Conroy, 2009).

7.5.3 Returnee students' lives back in China

Interviews with returnee students showed that the experience of moving back and readapting to their home culture was less intensive and challenging compared to the demands of adaptation to the UK. Nonetheless, on their return the majority of students experienced stress and disappointment with respect to work, friendships and family relations. Among them, PhD returnees and Master's returnee students showed some differences in their reflections on their lives after

returning, owing to their different motivations for studying abroad and to the lengths of their stays. Jie and Chang were PhD returnees who are currently working in well-known universities in China. They both expressed difficulties in re-adapting to their home culture, citing challenges in relation to expectations regarding relationships and pressure to marriage.

> I don't like the many red-tape requirements in China, and there are many interpersonal relations at work, unlike in the UK, where things are done in a more professional manner and things are less complicated by human factors.
>
> (Chang, female, returnee PhD student, extract from the second interview, original in Mandarin)

> There is a culture in China that binds women's age to marriage. In China, I always feel that if you are 30 and you are not married, this is a ridiculous thing … especially in the eyes of the older generation. My colleague said, 'What does it matter if you have a PhD degree? You are still single.' It's hard to accept this value … but in the West, society gives women less age anxiety and pressure to marry, and women who have successful careers can also be widely recognised … Even your family doesn't understand this, you know? I don't like to attend family gatherings with my relatives because of this. They were not sensitive to nor aware that I had changed in my thoughts and values. They don't expect you to change regarding any of this. So, it's hard to have a nice chat with them at a family gathering.
>
> (Jie, female, returnee PhD student, extract from the first interview, original in Mandarin)

During re-entry, sojourners need to integrate their experiences overseas with life back home, while resolving internal and external disconnects between the country they visited and their home country (Tomlin et al., 2014). Problems with (re)adaptation can impact people in many ways, such as creating feelings of anxiety or depression on returning home, and it can cause obstacles for students trying to re-establish a sense of belonging with their original society. Both Jie and

Chang had complaints about their returning lives and workplaces, which they highlighted as stemming from cultural differences between the UK and China in terms of work practices and gendered social expectations. They seemed to look at Chinese expectations regarding work and women through a new perspective, gained from living in a cultural setting where these expectations are - at least in some respects - quite different. Thus, when looking at Chinese society and social relations in the light of their experience of living in the UK, conflicts were arising because their views had changed during their study abroad period.

Changes may cause tensions with locals upon the sojourner's return, as can be noted from the extract below, where Jie (female, returnee PhD student) noted that she was unhappy with her colleagues' comments about the irrelevance of her qualification in the face of her still being single (discussed in the extract above) and considered them 'unacceptable'. When I asked Jie to talk a bit more about her feelings when hearing these 'unacceptable comments', she said she was a bit angry, and that she felt alone in such a situation.

> I disagreed and was a bit angry. But I did not argue because I knew it would be a waste of time trying to convince people who would never understand me … I felt lonely.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the first interview)

According to Pitts (2009), communication is both a key component of cultural readjustment and a useful coping mechanism for bridging expectation gaps. Pitts (ibid.) notes student sojourners may experience gaps between social expectations and culture/value expectations and the sources of those expectations might come from friends/family at home, co-students and/or co-nationals. Thus, communication within the co-national network can reduce expectation gaps and allow students to (re)adjust over time and establish more nuanced cultural identities. However, in the absence of shared objectives and guiding principles, communication can result in emotional distancing and dissatisfaction with one's home culture, as well as strain due to the changed worldview (Butcher, 2002). In addition, the international transition brings changes in sojourners' self-recognition, such as challenging stereotypes, confronting cultural assumptions

and developing international perspective (Brown, 2009). However, feelings of detachment might be caused by the absence of both UK's cultural norms, as students return to China, and the original cultural norms, as they have been away for a long time and may feel some distance from norms they used to take for granted. Talking about Algerian migrants in France, Sayad (2018) argues that a 'double absence' can result from people being perceived as 'foreigners' both in the country of migration and in the sending community. This 'double absence' seems to come through in the narratives of some returnee students, who reported feeling of lacking a presence or belonging to either the receiving or home culture.

Similarly to Jie and Chang, Zhe (female, returnee UG student) shared a comment about having to readapt to local expectations and rules:

> Nowadays, many students return to China after they complete the degree. This is my country and I came back to be with my family, but I also enjoyed living abroad. Anyway, people would say, 'If you really like the foreign country, why did you come back?' They expect me to adjust to them, to the home society, rather than them adjusting to me. So, if you decide to come back, you should be ready to accept this set of domestic rules, which may be different from those abroad, but you can only accept it.
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

While intercultural awareness regarding emotional loss, loneliness, isolation and detachment from previously familiar cultures has been acknowledged in the context of 'adapting to the new', it has not been thoroughly explored in the context of 're-adapting to the old'. This nuanced awareness can be nurtured through what Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) describe as 'transnational consciousness', wherein returnee students demonstrate a desire to establish social and cultural connections with individuals in their local environment. The authors further contend that transnational consciousness is intricately linked with self-identity so that returnee students require an understanding of multi-locality to ultimately foster an enhanced sense of belonging across multiple contexts, thereby facilitating a smoother transition. In this project, students resorted to two options, either

(begrudgingly) accepting domestic social rules or befriending other returnee students who shared the same experiences. What the two approaches have in common is that the students appear to be searching for ways to increase a sense of belonging, although these belongings took different shapes.

The first option, to adapt to the home culture, results in - intentionally or unintentionally - having to downplay the experience of living abroad and the cultural knowledge acquired in order to (re)integrate into the working and living environment at home. This was also expressed by Zhou (female, returnee PhD student), a former doctoral student in the UK. In her second interview, at which point she had been back for eight months, she said,

> When I had just came back, I was very concerned about differences between China and the UK, but paying too much attention to differences only caused trouble, because others did not adjust to me. They didn't understand me nor behave in my way. So, I decided not to stress my overseas experience if people didn't ask, as I didn't want to increase the distance from others … Now, I prefer to see more similarities and adjust myself to them. People like to talk about children's education, housing prices, someone bought a new car, blah blah blah, which I didn't care about before, but now it is acceptable …
>
> (Original in Mandarin, extract from the second interview)

While they share similarities in the need to downplay their experiences abroad, the two narratives by Zhe and Zhou also show a different approach. While Zhe did not dwell on the possibility that certain values and social conventions may be shared by people from different cultures and therefore just accepted that she had to let go of her experiences, Zhou found her own way to get along well with locals who do not have the same experience of living abroad by focusing less on differences and pursuing similarities by keeping her study abroad experience private, but without putting herself in a passive position. Zhou's excerpt suggests a change in focus from a block to a thread view of culture ('paying too much attention to differences only caused trouble'), foregrounding or downplaying parts of her identity and experiences to fit into the context. Zhou stands out from other participants

because she seems to possess the creative ability to develop, re-design, switch and combine resources at different times to ensure successful and easy integration and communication. This also reflects the 'internal outcome' of Deardorff's (2006, 2009) ICC, which relies on adaptation and the propensity to temporarily adjust one's behaviour to suit social needs. Arguably, this allows her a greater understanding of the intricacy of cultural processes.

While Zhe and Zhou appeared to hide their overseas experiences and the cultural values acquired from the host culture by 'wearing masks', some students discovered a 'third place' (Bhabha, 1993), wherein they integrated aspects of both cultures, compromising while still retaining elements of the host culture to inform their social interactions. For example, Xiaoqing (female, Master's student), a former Master's student, reported that she made a compromising strategy to signing documents at work.

> Xiaoqing: I just started working at a school and an observer came to observe me teaching. After the class, we had a meeting to talk about any improvements for my teaching and he gave me an observation report to sign. I kept the habit from being abroad of reading the documents carefully before signing, but my Chinese leader felt he was not trusted because of me not signing immediately, so he asked, 'Do you have any problems?' He thought I didn't trust him. I know in China, probably, we are expected to show trust and obedience to the mentor at work and I should be 'happy' about what the mentor gave me. So, I said, 'This advice is very detailed. I want to take a good look at it, and I'll give it to you later'. In this way, I read the document carefully but not in front of him to avoid making him uncomfortable. There's a lot of that, and I usually don't want people to be uncomfortable, but I'm going to do what I'm supposed to do.
>
> Researcher: How did you come up with this habit while abroad?
>
> Xiaoqing: I was doing an internship in a UK primary school and it was the same situation, that the mentor gave me an observation report to sign. And he was surprised why I signed it immediately. I said because we just

talked about it and I trusted you. It was him who reminded me that in case there was anything hidden in the document, I should always be careful of signing my name on any paper.

Researcher: So, you think it is right that you should do this?

Xiaoqing: Yes, in any case, no matter which country I stay in, people should be careful with their signatures. But I also know that probably in China, it is more likely that you accept what is given to you and do not ask questions. They [work leaders] do not expect you to raise questions. So, I changed my way of behaving to be nicer.

(Original in Mandarin)

Xiaoqing's experience showed her cognitive flexibility as part of Deardorff's (2006) ICC model, that is an ability to select and use appropriate communication styles and behaviour. This includes being open to new information, being aware of more than one perspective and becoming aware of how messages are interpreted and situations are different (Pusch, 2009). Xiaoqing demonstrated her awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences by making a judgment call about 'how quickly to sign documents', and she was able to find a compromise to avoid conflicts. This also demonstrates the nuanced positionality of individuals with hybrid cultural value attachments, as discussed by Holliday (2022), who negotiate between cultural blocks and threads. Specifically, Xiaoqing initially adhered to a culturally essentialist belief by linking trust to leaders with national norms, reflecting a block-oriented view of culture. However, she then balanced two apparently conflicting expectations by focusing on not causing discomfort, which helped her handle the differences between Chinese and British working cultures in a more flexible way. She thus created a third space which combined two cultural expectations and enabled her to de-centre the process of thinking as usual (Pennycook and Makoni, 2019), making sense of her complex positioning, a core element of hybridity.

Xuan (female, returnee Master's student), a former Master's student, chose yet a different option, developing her belonging to a community of returnee students who shared the same overseas experiences. However, Xuan's is a unique

experience of ‘uprootedness’ since she grew up in China and moved to the UK with her family when she was 10 years old. She was educated in the UK up to Master’s level and, following this, went back to Mainland China to work, while her family stayed abroad. Thus, Xuan’s experience is not representative of the vast majority of Chinese students in the UK. Xuan’s prolonged stay in the UK meant that she grew up immersed in British culture, which she absorbed as part of her schooling, socialising with peers and general cultural immersion. After returning to China at the end of her Master’s degree, she maintained close ties to the UK. Even though her friends may not have stayed in the UK as long as Xuan, they developed a collective sense of belonging to a community, one in which the UK experience was shared.

