

## Long-Term Chinese Students' Transitional Experiences in UK Higher Education: A Particular Focus on their Academic Adjustment

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The global population of students pursuing studies abroad continues to grow, and consequently their intercultural experiences are receiving greater research attention. However, research into long-term student sojourners' academic development and personal growth is still in its infancy. A parallel mixed method study was designed to investigate the academic adjustment of international Chinese students who had studied in the UK for more than three years. Using interview data collected from both Chinese students and British teachers and questionnaire data collected from a wider sample of the Chinese students, the researcher examined the relationship between their academic, psychological, and social adjustment and provided a more holistic view of Chinese students' intercultural adaptation process. The results showed that the big challenge for the Chinese students during their early adjustment was to deal with the different perceptions of teaching and learning within their own culture and within the culture of their host country. Changes were found in their language ability, learning approaches, and sense of self over time. In particular, social support and their agency as a learner played an important role in their academic development.

Universities around the world have become more internationalized. According to the UNESCO statistics (2014), the number of international students in tertiary education increased significantly from 2 million in 2000 to 4 million in 2012. In the case of the UK, Chinese students make up the largest group of international students, and the number of Chinese students is continuing to rise, with a 44% increase predicted over the next decade (British Council, 2013). Research on the intercultural experience of Chinese students has been conducted to explore various issues, such as psychological consequences of cultural change (e.g., Gallagher, 2013), language skills (e.g., K. Wang, 2015), learning shock (e.g., Gu & Maley, 2008), and social networks and support (e.g., Yu & Wright, 2016), and it has also reported considerable difficulties in adjusting to academic and social life and dealing with life stress in the UK. Chinese students' academic, psychological, and social adjustments appear to intertwine together, but there has been a lack of empirical research to address the interrelationship. The study abroad experience also provides students with the opportunity for personal growth. While researchers have attempted to examine the impact of the study abroad experience in terms of students' intercultural development, much of the work focused on the outcomes of the study abroad experience on student sojourners rather than their actual adjustment processes (Beaven & Spencer-Oatey, 2016). In particular, long-term (i.e., more than three years) student sojourners' transitional experiences are often neglected. Furthermore, 'the Chinese students' are often viewed as culturally determined; however, this seems to stereotype international Chinese students' characteristics (Gill, 2007). There is a growing

literature about considerable variation in the way Chinese students adjust to an unfamiliar culture (Li, 2012; Wu, 2015), and more insightful analysis of individual Chinese students' intercultural experiences needs to be provided.

In response, a mixed-method study presented in this paper offers not only insights into Chinese students' intercultural experiences, but also an in-depth account of how long-term student sojourners, who had already studied in UK higher education for a few years and been continuing a transition, change and develop over time. In particular, it addresses the issue of intercultural adaptability and continuity. By comparison with other intercultural sojourners, such as business people and volunteers, academic life appears to be a major concern among international student sojourners (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Therefore, this study aims to explore Chinese students' academic adjustment, as well as the relationship among their academic, psychological, and social adjustments, in order to provide a holistic view of their intercultural adaptability process. It seeks to address the following three research questions:

- RQ1: What are the key challenges for Chinese students studying in the UK?
- RQ2: How do Chinese students cope with their academic challenges?
- RQ3: How do Chinese students change as they undergo the process of intercultural adjustment?

### **Intercultural Experiences of Chinese Students**

Academic adjustment plays an important role in their academic success and overall intercultural

experiences (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). International students experience challenges, especially those students whose learning culture distinguishes greatly from the host culture. Academic problems and difficulties faced by Chinese students while studying abroad have been addressed, such as difficulties adjusting to unfamiliar teaching methods, the problem of active participation in communicative activities, and mismatches between the perceived roles of teachers and students (e.g., Wu & Hammond, 2011; Xiong, 2005). When Chinese students experienced a loss of their familiar culture in the new educational environment, researchers also reported different psychological consequences of culture changes among them, such as confusion, anxiety, and helplessness (e.g., Tian & Lowe, 2013). Much of the work appears to focus on the academic challenges experienced by short-term student sojourners or the learning shock during Chinese students' initial contact with the host culture, but few studies have explored the transitional experiences of long-term student sojourners who have studied abroad for more than three years. By comparison with short-term sojourners, long-term sojourners tend to experience more challenges, conflicts, and changes during their adjustment (Sobre-Denton & Hart, 2008). To explore the complexity of academic adjustment further, besides investigating long-term students' academic challenges during their initial time period, the dynamic processes of their adjustment over time could be an important aspect for researchers to investigate.

Attempts have been made to explore factors that affect Chinese students' academic adjustment. Apart from English language proficiency, Chinese students' cultural and educational backgrounds are considered as important factors (Jin & Hill, 2001; L. Wang, 2015). Drawing on research on work-related values in more than 50 countries, Hofstede (1980) compared Western with non-Western countries' cultural values and identified four key dimensions of country-level variation across different cultural groups, including high-low power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and high-low uncertainty avoidance. The Chinese culture was characterized by high power distance, collectivism, and long-term orientation. By contrast, low power distance, high individualism, and low long-term orientation tended to be found in the British culture. Hofstede (1986) further suggested cultural differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction with reference to these four dimensions. For example, in the collectivist societies, individual students would avoid speaking up in class and prefer to bring harmony to interactive learning situations as they tend to maintain strong ties in a group and give priority to the needs of the group, whereas in the individualist societies, individual students are willing to speak up in large groups and view confrontation in learning situations

positively as they are likely to keep loose ties between individuals who give priority to their own needs. While the dimensions have been used to explain behavior differences in many cross-cultural studies, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) cautioned that individual differences in each cultural group should be taken into consideration in order to avoid cultural stereotypes and that Hofstede's dimensions are likely to explain a tendency at the country level as a whole rather than individual behavior.

