The Intercultural Experiences of a Group of Chinese International Students in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate a group of Chinese students' intercultural encounters studying in two articulation programmes in one British university and analyses the barriers that seem to exist between them, home and other international students. This research is qualitative in nature. Thematic analysis of sixteen Chinese students' interviews and reflective narratives were adopted. A core finding is that the power of the 'Chinese circle' provides this group with a comfortable zone but also presents a barrier to engaging in intercultural communication and developing more intercultural identities. Contributing factors to this pull of the Chinese circle include changing attitudes to English and Chinese language, negative intercultural experiences, and a lack of awareness of intercultural identity. It is suggested that universities should diversify their international recruitment, enhance intercultural education and training provided for all international students before and during their studies abroad.

Keywords: Chinese circle, Chinese students, intercultural experiences, English learning, intercultural communication, intercultural identity

1.   INTRODUCTION

International students' English learning and intercultural adaptation in situations of student mobility and higher education (HE) internationalisation is not a new topic. Much research has been conducted around international students learning experiences and their immersion within the academic and socio-cultural contexts during sojourns abroad (e.g. Alhassan, Abdulai & Ibrahim 2020; Coleman & Chafer 2011; Kinginger 2013; Beaven & Borghetti 2014; Jackson 2020). Such research has shown rather mixed findings with study abroad in itself no guarantee of linguistic or intercultural advances. The need for adequate preparation before studying abroad and support during sojourns is crucial (Jackson 2012; Alhassan, Abdulai, & Ibrahim 2020). Turning specifically to Chinese students, the focus of this study, Gill (2007) studied a group of Chinese students' intercultural adaptation in the UK and suggested that although there were many challenges identified, their experience was rewarding

and successful because 'intercultural adaptation is in itself a process of intercultural learning, which has the potential to bring about profound changes in overseas students themselves, transforming their understanding of the learning experience, self-knowledge, awareness of the other, and values and worldview' (2007 P.175). Similarly, Dai (2018) and Dai, Lingard & Reyes (2018) examined a group of Chinese students studying in an Australian university and argued that cultural differences play important roles in international higher education programmes. It was further suggested that instead of seeking to reduce the differences, these contradictions should be leveraged as learning opportunities to enrich intercultural experiences. Both researchers (Gill 2007 & Dai 2018) focused on the positive side of Chinese students' intercultural encounters, or at least regard intercultural experience as a learning opportunity leading to positive intercultural outcomes. However, in reality, research also showed it is a major concern that many Chinese students do not enjoy intercultural experiences

and mainly socialise with fellow nationals (Spencer-Oatley & Xiong 2006).

Indeed, many Chinese students mainly or totally rely on what we term, 'the Chinese speaking circle' while they study in the UK: renting from Chinese landlords, eating in Chinese restaurants, socialising on WeChat. This study is not focused on how the Chinese students use WeChat to communicate with their friends; however, research showed that WeChat has facilitated Chinese learners to address key communication barriers and challenges encountered when they study abroad (Sun, Smith & Cowley 2017). Chinese students themselves admitted 'we just talk in Chinese because we're all Chinese people' (Bond 2019) but at the same time are frequently reported feeling frustrated at the lack of intercultural opportunities (Spencer-Oatey, et al. 2017; Baker & Fang 2019). Furthermore, many British universities have been recruiting their highest number of Chinese students in history. In 2019-20, UK universities recruited 106,530 Chinese students, accounting for the largest international student cohort (UKCISA 2020). In many China-UK joint programmes especially final year direct entry programmes, the percentage of Chinese students can reach 90%. If over 90% of students in a classroom are from China, a small society would form. Chinese can become a second language alongside English in classroom discussions and social contexts. This is a challenge for students' English learning and intercultural experience in the UK, and this is an under-researched area.

As there are different waves of Chinese students' studying abroad in various historical backgrounds and many researchers have conducted similar research (Spencer-Oatey et al 2006; 2017; Dai 2018; Dai et al 2018; Gill 2007); however, no recent studies are conducted under the fast changing economic and social-cultural environments of China. Thus, the aims of this research are to examine the current Chinese students' intercultural experience in the UK, the role of the English language in this and their development of an intercultural identity. To make it specific, the gap addressed in the current study focuses on the link between the students' ability to build an intercultural identity and their attitude towards the language of the target culture, English. In addition, the current research is informed by recent

changes in the status of the English language and the relevant cultures due to the rise of China as a world superpower.

The paper begins with a review of the changing attitudes to English among Chinese students, highlighting increasing confidence in the use of Chinese. It reviews current research on international HE, underscoring its multilingual and intercultural nature. An outline is then provided of the key theoretical concepts informing this study: intercultural communication, intercultural adaptation, intercultural identity, and intercultural belongingness. Afterwards, the qualitative methodology, setting and participants for this study are explained. This is followed by a presentation of the findings according to the three research questions which address the above aims. These findings are also related back to the literature review. Finally, conclusions and implications for higher education practice and study abroad are offered.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. The changing attitudes to English and Chinese language

Chinese students' attitudes to English has gone through different phases, mainly influenced by policies linked to political, economic, and social development in the country in the last 50 years. As Hu (2005) recorded in the 1970s, English was regarded as the language of the enemy during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) because anything capitalist including their language was rejected by the communist nature of the country. However, since China's opening up in the 1980s, English has become a subject of paramount importance and English proficiency has been widely linked to higher salary and social status, which was a typical extrinsic instrumental motivation in foreign language learning.