> Most of my friends have experiences abroad, and we go skiing, play boardgames and sometimes they teach me what they often do in China … and I still keep in touch with my friends in the UK. It is true that I don’t have deep relationships with people who have no experience of going abroad, because we have different focuses, opinions and hobbies, so it is a bit embarrassing when chatting with them.
>
> (Original in English, extract from the second interview)

Xuan underlined that she maintained friendships with the group of returnee students and those she met in the UK while keeping a certain distance from those who have never travelled outside of China. She was still struggling with building an in-group membership with the same social identity as other Chinese locals. The excerpt from Xuan’s interview suggests that she had been switching between approaches to culture as nationally bounded blocks and as connected, intertwined threads (Holliday, 2016a). Although she might not have been aware of it, she linked personal interests and preferences to a specific nation (i.e., the UK) in what appeared to be a block understanding of culture, but, in her friendship zone of returnee students, she was seeking out common ground in order to better integrate with others. The majority of returnee students had longer experiences of living in China before studying abroad, which meant they had stronger connections to Chinese society, and most returning students opted to downplay their foreign student experience and to assimilate into the community.

7.5.4 Cosmopolitan identity

Findings show that a small percentage of students have a cosmopolitan identity (see section 2.4.2), which emerges as part of ICC, suggesting that there is an association between the formation of cosmopolitan views and intercultural encounters. However, given that cosmopolitan identity is developed through the long-term negotiation of many conditions, including the students' experiences before or after studying abroad and their familial histories (Jackson, 2011), I am unable to conclude from the evidence that a cosmopolitan identity is the result of studying abroad. Nevertheless, this is an important aspect of how some students' identities are formed, resulting in a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan self. This is achieved through critical reflection and intercultural communication in localised, global spaces and as a result of multiple intercultural negotiations during students' experiential learning (ibid.). To illustrate this point, I use Jinyi's (female, returnee Master's student) extract as an example of a developing cosmopolitan identity:

> Researcher: How do you think about different cultures as you have been living in different countries with different cultures?
>
> Jinyi: I don't think there is a clear boundary between cultures. It is hard to define 'Western' or 'Eastern' culture because they are inter-impacted. The 'Western' culture contains Eastern elements and vice versa. Like, I am from China and I am speaking English. Language cannot give direct information about nationality.
>
> Researcher: Which position are you in when you say this?
>
> Jinyi: Ummm. I am a global citizen. The geographical and national boundary does not trap me. I was born in China and am working and living here [China], but it doesn't mean there is label on my head that I have to behave as what people think Chinese people should behave. I can go wherever I want. I chose to work and live here because now I am satisfied with my current life and job and maybe I will go to another country to try a different lifestyle.
>
> (Original in English, extract from the second interview)

Jinyi's extract is particularly interesting as she was one of the returnee students who chose to speak English during our interview. Jinyi's English proficiency is high because she has a background as an English teacher, she studied abroad for her Master's degree, and she is married to an American husband. Her identity as a 'global citizen', as she labelled herself, is not constrained by language but actually strengthened by her language practices and in-depth immersion in an intercultural quotidian experience. By engaging with complexity and multiple intercultural encounters, she displays her sensitivity to 'the multiple, ambivalent, resourceful, and elastic nature of cultural identities in an intercultural encounter' (Guilherme, 2002, p.125), which reflects the many facets of her sense of self and refusal to see herself through the prism of a single identity (Byram et al., 2002). Furthermore, by advocating for mutual respect and the absence of cultural boundaries, Jinyi made a clear allusion to the hybridity of civilizations. In the extract above, she detached language from culture and national identity, highlighting how the rise of English and increased global mobility have widened, but also bridged in complex ways, the gap between local and global culture compared to earlier national cultures (Kramsch and Uryu, 2020). In what Bhabha (1993) refers to as a 'third space' where cultures combine, Jinyi demonstrates an in-between-ness that adds to the complexity of social practices and allows for forms of cultural hybridity that can potentially challenge, appropriate and reconstruct the meanings of culture (ibid.).

Similarly, Xuan (female, returnee Master's student, already quoted above) seems to embrace a cosmopolitan identity when she expressed that she did not feel confined to fostering friendship in China as she had been absent from there during her time in the UK. However, she still experienced difficulties in engaging with the local Chinese community who had never been abroad, even though she speaks fluent Mandarin.

> Xuan: I feel very lucky that I didn't give up learning Mandarin when I moved to the UK. Language helps a lot when I came back, but it's not easy to find close friends here [in China] who have never been abroad.
>
> Researcher: How do you feel about it? I mean, how do you feel about your life in China without close Chinese friends?

> Xuan: I think I am OK with that, just don't have close local friends. But it's not a big problem living there. I still have Chinese friends who share same experiences as me. And I keep contacts with my British friends. I have social relations in both countries. Ummm, I think I might gradually have local Chinese friends if I know more about them, but I don't feel upset about this. I feel comfortable with what I am having now.
>
> (Original in English)

Xuan's comments demonstrate a sense of 'flexible citizenship' (Ong, 1999), one which allows people to accumulate resources and capital across nations, such as education, career and relationships. Waters (2003) puts forward the idea of 'instrumental citizenship', one that supports Chinese international students to 'retain a geographically hybrid identity as well as a physically mobile existence' (p.221). Building on Ong and Waters, Wu and Tarc (2021) have applied the concept of 'flexible/instrumental citizenship' in a study of secondary school Chinese immigrant students in Canada, pointing out that study abroad can advance students' flexible citizenships and capital accumulation in their transnational life. Similarly, Xuan's flexible citizenship encourages her cosmopolitan competence and openness towards different ideas and values. She also notes the reason for not having local Chinese friends is due to her own lack of knowledge about them, which shows critical intercultural awareness and demonstrates the feeling of 'otherness' regarding identity and belonging that returnee students might face, in particular when they study abroad for lengthy periods of time. However, Xuan noted that she would like to have more local Chinese friends, which indicates that she would like to increase intercultural contact with the domestic society to be more integrated. Kramsch and Uryu (2020) argue that voluntary intercultural contact can be driven by one's interest in a 'cultural Other' or the needs of a social life and survival. For people like Xuan, who speaks more than one language and belongs to more than one culture, voluntarily engaging in intercultural contact with local Chinese friends may reflect the constant interplay of her multilingual/multicultural identities.

It is crucial here to note that both Jinyi and Xuan had long-term experiences of cultural immersion, and Xuan is a specific case since her migration experience indicates the socioeconomic capital her family could draw on. Many studies have

consistently shown that families with higher socioeconomic status are inclined to foster independent thinking and intellectual curiosity in their children (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Choi and Nieminen, 2013; Haider and von Stumm, 2022). Within the realm of intercultural learning, research indicates that individuals from high socioeconomic backgrounds tend to experience significant effects on their social connectedness and cultural intelligence when studying abroad. Ultimately, these effects contribute to an increased life satisfaction, facilitated by the strong social networks they develop and the abundant resources they access (Chen et al., 2021). The various forms of social capital may play a significant role in shaping Xuan's specific attitudes towards intercultural encounters, as she views them as part of her life rather than separate academic experiences. Even though they completed Master's programmes in the UK, what made these two participants different from other Master's students was that they were more immersed in the UK's cultural landscape due to the length of their stay, family choices, parental support and transnational marriage, which indicates that these are all important elements in the development of a cosmopolitan identity.

7.6 Summary

Supported by narratives of culture as blocks and threads (Holliday, 2016a), among other theories, this chapter illustrated Chinese students' intercultural activities and experiences in the UK. It touched upon their experiences in China after they had completed their study programme and returned. The chapter also illustrated students' reflections on both the host culture and culture of origin. In line with cultural adaptation processes, this chapter was organised along the lines of the four phases of intercultural experiences identified in the data: honeymoon, challenges, struggling and adjusting.

The discussion in this chapter drew from interviews conducted eight months apart, which aimed at exploring students' motivations and their choices of intercultural activity by looking at different phases in their intercultural experiences. These demonstrated that students have switched their views on culture between blocks and threads views during their stay, which shows a constant (re)adjustment in their personal development throughout the study abroad period. For example, during the honeymoon phase, when students started their intercultural journey in the UK,

they expressed curiosity, excitement, uncertainty and concerns for safety when encountering unfamiliar cultural materials. In the academic challenge phase, students suffered from the academic burden which brings students a feeling of barriers between educational systems. In the struggling phase, students experienced more intensive shock in socialisation which caused (deep) uncertainty, a lack of self-confidence and also resulted in them avoiding engagement in intercultural events and language development. Other students preferred to stay closer to their culture of origin, finding support through engagement with Chinese traditions. However, it should be realised that this is not a straightforward process and varies among individuals. Finally, some returnee students might have to reduce their intercultural characteristics to (re)adjust to the dominant culture in China, since the local environment did not appear to value their experiences as international returnees.

Chapter 8 Discussion

8.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter offers a summary of the main findings and discusses the four main factors which the findings indicate as having a crucial impact on Chinese students' overall intercultural communicative experiences during study abroad, namely: cultural understanding; length of stay; language barriers; and hybrid self-identity. In the conclusion chapter I will explain how these factors address the project's research questions.

The study shows that Chinese students' participation in a new learning and living environment depends on several interrelated individual and contextual factors, including the students' backgrounds, the specific programmes or universities they have attended, and the types of intercultural experiences the student encountered during their time abroad. This outcome is consistent with research by Heinzmann et al. (2015) which found that the participants' initial circumstances, the length of their stay, the amount of intercultural engagement and the frequency of target language use all had a role in shaping participants' intercultural competence. None of these factors alone plays an independent or deterministic role in students' intercultural engagement, but all are interconnected and work together in shaping students' intercultural journeys. This further reflects the intricate and dynamic nature of ICC development highlighted by Deardorff (2006), one which emphasises that ICC can evolve over time due to the development of specific attitudes, knowledge and skills. In the following sections I discuss each of the main factors that influence the intercultural experiences of the students in this research project.