With regard to the Chinese culture, Confucian traditions remain influential in the basic values of Chinese civilization and learning culture and can have a significant impact on Chinese students' learning approaches and views of classroom roles (Holmes, 2006). For example, the Confucian educational tradition emphasizes memorization and repetition, and memorizing classic texts is strongly supported by many Chinese teachers and students (Chien, 2014). Chinese mechanical learning without meaningful understanding is often questioned by western researchers (e.g., Martinsons & Martinsons, 1996; Turner 2013), and they claim that the students' over-reliance on the classics could lead them to be less involved in critical thinking. This seems to be one of the reasons why international Chinese students encounter difficulties in writing papers to earn better grades. However, westerners might mistake repetition for rote learning; many Chinese learners do achieve academic success through using traditional Chinese learning styles (Biggs, 1996; Wu, 2015). Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1996) found that memorization and understanding were integrated in the Chinese learning culture, and they argued that "memorizing was what was understood and understanding was through memorization" (p. 77). There appear to be both strengths and weaknesses of Chinese approaches to learning.

"The Chinese learner" is often viewed as culturally determined. A study by Sun and Richardson (2012) was conducted at six British business schools to compare the British and mainland Chinese students with regard to their perceptions and approaches to studying in UK higher education. The study revealed that there were no significant differences between the two groups in their learning approaches. There was also no evidence in the Chinese students for a distinctive approach to studying that combined memorialization with understanding. Like British students, Chinese students were also less likely to use learning approaches in isolation. Rather, they tended to combine different learning approaches. The authors argued that variation in students' learning approaches appeared to be attributed to characteristics of their educational context (e.g., teaching methods) rather than to characteristics of their culture or ethnicity. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence in the literature to suggest that factors other than cultural

backgrounds alone influence student sojourners' adaptive process, including their goals and motivation (e.g., Wu, 2015); their specific learning contexts (e.g., K. Wang, 2015) and individual personality (e.g., Ryan, 2013). Hence, the influence of cultural and educational backgrounds in their academic adjustment should not be overemphasised.

Intercultural adjustment is a dynamic process which involves stress, challenges, and also changes and growth. This transitional experience was primarily looked at by Oberg (1960). His famous U-curve model was designed to explain sojourners' ups and downs of adaptation in a new culture. This model focuses on sojourners' emotional reactions to cultural change: initial reactions of curiosity towards the new culture, followed by stereotypical feelings towards the host culture and the feelings of confusion, and then recovery and adjustment. The U-curve pattern particularly offers a common sense for understanding intercultural adjustment from a psychological perspective and remains influential in this field (Ward et al. 2001). However, scholars argue that the model is over-generalized and does not recognize a high degree of variability of intercultural adjustment (e.g., Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Brown & Holloway, 2008). Adler (1975) provided a further explanation of intercultural adjustment with progressive depth. According to his model, sojourners tend to follow an initial contact with a new culture, pass a period of confusion of the new culture, and then enter into a phase of the development of coping skills towards personal growth. Unlike the U-curve model, this model emphasizes the growth-facilitating function rather than the problematic nature of intercultural experience. Kim (2001) also viewed the intercultural experience as an important aspect of culture learning and self-development. Her model highlights that intercultural adjustment is a cyclic and continuous process rather than a smooth and linear process, and it reveals the complexities of sojourners' adjustment process. However, there has been a lack of empirical research to explore the dynamic interrelations between international students' learning performance and their changed learning environment from a developmental perspective, as well as provide a complex picture of their adaptation through study abroad (Wu, 2015).

Student sojourners' learning approaches and strategies appear not to be fixed and can change within a different cultural environment over time. Vygotskian sociocultural theory has the potential to contribute towards the understanding of their change. The theory highlights the dynamic interaction between learning approaches and learners' cultural, historical, and institutional settings and suggests that learning approaches and strategy use can be mediated through culturally constructed artifacts (e.g., learning materials)

and sociocultural practices (e.g., classroom tasks) (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Wertsch, 1985). A study by Gao (2006) revealed that Chinese students studying in Britain adopted different learning approaches and strategies from those studying in China, and they developed their strategies in order to adapt to a new learning context. From a sociocultural perspective, he stressed the important role that mediating agents (such as language teachers and friends) and mediating objects (e.g., assessment methods) play in their academic development. This shift, from focusing on the problems which international Chinese students encountered to the process of how they manage academic challenges in relation to their learning contexts and how their coping strategies develop over time, has been seen as an important development in future research.

### Method

This paper describes a parallel mixed-methods study which explored the experiences of Chinese students studying in the UK. The research project is taken aimed to provide a deeper understanding of intercultural transitions of long-term student sojourners from an academic, social, and personal point of view. In order to achieve the aim, interviews with both Chinese students and British teachers were carried out. Meanwhile, a questionnaire was conducted with a wider sample of the Chinese students. Both interview and questionnaire data were collected and analyzed in a complementary manner.