Chinese students in general hold conservative attitudes towards varieties of English especially when they have had limited international experience (Yang & Liu 2016). The most popular English recognised in China are American English and British English and 'authenticity' of pronunciation is appreciated by many students, parents and teachers. The influence of native-speakerism is still big especially in recruiting teachers in China (Weng 2018). Notions such as World Englishes and English as a

lingua franca (ELF) are still unfamiliar to many students and English teachers (Fang 2017).

Nonetheless, in the last few years that the status of English in China has begun to be challenged. Fang (2017) noted in 2016 that the Chinese Ministry of Education decided to reduce the weighting of English in Gaokao from 150 to 100 points, and increase the weighting of Chinese language. On policy level, this means the government has begun to emphasize the importance of Chinese language and Chinese culture to its citizens. English is increasingly associated with a necessary communication tool rather than a subject. The underlying rationale is firmly linked to the strong economy China has. As Schneider (2014) notes:

> This decision is also fuelled by an increasing self-confidence, economically and politically, of the People's Republic of China in their relationship with the western world: a desire to privilege a renewed emphasis on Chinese cultural roots (and also language competence in Chinese) over access to western technology and an outward orientation (P. 254).

The less educated Chinese public tends to be critical about the usage of English in formal situations. This is reflected in the ban on the mixed usage of both English and Chinese in media. For example, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in China stated that the media should avoid English language and English acronyms such as WTO, CEO etc. The main reason was to keep the 'purity' of the Chinese language.

At the same time, Chinese language is becoming an influential world language and is offsetting the status of English in China. The Chinese government has set up a total of 516 Confucius Institutes and 1,076 Confucius Classrooms in 142 countries and regions, with the aim of teaching Chinese to the world (Confucius Institute Headquarters 2017). The initiative of 'One Belt, One Road' is another global development strategy adopted by the Chinese government to involve infrastructure development and investments in 152 countries and international organizations in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. During the process of trading and cultural exchange, Chinese language has been spreading worldwide. Researchers argue that

'members of a community of communication that has millions of speakers do not have the same impulse to learn foreign languages as those from smaller communities. Citizens of states which are economically successful often find that those who wish to trade with them learn their language' (Wright & Zheng 2017 p.174). China fits both criteria. To sum up, the changing attitudes to English, the rise of China and the increasing influence of Chinese language worldwide is challenging Chinese students' English learning motivation. This results in a paradoxical situation in which studying in UK universities is increasing, while the prestige of English language decreases. Apart from the Chinese people's changing attitudes to English learning, it is also necessary to point out that UK sometimes hold a negative and discriminatory attitude towards speakers of languages other than English, especially Chinese. For example, Whittington-Buckley (2016 P.3) concluded 'there are a need for the UK to expand their acceptance of other languages, especially non-EU languages and embrace cultural and linguistic integration'. The unequal attitude to non-EU languages is also consistent with the group contact and diversity research (Bowman & Nida 2011), which also suggested that positive effects of intergroup contact occur in contact situations characterized by four key conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities. Surely, these issues seem to be critical in reducing prejudice and discrimination.

2.2. International HE, language and intercultural communication

Multiculturalism is a key part of UK HE and this is especially so in regards to internationalisation and student mobility. One of the often stated aims of internationalising universities is to increase diversity through intercultural interactions among an international and multicultural campus population (e.g. Knight 2008). In such an environment, intercultural communication (explained below) becomes central to a successful educational experience since this will be an everyday practice for students and staff. This has been conceptualised through the notion of intercultural citizenship, with students at international universities promised in marketing materials to emerge as global or intercultural citizens, who are able to interact across communities from the local to the

global. The importance of the intercultural dimension and intercultural citizenship has been recognised in research (e.g. Byram et al. 2017) but less so in universities actual practices, beyond marketing, and it is typically not well integrated into university curricula. In a recent study of Chinese international students in the UK, participants reported little or no intercultural education either before or during their time at university which led to uneven development, and rejection in some cases, of intercultural communication and intercultural citizenship (Baker & Fang 2019).

The issue is further complicated in terms of language as typically students are taught and prepared using an idealised model of 'standard' English (Baker & Fang 2019), and they often hold conservative and restricted views of English. However, the linguistic reality of international universities in the UK is considerably more complex than this. English is used as a lingua franca in the majority of postgraduate teaching due to the diversity of students and staff with native English speakers likely to be a minority and in undergraduate teaching students and staff with different L1s are now a substantial minority (Jenkins 2013). Furthermore, English is typically one of many languages in use at an international university with international students L1s present, particularly for large groups of international students such as Chinese. Thus, multilingualism is the norm in international university language practices even if it is little recognised in policy or even stakeholders' perceptions (Jenkins & Mauranen 2019). Given international universities super diversity in terms of cultures and languages the links between a particular geographical location, the UK, a particular culture, British, and a particular language, 'standard British English' no longer hold (if they ever did). Indeed, this has led to a suggestion that international universities should be approached as transcultural and translingual since the borders and boundaries between linguistic and cultural practices are transcended in many everyday practices (Baker 2016; Jenkins & Mauranen 2019).

Therefore, if Chinese students are to be well prepared for this linguistic and culturally diversified education for their international study, most often through language classes, needs to incorporate this complexity. However, research reveals most ELT teaching in China as adhering to a narrow and idealised 'standard' English and students

expecting to interact with native English speakers, which has limited relevance to students' actual experiences at UK international universities (Fang & Baker 2018). British education philosophy emphasizes inclusivity and multiculturalism in international HE and Chinese students are a crucial part of a multicultural HE environment in the UK; thus, there emerges a valuable resource that needs to be researched and supported. For Chinese students themselves, they need to be inspired and informed on how to deal with language and culture issues during their intercultural transition from China to the UK if the reality of studying abroad is to meet their expectations.