8.2 Cultural understandings encompassing block and threads

The intercultural communicative practices of Chinese students abroad depict a nuanced picture of intercultural adaptation during and after their study abroad experiences. It is apparent that the students' intercultural learning and adaptations constitute a complex process influenced by various factors, such as academic, cultural, social and psychological adjustments made by international

students (Mesidor and Sly, 2016). This project suggests a close connection between students' intercultural performances and outcomes and their attitudes towards diverse cultures and intercultural encounters, indicated by whether they can move fluidly between block and thread views of culture (Holliday, 2016b). Block narratives, which represent a more essentialist view of culture, carry the risk of fostering prejudice by hindering understanding of shared attitudes, needs and experiences, potentially leading to a reluctance to accept those who differ from oneself (Dervin, 2012). Conversely, thread narratives, which focus on finding similarities and links between people from different cultural backgrounds, can support a cosmopolitan identity and shared meaning across national boundaries, countering cultural prejudice and exclusivity (Holliday, 2016b).

Due to the potential influence on the upbringing and education of Chinese students of the 'Great Unity' (*Datong*) ideology that is embedded in Confucian culture, which tends to stress the importance of assimilation rather than diversity (B. He, 2013), a block perspective on culture may be the default interpretation for participants without prior overseas experiences or inherited social and cultural capital from their families that may have exposed them to different perspectives. However, in their second interview, the majority of participants reported that they were actively exploring new approaches in order to adapt to an evolving context, after the first few months of tension and struggle. At this point in time, they were focusing on enhancing their language skills, fostering connections with non-Chinese peers and engaging with local communities to increase their sense of belonging. This suggests that some individuals may undergo dynamic changes in their identities and senses of belonging during the intercultural adaptation period, which also translates, for some of them, into a noticeable shift from primarily block narratives of culture to narratives that show awareness of the threads that connect and entangle people. These cultural negotiations are evidence of their understanding of the adjustment processes and of the effort required to become familiar with an initially unfamiliar context (Holliday and Sadoudi, 2023).

The essentialist, block view of culture was particularly noticeable in participants' initial interviews, coinciding with the adaptation stages (i.e., what I called the 'honeymoon' and 'challenge' stages) that are characterised by excitement but also questions and conundrums. During these stages, participants' tourist-like approach

was based on an appreciation of the novel aspects of their situation together with concern about potential difficulties, such as language barriers and different academic expectations. This view of culture, focused on perceived cultural homogeneity, might cause students to overlook the diversity and complexity of cultures. These tendencies may also be influenced by the collectivist Confucian pursuit of harmony within the community, which can result in cautiousness as an attempt to avoid impacting others (Husted and Allen, 2008). This mindset may limit intercultural interactions with strangers and engagement with the external environment due to concerns about potential adverse effects on others and the fear of losing face in the event of language or cultural mistakes. Consequently, the collectivist perspective can limit the building of connections with the external environment (Bhawuk, 2017), which is seen as the initial point for developing ICC (Deardorff, 2008).

The same essentialist view of culture also contributed to several returnee students' re-adaptation challenges in the first few months after returning. Jie and Chang's confusions about their identity and difficulties in positioning themselves in the daily routines of Chinese locals were caused by the transition (see section 7.5.3). Cultural expectations they had collected while in the UK questioned 'home' cultural practices and beliefs, leaving some of them feeling a bit disoriented. However, participants' responses in the second interview, which occurred eight months after their return, seemed to reflect greater flexibility in their identities and growing ties to the local Chinese society, which were grounded in a non-essentialist view of culture, arguably the result of their reflections on their experiences. A thread approach to culture was, for these returnee students, the result of positive engagement and increased mutual understanding, as they began looking for communities in their home area where they could connect with people from various cultures. Compared to the first stage of their return, which was largely dominated by an essentialist view of culture, with the passing of time some students appeared to be actively looking for shared meanings and connections in their changing life events, and to be pulling the threads of their experiences together. By starting a career in China and increasing the level of intimacy with locals, students like Jie and Chang were more engaged in the local culture at work and family gatherings. Through this process, participants were showing a growth in

understanding and respect towards others who did not share the same (overseas) experience they lived through.

As argued by Holliday (2016a), one's cultural understanding is represented and interpreted through individual experience and communication, which aligns with the social constructivist epistemology applied in this study. For instance, in Chapter 7, I illustrated the dynamic process of developing cultural understanding, which suggests that participants' did not automatically switch to a thread view of culture by moving abroad but rather constructed this through constant interaction and through gradually developing their understanding of the new culture. This process also entailed, for several students, greater recognition of their culture of origin. This dual shift involves the critical analysis of different cultural and social norms that is a component of ICC, which can be cultivated through social engagement. Furthermore, the ongoing learning experience can also impact individuals' previous knowledge and assumptions and create a shift in how these are perceived and appraised. This is illustrated in Chapter 7, for example, in which Yao stated that by engaging with other cultures she also became more aware of her insufficient knowledge of her original culture. This shows how increased intercultural awareness and sensitivity toward cultural differences, the result of being immersed in a new cultural environment, also translate into greater awareness of cultures in general, including in Yao's case greater awareness of her culture of origin.

After clarifying how students' cultural understanding affects their ability to engage in intercultural communication, I move onto the study's second finding, which focuses on the link between their intercultural engagement and the length of their stay, and I discuss how the length of stay influences students' intercultural immersion, which can have important implications for policy and practices of inclusion in UK universities.

8.3 Cultural understanding and length of stay

Findings showed that students' length of stay in the new environment has a significant impact on their cultural adaptation and intercultural communicative engagement. It is noted, however, that the length of stay abroad is influenced by factors such as students' socioeconomic status and familial support (Chen et al.,

2021). As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, students who stayed longer (e.g., undergraduate and PhD students) had greater opportunities to observe and appreciate cultural differences through daily interactions and experiences. Conversely, students in Master's programmes might face challenges in deepening their intercultural experiences due to shorter stays and a greater focus on their degree (see Section 1.1). This can limit their opportunities and motivation to explore and understand the culture they are immersed in, potentially resulting in a superficial understanding of the new culture. These findings align with research regarding the effects of the duration of overseas stays on various aspects of international students' personal development. Studies indicate a correlation between longer periods of residence abroad and positive impacts on intercultural sensitivity, affection and appreciation for cultural differences (Hammer et al., 2003); critical thinking and professional effectiveness (Coker et al., 2018; S. B. Goldstein, 2022); relationship-building with nationals of destination countries (Dwyer, 2004); and outcomes in foreign language acquisition, including fluency, pragmatic competence and lexical development (Freed, 1995). As Y. Li (2013) notes, intercultural learning should not be seen as a stand-alone, one-time endeavour. Instead, an extended duration provides international students with the opportunity to cultivate close and collaborative relationships, and through this extended period, they can effectively integrate their disconnected knowledge and experiences into cohesive behavioural outcomes and enhanced cognitive competence.

For some participants who stayed longer in the UK (as discussed, for example, in sections 6.5.2, 6.5.3 and 6.5.4), communicative practices were influenced by the process of intercultural adaptation, which included, as some of the many variables, frequency of opportunities to engage in intercultural communication; experiencing cultural differences and conflicts; comparing and contrasting traditions; and identity formation through self-reflection. This finding is consistent with the research, which has highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation during the study abroad experience of Asian students in terms of their performance of intercultural communication (Hou et al., 2018; Wu and Hammond, 2011). This also echoes findings by Brown (2009), who notes that long-stay 'tourism' has the power to affect a growth in IC, as well as a shift in self-discovery and re-evaluation for freedom from cultural and familiar expectations. Longer stays do seem to provide

students with invaluable opportunities to engage deeply with diverse cultures, breaking down cultural barriers and fostering a critical awareness of themselves as cosmopolitan individuals. Through this experience, individuals are empowered to cultivate an intercultural citizenship that favours multiculturalism, emphasising the importance of diversity, critical thinking and self-development (Guilherme, 2007).

However, the finding also indicates that long periods staying abroad may cause more challenges when re-adapting to the original cultural environment compared to those who stayed for a shorter period, such as Master's students. Photographs taken as part of this project show that PhD returnee students were more eager than Master's students to share their experiences about cultural conflicts once back in China, which suggests that those who stayed abroad longer experienced more changes in their expectations and thoughts about social practices in their country of origin. Navigating readaptation can indeed be challenging, as students have found themselves misunderstood and unable to express the personal changes they have undergone (Fanari et al., 2021). Additionally, their actions could be perceived as either emphasising individuality and uniqueness, or challenging established cultural norms, potentially breaking up the sense of wholeness and harmony represented by collectivist Confucian culture within their social groups (P. Yang, 2013). Several returnee students (as discussed in section 7.5.3) who struggled with possible cultural conflicts were also seeking a 'way out' and developed adaptative skills in the home culture by repositioning their 'study abroad' self in order to build supportive relations with people in the home country (ibid.).

This adaptative skill is one of the desired internal outcomes of ICC, as it results in growth of intercultural attitudes, knowledge and language skills (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). The relocation of the self that some returnee students demonstrated is the consequence of developing cultural self-awareness through understanding cultural patterns, both in the receiving society and the original one, in order to become aware of the differences between values, beliefs and behaviours. Some cultural distances, such as oral expressions or work and life balance, can be more readily adjusted to; others, such as interference from family or marriage pressure, need more negotiation. Finally, the adaptative skill represents a joint venture that returnees need in order to build a third cultural bridge between their intercultural

positions (Bennett, 2009), through focusing more on the similarities, or seeking a third-space methodology (Holliday, 2022). This approach intervenes in handling the challenge from the original culture and allows the threads of hybridity to exist, although finding the third space is extremely difficult (ibid.). This may entail 'wearing masks' to hide some newly-acquired cultural values and integrate while still maintaining the components that others might find uncomfortable. Together with sensitivity, empathy and critical awareness, participants showed that they had grown more skills to make use of their repertoire of behaviours and meet the needs of intercultural communication, achieve shared meaning and accomplish a smooth exchange of information that involved culturally different others (Bennett, 2009).

The next section discusses the importance of linguistic proficiency for students' intercultural communication and adaptation, and the evidence in this section draws on data illustrated in Chapter 6 concerning students' language practices in intercultural communication.

8.4 The impact of linguistic factors

The third finding of this project is that students' IC performance is significantly impacted by their English level and their awareness of English use and that students' IC performance is likely to be severely limited by inadequate English proficiency and a lack of awareness of the global uses of English. This finding echoes research by Ma et al. (2018) and Turner et al. (2021), who highlight a strong relationship between Chinese students' ICC and their English proficiency. My project identified two elements related to language that impact on Chinese students' cultural engagement: (1) awareness of global Englishes; and (2) challenging power dynamics among language users.