### Participants

Interviews were conducted with 6 Chinese students and 6 British teachers at two British universities. Also, a questionnaire was collected from 82 Chinese students at five British universities. The choice of the five universities was related to a high proportion of international Chinese students, and the universities were also geographically accessible. The Chinese students who participated in this study had completed an undergraduate degree in the UK and were taking a master's course or doing a PhD. Some of the students also took a one-year International Foundation Program prior to starting a degree course. Their length of stay in the UK ranged from 4 to 6 years, and their age ranged from 24 to 27. The subjects which the students were studying varied, such as Chemistry, History and Finance. With regard to the six interview participants, the sample selection was based on two criteria. Firstly, all participants had taken a pre-university course (e.g., International Foundation Programme) and had been living in the UK for over 5 years. Secondly, in order to provide richer insights into academic experiences of international Chinese students, the researcher chose the six participants from a variety of majors, both science

and non-science. The British teachers who participated in the teacher interview were teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and specialized in different subjects. Their teaching experience of Chinese students was all more than three years. The reason for choosing these six British teachers as the participants is due to the fact that they all had rich experience in teaching international students as well as working closely with international Chinese students in UK higher education.

### Data Collection

The data collection for this project lasted for approximately 7 months, between March 2010 and September 2010. A total of 18 in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with 6 Chinese students. An interview guide was used to help the students to organize their memory and reflect on their experiences in a more narrative way. The interview questions were derived from the following 6 issues:

1. Expectations prior to departure,
2. Academic challenges and stress,
3. Views about the teaching and learning that they receive,
4. Daily life and social life issues,
5. Coping strategies and adjustment, and
6. Perceived changes and personal growth.

The students were encouraged to talk about any issues that they wanted to address or considered important. The in-depth narrative interview was used as an important method to explore the dynamic process of student sojourners' intercultural adjustment (see also Fougère, 2008). The students were interviewed individually in their mother tongue, Chinese, and the length of each interview ranged between 40 and 60 minutes. 12 semi-structured interviews with 6 British teachers were also conducted in English in order to explore their experience of teaching Chinese students and the factors that may affect the students' adjustment processes. The length of each interview ranged from 30 to 40 minutes. With the interviewees' permission, all the interviews were audio-recorded.

The questionnaire included four main sections. The construction of the questionnaire items was inspired by the Gu and Maley's (2008) Questionnaire for Chinese Students, the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (Searle & Ward, 1990), and Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub's (1989) list of coping strategies. Section 1, which had two questions, explored Chinese students' early academic adjustment. The first question requested the respondents to choose at least three aspects which they found unexpected from a list of seven and give comments. They were also invited to provide further information on how they adjusted to these aspects.

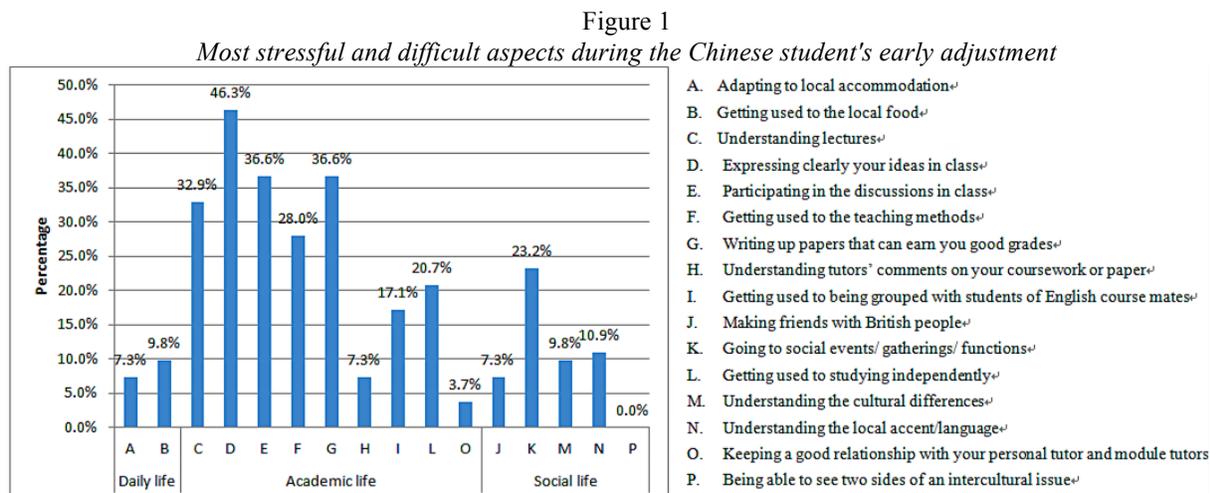
Section 2 was constructed to identify what difficulties Chinese students experienced in three areas, including daily, academic, and social life. The respondents were asked to select the three most difficult aspects they perceived during their early period and the three most difficult aspects they perceived after three years from a list of difficulties (16 items). Section 3 explored which of the coping strategies (12 items) Chinese students perceived as helpful. The respondents were asked to choose the coping strategies which they used and found helpful. In the final section they were invited to comment and reflect on their changes and personal growth as they moved from the Chinese to the British context. They were also asked to provide their background information, including their gender, age, length of study in the UK, and subject of study. Two hundred fifty questionnaires, including both Chinese and English versions, were distributed via internal mail to the members of the Chinese student unions at five British universities, and 82 long-term student sojourners responded to the questionnaire. All data was anonymized, and pseudonyms were assigned to the participants.