2.3.   Intercultural communication and adaptation

Intercultural communication can be defined as communication where cultural and linguistic differences are perceived as relevant to the interaction by participants and/or researchers (Zhu 2014; Baker 2015). It is important to distinguish intercultural communication from earlier cross-cultural studies that identify cultural differences based on national level cultural comparisons. These have rightly been criticised for taking an overly simplistic and essentialist account of culture that marginalises or ignores cultural groupings beyond the nation and fails to recognise the dynamic and interactional nature of intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon 2001; Holliday 2011; Baker 2015). Nonetheless, previous research has shown that stereotyped cross-cultural approaches are still prevalent in much language and study abroad education (Gray 2010; Beaven & Borghetti 2015) and this is frequently the case for Chinese international students (Fang & Baker 2018).

Acculturation is another concept which needs to be unpacked given its prominence in study abroad literature. It can be defined as the process of learning and incorporating the values, beliefs, language, customs and even mannerisms of the new country that international students are studying in while still retaining their own distinct culture (Kim 2008). In addition, it depends on the acculturation patters: adaption, assimilation, and integration. Yet, given the multilingual and multicultural nature of international higher education it is difficult to establish a single culture that international students need to acculturate to. A possibly more relevant perspective is to view intercultural experiences as resulting in cultural

adaptation based on a continual process of what Kim terms acculturation and deculturation:

The act of acquiring something new is the suspending and, over a prolonged period, even losing some of the old habits at least temporarily. This interplay of acculturation and deculturation underlies the psychological evolution individuals undergo -from changes in "surface" areas such as outwardly expressive behaviours such as choices of music, food, and dress, to deeper-level changes in social role-related behaviours and fundamental values. (Kim 2015 P.5).

Importantly, this process results in the creation of new awareness that did not exist prior to the interaction in cultural encounters. The awareness may generate interests, drive and desire in changing the old self. The interplay of acculturation and deculturation stimulates the cycle of stress-adaptation-growth pattern (Kim 2017). That is, students encounter challenges when they come into close contact with a new culture, this stress is strong at the beginning of their intercultural journey. Kim's model shows intercultural adaptation is a spiral process which involves the interactions of learning new things and giving up old habits (at least temporarily). Moreover, an intercultural identity can be formed during this process.

2.4.   Intercultural identity and belongingness

Intercultural identity is used to identify an individual's ability to grow beyond their original culture and encompass a new culture, gaining additional insight into both cultures in the process (Kim 1994). It provides the fundamental means by which individuals develop insights into their new environment. Intercultural identity should not be viewed as static and monolithic and it should be "an open-ended, adaptive and transformative self-other orientation" (Kim 2008) because many societies are shifting towards pluralistic and multicultural so 'us and others' boundary is blurred. This is especially the case in international universities which, as discussed above, are typically very multilingual and multicultural.

Furthermore, 'Belonging is not just about multi-locality and relationships; political scientists remind us that belonging involves geopolitics and power' (Mueller 2009 in Glass 2018 P. 27). International students' sense of belonging is shaped by the restrictions they are subject to, including political, economic and social, legal restrictions (Glass 2018). The subtext of the question, "Where are you from?" is often "Why are you here?" It is not surprising that students who have less intercultural experience lack a sense of belonging. Research demonstrates that students from non-European countries, especially East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, perceive more challenges in both classroom and social activities than their Western European peers in Anglophone settings. Students who report these barriers also report significantly less social adaptation and sense of belonging (Glass, Gómez, and Urzua 2014). It is suggested that 'cultural events, leadership programmes, and community service organisations have been shown to enhance international students' sense of belonging and buffer against negative intercultural experiences.' (Glass 2018, P.30).

3.   THE METHODOLOGY

To address the research issues identified above the following research questions are formulated.

1.   How did the Chinese students feel while trying to communicate in English upon arrival to the UK?
2.   In what ways/manner do they communicate with other international students, local students and Chinese students and why?
3.   In what way have the Chinese students' intercultural experiences facilitate or hinder their development of an intercultural identity?

However, it should be noted that this final version of the questions was also influenced by the data collection and analysis (described below) and initial data analysis was based on the broad research aims described in the introduction, which is to examine Chinese students' intercultural experience in the UK and the role of English in this. This research is purely qualitative, as the purpose is not to achieve generalisation for statistical analysis but to collect rich data from participants' perspectives. However, it should be noted that the perspectives, the

questions asked and our assumptions and interpretations are no doubt influenced by our culture, position and context.

3.1.   Access and ethical consideration

To gain access to the students, a research ethic review form was submitted to the Research Ethic Committee of the author's university. Once approval was granted, participants were recruited through an introductory letter, which explained the aim of the research and the rationale. The participants were final year undergraduate Chinese students who came to the UK to study on a

degree course in Business and Humanities, in English as medium of instruction. Students were recruited from author A's classes. While there is a risk of bias and subjectivity due to the author's close relationship with the participants, the insider perspectives gained through the relationship balanced the limitation. Students' participation was voluntary and did not influence their academic marks. The participants' names are replaced by 'gender plus number' (e.g. male student 1 is noted as MS1) due to confidentiality. Interview transcripts and narrative essays were treated in a way that protected the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1: The respondent profiles