8.4.1 Awareness of global Englishes

Findings indicate that students' attitudes to English and willingness to learn English are related to their awareness of the global role played by the English language and about the different varieties of English. Participants who had an awareness of the global role of English tended to consider English as a communicative tool that can be used by anyone, rather than a language owned by 'native speakers'. The

cosmopolitan identity shown by Jinyi and Xuan, for example, as well as the translanguaging and code-switching practised by Fan and Pang and illustrated in section 6.5.4, demonstrate that these students did not associate English with national boundaries. Similarly, as discussed in section 6.3.2, Sierra was less concerned about her standard of English after realising the diversity of accents in use in the UK. In contrast, many students who were afraid of making mistakes and losing face appeared to buy into the belief that English only belongs to 'natives' and that there is only one correct and acceptable variety of English. They were less likely to speak up and less motivated to practise because of the pressure to speak 'perfect' English, and they showed concern about the possibility of achieving 'native-like' proficiency. This result echoes the finding by Schildhauer et al. (2020) that integrating Global Englishes (GE) materials into English classes and into English used in public fora (e.g., TED talks, advertisements or movies) can assist students to address pragmatic and interaction strategies, can lower communication barriers and develop their (listening) comprehension skills.

As Pennycook (2010) argues, languages can be seen not as pregiven, fixed entities but as sets of possibilities that emerge from practices, discourses and genres, so that we do not actually 'speak language' but engage in language practices. This aligns with Gee's (2007) argument on sociolinguistics that language use is shaped by social and cultural contexts, contending that language is not only a tool for communication but also a means through which people construct and negotiate identities, ideologies and power relations. This perspective strengthens the dynamic and contextual nature of language use, including the regional varieties of English, highlighting that individuals' linguistic repertoires are shaped by the diverse learning environments they inhabit (Blommaert and Backus, 2013; Pennycook, 2019). By highlighting the importance of acknowledging the global and local diversity of English, the findings from my project further stress that acknowledging this diversity and emphasising dynamic meaning-making are crucial aspects of English language teaching for L2 students which can facilitate intercultural communication.

8.4.2 Challenging power dynamics among language users

However, findings also indicate that there are power dynamics among language users and that the construct of the 'native' English speaker has a significant impact on participants' linguistic and social behaviours (Pennycook, 2016). This is an outgrowth of English dominance in global education (discussed in section 3.4) as international students are almost invariably positioned as the weak L2 learners who must shoulder the responsibility for pursuing native-speaker proficiency (Kramsch, 2023; Pennycook, 2019). Pennycook (2016) notes that the inequalities of languages and of language education result from the imbalance of nations' economic successes and the individual's financial well-being. Access to high-quality English language education increases one's social and cultural capital, in turn facilitating access to education, employment and other English-dependent activities. Meanwhile, language inequality is embedded in the local economies, social lives, modes of communication and in an educational system which disadvantages international students, in particular those from low- and middle-income countries. Findings from my study indicate that the majority of participants did not recognise the relative power of language nor the historical inequalities through which this power was achieved; however, they experienced directly the consequences of such language inequalities, such as insufficient intercultural knowledge and a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences in English-dominant contexts, which pose significant challenges for fostering friendships and mutual understanding both among international students and with local people. This challenge, in turn, hinders the creation of an inclusive learning environment in higher education (Pennycook, 2019).

ICC models do not adequately address the relationship between language and power and some scholars (e.g., Baker, 2012; X. Gu, 2016) have argued for the teaching of cultural knowledge in foreign language classrooms. Kramsch (2014) advocates for foreign language teaching to include sociolinguistic perspectives to meet students' needs in a globalised and interdependent world so that learners can be more aware of the power dynamics and political agendas that languages carry, rather than seeing language as a neutral, natural practice. Participants in my study told me that their language instruction barely touches on this topic. I contend that, rather than putting a huge emphasis on grammatical rules and correctness,

students would gain more from language curricula that focus on enhancing their awareness of the variety of Englishes, intercultural abilities and sensitivities, thereby helping them to become intercultural citizens and globally competent cultural brokers (Porto et al., 2018). The next section discusses Chinese students' hybrid self-identities and explores how this identity influences their approach to navigating between the receiving culture and their cultural heritage.

8.5 Hybrid self-identity

The fourth finding of this project suggests that a few participants, both current students and returnees, began a process of constructing hybrid identities for themselves, given that a person constructs the 'self' through the reciprocity of exchange and that it exists in the fluidity of living and negotiation (Z.M. Huang, 2021). Students like Yao, Qi and Qing in Chapter 7, who embraced cultural diversity and engaged actively in intercultural events, also kept their 'Chineseness'. This is different from the more conventional approach criticised by Ploner (2018), which understands integration as 'localisation', measuring it on the basis of criteria such as the quantity of 'local' friends and the extent to which the behaviour and values of the 'host' country are adopted. In this project, the majority of participants were engaged in self-discovery and evaluated their cross-cultural experiences according to their own standards rather than pursuing assimilation.

The fluidity of identity shown by some participants who engaged interculturally from the standpoint of their Chineseness can be further explored through the lens of Byram's (1997) intercultural skills of interpreting and relating - i.e., the ability to interpret, explain and relate events from other cultures to one's own. The interpreting and relating skills played a role in reducing misunderstandings and prejudices about other cultures, facilitating a shift from a block narrative about culture to a thread one, which implied a greater acceptance of multiple cultures and evolving skills for intercultural interactions. Similar observations were made in T. Jin's (2014) study, which evidenced how British learners of the Chinese language developed a more fluid and comprehensive understanding of themselves and others through their learning, adopting a non-essentialist view of culture. Participants in Jin's study tended to shape 'Chinese' identity through language learning, becoming attuned to Chinese customs and engaging in imitation. This aligns with what I

observed in my study, as Chinese students improved their English and increased their engagement with the local British community to cultivate an 'English' or cosmopolitan identity (see section 7.5.1). However, while some students managed to bring together their cultural identities, other students struggled to develop an 'English' identity due to the linguistic challenges they faced, and a few eventually tended to forego imitation and reverted to more 'Chinese' behaviours (see section 7.5.2). Therefore, the essence of thriving in a multicultural world lies in valuing individuals, their unique perspectives and their personal interpretation, thereby fostering an in-depth grasp and appreciation of diversity. This emphasis on individuality enriches interactions, transcending boundaries of language and cultural systems.

In addition, findings suggest that there is a tendency among Chinese middle-class students to switch between focusing on their Chinese identity and on a cosmopolitan one. It is important to note that living and studying abroad requires substantial capital (financial, social and cultural) and the construction of a cosmopolitan identity may not only be the result of their overseas experience but also an outcome of their socioeconomic background and/or of family choices, as can be seen in the way in which Jinyi's family accepted her transnational marriage and the immigration of Xuan's whole family to the UK. Both Jinyi and Xuan demonstrated that their cosmopolitan identities overtake their national ones due to their upbringings and backgrounds and, in the long-term, their in-depth immersion into different cultural milieus. Students who were moving towards a cosmopolitan identity were better able to connect with the new culture and better able to engage with international peers. While students develop the knowledge, traits and skills linked to a cosmopolitan identity, it should be noted that their ability to acquire a critical knowledge of cultural and social complexity is also a signal of a developing ICC (Byram, 1997) and cosmopolitan intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2006).

8.6 Summary

This chapter focused on how the four main factors identified in the analysis have an important impact on participants' intercultural attitudes and behaviours. These factors include the following: the shift of cultural understanding between block

and thread narratives; the impact of the length of stay on these shifts; the linguistic factors that can influence identity formation; and the hybrid self-identity formed during this journey. In this chapter I discussed how students' cultural attitudes, a shorter stay abroad and less proficiency in the English language may prevent some students from actively engaging in the multicultural activities and from developing a more cosmopolitan identity, while participants who had been able to develop a more flexible and connected view of the relations among cultures, those who stayed abroad for longer period of time, and those who had higher English proficiency were more likely to achieve deeper learning and intercultural engagement in their new context. It is important to consider that engaging in international communication interaction can yield positive effects in terms of individuals' personal growth and enhancing their self-reflection in order to (re)locate themselves in the multicultural world. In the next chapter, I will answer the research questions, then outline the contribution of this project, theoretical implications for future research and social implications for institutions, educators and local Chinese agencies involved in sending students abroad.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

9.1 Overview

This chapter moves beyond the thematic analysis presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and discussions in Chapter 8 to bring in conceptual discussions of Chinese students' intercultural communicative experience in the UK and upon return. Section 9.2 provides the contribution of this thesis to the current literature on Chinese students' intercultural communicative practices. Sections 9.3, 9.4 and 9.5 summarise the key findings. Section 9.6 considers the contributions and limitations of the thesis, while section 9.7 presents the pedagogical implications for HEIs, educators and local Chinese agencies that cooperate with HEIs to send students for overseas education, and provides practical suggestions for forthcoming international students and their peers. Section 9.8 reflects on my personal and professional development throughout the PhD journey. Finally, section 9.9 draws this work to a conclusion and provides guidance for practical reflection for students, educators and students in comparable situations.

9.2 Contribution to the relevant literature on Chinese students' intercultural communicative practices

The findings of this study make contributions to existing intercultural theories and studies on multiple fronts. First, the research investigated the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students in the UK and examined the experiences of those who returned to China after studying abroad. This exploration sheds light on the relationships between students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the cognitive and behavioural dimensions of their adjustment, which in turn enhances our comprehension of ICC in the context of intercultural adaptation, making noteworthy contributions to the current literature in ways that are discussed presently.

To begin with, the findings of this study significantly broaden the scope of the existing literature on the intercultural adaptation of Chinese students over the long term. Much of the current literature has predominantly focused on specific groups within higher education: particularly, Master's students undergoing a cultural

immersion period of one year. This selective emphasis on a singular group has resulted in a gap in understanding the broader landscape of higher education inclusion. The inclusion of participants from various programmes and levels of study within higher education - including Master's students but also undergraduate and doctoral students - has yielded rich data, uncovering distinctive features and patterns in the intercultural journeys of Chinese students. This illustrates that the duration of stay and students' motivation for studying abroad are critical dimensions of ICC development. It suggests that longer stays and a genuine motivation for studying overseas, such as pursuing education or experiencing different cultures rather than being solely driven by qualifications, may encourage students to actively engage in multicultural experiences. This approach has also shed light on the perceived challenges and strategies employed by these students in fostering understanding and respect towards cultural differences. Findings highlighted that Master's students tended to encounter more language barriers and academic pressure compared to the other two groups. These challenges may restrict their time and energy for cultural exploration, and thus many Master's students stayed closer to the Chinese communities in the UK, seeking a sense of belonging and mental safety. In contrast, undergraduate and doctoral students demonstrated greater openness to engaging in intercultural communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, the data for this study was derived from two interviews conducted eight months apart, allowing for an in-depth exploration of shifts in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical evaluation of cultures. An analysis of the participants' construction of intercultural attitudes indicates that studying abroad improved Chinese students' ICC to deal with cultural differences, with nuanced personal variations that are closely intertwined with their pre-existing knowledge and with the purposes behind their decisions to study abroad. Furthermore, students' intercultural encounters, such as forming new friendships, gaining travel experiences and experiencing deeper exposure to various forms of English, significantly influence their growth in ICC. These aspects, along with the dynamic evolution of their cultural understanding and experiences, from initial excitement to facing challenges until eventual adjustment, have been effectively observed over the eight-month period.