### Data Analysis

There were two stages of data analysis. Firstly, a direct analysis of data gained from each instrument was carried out. The data which was collected from student and teacher interviews was analyzed manually, and the process of direct analysis included coding the data in order to put it into categories, reflecting on the data, organizing the data in order to look for patterns and themes, and connecting discoveries to an analytical and conceptual framework (Richards, 2003). In order to make the interpretation closer to the interviewees' original ideas, the interview data was transcribed and analyzed in their original language. With regards to the questionnaire data, the Chinese students' responses to the open questions in Sections 1 and 4 were mainly analyzed inductively and were also examined for similarities and differences in their views and experiences. Responses to Section 2 and 3 were analyzed quantitatively as the frequency of perceived difficulty studying abroad, as well as usefulness of coping strategies. After a direct analysis of the data was gleaned from each instrument, the next level of data analysis included the synthesis and interpretation of different data sources.

### Results

This section will describe the intercultural experiences of the long-term Chinese student sojourners in the UK. In presenting the data, the sections that follow will describe what challenges and problems the Chinese students experienced over time, how the Chinese students managed their difficulties, and what changes they underwent as they moved from the Chinese to the British context.



### Perceived Difficulties and Stress

The Chinese students who participated in my study encountered a wide variety of challenges in adjusting to daily, academic and social life in the UK. The questionnaire respondents reported that adjusting to academic life was the major concern during their first year. Figure 1 shows that the most frequently reported difficulties and stressful aspects were expressing clearly ideas in classes (D), participating in class discussions (E), writing up papers (G), and understanding lectures (C).

The participants in the student and teacher interviews also highlighted a number of language-related issues, such as weak reading skills, difficulty in taking notes, and the understanding of lectures, which gave rise to academic problems. In particular, most student interviewees addressed linguistic challenges in verbal interaction in the classroom: "I knew I wasn't able to speak fluent as native speakers. I felt nervous to speak up in class or talk to local students. It was difficult to express myself clearly when I felt nervous" (Ying).

Due to inadequate speaking ability, the students felt less confident and their anxiety increased when they spoke up publically or interacted with local students. The language weakness was considered as one of the biggest barriers to international students' academic performance: "Language is the key factor to make them more or less successful than domestic students... if they feel more comfortable in using English, they can remove the stress of working in the second language" (Adam, lecturer).

Apart from language weaknesses, the teacher interviewees further suggested that a lack of participation in interactive activities could be also attributed to cultural differences, as noted by the following lecturer: "Their participation in the group

discussion is always lower. I'm wondering whether that is a cultural barrier or is a feature in the way which they were taught in China, because normally the language is not a big problem after six months" (Richard).

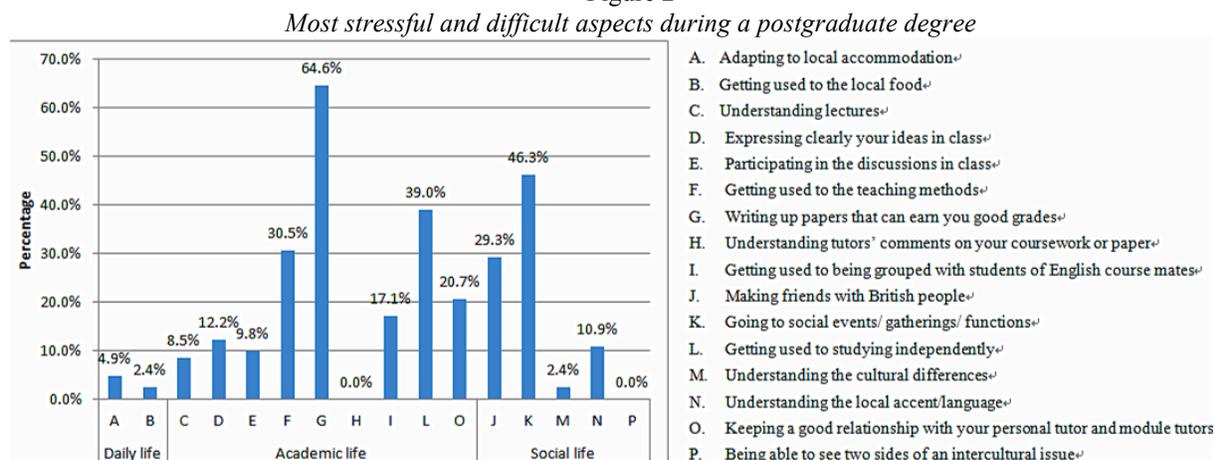
Evidence from responses in the student interviews also indicated that the Chinese students' cultural values and traditions, such as collectivism and harmony, influenced their ways of learning and interaction. The student interviewees described that they tried to control their emotions, avoid conflict, and maintain inner harmony with their teachers and peers: "Many Chinese students are good listeners, but seldom ask questions. We could have lots of worries that stop us from questioning others' opinion. Group harmony is always considered. We think if it's polite to interrupt when people are talking. If I challenge their opinion, I may make them lose face" (Ming).