No.	Gender	Mode	Methods of collecting data	Year of graduation
1	Male	3+1	Semi-structured interview	2019
2	Male	2+2	Semi-structured interview	2019
3	Male	2+2	Semi-structured interview	2019
4	Female	2+2	Semi-structured interview	2019
5	Male	3+1	Semi-structured interview	2019
6	Male	3+1	Semi-structured interview	2019
7	Male	1+3	Unstructured narrative	2020
8	Male	3+1	Unstructured narrative	2020
9	Male	2+2	Unstructured narrative	2020
10	Male	3+1	Unstructured narrative	2020
11	Male	3+1	Unstructured narrative	2020
12	Male	3+1	Unstructured narrative	2020
13	Male	3+1	Unstructured narrative	2020
14	Male	2+2	Unstructured narrative	2020

3.2. Two phases of data collection

There were two phases of data collection. The first phase was semi-structured face-to-face interviews with six students towards the end of the academic year 2018-19. Interviews enabled the researcher to ask all the interviewees a series of predetermined questions but also allowed openness for follow up and new directions based on participants' responses (Dörnyei 2007). The interview topics related to students' expectations before coming to the UK, experiences with other students (local and international), socialisation with Chinese students, English use and learning and identification with the university. The main interview language was Chinese as this was the shared L1 of author A and the participants. Responses were typed during the interview and checked with the participants at the time.

During the second phase, newly arrived students were asked to write a reflective narrative on the topic 'my self-reflection of studying in UK, with reference to intercultural communication' towards the end of the academic year 2019-20. Ten students' narratives were received through email attachment. Narrative is an effective way to collect data on the students' intercultural experiences as 'narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of understanding experience. It is both a view of the phenomena of people's experiences and a methodology for narratively inquiring into experience' (Clandinin & Connelly 2004). Narration discourse is also a natural flow of the respondents' inner world, which can be difficult to enter in daily conversations or even in interviews. Moreover, narrative can expose hidden themes emerging from respondents themselves rather than given by the researcher. The narrative not only helps reduce the likelihood of bias in the predetermined questions set in the interview but also 'triangulates' the findings. 'Prolonged engagement, persistent observation and data collection triangulation are all techniques to address credibility of research' (Nowell et al. 2017). The narratives were written in Chinese to allow participants to express themselves in their mother tongue, which is crucial in allowing participants the freedom and articulation to explore their underlying attitudes, beliefs, values and feelings. It must be acknowledged that several female participants withdrew in the later phase of the research for no reasons. As a result, there were more male students than females who actively responded to the research call. This, to some extent, is a limitation of the study, but meanwhile, it respects the voluntary nature of participation.

3.3. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis approach to data analysis was adopted. Interviews were initially analysed through a top-down thematic analysis based on research aims. A bottom up coding approach (Blair 2015) was also used for themes not relating to the existing codes. The existing codes used in the interview were then transferred to the narrative analysis. This was complimented with a bottom-up coding approach as emergent new codes were also identified in the narratives. The new codes created in the second phase were then used to re-analyse the interview data following a top-down approach. The interviews and narratives were then analysed together according to themes. Similar themes were grouped together as evidence for major findings in relation to both the content and the meaning. The findings are presented below based on these themes. The coding process is shown in the appendix.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In presenting the findings on the Chinese students' intercultural experience in the UK, we considered the key themes that emerged from the data. The following discussion are divided into three themes.

4.1. Theme 1: English and English learning

In an answer to the first research question 'what do the Chinese students feel about their English language and their prior English learning in relation to studying in the UK?', like previous studies (e.g. Fang & Baker 2018), the findings indicate inadequate preparation of English language needed to cope in an international university in the UK. 'I don't understand' was the main reaction (Extracts 1 & 2).

Extract 1

'I don't understand what they said back to me, I just tell them what I think' (FS16 narrative).

Extract 2

> 'The person at the Immigration asked me many questions but I could only say yes yes yes. I gave all of my documents to him because I didn't know what he was talking about. (MS8 narrative).

This group of students lacked the appropriate learning of English, for example vocabulary and phrases, especially active vocabulary used in daily life in the UK. Many words they know are passive, 'stuck in brain' (Extract 3) and need to be activated in real communicating environment.

Extract 3

> 'I passed China National English Exam Band 4 and 6. But I can only grasp the keywords when I talk to them. I cannot fully understand. When I expressed myself, I felt many words were stuck in my brain, so I can only say single words.' (MS11 narrative).

This is also because their English preparation was mainly for IELTS (MS1 interview) rather than for communication. The differences between their previous English learning experiences and using English in the UK led to a lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority in many of the students as vividly illustrated in Extract 4.

Extract 4

> 'It is very weak to apply English into practice. Most Chinese students like me studied IELTS in short time in order to come to the UK. We memorize typical sentence structures for IELTS oral in order to pass. But we don't know how to use it. We can only say words we know, the one we don't know still are unknown, let alone go out to socialise with British! Over time, there is a negative impact on us. We feel inferior' (MS1 interview).

Although some respondents mentioned the English they learned in China was American English (Extract 5), the issue of 'I don't understand' cannot be simply explained by accent. Accent is apparently used as an excuse of not being able to understand essential English in basic communication settings.

Extract 5

> 'I asked myself, is this British accent? English taught in China are American English but what they said here is British English. Many words sound familiar, but I just can't remember' (MS9 narrative).

Unlike some strong Chinese students with extrovert motivations in studying abroad in Bond's (2019) research, who had begun to disregard their 'existing understanding of the signifier in favour of a new one for the new context' (Land, Rattray & Vivian P. 204), for this group, language apparently created an impassable barrier to initiating intercultural communication. This confirms the important distinction between academic English and social uses of English with a lack of confidence in the later influencing Chinese students more and resulting in negative impressions of their time in the UK. The inability to communicate clearly demotivated Chinese students' further engagement and led to a turn back to the Chinese-speaking circle (see also Wright & Zheng 2017). This lack of interest in English may in part be due to the reduced motivation for in-depth learning of English and increased confidence in Chinese as an important global language (Wright & Zheng 2017). Some students simply do not feel the need of practising English especially if they have no intention to work for English speaking companies.