Thirdly, this study employs a visual method to investigate the intercultural experiences of Chinese students, offering distinctive value to the findings. Compared to previous studies, which have adopted closed-ended questionnaires or conventional interviews, the visual method allowed for a more profound exploration of the intricacies, dynamics and unique individual processes involved in interpreting and responding to personal experiences and emotions within the realm of interculturality. Specifically, the use of photography and of open-ended questions in photo interviews granted participants control and freedom over the data they contributed to the research (Richards, 2011), and this approach facilitated the collection of comprehensive data regarding participants' intercultural concerns, such as motivation, the purpose of studying, challenges faced and expectations — individual elements that may not otherwise have been fully captured in conventional interviews. Photo interviews elicit a wealth of visual and textual data (Lomax, 2015) and, in this project, allowed in-depth insights regarding students' intercultural life experiences, observations of cultural products, relationships with the receiving culture and reactions to intercultural encounters. This method proved more effective than conventional interviews in revealing the depth and nuances of these experiences.

Last but not least, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of returnee students as an integral aspect of the intercultural adaptive process. While existing literature predominantly focuses on the intercultural experiences of Chinese students studying abroad, it often overlooks the significance of the post-study period (Jiani, 2017). This period is crucial for students to effectively apply the intercultural knowledge and skills acquired abroad to their original cultural environment (Fanari et al., 2021). The participants in this study, all of whom expressed an intention to return to China or had already gone back, demonstrated a softer non-essentialist perspective on culture, which acknowledges the distinct national culture but still seeks commonalities between various cultures. They embraced both British culture and their national culture to varying degrees, influenced by their prior knowledge of foreign countries and respect for cultural differences. Furthermore, the study identified that a majority of returnee participants developed a critical awareness of culture, which enabled them to assess cultural norms and values based on their individual understandings and needs. Notably, returnee students experienced direct conflicts between social

norms they had been exposed to while in the UK and social norms in China. The study suggests that the returnee experience explored herein has implications that HEIs should consider, emphasising the importance of supporting graduates with mental healthcare, alumni networks and career connections with students' home countries in order to enhance the inclusiveness of higher education.

In conclusion, this study transcends the prevalent framework in Chinese students' intercultural studies, offering insights into the intricacies and dynamics of intercultural communicative and adaptive phenomena. It makes a significant contribution to empirical studies, presenting a fresh perspective on research scope, methodology, and returning experiences while also illuminating the myriad issues and processes involved in the intercultural adjustment journey. The following section delves into the main research findings, addressing the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Its objective is to illustrate how the intercultural communicative experiences and cultural understanding of Chinese students evolve both during their study abroad and upon their return.

9.3 Answering Research Question 1

What challenges do Chinese students encounter in intercultural communicative practices during study abroad?

In order to better understand the cultural adaptation process of Chinese students in the UK and identify strategies to increase engagement and integration, it is important to consider the difficulties Chinese students experience in intercultural communication. Interviews at different points during participants' study abroad period revealed that they encountered a variety of difficulties as they progressed through four phases of cultural immersion: honeymoon, challenges, struggling and adjusting. Here, I want to emphasise that the four phases I identified can occur repeatedly over time and that they do not constitute a linear process but rather represent broad patterns that I observed in participants' narratives of their experiences. Lack of intercultural competence in terms of the elements that Byram (1997) identified - i.e., attitudes, knowledge and language skills - was the first obstacle Chinese students experienced in relation to intercultural communication practices in the UK. Students' levels of intercultural competence, however,

appeared to correlate quite closely with their previous overseas experiences, their goals for studying abroad and their English communicative abilities. Less familiarity with engagement in intercultural contexts, such as teaching and learning styles (as exemplified by Qi and Huang in section 7.3), could cause students to attribute personal preferences to cultural differences, which can hinder mutual understanding (e.g., Yuli in section 7.4). Lower levels of English communicative skills that might be exacerbated by regional accents, practical use of English and the local sense of humour (e.g., see section 6.2), can lead to 'escaping behaviours' in intercultural interactions so that students prefer to leave a situation or remain in silence to avoid losing face (e.g., Ying and Fan in section 6.3.1). Moreover, students' ICC was clearly influenced by the length of their stay. Thus, many Master's students, who had to handle substantial pressure from academic tasks in the space of one short year, had fewer opportunities and less time to develop their ICC, integrate into the local culture and participate in intercultural events than undergraduates and doctoral students did. This was unless they were able to handle cultural shock with existing intercultural skills developed during previous travelling or study abroad experience.

Further challenges in relation to the development of ICC can arise from an essentialist view of culture, which emphasises national boundaries rather than seeing that 'culture is a verb' (Street, 1993) and the fluidity of cultural development and mutual influences. This may slow the development of a sense of belonging to the receiving society, as students may prefer to remain within their national circles, thereby missing out on opportunities to engage with other cultures (e.g., Na in section 5.2). As noted by Holliday (2016a), this perspective, influenced by an essentialist perception of the nation state or national culture, strengthens emotional ties to one's own culture but also tends to create barriers between cultures, hindering mutual understanding and ultimately impeding intercultural adaptation and flexibility. For individuals holding a strong block idea of culture, it may require extra effort to encourage them to perceive others as potentially similar to themselves, finding common ground rather than viewing them as exclusive representatives of a different culture (Holliday, 2016b).

9.4 Answering Research Question 2

What intercultural communicative strategies do Chinese students adopt to deal with communicative difficulties in the UK?

The strategies that the participants adopted to deal with intercultural communicative difficulties faced in the UK had a decisive impact on their IC activities and cultural immersion. My project identified two related elements of these strategies: (1) developing intercultural attitudes to cultural differences; and (2) building a sense of belonging to preferred communities.

In terms of (1) developing intercultural attitudes to cultural differences, Deardorff (2006) argues that they lay the foundation for the development of ICC skills and the critical evaluation of one's own and other cultures as a more advanced goal. Openness and curiosity towards other cultures facilitate the ability to see from alternative perspectives, value diverse cultures, withhold judgment and respect ambiguity (ibid.). Findings in this study indicated that participants often formed friendships with individuals from other cultural backgrounds and demonstrated a willingness to step out of their comfort zones to explore other cultures (e.g., Dan and Sierra in section 5.4.2). Moreover, participants' attitudes toward cultural differences have been found to be closely linked to their motivations and purposes for studying abroad. Master's students, primarily driven by the pursuit of a qualification, exhibited less motivation to explore other cultures deeply, whereas undergraduate and PhD students tended to have a stronger desire for intercultural immersion and exploration.

In relation to (2) building a sense of belonging to preferred communities, the findings indicated two approaches to adaptation. One approach is striving to engage with the new community, while the other is remaining within the Chinese community. While they appear to be mutually exclusive, these were broad approaches which shared some overlaps, and some students experimented with both prior to finding what worked for them. Moreover, they both served to help students overcome communicative difficulties, albeit through different strategies. Students who stayed closer to the receiving culture tended to increase their exposure to cultural differences by engaging in activities such as attending school

parties, traveling within the UK, visiting churches or pubs, and participating in food gatherings with other international students (e.g., see sections 5.3.2, 5.4.2 and 7.5.1). Through these activities, they could build bridging social capital to deepen their intercultural immersion and foster reciprocity and trustworthiness within the receiving culture (Putnam, 1993). Additionally, a few students appeared to strengthen their bonding social capital with Chinese colleagues while studying in an unfamiliar society. They built friendships through food socialising with other Chinese students (see section 5.3.1) in the UK or strengthening their Chinese roots by wearing traditional dress, the *Qipao*, or taking the philosophical course, the *Guoxue* (see section 7.5.2), to increase their sense of security and confidence. This approach highlights a softer, non-essentialist view of culture, one that contains the open-mindedness and looks for commonalities that people can share to facilitate connections with other cultures, but still maintains the notion of national cultures as separate experiences and the prime unit of cultural identity (Holliday, 2016b). The second approach allowed participants to flexibly change their roles and switch their identities between national and cosmopolitan to meet their social needs (Deardorff, 2006). This flexibility provides space for cultivating critical awareness of various cultures, which serves as a vital contribution to intercultural adaptation (Y.Y. Kim, 2009).

These two approaches were not mutually exclusive, as students could mediate between them depending on the situation, demonstrated that by alternating between block and thread approaches to cultures, many Chinese students in the UK were adopting a softer cultural non-essentialism. As a result, students could develop greater respect for other cultures by looking for threads that unify them or by creating a third space where elements from both cultures could coexist (Holliday, 2016a). However, both approaches seemed to restrict student's capacity to be fully immersed in a different cultural setting, which might lead to some loss of identity through integration with other cultures (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

9.5 Answering Research Question 3

How does study abroad change the cultural understanding of both current students and returnee students?

Here, I set out to investigate how students' experiences in the UK had affected their understanding of both receiving and home cultures, and their self-identity. Building on the challenges and strategies discussed previously, the goal of the final question was to investigate how the receiving culture impacted the way in which sojourners saw themselves and their culture of origin in a globalised world. Returnee students were included in the research because their experiences could offer insights into the post study abroad stage and prepare potential returnee students to deal with any possible discomfort during re-adaptation to their home environments. This added an extra layer to the understanding of the impact of study abroad experiences on Chinese international students' personal growth in relation to intercultural awareness.

The development of students' cultural understanding is intricately tied to their interactions both amongst themselves and their peers and with the outside world around them. The findings highlight a progression in cultural understanding, shifting from an essentialist perspective, linking culture solely with nationality, to a more nuanced thread view, one emphasising cultural similarities and embracing diversity (Holliday, 2016a). The findings indicate that most participants' self-identities were significantly linked to nationality so that they looked at social behaviour in the UK from the perspective of 'being a Chinese', which triggered a block view of cultural difference. However, their experiences in the UK with what could sometimes be shocking cultural differences led them to develop a more flexible understanding, viewing their home culture as comparatively homogeneous and collectivist. This shift towards a thread view of culture was facilitated by engaging in more intercultural activities through communication in English and by establishing connections within the host society.