Their interaction style was also related to the concept of "mian-zi," or "face" (see also Spencer-Oatey, 2000). In order to maintain others' "face," most student interviewees tended to ask few questions and avoided challenging their teachers' and peers' opinions. By contrast, Hua sought opportunities to interact with her peers and enhanced her learning through discussion and questioning. She highlighted in the interview that the Chinese learner should not be stereotyped and that teacher-student interaction was a two-way process. In particular, a close relationship between her British teacher and peers and a relaxed classroom interaction motivated her to actively engage in group discussions.

After moving on to postgraduate study, both interview and questionnaire data revealed that the students' language barrier decreased over time, but other challenges arose (see Figure 2).

Compared with Figure 1, there was a noticeable decrease in language-related problems in academic life,

Figure 2



such as understanding lectures (C) and expressing clearly ideas in classes (D). Writing papers that earns good grades (G) was still regarded as the most difficult and stressful aspect. The students' language problems reduced in academic writing; however, in order to write better papers, presenting a critical argument was viewed as a more difficult aspect to deal with: "My supervisor often asks me to provide more critical argument. I think being critical doesn't just mean criticise. Thinking critically is not easy. I need to seek further advice from my supervisor and develop my critical thinking skills" (Lily).

Like Lily, other student interviewees also realized that their critical thinking skills needed to improve and played a vital role in their academic achievement. The tradition of rote learning and memorization could affect Chinese students' independent and critical thinking, as noted by a PhD supervisor: "Some of my students are from China. They told me that they got used to believing teacher's answers or often followed the model answers. I often encourage my students to challenge the conclusions of other writers more and establish their own conclusion" (Maggie). Maggie's comment indicates that some Chinese students were less likely to question knowledge, and tended to rely on the textbook and follow their teachers' instruction. They needed to engage more in the process of critical writing and develop their critical thinking skills with continuous support and feedback from their teachers.

When the students moved on to postgraduate study, they were given more opportunities to engage in independent research and more responsibility for learning:

- "The idea of the course is to enable students to become an independent researcher... They may start some confusion, but they will gradually discover their own research areas through our direction" (Mary, lecturer).

- "They often want me to tell them what to do but I always ask them to get their own plans first. As a teacher, you need to encourage learner autonomy" (Adam, lecturer).

The British teachers advocated autonomous learning and expected their students to play an active role in learning. By contrast, many students expected their British teachers to give them more explicit directions and found it difficult and stressful to study and research independently:

- "I have more time to do my own research now. My supervisor gives me lots of freedom, but I feel confused and unsecured. I often wonder whether I'm on the right direction" (Hua, interview).
- "Independent study is challenging. My supervisor won't tell you how to do the experiment. You have to discover the rules by yourself" (Lan, questionnaire response).

In Figure 2, going to social events (K) was reported as the second most difficult and stressful aspect. The stress which was caused by making friends with British people (J) and keeping a good relationship with your module tutors and supervisors (O) also increased. Many students noted in the questionnaire that they had few opportunities to socialize with local people and lacked social language. This made them feel uncomfortable in attending social events and interacting with local people. Some student interviewees also commented that they found it very difficult to keep real friendships with host students:

- "My British friends often asked me to go to pubs. I didn't enjoy clubbing and drinking,

maybe because of our cultural differences. Now I only have two British friends I stay in contact with” (Lin).

- “We know their culture a lot, the problem is that my British friends don’t know much about ours or sometimes misunderstand our culture. It’s hard to maintain our friendship” (Lily).

Due to different lifestyles and their perceived cultural distance, the Chinese students became less willing to interact with host students and maintain their friendship. Some teachers also suggested that a situational constraint could influence their social network: “There are lots of Chinese in British universities. There is no pressure for them to learn about other cultures by social means. If you are from somewhere like Russia, there would be a few on the campus. You will be forced to mix with people from other groups” (Andrew).

Most teacher interviewees commented that Chinese students tended to stick together and interact less with people from other countries. However, Ming, Hua and Tao stated in the interview that they made great efforts to stretch beyond their comfort zone and expand their social network:

- “I know it’s difficult to make local friends, but it’s nice to meet more people and know more about the British culture from them. I try to build closer relationship with them. Reading local magazines can be a good way to know their life and find common topics to talk about” (Tao).
- “The more I communicate with them, the more proper I can acquire at English, particularly in terms of idiomatic expressions” (Hua).

The interview data indicated that increasing contact with local people was viewed as an important way to enhance their cultural and language learning by the Chinese students.

As can be seen from the questionnaire and interview responses above, the students were still adjusting to academic and social life in the UK after they completed an undergraduate degree, and the transition to the host environment which the students underwent appeared to be slow and continuous. Although some language-related problems which occurred at the early stage reduced, the students also encountered new challenges when they became more involved in social and cultural activities in the UK.

### **Managing Stress and Problems**

Although the Chinese students encountered many difficulties, they made strategic attempts to deal with

their stress and problems and managed to survive in the new environment. According to the questionnaire data, social support played an important role in their psychological, social, and academic adjustment. In particular, contacting with co-nationals (e.g., their Chinese friends and course mates) was perceived as the most useful strategy to support them emotionally and academically. More than 50 % of them also highlighted the importance of contact with module tutors and other international students for their academic support, although they sought little emotional support from people from other countries. Apart from social strategies, planning (e.g., making a study plan) and mental disengagement (e.g., listening to music to take the mind off things) were selected as helpful personal coping strategies by about half of the students. By contrast, the smallest proportion of them found behavioral disengagement (e.g., giving up the attempt) helpful.