There may also have been an assumption that improved English would be a natural by-product of studying in the UK; however, as much previous research has demonstrated (e.g. Coleman & Chafer 2011), studying abroad is not a guarantee of improved foreign language proficiency. The lack of motivation to improve their English was problematic since it clearly led to difficulties in communicating, a lack of intercultural connections and a feeling of isolation and failure for many students. Furthermore, the influence of native-speakerism is still big in China (Weng 2018). Notions such as World Englishes and English as a lingua franca (ELF) are still unfamiliar to many students and English teachers (Fang 2017). There seemed to be little awareness that English functions as an academic lingua franca in international universities in the UK and that standard British English is not necessary or even always appropriate (Jenkins 2014). Indeed, had such an awareness been present, students might have been more confident in their own use of English and formed fewer negative impressions of their time in the UK.

4.2. Theme 2: Intercultural relations and adaptation

As regards the second research question, 'to what extent do they communicate with other international students, local students and Chinese students and why?' a number of important points emerge. Firstly, as noted above, the lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in English hindered their willingness to engage in intercultural communication. Secondly, although they all had some sort of intercultural communication experience, many were not so positive. These negative intercultural experiences were often related to perceived discrimination and stereotyping from local students (Extracts 6 & 7) (see also Alharbi & Smith 2018).

Extract 6

'I found this from chatting with my English flatmates, their understanding to China still stayed at the last century! They believe China is not so rich, many students in the UK are from rich families. I discussed this with my Chinese friends, and we all believe the higher social status English person tends to think China is a threat, the low to middle level of English people believe China is still in the state before liberation (1949)' (MS11 narrative).

Extract 7

'I feel English do see us from a coloured glass. They probably feel we are small, can be bullied, but rich. I also feel some reasons actually come from us. Many Chinese students here are full of negative power. Actually, this prevents us communicating well with the locals and this is why the status of Chinese in the UK is not at the level it should be' (MS9 narrative).

Some Chinese students, particularly male students, are sensitive to other people's attitudes to China and themselves. These students who are the 'post 90s' generation in China were born during the fast development of China and their parents are typically better off and middle class so for these students' China is a powerful country with good economy. When they were confronted with criticisms, they felt angry and tended to relate their negative experiences to these stereotypes. Similar findings were found by MS9 (Extract 7) although he was more nuanced in his interpretation of negative experiences attributing it to misunderstanding and miscommunication of both local and Chinese students.

This resulted in students returning to the Chinese circle and only communicating and socialising with their Chinese co-nationals. Similar to the findings reported in (Baker & Fang 2019), by staying in their Chinese comfort zone rather than stretching themselves to adapt to a new environment their opportunities to develop intercultural awareness were curtailed. Even when students were more willing to engage in intercultural communication, the large number of Chinese students and the Chinese circle in UK proved a difficult barrier for them to overcome (Extract 8).

Extract 8

'I feel difficult to involve in the local circle, because sometimes I can understand their words, what they are talking about or what mood, but I can't catch the deep meaning or the laughing points. If you do not understand, they feel you are not interesting to talk to. Plus, I can't express myself clearly, making both tiring' (MS7 narrative).

As a result of the above, this Chinese group is separated or marginalised according to Kim's (2017) intercultural adaption strategies which is not the intention of the articulation programme. However, it should be noted that the lengths of studying in a foreign country is crucial for intercultural adaptation. It is only one-year study in the UK for most of them, although many of them may continue postgraduate studies, many of their expectation is to get a degree and go home (Extract 9).

Extract 9

'Many people hold an attitude of 'get the degree and go home'. Some are not coming to the discussion or do nothing.' (MS2 interview).

It should also be noted that the students in this study predominantly focused on communication with 'home' students and in the few instances when they reported communication with other international students the experiences appeared more positive (Extract 10).

Extract 10

'This English boy flatmate shows cold attitude to me all the time, so does the English girl flatmate. I thought it is discrimination initially. The Indian girl flatmate chats to me every time, which makes me feel warm'. (MS11 narrative).

This would suggest that greater awareness of the international nature of HE and more understanding of the need to communicate with multilingual and multicultural groups through English used as an academic lingua franca would benefit students (Jenkins & Mauranen 2019). In particular, this may help to give them greater confidence in their own voice and result in more positive attitudes to intercultural communication. At the same time further education for both home students and international students in intercultural communication are needed to make them aware of these issues and especially to avoid stereotyping and discrimination (Baker 2016).

There are some students who still missed the life of China and were not well prepared to start a different life in the UK. Many of the differences they mentioned included what might be viewed as superficial or surface level cultural aspects such as nightlife, shopping mall closing times and English pubs but which combined made for a very different and difficult experience as described by FS4.

Extract 11

'In China 11-12 pm at midnight are still very bright on the road, surrounded by food and noise. Here some roads have no lights at all. The only place to go is pub. Most Chinese students like KTVs, cinemas, shopping malls, night markets in China. Chinese students would not go to pubs' (FS4 interview).

Other aspects which student noticed as different were related to studying and particularly the higher degree of independent learning and responsibility in the UK (Extract 12).

Extract 12

'China has 'fudaoyuan', to urge you to finish your work and any other issues. Here has personal tutor but if you did not contact him, he would never contact you'. (MS3 interview).