Moreover, through exposure to diverse cultures, students enhanced their critical awareness of various cultural contexts, leading to reflections on their own identity formation, particularly in relation to their cultures of origin. Byram (1997) emphasises the importance of critical awareness in ICC, which requires individuals to be reflexive, enabling them to move beyond a narrow focus on their own culture and to understand the significance of different perspectives both within and outside their communities (Byram, 2012). The example of Yang in section 6.3.1 demonstrates that he challenged the widely held belief that high proficiency in

English is essential for successful cultural adaptation and immersion. This case prompted critical language awareness and led to questioning the practicality of pursuing a 'native standard' of English, which may hinder deeper intercultural experiences (F. Fang and Ren, 2018). This, in turn, contributed to achieving desirable external ICC outcomes such as effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006), allowing the students to apply their skills according to social needs.

Moreover, findings show that returnee students who had stayed abroad for a substantial period of time experienced a conflict between the more global thread view of culture they had developed and the requirements of the dominant national culture when back home. However, this feeling could gradually diminish as they increasingly integrated into their domestic culture and engaged in daily interactions with local Chinese communities, thereby reducing the influence of their experiences abroad in their everyday interactions. They demonstrated a higher level of reflexive skills than current students did to reposition them 'back' in their home culture. By shifting their intercultural identity between 'international students' or 'global citizens' in the UK to 'Chinese locals' or 'home people' (see section 7.5.3), former students developed intercultural adaptative skills to re-integrate to the home culture in the post study abroad period. This process of ongoing role-shifting and self-reflection reflects the dynamic development of intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills, contributing to an ever-evolving intercultural experience (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009).

9.6 Limitations

This study aimed to explore Chinese students' intercultural communicative practices in the UK and their reflections on their culture of origin. Participants were a group of Chinese students currently studying in the UK as well as a group of former students who returned to China after they graduated. The findings were specific to this sample of students and cannot not be generalised across a large group of international students in different contexts. However, the study's findings resonate with other research targeting similar groups and contexts, indicating potential for broader patterns. Moreover, the findings from my project might, in turn, resonate with other research focusing on this topic in the future. Therefore,

this study adds to the ongoing academic conversation, contributing to developing in-depth insights into the key features of Chinese students' intercultural experiences in UK higher education.

Data was collected through participant-led photography and photo interviews. This tool increased participation by allowing the students the time and space to choose their responses during the research (Richards, 2011). On reflection, however, I realised that the photo briefs might have influenced participants by pointing them in particular directions. For instance, one of the instructions asked students to consider 'challenging experiences during study abroad', which might have influenced the participants' responses since they were asked to consider what had been difficult, assuming that there had been difficulties and arguably directing them to look for challenges rather than allowing these challenges (if any) to come from their reflections. In addition, images can tell 'lies' (Goldstein, 2007). One participant showed me only two images about hiking as a sport that she would love to do in her spare time, one of which was a picture downloaded from the Internet. She spent most of the time in the interview talking about the unpleasant living experience with her flatmate, which demonstrated a totally different angle of her intercultural life from what her images told me. This indicates that in this case, images as data might not be any more truthful than words. Since participants can show what they want in their images, the images might not truly reflect participants' feelings and thoughts. This awareness also motivated me to develop more precise interview questions in my future research so that interviewees will have enough space and proper direction to offer insightful data regarding the research objectives.

Thirdly, compared to current Chinese students in the UK, the intercultural experiences of returnee students drew on limited data, since there was a loss of returnee participants for the second interview, with only six of the original 15 participants showing up. Overall, returnee students showed less enthusiasm about participating in the research than the current UK students. I am not sure why this happened, and I can only speculate that either they did not want to dwell any further on a challenging set of emotions or that, by the second interview, they had fully readapted to the home culture and thus had less interest in talking about what for them was now 'normality'. This might also suggest that the memory and

emotions linked to the study abroad period had faded with time and even that the 'reverse cultural shock' did not last long. To address the issue of the loss of participants during the research, future research might shorten the interval between rounds of interviews and/or use tools such as journaling to record thoughts, feelings and behaviour on a regular, long-term basis.

Finally, this project did not involve the investigation of participants' socioeconomic backgrounds as a dimension of their intercultural competence. This problem was not identified until the data analysis, as a few students mentioned their parents' educational backgrounds or occupations, which contributed to the development of their own cosmopolitan identities, such as Fan's code-switching skills and Min's observation of the class divide in a UK supermarket. It is likely that, in order to be able to afford the expense of studying abroad, most of the Chinese participants are likely to have been from a middle-class background in Chinese society. However, the data also hinted at class disparities and variances within the study abroad group, which may need to be investigated further in the future.

9.7 Implications

By investigating the intercultural engagement of Chinese students in the UK as well as the returnee students experience, this research identified learning and social activities that effectively helped students engage in intercultural communication and navigated the challenges these might cause, both while studying abroad and upon their return. This section discusses the implications for anyone involved in Chinese students' intercultural learning experiences in the UK and China, including HEI management and staff and local Chinese agencies with agreements in place with British universities regarding study abroad programmes, all of whom have a role to play in creating a supportive community that is beneficial for everyone involved.

9.7.1 Implications for further research

The post study abroad experience of returnee students is a crucial component that has not received as much attention as that of international students who are currently studying abroad. The ICC of Chinese returnee students within their home

culture and the first language group have not been examined in any currently available research, which makes a case for the need to update the ICC model in order to evaluate the ability of individuals who have lived abroad for extended periods of time to interact effectively with others who share the same first language and cultural background. Future studies should look into the communication challenges faced by returning students when interacting with others upon return, as this has a direct bearing on increasing the understanding of reverse cultural shock among returnees so that they can better prepare for the changes they are likely to have experienced as a result of living abroad and which they may not be (entirely) aware of. Methods like participatory research with regular monthly contact with participants may be used to investigate and track their real experiences while maintaining their interest and motivation in continuing with the research.

The results of this study have several additional significant implications for future research. Future studies on Chinese students' ICC could take their socioeconomic background into account because their prior education, family social status and their parents' education all have a potential effect on their sensitivity and attitudes towards new cultures and cultural differences. There has been some research into the role of class in Chinese society, but most studies on Chinese students studying abroad adopt a similar approach to mine and tend to homogenise them as a singular group from a middle-class background, paying insufficient attention to the internal disparities within this group. Future research could delve deeper into examining Chinese students from various cities across China or dispersed across different UK cities, such as London and others. This approach may shed light on the varying levels of financial support provided by their families.

9.7.2 Implications for institutions, educators and Chinese local agencies

Language support and services

To address the need among international students to improve their language skills and increase their cultural immersion through intercultural communicative activities, HEIs could establish mentorship programmes, pairing incoming international students with experienced peers or faculty members, fostering peer

support groups that facilitate the exchange of experiences and offering a platform for international students to share challenges and successes. To raise international students' awareness of linguistic diversity, HEIs could organise language exchange programmes to allow students with different language backgrounds to share their experiences of learning English and how English is localised in their countries. HEIs could offer interdisciplinary language courses that not only involve academic language skills, but also explore topics related to language diversity, inclusive language and intercultural communication. These courses could provide students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills for engaging with diverse perspectives. such as those provided by Student Learning Development (SLD) at the University of Glasgow (https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/sld). Implementing an academic writing course as a mandatory component, complete with an evaluation system, for international students, regardless of their IELTS score, is imperative. It is also essential that HEIs focus on enhancing students' academic English abilities, incorporating academic writing training and relevant courses before or during formal programmes to boost students' sense of achievement (Leask, 2009). By offering such resources, HEIs empower international students to enhance their language proficiency and academic performance, thereby fostering a greater sense of belonging and inclusion within the university community.

Training for teaching staff

HEIs might enhance support for international students by diversifying their staff, valuing their cultural backgrounds and leveraging their insights to better serve the international student community. Encouraging teaching staff to participate in student-led cultural events can foster closer connections between lecturers and students, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of students' cultural perspectives and needs. To support students with less proficient language skills, lecturers could be given training on utilising multimodal instructional materials such as visual aids, diagrams and interactive activities to complement verbal instruction, as these approaches help students better comprehend complex concepts and content, regardless of language barriers. Moreover, providing professional training for staff to enhance their cultural competence and awareness challenges faced by international students is essential. This training should encourage reflective activities, prompting educators to consider how their teaching

practices impact international students' engagement and how they can better assist those with lower language proficiency. Continuous professional development is crucial to ensuring that cultural competence training remains an ongoing priority, particularly in the context of intercultural communication and understanding. By prioritising these initiatives, HEIs might create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

Community engagement

HEIs could cooperate with local communities, such as churches, nursing homes, etc., to provide more internship opportunities for international students, as encouraging participation in internship programmes could increase their immersion in local community life and enable them to organise more inclusive activities involving local students, such as food sharing, cultural dances and group trips. These events aim to promote intercultural awareness, foster mutual understanding, break down cultural stereotypes and encourage a more fluid perspective on cultural differences. Moreover, practical tutorials on adapting to British culture, including booking a restaurant or asking for directions, could be provided by HEIs to enhance students' practical and adaptative skills. Collaborations among institutions can also help develop students' mobility in transnational education. HEIs might foster collaborations with the Chinese Students' Union and Confucius Institute in the UK to encourage students from many cultural backgrounds to participate in events hosted by Chinese groups, such as celebrating traditional Chinese festivals and learning the Chinese language (R. Huang and Turner, 2018). These events should be organised regularly and HEIs should enhance promotional efforts to extend their impact beyond the campus and reach the broader public. Compared to Chinese students visiting Western cultural events as 'guests', they may be more confident and have a home field advantage when introducing Chinese culture to other international students.

English educators in China

Foreign language learning is an essential way for Chinese people to learn a foreign culture (Jin and Cortazzi, 2006). Instead of teaching exam-oriented English, the

ELT in China could work on improve students' IC through incorporating diverse cultural elements into the curriculum and improve their understanding and tolerance for different cultures. It is suggested that integrating an intercultural approach would foster students' sense of intercultural citizenship and strengthen their intercultural connections with the world (F. Fang and Baker, 2018). To achieve this, English educators, particularly in public schools, which constitute the primary educational avenue for the majority of Chinese students, should diminish their dependence on test-oriented English education. Instead, they might update their knowledge and teaching methods to enhance students' practical English skills, prioritising usage over grammar. Incorporating authentic materials like newspaper articles, advertisements and social media posts into teaching practices is essential, and schools could establish a systematic evaluation process for this approach, collecting feedback and reflections from students regarding its effectiveness in learning. These resources would expose students to genuine cultural contexts and language usage, fostering the development of both cultural sensitivity and linguistic competence (Hussein and Elttayef, 2017). English educators need to foster students' awareness of the various forms of English, as well as different accents and local dialects, challenging conventional perceptions of 'standard' English. By incorporating diverse cultural and language perspectives, students might gain a more comprehensive understanding of the global English-speaking community.