Evidence from the student interviews supports the use of coping strategies identified from the questionnaire data. Social support was also perceived as an important resource for coping. During their early adjustment, the student interviewees were more likely to seek academic support from co-nationals rather than host nationals due to language barriers. Hua and Tao later increased opportunities to build closer relationships with their British teachers and socialize with their peers outside the classroom. As a result, they were more willing to participate in classroom interactions: “I try to let my tutors know about my stress and progress. When I communicate more with my tutors, I feel more comfortable to interact with them. I find it very helpful to talk with them. They don’t simply tell me the answer. Instead, they direct me to find out the solution” (Hua). Hua consciously formed social relationships with her tutors outside the classroom. The attempts were viewed as important affective strategies to help her build on her intrinsic motivation and lower her anxiety (Oxford, 2011). She also experienced the benefits of using social strategies and developed her learning strategies through interacting with her tutors.

One of the teacher interviewees further commented that not all Chinese students wanted to seek support from their teachers and that it varied considerably. She expected the weaker students to seek more advice, but the good students normally asked for more help: “I know some Chinese students, who are struggling, but they never ask for help. They shouldn’t feel that they’ll be judged. Good Chinese students tend to seek more advice from us” (Mary).

Compared with other student interviewees, Ming felt more willing to seek support from international students from different cultures. He found that other international students could show more patience and empathy to his problem than domestic students. Most

student interviewees tried to seek academic help from different social networks, but they preferred to gain emotional support from their co-nationals. As they shared the same language and culture, they felt closer to their co-nationals and more comfortable to talk about their personal issues with them: “I can communicate with my Chinese friends in the way I cannot speak in English. They understand my problems and feeling more easily” (Lily).

Besides social strategies, the student interviewees also combined with other personal strategies to support their adjustment:

- “I keep thinking that stress can be good too and it enables me to work harder and helps me reorganize myself” (Ying).
- “Managing time effectively and making plans are important strategies for me to manage stress” (Tao).
- “I often draw cartoons when I feel lonely and watching films is also a good way to reduce stress” (Lin).

As can be seen, attempts to focus on the positive aspects of a situation, make plans about their coping actions, and reduce stress and loneliness through engaging in other activities were deployed as useful strategies to help them cope with their stress. In particular, some students highlighted that devising a clear study plan could be an effective strategy to deal with their study stress.

### Academic Development and Personal Growth

Although the Chinese students encountered a variety of difficulties in the UK, their intercultural experiences enabled them to develop academically and personally. In particular, the Chinese students’ listening and reading skills improved noticeably, and self-confidence in using English increased:

- “I heard English every day. I have no problem understanding lecturers and daily life conversations. I can’t say that my speaking has improved greatly, but I’m more confident to communicate with local people” (Lin, interview).
- “I tried to understand every word when I read an article, but now I use skimming and scanning to increase my reading speed. These two strategies really work for me” (Jia, questionnaire response).

Increased contact with the English-speaking environment and the effective use of language learning

strategies were reported as two important factors that promoted their language learning. However, not all language skills improved greatly, and the improvement in speaking did not match their expectation: “I expected to speak English fluently. But, actually, I spend more time studying and don’t have many opportunities to speak English. I don’t think my speaking has improved a lot” (Han, questionnaire response). As their academic life was stressful, participants described that they devoted considerable amount of time and effort to strengthening their subject knowledge and doing their academic work. However, they had much less time to attend social events and socialize with people. Consequently, they lacked social language and skills and suffered great loneliness in their social life.

The questionnaire responses and interview data also revealed that there were noticeable changes in the students’ learning strategies and approaches. In order to achieve better academic performance, many students evaluated their learning and made a continuous effort to strengthen their existing strategy use:

- “I used to follow the reading list which my teacher gave, but I found that I need to read more in relation to my own needs. Discussing ideas with my coursemates is also a useful way to help me understand the reading material” (Lin, interview).
- “I’m quite good at preparing my exams now. I tried to talk to my learning advisors and gained great insights from them. I realize that memorizing the textbook is not always effective. I need to review my schedule and leave more time to revise” (Cai, questionnaire response).

Lin and Cai became more selective in what they read and revised, and they improved their strategy use in relation to their learning needs. They reflected upon their own learning and developed their strategic awareness. Interaction with more capable others (e.g., peers and learning advisors) also played an important role and promoted their potential development.

The students experienced a more teacher-centered way of teaching in China and had fewer opportunities to learn through interaction. By contrast, they were engaged in more learner-centered teaching in the UK. Although some students experienced difficulties in adjusting to the teaching style, they also recognized the value of autonomous learning:

- “When we weren’t sure about what the ‘text’ is referring to. Our teacher didn’t offer assistance straightway; rather, she directed us to explore the answer by ourselves. I realized that my own discovery is better. I really enjoyed my achievement” (Hua, interview).

- “No one can do the learning for us from a lifelong perspective. It’s important to develop my own problem-solving skills. Copying other people’s work won’t help. We shouldn’t waste our time repeating others’ opinion” (Long, questionnaire response).