For many of the students the experiences of new people and environments were negative and led to a lack of interest in intercultural interactions. As a result, unsurprisingly, some of the students reported feeling lonely (Extract 13).

Extract 13

'We are facing an unfamiliar place and people, we have nothing to do, we feel emptiness. No going out, we stay at home, play computer games and watch American series, not take the initiative to communicate with others' (MS15 narrative).

However, not all the students reported wholly negative impressions of the new environment, MS13 (Extract 14) reported feeling it is their first time living in a truly open society and culture and, hence, enjoying the experience of openness intercultural experiences often result in.

Extract 14

'UK has an open campus; the environment you are in is actually society. When I noticed this, I feel very cool' (MS13 narrative).

This positive intercultural experience was the exception and the majority of students, as shown in the previous extracts, felt that their time in the UK was not successful from an intercultural perspective. They typically found it difficult to feel comfortable in a new cultural setting and also appeared to suffer from a degree of stereotyping from other students and these factors often led them to 'stay at home' (Extract 13). The findings also highlight the difficulty of intercultural adaptation (Kim 2017). That is, students encounter challenges when they come into close contact with a new culture, and this stress is strong at the beginning of their intercultural journey, as is the case with these students.

4.3.   Theme 3: Identity and belongingness

The last research question 'how do their intercultural experiences relate to changes in their identity (as a member of the university and/or as an intercultural or global citizen)?' shows a strong sense of national identity and low sense of belongingness to university in UK or intercultural citizenship as shown above (e.g. Extracts 8

& 9). The respondents clearly felt uncomfortable in the change from their L1 'home' identity to other identities associated with English and being an international student. But many do not seem to understand why they have this feeling and what has caused this feeling, so the only response they have is to avoid intercultural encounters and choose to live in their comfort zone in the Chinese circle. The current large number of Chinese students in class makes this retreat to the option of their L1 identity easier and may hinder the development of other identities. As made clear in study abroad research (e.g. Jackson & Nyoni 2012) it is crucial that students are given support before, during and after their time at an international university if they are to be able to properly process their experiences and to develop as intercultural citizens. However, in this study, as in other studies at UK universities involving Chinese students (e.g. Spencer-Oatey et al. 2017; Baker & Fang 2019), it seems that such support was lacking or inadequate and it was not mentioned by students.

As a result of these unsuccessful and sometimes unpleasant intercultural encounters, many of these students sought comfort from the social circle they felt most familiar with, namely the Chinese circle. Students frequently reported that they found it easier to communicate and make friends with other Chinese students (Extract 15 & 16).

Extract 15

'I felt amiable to make friends who have a closer skin colour to us. No matter the Chinese northerners or southerners, we all speak Putonghua (Mandarin) (MS9 narrative).

Extract 16

'I prefer to work with Chinese as communication is easy' (MS6 interview).

In the case of some students (MS1, extract 17), there was even an ethnic and racial dimension to this separation from others and attachment to other Chinese students.

Extract 17

'When I see their eyes and faces, it always reminds me that I'm a foreigner. I knew Europe and USA are strong since my childhood, but when I see their faces, I feel they are not friendly and difficult to

approach' (MS1 interview).

Yet, this draw towards familiar groups and communities was not just experienced by Chinese students, as can be seen in the extract below, it was perceived as a problem for many different groups resulting in student cliques as described by FS4.

Extract 18

'Foreigners think we stay together in a small circle. From our point of view, they also do the same-stay together in their circle' (FS4 interview).

However, even though the Chinese social group was the only one available to students, students did not always feel a strong sense of identification with other Chinses students. Some students mentioned their friendship within the Chinese circle was different to that in China. It was at a more superficially level that was not a 'heart to heart' friendship as MS12 (Extract 19) describes it.

Extract 19

'Chinese like to stay together but it seems not really unite each other. Most Chinese students found it difficult to develop a 'heart to heart' friendship. There are many strange students around. Everyone wears a mask to communicate, to make friends'. (MS12 narrative).

Difficulties with relying on a Chinese social circle also extended to academic work. Group work is not popular in China and hence, as MS2 notes, 'really not suitable for Chinese students' (Extract 20), yet due to a lack of contacts with other students, they had no choice but to work with Chinese students to survive.

Extract 20

'Group work is really not suitable for Chinese students. The biggest problem is we do not know each other'. (MS2 interview).

Even if students were interested in expanding their network of contacts, the difficulty of breaking out of the Chinese circle was articulately expressed by MS7 in Extract 8. Furthermore, the presence of so many Chinese international students seemed to inhibit some students' willingness to adapt their behaviour to a more international environment and hence restricted their ability to break out of the Chinese circle.

Extract 21

> *'If the classroom contains just a few students from China, I will speak up. But interestingly, if the majority of the classroom is Chinese students, I feel I am sitting in the classroom in China, so nobody speaks although we know the answers' (MS10 narrative).*

While most of the students referred to local British students when discussing intercultural interactions, on the few occasions that they referred to other international students it was often in more positive terms. They were viewed as 'easier to communicate with' (MS3 Extract 22), made them 'feel warm' (MS11 Extract 3) and crucially they felt a sense of identification (belonging) with them (FS16 Extract 23). However, this was not expanded on in-depth by students and such positive response were much less frequent than the negative ones.

Extract 22

> *'I found I played nicely with Muslim students as they are easier to communicate with' (MS3 interview).*

Extract 23

> *'I feel I belong to the classroom when there are international students in'. (FS16 narrative).*

In sum, for many of the students, difficulties with English, negative impressions of their few intercultural interactions and the difficulty of breaking out of the Chinese circle meant that they did not develop a sense of belonging to the wider student community at the university or an identity as a successful intercultural communicator and global citizen.