Local Chinese agencies

The study also has implications for HEIs collaborating with local Chinese agencies to care for returnee students when they return to China. After receiving their qualification and returning to their home country, the local agencies which send students abroad have the potential to positively impact the mental health of returnees. First, the local Chinese agencies could provide information about the returning experience during pre-departure orientation sessions to make students aware of potential challenges and encourage students to anticipate changes and differences they might experience upon returning home. Second, returnee support networks or alumni groups could be built that would encourage students to maintain contact with friends made during their international experiences since they may share similar feelings when returning home. Third, the local agencies

could also offer debriefing sessions or workshops upon a student's return to provide a space for them to share their experiences, challenges and emotions. Counselling services could be provided that specialise in addressing the emotional aspect of returnees and make students aware of available resources for mental health and well-being (Sonnenschein et al., 2023). Fourth, local agencies could support returnee students in their job-seeking endeavours by collaborating closely with domestic companies in China that highly value employees with international knowledge and experience. These agencies could offer career guidance to help returnee students effectively utilise their international experiences in pursuit of their professional goals. By providing comprehensive support, local Chinese agencies might assist returnee international students in navigating the challenges of re-entry and making a smooth transition back to their home culture.

9.8 Personal and professional development

Through this qualitative exploratory research, I gained more in-depth understanding of the study abroad experiences of Chinese students from the perspectives of intercultural communication and their post-study lives. This study was inspired by my own study abroad experience during my Master's degree in the UK and by life back in China as a returnee. This research assisted me in identifying common challenges, adaptation strategies and development of intercultural understanding of Chinese students going through the transitions I too went through. I was able to understand the significant role of context and of people's self-reflection in intercultural communication by recognising my own essentialist views of culture and language and by striving to move away from them. However, this has not always been a successful endeavour. I have come to recognise that, to varying degrees, the threads running through my intercultural trajectories are tainted by a block thinking about culture and that we are all, to some extent, used to essentialist narratives of culture (Amadasi and Holliday, 2017). However, through the process of reading, thinking and researching the experiences of Chinese students in the UK I have built a critical awareness of my own assumptions, even though I may not have yet fully overcome them.

Though it was not my intention to do so, my presence as an international student and as a former returnee student had an inevitable impact on the thoughts of the

Chinese students as participants shared their personal life experiences with me as a listener with similar experiences. I am pleased that this study was able to help participants with their studies, lives, emotions and reflections. One student sent me a message after the interview saying she had been happy to talk with me about her anxiety and confusions regarding and countering loneliness, which would appear to support the importance of creating these spaces for international students to discuss the challenges they are facing. I also built friendships with some participants, and we kept in contact after the interviews.

The path of this study was not an easy one to complete, and I encountered several difficulties while doing the research, including self-doubt, anxiety and confusion. Fortunately, the experiences and insights I have gained along the way have helped me become a more confident researcher and discover my own academic voice in this area. Additionally, they helped me refine my critical thinking abilities and give up searching for straightforward, 'correct' answers.

9.9 Concluding remarks

By providing a detailed description of the intercultural communicative experience of a group of Chinese (former) students in the UK as well as their reflections on their culture of origin, this study has contributed to practice and research in the following ways. First, this study provided empirical evidence of Chinese students' intercultural communication and culturally adaptative experiences from a social constructivist perspective, confirming that people's cultural adaptation is a dynamic process and that their identity shifts over time. Secondly, the study brought together Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2006, 2009) ICC models with Holliday's (2016a, 2020) model regarding cultural threads and blocks, demonstrating that students' IC development and cultural knowledge is a dynamic process rather than a set pattern. In addition, this study contributes to the current ICC models by introducing a reflexive dimension and examines intercultural speakers' self-positioning between the newly acquired cultural setting and their original one. Thirdly, this study brought attention to the intercultural dimension of returnee students, highlighting how they were not adequately prepared for the reverse cultural shock that awaited them on their return and for the work required of them to facilitate communication with local people who have never been

abroad. This too is a crucial aspect of ICC but one that has not yet received sufficient attention. Finally, this study has implications for HEIs that they should provide a more sophisticated account of the diversity of students' backgrounds in the universities. Key areas of focus include food practices, language barriers and cultural adaptation — common challenges faced by this group. Recommendations centre on the need to actively engage with the cultural heritage of Chinese students to enhance the multicultural environment on UK campuses. Rather than viewing them solely as transient 'student migrants', efforts should be made to transfer intercultural and inclusive values to international students and, in turn, integrate their cultural legacies into the fabric of university life. The same effort should also be made to integrate returnee students' cosmopolitan cultural legacy and knowledge - beyond the subject-specific knowledge and qualifications they acquire - into their home cultures and societies. This endeavour not only enriches the overall campus experience in international higher education but can also help to promote a more inclusive and harmonious environment for all.

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Appendix 1 Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet (Students studying in the UK)
(This document will also be made available in Mandarin)

Study title and Researcher Details.

Project Title Exploring Chinese students' intercultural communicative practice and their reflections of culture of origin

Researcher Details Yuanjing Ye
Student ID/Staff Number xxxxxxxx
School/Subject/Cluster/RKT group School of Education
PGR Programme Title PhD in Education

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the project's purpose?
This research project looks at the study and life experiences of Chinese students who are studying in the UK and of students who have returned to China after having studied in the UK. I wish to understand if (and how) studying in the UK affects Chinese students' behaviour, language, social skills, etc. My aim is two-fold: on one hand I aim to understand how Chinese students adapt to British culture in the UK, what they are comfortable or struggling with, what helps them and what doesn't. On the other hand, I want to explore what students who have returned to China after studying in the UK feel that has changed about their understanding of Chinese culture, and whether they found returning was easy or somewhat challenging. I hope that this study can benefit Chinese students currently in the UK and those who have gone back to China by allowing them to share their experiences and stories of living/having lived in a different country and whether this helped them to develop intercultural awareness, communicative and social skills. I also hope that the insights emerging from this research can help students who are hoping to study in the UK, to prepare for life in a new country but also for what they may expect upon return to China.

2. Why have I been invited?
You have been invited because you are a Chinese student studying in the UK, and so you have knowledge about communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds and are currently likely to be navigating the differences between Chinese and British culture.

3. Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet and you should indicate your agreement to the consent form. If you decide to take part, you can still withdraw from the study at any time and you will not need to give a reason. Your decision to take part (or not) in the project, or to withdraw once you have started, will have no consequence at all on your grades or your studies.

4. What should I have to do?
You will be asked to take around 10-15 photographs which you think show your experiences and the moment of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds (including British and Chinese) in 2 weeks. I will then ask you to talk to me about your photographs in an online/face-to-face follow-up interview (about 1 hour) so you can explain why you took some of the pictures and what you wanted to show (so I don't get this wrong!). You will decide which type of interview you prefer, and the interview will be recorded. Both the photographs and the conversations will take place twice, in November 2021 and then June 2022. Finally, you will share your photos (only the ones you will select) in an online photo 'exhibition' which will be open only to other students that are part of this project, so you can show them your pictures, see what photos other participants have taken, and talk together about the images.

5.Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?
All the information that we collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. Your personal data including your name and other relevant people, hall of residence, departments, etc., will be replaced by different capital letters for anonymity. I will ensure that you and the institution you are studying at will not be identifiable in any reports or publications.
Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

6.How will the data be used for, and stored?
Any data collected about you, such as images, interviews and comments on the images will be stored at the University of Glasgow and on the researcher's laptop with password protected for 2 years until the end of this study. Any personal data including your name and other relevant people, hall of residence, department, etc., will be replaced by different capital letters for anonymity. Your data may be shared in an anonymised way with the researcher for relevant studies as secondary data by my approval. You will not be identified by anyone or any institutions. Research data will be stored at Enlighten: Research Data at the University of Glasgow for 10 years after the study has been completed if it is still useful and there is an intention to use them further for research. Data will then be removed and destroyed from the storage system. The results of the research can be published in thesis, journal articles, conference papers. The written summary of results can be available to all participants if requested.

7.What will happen if I feel distressed during the research?
The consent form explains the purpose of this study and you will have an opportunity to ask questions before you decide to take part. I do my best to avoid any questions that may cause emotional problems. However, should you feel distressed during the project, please let me know. There is support that you can access at the University and more widely (e.g.,
University Crisis Team 0141 330 5497 or 0141 330 5121
https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/staff/emergencyandcrisissupport/;
Samaritans: TEL 116123 or https://www.samaritans.org/?nation=scotland;
Breathing Space Helpline 0300 123 1053 https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/nhs-voluntary-charity-services/charity-and-voluntary-services/get-help-from-mental-health-helplines/).

Contacts for further information
To purse any details of the research, contact the researcher of the project,
Yuanjing Ye (PGR) School of Education email: xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk
Dr. Giovanna Fassetta (Supervisor) School of Education giovanna.fassetta@glasgow.ac.uk
To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Researcher

Enter Signature or GUID xxxxxxxx

Yuanjing Ye

Participant Information Sheet (Returnee students)
(This document will also be made available in Mandarin)

Study title and Researcher Details.

Project Title Exploring Chinese students' intercultural communicative practice and their reflections of culture of origin

Researcher Details Yuanjing Ye
Student ID/Staff Number xxxxxxxx
School/Subject/Cluster/RKT group School of Education
PGR Programme Title PhD in Education

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the project's purpose?
This research project looks at the study and life experiences of Chinese students who are studying in the UK and of students who have returned to China after having studied in the UK. I wish to understand if (and how) studying in the UK affects Chinese students' behaviour, language, social skills, etc. My aim is two-fold: on one hand I aim to understand how Chinese students adapt to British culture in the UK, what they are comfortable or struggling with, what helps them and what doesn't. On the other hand, I want to explore what students who have returned to China after studying in the UK feel that has changed about their understanding of Chinese culture, and whether they found returning was easy or somewhat challenging. I hope that this study can benefit Chinese students currently in the UK and those who have gone back to China by allowing them to share their experiences and stories of living/having lived in a different country and whether this helped them to develop intercultural awareness, communicative and social skills. I also hope that the insights emerging from this research can help students who are hoping to study in the UK, to prepare for life in a new country but also for what they may expect upon return to China.