The context of teaching and learning in the UK, including the teaching style, classroom interaction and teacher-student role, appeared to be an important factor influencing their learning approaches. As can be seen, their learning approaches were not fixed, but rather, were socially constructed and could change over time. With regard to Hua and Long, the process of autonomous learning engaged their personal agency in thinking and analyzing the problem, and this in turn increased their motivation to discover the answer or solve the problem. The students also recognized that independent learning did not mean learning without help, and negotiated interaction with others can enable them to engage more in the thinking process and enhance their understanding: “The best thing to enhance our learning experience is to talk about our work to the people around us so we can learn new things how other people do [*sic*]” (Tao, interview).

Communicating with people from different cultures also provided the Chinese students with more opportunities to recognize their cultural uniqueness and helped them grow in terms of sensitivity to cultural differences:

- “Although I’m proud of my culture, this experience makes me become tolerant to cultural differences. I really enjoy knowing about their cultures” (Lin, interview).
- “I got an impression of British people who are cold and a bit elegant...but I change my mind. Now I don’t think they are elegant, they may be shy. Sometimes they don’t talk to you, because they don’t want to disturb you” (Ming, interview).

Lin became more tolerant of cultural differences than before. By contrast, Ming reflected on his preconceived opinion about British people and tried to avoid a cultural misunderstanding. Their intercultural experiences also brought some challenges to their identity in terms of their personal characteristics and interpersonal relationships:

- “I reconstruct my perception of myself. I was a confident person. However, when I encounter many unexpected difficulties, I become less confident and very dependent now” (Lily, interview).

- “The longer I stay here, the less common topics I have with my friends in China. I start to lose my old friends. This is the change which I don’t want to accept” (Ying, interview).

The Chinese students experienced many changes in their personality and social life during their stay. Their identity also changed over time and they had a less clear sense of their original identity. Ying, Tao, and Hua further commented that their re-entry experiences provided them with opportunities to reflect on their identity: “Last year when I went back China, I found it difficult to adjust to the lifestyle in China. I also have to admit that I can’t fit in the British culture. However, I enjoy my own space now. I have made lots of friends from other cultures. I’m happy to talk to them and share experiences with them” (Hua, interview).

The interview data suggested that their length of stay did not affect the degree of the acceptance of other culture(s), but the long-term sojourners needed to respond to more dynamic identities and experienced more complex issues about their identity. As can be seen from Hua’s comment, she made further efforts to expand her social networks and created a new space in which they felt more comfortable to have contact with each other. She negotiated her cultural experience with others, and the process of exploring a new space seemed to bring a different formation of life.

## Discussion

The key findings from both the interview and questionnaire data can be summarized as follows:

1. The language barrier was perceived as a key challenge to academic, psychological, and social adjustments.
2. Cultural differences in educational perceptions were seen as one of the biggest challenges in fitting into the British education context during the students’ early adjustment.
3. Changes were found in the students’ perceived stress and difficulties when they had better language ability.
4. Social contact with co-nationals and British teachers was perceived as the most helpful strategy to manage academic and personal difficulties.
5. The students’ academic development was mainly in three aspects: language ability, learning strategies, and learning approaches.
6. The sojourn experiences helped the students grow in terms of intercultural sensitivity and identity.

### Difficulties and Stress

The main aim of the Chinese students studying abroad was to obtain the best possible degree. Academic life was of greatest concern among the students during their early adjustment. In particular, they perceived inadequate language proficiency as one of the biggest obstacles constraining their academic adjustment. Weak language skills caused many language-related problems, such as expressing clearly ideas in classes, understanding lectures, and writing papers. These findings support the previous research of Tian and Low (2012) and Griffiths (2013). The students also showed that inadequate language proficiency brought psychological distress when they had to produce any kinds of spoken discourse in classroom activities. With regard to the long-term student sojourners, the teacher interviewees further suggested that a cultural barrier was more likely to prevent their participation in classroom interaction when their language ability had improved.

After the students moved on to their postgraduate study, some daily life issues and academic problems were reduced considerably, and they were overtaken by social problems. Although some studies showed that there was a continued social development among Chinese students when they stayed longer in the host country (e.g., Li, 2012), the social adaptation of the long-term student sojourners in this study seemed to be more daunting than what they had expected. In particular, going to social events and making local friends brought stress to them, and they also suffered loneliness due to an isolated social network. The more they interacted with local people, the more cultural and lifestyle differences they found. Due to cultural differences, they found it difficult to build a social network with British people or develop a lasting friendship. Furthermore, although their confidence in using English increased over time, they also claimed that they needed to improve their social language which could help them engage in everyday conversation. Some of the students made continuous efforts to expand their social network with British people and the people from other cultures and recognized the social interaction as an important aspect of cultural and language learning.

Moving on to a postgraduate degree, the students had better language ability and increasingly adjusted to the convention of the academic writing. They aimed to write more critically and enhance the quality of their academic writing. They tried to shift from reproducing other people's work to presenting more critical argument. Many students showed that they needed to improve their critical thinking skills, which played a vital role in their academic achievement. This is also supported by other studies (e.g., Paton, 2005; Turner,

2006). However, the Chinese students cannot be generalised as less critical learners, because the findings of this study also showed that some Chinese students' critical thinking skills developed over time through their effort, as well as through their teachers' support.