5.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The small scale of this study means that it is not possible to generalise from this cohort of students in a single setting to all UK universities and even less to the highly diverse group of Chinese international students. Furthermore, the short time scale of the study means that we have only captured a snapshot of these students' experiences and it may be that their impressions of studying abroad in the UK change given

more time for reflection and processing. Nonetheless, a number of clear themes emerge from this study that may resonate in other UK universities with similar student populations. A core finding has been to show the power of what we term the 'Chinese circle' which provides Chinese students with a comfortable and familiar group of peers while in the UK, but also presents a barrier to engaging in intercultural communication and developing more intercultural identities. Contributing factors to this pull of the Chinese circle include a perceived lack of proficiency in English, especially in social settings, negative intercultural experiences, often because of stereotyping or discrimination from local students, and a lack of awareness of the processes of identity change and development. This led to negative impressions of their time in the UK for many students who wanted to integrate into the wider student community but did not know how. Thus, this group of students need educational support and guidance in preparation for study abroad and during their time in the UK. In particular, in contrast to simplistic views of 'standard' English and socialising only with 'local' native speaking students, they need greater awareness of international UK universities as multicultural and multilingual environments with very mixed groups of students. Moreover, given the reported discrimination from local students, such education and support need to be provided for all students, not only international students. The increasing number of Chinese students present in the UK means that these educational issues should be a central concern for many universities.

The finding of this research provides practical implications for the Chinese students to increase the awareness of developing their intercultural identities, shifting the focus from cross-cultural communication to intercultural communication as the UK higher education is multicultural. Universities should provide more international students activities to encourage conversations interculturally (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber 2017) and also enhance curriculum design making sure intercultural communication modules are in place (Baker 2016). Universities can draw upon their multilingual and multicultural resources to develop critical intercultural awareness among students, for example, to encourage language learners who see the intercultural environment and multicultural diversity as resources and who are aware of the potential of turning these resources into

valuable assets. This can be facilitated through utilizing authentic and cultural-contextualized case studies in curriculum, organizing language exchange partners and also managing intercultural group works (e.g. Baker 2016; Byram et al 2017; Spencer-Oatley & Dauber 2017; Jenkins & Mauranen 2019). The present study is not without limitations. While this study is mainly focused on the Chinese students in articulation programme, it would be desirable to include the intercultural experiences of other international students and unravel the complexity of ethnicity, identity, and language involved in intercultural communication, within the increasing diversification/ multiculturalism of higher education. It is also suggested that universities should diversify their international recruitment, enhance intercultural education and training provided for all international students before and during their studies abroad.

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APPENDIX
Theme 1: English and English learning

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning	Code	Themes	Final Theme
'I don't understand what they said back to me, I just tell them what I think' (MS1, interview)	Don't understand, only say what I think	Don't understand; one-way communication	English 'input' and 'output'	English and English learning
'I passed China National English Exam Band 4 and 6. But I can only grasp the keywords when I talk to them. I cannot fully understand. When I expressed myself, I felt many words were stuck in my brain, so I can only say single words.' (MS11, narrative)	Passed College English Band 6 but can only grasp key words; can only say single words	Can only grasp key words; say single words		
'We can only say words we know, the one we don't know still are unknown, let alone go out to socialise with British! (MS1, interview) 'When I expressed myself, I felt many words were stuck in my brain, so I can only say single words'.	Can only say words we know; what we don't know are unknown; Words stuck in brain	Words stuck		
'I was so nervous when I did my first presentation during PSE course as we had no presentation requirement when I studied in China, neither group work' (MS2)	No presentation and teamwork practices in China	Presentation and or teamwork	Expectations and reality on English and English learning	
'It is very weak to apply English into practice. Most Chinese students like me studied IELTS in short time in order to come to the UK. Agencies helped us apply for universities and we know nothing about things we should know. We memorize typical sentence structures for IELTS oral in order to pass. But we don't know how to use it.	Studied IELTS in short time; agencies help us apply; memorize to pass exam, don't know how to use English.	Agency; memorization; don't know how		
'I feel I can discuss academic topics in classroom but feel difficult to talk about daily life in other settings. I feel I can fly but I can't walk'. (MS11, narrative)	Can discuss academic topics but feel difficult to talk about daily life.	English use in non-academic context		
'I tried to chat with my flatmates, but I feel they don't correct my English. They feel it is okay as long as they can understand. So, it is difficult to improve my oral.' (MS5, narrative)	Flatmates not help correct English	Help correct/improve English		
'I asked myself, is this British accent? English taught in China are American English but what they said here is British English. Many words sound familiar, but I just can't remember' (MS9, narrative)	English learned in China was American English.	Accent	Standard English	
'Home students are mainly interested in speed of delivery and an accent which is easy to. Actually, they do not care about our grammar or accent (FS16, interview)	Home students do not care about grammar.	Grammar		
'I noticed in group discussions with home students, home students' English is short and concise while ours is lengthy and complicated. Sometimes this makes it difficult to continue a long conversation'.	Home students' English is short and concise while ours is lengthy and complicated.	Different Englishes		
'I feel difficult to involve in the local circle, because sometimes I can understand their words, what they are talking about or in what mood, but I can't catch the deep meaning or the laughing points. If you do not understand, they feel you are not interesting to talk to. Plus, I can't express myself clearly, making both tiring' (MS1, interview)	Can understand words but not deep meaning, feel not interesting to talk; tiring	Not interesting; tiring	English issue but due to cultures and contexts	