2. Why have I been invited?
You have been invited because you studied in the UK and now have returned to China, As a consequence, you will have experienced of navigating Chinese and British culture in your daily life, and also of re-adapting to Chinese culture upon your return. I would like to learn from you what studying in the UK was like for you and, most of all, how you felt that your period of study in the UK affected you when you returned to China.

5. Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet and you should indicate your agreement to the consent form. If you decide to take part, you can still withdraw from the study at any time and you will not need to give a reason.

6. What should I have to do?
You will be asked to take around 10-15 photographs which you think show your experiences and the moment of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds (including British and Chinese) in 2 weeks. I will then ask you to talk to me about your photographs in an online/face-to-face follow-up interview (about 1 hour) so you can explain why you took some of the pictures and what you wanted to show (so I don't get this wrong!). You will decide which type of interview you prefer, and the interview will be recorded. Both the photographs and the conversations will take place twice, in November 2021 and then June 2022. Finally, you will share your photos (only the ones you will select) in an online photo 'exhibition' which will be open only to other students that are part of this project, so you can show them your pictures, see what photos other participants have taken, and talk together about the images.

5.Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential. Your personal data including your name and other relevant people, hall of residence, departments, etc., will be replaced by different capital letters for anonymity. I will ensure that you and the institution you are studying at will not be identifiable in any reports or publications.
Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

6.How will the data be used for, stored?
Any data collected about you, such as images, interviews and comments on the images will be stored at the University of Glasgow and on the researcher's laptop with password protected for 2 years until the end of this study. Any personal data including your name and other relevant people, hall of residence, department, etc., will be replaced by different capital letters for anonymity. Your data may be shared in an anonymised way with the researcher for relevant studies as secondary data by my approval. You will not be identified by anyone or any institutions. Research data will be stored at Enlighten: Research Data at the University of Glasgow for 10 years after the study has been completed if it is still useful and there is an intention to use them further for research. Data will then be removed and destroyed from the storage system. The results of the research can be published in thesis, journal articles, conference papers. The written summary of results can be available to all participants if requested.

7. What will happen if I feel distressed during the research?
The consent form explains the purpose of this study and you will have an opportunity to ask questions before you decide to take part. I do my best to avoid any questions that may cause emotional problems. However, should you feel distressed during the project, please let me know. There is support that you can access in your locality (e.g., Anxlzxi http://www.laahome-cec.com/; Huacan 010-88680603 https://www.huacanxinli.com/; Fateman 010-62214883 http://www.fateman.cn/lxwm/)

To purse any details of the research, contact the researcher of the project,
Yuanjing Ye (PGR) School of Education xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk.
Dr. Giovanna Fassetta (Supervisor) School of Education giovanna.fassetta@glasgow.ac.uk

To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Researcher

Enter Signature or GUID xxxxxxxx

Yuanjing Ye

Appendix 2 Consent Form

Consent Form
(This document is for students studying in the UK and returnee students)
(This document will also be made available in Mandarin)

Title of Project: Exploring Chinese undergraduate students' intercultural communicative engagement and reflections of Chinese culture during the study in the UK

Name of Researcher: ……Yuanjing Ye……

Please tick as appropriate

Yes ☐ No ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I consent to photographs and comments being stored and used by the researcher.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee; for example in the event of disclosure of harm or danger to participants or others.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that participants will not be identified by name in any publications arising from the research.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades/ coursework arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

I agree that:

Yes ☐ No ☐ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
Yes ☐ No ☐ The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research
Yes ☐ No ☐ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
Yes ☐ No ☐ Other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
Yes ☐ No ☐ I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I agree to take part in this research study ☐
I do not agree to take part in this research study ☐

Name of Participant …… Signature ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher ……Yuanjing Ye……
Signature …YYJ……

Date …17/09/2021……

Appendix 3 Photo brief

(This document will also be made available in Mandarin)

For students studying in the UK

You will have 2 weeks to take photos of

- Anything around you that you feel represents ‘Chinese’ or ‘British’/ ‘Scottish’ culture.
- Anything around you that you are familiar/ unfamiliar with.
- Anything/ anyone/ any situation around you that makes you feel homesick.
- Anything that makes you feel excited about.
- Anything/any situation that you feel hard but want to know/ engage.
- Anything/any situation around you that you found your attitudes/views are changing.
- Anything/ any situation that you want to explain with ‘cultural difference’.
- Anything/ anyone that helped you feel comfortable communicating with local people.

You may take as many pictures as you can but remember you will only choose 10 pictures that best represent your yourself. You will have total freedom on what photos you would like to provide. But please note that etiquette of photography should be considered:

- Do take photos of what think is important;
- Do ask for permission for taking a close-up photograph of a person;
- Do not take photos if photo-taking is forbidden;
- Do not disturb others to take photos (e.g. in class).

For returnee students

After studying in the UK and returned to China, you will have 2 weeks to take photos of:

- Anything around you that you feel represents ‘Chinese’ or ‘British’/ ‘Scottish’ culture.
- Anything that makes you feel excited after going back to China.
- Anything/ anyone/ any situation around you that reminds you of your life in the UK/Scotland.
- Anything/ anyone/ any situation around you that reminds you that you need to behave as a Chinese
- Anything/any situation around you that you found your attitudes/views are changing.
- Anything/any situation that you feel hard to explain to other Chinese people.

- Any situation that you want to explain with ‘cultural difference’.
- Any tools that helped you feel comfortable communicating with local people.

You may take as many pictures as you can but remember you will only choose 10 pictures that best represent your yourself. You will have total freedom on what photos you would like to provide. But please note that etiquette of photography should be considered:

- Do take photos of what think is important;
- Do ask for permission for taking a close-up photograph of a person;
- Do not take photos if photo-taking is forbidden;
- Do not disturb others to take photos

Appendix 4 Interview Questions

Study and Social Life (students studying in the UK/Scotland)

1. What course did you study？
2. Why did you choose to study in the UK/Scotland?
3. What is one difference between education in China and education in the UK/Scotland?
4. What is the most academically challenging part of your immersion experience in the UK? In what ways did you handle it?
5. What helps you with your study?
6. Do you think that your institution could do more to support you? What would this be?
7. What do you do in your spare time?
8. How do you keep in touch with people in the UK/Scotland and back home?
9. Are you involved in the local community? (How?)
10. Where are your friends from?
11. Is there anything that you would like to do in your spare time but don't do? (Why?)

...

Cultural Shock and Adaptation to the UK

1. How do you feel about studying in the UK/Scotland? Why？
2. What brought you here?
3. What do you think British/Scottish people should know about China?
4. Have you got/Is there experience experience in the UK/Scotland that you would never experience in your home country?
5. Do you feel you view your study and life differently as a result of your overseas experience in the UK/Scotland?
6. How much do you feel that you have changed because of your experience in the UK/Scotland?
7. How has your experiences affect your interaction with different cultural groups?
8. How has your experience in the UK helped you learn to deal with cultural differences?
9. How confident do you feel in adapting to the UK/Scottish culture?
10. Do you feel you have been given support from the UoG to adapt to UK/Scottish study and social culture? What? Could university have been done more /supportive in adaptation?
11. What advice do you have for others immersing themselves in a new language/culture?

...

Work and Social Life (returnee students)

1. What is your profession?

2. How do you see the connection between your course in the UK/Scotland and the job you are doing?
3. Why did you choose to come back to China?
4. Are you involved in the local community? (How?)
5. What is the most challenging part of your life coming back to China? In what ways did you handle it?
6. What helps you with your returning life in China?
7. Do you think that your community could do more to support you? What would this be?
8. Where are your friends from?
9. Do you want to keep in touch with people in the UK/Scotland? (How?)

…

Reverse Cultural Shock

1. How do you feel about returning to your home routine?
2. Have you experienced a honeymoon period or depression after you went back to China? mixed
3. Do you feel you view your life differently/the same as a result of your experience in the UK?
4. What do you consider to be the biggest difference before and after your stay in the UK?
5. What/Who helped you re-adapt to your original culture?
6. Did your stay in the UK/Scotland influence your perceptions of China back to China?
7. Was there anything that felt strange/different in the Chinese context after living in the UK?
8. Have you applied anything that you have learned from the British/Scottish culture after you went back to China?
9. If you could change one thing about experience, what would it be?
10. What advice do you have for others who are coming back to China after studying abroad?

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Appendix 5 Participants information

Current group	Name (anonymous)	Gender (F/M)	Degree	Language in interview
	Li	M	PhD in Education	Mandarin
	Wei	F	MSc in Education	Mandarin
	Liu	M	MA in Business	Mandarin
	Zhu	F	MA in Business	Mandarin
	Jin	F	UG in Education	Mandarin
	Min	M	PhD in Engineering	Mandarin
	Huang	F	MA in Law	Mandarin
	Zhou	F	MA in Law	Mandarin
	Ni	F	PhD in Education	Mandarin
	Dan	F	PhD in Education	English
	Xue	M	MA in Linguistics	Mandarin
	Jintong	F	UG in Business	Mandarin
	Chen	M	UG in Business	Mandarin
	Junliang	M	MA in Education	Mandarin
	Yu	F	UG in Business	Mandarin
	Fen	F	MA in Art	Mandarin
	Ying	F	PhD in Sociology	English
	Yang	M	MA in Chemistry	Mandarin
	Kai	M	PhD in Translation	English
	Guo	M	PhD in Linguistics	English
	Liang	M	PhD in Engineering	Mandarin
	Ru	F	UG in Education	Mandarin
	Shuai	M	MA in Business	Mandarin
	Ming	F	MA in Education	Mandarin
	Yao	F	UG in Business	Mandarin

Returnee group	Name (anonymous)	Gender (F/M)	Degree	Language in interview
	Na	F	MA in Education	Mandarin
	Feng	M	MA in Education	English
	Jie	F	PhD in Education	Mandarin
	Chengua	M	MA in Business	English
	Fan	F	MA in Business	English

	Jinyi	F	MA in Engineering	English
	Zhou	F	PhD in Linguistics	Mandarin
	Xiang	M	PhD in Sociology	English
	Han	M	MA in Business	English
	Sierra	F	MA in Education	English
	Xuan	F	MA in Business	English
	Hu	M	MA in Business	Mandarin
	Zhe	F	UG in Physics	Mandarin
	Pang	M	PhD in Education	Mandarin/English
	Chang	F	PhD in Education	Mandarin