This study further revealed that the students' academic adjustment, social adjustment, and psychological adjustment were all interrelated. Their linguistic competence can be improved greatly through socializing with people from other groups. Consequently, the students can become more relaxed and confident to produce spoken discourse in different kinds of situations. Few studies on international students have related social adjustment to academic performance. Gill (2007) showed the importance of social adjustment in both psychological and academic adjustment. By contrast, this study further suggested that weak language skills and perceived cultural differences caused the students' stress to interact with host students and limited their opportunities to exchange ideas for greater learning.

### Coping Strategies

Social contact was identified as a major coping strategy in student sojourners' intercultural adaptation, and three distinct types of social networks served different functions (see also Yu & Wright, 2016). However, not all three networks played an important role in their academic, psychological, and social adjustment. The students stressed the significance of friendship with co-nationals in all three aspects of adjustment. With regard to academic support, interacting with British teachers and other international students also played an important role, although little emotional support was sought from these two types of social networks. They particularly appreciated the teachers' great encouragement and effective learning advice. Compared with domestic students, they seemed to feel more comfortable to seek academic help from other international students. However, social needs were not benefitted greatly from host nationals and international contact.

### Changes and Growth

The results of this study indicated cross-cultural differences in educational expectations between the Chinese students and British teachers. In particular, the differences were found in their teaching style, classroom interaction, and teacher-student roles. Consequently, the students experienced learning shock and felt a loss of their familiar teaching-learning culture during their early adjustment. Several studies (e.g., Durkin, 2011; Jin & Hill, 2001) reported similar findings and suggested that

cultural and educational backgrounds influenced students' academic adjustment. However, this study also showed that the influence of cultural and educational backgrounds in the students' academic adjustment became less influential when they had more exposure to the academic culture in the UK. Cultural differences cannot be used to stereotype the Chinese learner, and there are considerable individual differences in social interaction, learning approaches, and strategies.

The students' academic adaptation appeared to be a dynamic process rather than a static picture. Their academic stress and the challenges which they experienced could be beneficial to their academic development. The process of their academic adaptation was generally seen as a positive development over time (see also Wu, 2015). In particular, their motivation, teachers' effective pedagogical skills and a good teacher-student relationship were perceived as important factors for their academic adaptation.

Their sojourn experiences also enabled them to develop their tolerance of cultural differences (see also Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006). However, the degree of their intercultural sensitivity varied among individual students. The long-term sojourners also experienced more complex issues in terms of their identity. As mentioned above, the students experienced a conflict between the need to adapt to British culture and resistance to losing their original identity. Their identity development underwent a process of transformation rather than one of replacement. It would seem that the longer they stayed in the UK, the more confusion they experienced as to where they belonged. Yet, this also provided a great opportunity for them to explore a third "space" in which their intercultural identity developed. Creating a "third space" appeared to be an important route for them to manage the interrelationship between the old and the new culture (see also Fougère, 2008).

Many British universities have offered orientation programs which help international newcomers settle into university life, as well as academic and emotional support for their early transition (e.g., the first year). However, the findings of this study revealed that some international Chinese students who had studied in UK higher education for a few years continued to experience problems in adjusting to academic and social life in the UK, while they achieved personal growth over time. Therefore, universities need to provide ongoing programs, continuous support, and a variety of resources which help international students accelerate their adjustment to UK higher education. In particular, the results showed that the long-term Chinese students perceived academic writing and social interaction as the most difficult aspects. Apart from academic writing classes, universities need to offer a

series of workshops for international students and encourage them to discuss their writing problems at different stages of their degree programs. Furthermore, universities need to run some training programmes which provide practical advice for their social interaction problems and more explicit critical thinking instruction. To help students who are long used to a teacher-centered approach, it is crucial for teachers to modify a communicative approach in relation to students' needs and culture. Chinese students should seek more opportunities to engage with target language speakers, as well as with people from other cultures, and expand their social networks. They also need to make deliberate and continuous efforts to develop their language skills and intercultural awareness, as well as to reflect on their changes (e.g., keeping a reflection journal).

There are limitations to this study which suggest directions for future research. Firstly, the number of questionnaire responses received was a relatively small, and thus the results cannot be generalized to represent all international Chinese students. Secondly, the Chinese students were asked to describe their experience of study abroad over a period of three years. It is possible that they might make generalizations about their adjustment processes and reinterpreted what had happened during the process. Thirdly, since the study was undertaken in 2010, changes that have occurred in UK higher education, such as the changing costs of overseas study, investment in additional support, and further funding opportunities for international students, could affect the quality of learning and of the student experience. Further longitudinal research, involving collection of data at different points during student sojourners' adjustment process, is needed in order to obtain more specific information about their adjustment and trace their actual changes over time. The findings of this study also stress the need for further study of re-entry adjustments of international students to their home cultures, as well as changes in their identity after a long stay in the host country.

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### Acknowledgements

Malcolm N. MacDonald gave me invaluable advice and support throughout the writing of this paper. I want furthermore to express my thanks to my tutors and colleagues, particularly Helen Spencer-Oatey, Asca

Tsushima, Sunguk Kong, and Yukiko Ideno who provided useful feedback on earlier drafts of the manuscript and suggested many materials and ideas along the way, as well as the members of the Working and Communicating across Cultures Research Group, CAL, University of Warwick.