Theme 2: Intercultural relations and adaptation

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning	Code	Themes	Final Theme
'I feel communicating with British students is serious, distant, like doing business in China, false, no social satisfaction.' (MS3, interview)	Serious, distant, doing business, false, no social satisfaction	Psychological feeling of communicating with home students	Relating, belonging and searching for a space	Intercultural relations and adaptation
'Some home students look warm and friendly but the more you know them, they are not as friendly as you thought. Chinese students look cold but if you know them longer you find they are warm inside' (MS9, narrative.)	Home students look warm and friendly but not as friendly as thought			
'I found I played nicely with Muslim students as they are easier to communicate with' (MS3, interview)	Played nicely with Muslim.	Feeling of communicating with other international students		
'Another time, I cooked in the kitchen. ... He asked me if China nowadays is very powerful. I considered I'm in UK, so I was moderate. I said, no, Chinese people are better living now but compared to UK, still has distance. Then he looked at me and said you are a liar. Immediately I felt angry because in my hometown, to be called a liar is a very rude and insulting… (MS11, narrative)	Being called a liar in kitchen; felt awkward.	Taking respect seriously	Cross-cultural incident	
'I feel English do see us from a coloured glass. They probably feel we are small, can be bullied, but rich. After some months of study and living, I also feel some reasons actually come from us…' (MS9, narrative)	Being seen from a coloured glass			
'I found this from chatting with my English flatmates, their understanding to China still stayed at the last century! They believe China is not so rich, many students in UK are from rich families. I discussed this with my Chinese friends, and we all believe the higher social status English person tends to think China is a threat, the low to middle level of English people believe China is still in the state before liberation (1949)' (MS11, narrative.)	English flatmates understanding to China still stayed at the last century. People with different social status have different views on China.	Cares what people thinks about China		
'In China 11-12 in the midnight are still very bright on the road, surrounded by food and noise. Here some roads have no lights at all. The only place to go is pub. Most Chinese students like KTVs, cinemas, shopping malls, night markets in China. Chinese students would not go to pubs' (FS4, interview).	Different social habits	Lack of commonality	influence of the Chinese home culture	
'I chose to live in university halls of residence as I thought I should have opportunities to get contact with them, as we share a bathroom and a kitchen. But now I regret it because we have nothing in common, only say hello. I feel lonely' (MS2, interview).	Chose to live in halls but regretted; realised we have nothing in common.			
'Sometime there is no class the whole day, which is unbelievable in China'. (MS2, interview).	No class the whole day	Still miss living in the Chinese comfort zone		
'China has Fudaoyuan, to urge you to finish your work and any other issues. Here has personal tutor but if you did not contact him, he would never contact you'. (FS4, interview).	China Fudaoyuan vs. UK personal tutor			
'We are facing an unfamiliar place and people, we have nothing to do, we feel emptiness. No going out, we stay at home, play computing games and watch American series, not take initiative to communicate with others' (MS1, interview)	Unfamiliar place and people, feel emptiness, not take initiate to communicate	Not taking initiative	Attitude in Intercultural communication	
'In many situations, we do not understand, but we feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat, so we okay everything. Maybe we do not want to trouble people or maybe due to our own dignity' (MS6, interview)	Embarrassed to ask, okay everything, not take initiative to ask			

Theme 3: Identity and belongingness

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning	Code	Themes	Final Theme
'I felt amiable to make friends who have a closer skin colour to us. No matter the Chinese northerners or the southerners, we all speak Putonghua (Mandarin) (MS9, narrative)	Feel amiable to friends who have a closer skin colour to us	Identity judgement based on physical look (skin colour, eyes, faces, native language spoken)	Identity recognition and transition in a new environment	Identity and belongingness
'When I see their eyes and faces, it always reminds me that I'm a foreigner. I knew Europe and USA are strong since my childhood, but when I see their faces, I feel they are not friendly and difficult to approach' (MS1, interview).	Seeing their eyes and faces, reminds me I'm a foreigner			
'This English boy flatmate shows cold attitude to me all the time, so does the English girl flatmate. I thought it is discrimination initially. The Indian girl flatmate chats to me every time, which makes me feel warm. (MS11, narrative)	English students' attitudes and Indian flatmates attitude	Identity judgement based on national identity (English, Indian, etc.)		
'I felt much easier to make British friends when I was playing games in the virtual world as they don't know who you are in the real world'. (MS2, interview)	*Easier to make British friends when I was playing games in the virtual world*			
'Foreigners think we stay together in a small circle. From our point of view, they also do the same-stay together in their circle' (FS4, interview)	Stay in small circle but others do the same.	Excuses of staying with Chinese co-nationals	The Chinese circle identity	
'I prefer to work with Chinese as communication is easy' (MS6, interview)	Communication is easy with Chinese			
'Chinese like to stay together but it seems not really unite each other. Most Chinese students found it difficult to develop a 'heart to heart' friendship. There are many strange students around. Everyone wears a mask to communicate, to make friends. (MS12, narrative)	Stay together but not unite each other	Contradictory attitudes working with Chinese co-nationals		
'Group work is really not suitable for Chinese students. The biggest problem is we do not know each other. Many people hold an attitude of 'get the degree and go home'. Some are not coming to the discussion or do nothing. This is probably related to traditional Chinese competitive education-lacked cooperation. (MS2, interview)	Not engage in group work			
'I feel I belong to the classroom when there are all international students in'. (FS16, narrative)	Belong to international students' group	Sense of belongingness	Third space identity	
'I only feel sense of belongingness when I swiped my student card at the library which gives me the access to the resources.' (FS4, interview)	Feel belongingness when swiping library card			