

## "Who am I?" The Identity Construction and Preference of Chinese Students in England: A Case Study of the Chinese Students in Durham University

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore how Chinese students from Durham University engaged in two-way with Chinese society and England local society from the sociocultural perspective, and how they located and constructed their own cultural identities therein. 10 semi-structured interviews were applied to analyze how Chinese students participated in and maintained interaction with the host England society. With a combination of literature on the 'production of identity' (Hall, 2007), cultural adaptation (Brown & Holloway, 2008), and 'cleft habitus' (Bourdieu & Nice, 2008), the authors conducted an analysis to interpret 'who am I?' and the trend of identity construction and preference of Chinese students who studied in the UK concerning social engagements, perceptions of host culture adaptation and social interactive network. The result showed that the interviewees continuously extended and conferred new signs and experiences to enrich their cultural identities through their own understanding and interpretations of cultural attributes, interpretations of the local living environment and the forms of social interactions, which displayed a sensitive, and complex construction and preference of cultural identity they possessed.

**Key words:** Identity construction; Social engagement; Identity preference; Chinese students; Durham University

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

'Who am I?' is a philosophic issue which has perplexed a lot of people with experiences of studying or living abroad for years, especially those cultural identities which exist objectively as 'facts' through 'presence' in different regions. Immigrant communities continually produce cultural identity through continuity and differences and confer the identity with new cultural symbols and significance (Hall, 2007). People look for their own cultural identities to answer 'who am I?' in different narratives, and bring the identities with new symbols and experiences in the process of production of identity. In Fong's (2011) ethnographic research, the social systems and citizenship of developed countries have attracted a generation of 'one-child family' to move across borders. The transregional flow of people drove the flow and transformation of multiple capital. Sojourners might encounter short-term cultural shocks (Hall, 1959) and potentially loneliness (Sawir et al., 2007). However, the technological revolution of the Internet and transportation has changed the way people interact. Zhang (2018) pointed out that the two-way use of social media in Chinese and host societies has been considered an important form for international students to maintain identity. Lin and Chen (2019) argued that the belongingness of international student groups was more influenced by the evaluation of Chinese social media. The stereotypes and negative evaluations of international student groups reported by Chinese media were perceived intra-group exclusion (ibid). As Hall (2007) saw it, the identification of 'the other' was a dual construction process. The difference promoted the formation of 'the other' and maintained cultural diversity in the region. The development of contemporary information technology has changed the state of the social participation of residents. The remote interaction through the network supported the co-presence of the residents and the interaction of the same community with geographical and time differences.

Nevertheless, the existing literature has paid less attention to the two-way interaction between Chinese students and the British community and their previous communities before studying abroad. It is an important factor that may change the identity and belongingness of individuals during the dynamic production of individual identities. Specifically, in the current complicated global situation, this research examines the adaptation and identity construction of Chinese students in the UK. Thus, the study focuses on:

*How did Chinese students perceive the production of cultural identity when they studied abroad?*

*How did social engagement and cultural adaptation influence the construction of cultural identity for Chinese students in the UK?*

*And how did Chinese students interpret the cleft habitus and identity construction?*

To fulfill this study, the authors aim to collect interviewees' experiences on the social difficulties encountered in multiple media and various social contexts to illustrate the transnational mobility, adaptation to host culture, and interpersonal relationship maintenance with Chinese students in the inter-cultural learning processes.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1. 'Facts' and 'Production' of the Identity of Contemporary Overseas Chinese Students

#### 2.1.1. Contemporary Chinese Identity Construction

In China's modern history, there have been three waves of studying abroad, and of which occurred at a key stage in the process of modernization in China. The previous two took place in the early 20th century. Hu Shi, Sun Yat-sen and other statesmen introduced democratic and scientific ideas and Marxist theories into China and promoted two democratic revolutions (Zhao, 2008). The 1980s saw the emergence of the third wave of studying abroad, stimulated by China's economic reform and opening. After Chinese reform, the social structure and stratification were reorganized by the intricate political and economic interaction between socialism and capitalism. Students in the third wave of studying abroad grew up in the historical context of the process from collectivist models of social structure to the coexistence of forms of individualism and collectivism (Zhao, 2008). The problem of cultural identity was constantly discussed under the framework of heterogeneous cultural politics. The individual identity was selected, reformed, and constructed in an intricate social power structure. It was based on the signs and cultural code of the past collectivist society (Hofstede, 2001, p.10); in addition, the cultural revolution (the social movement characterized by 'breaking away the old thought, the old culture, the old custom, the old habit') and the class political movement all contributed to the confusion of identity (Ruth, 2008). The cultural identity

of the Chinese people was diverging in the continuous and broken historical era. The process through which the Chinese were constructed on both political and ideological levels was known as identity formation.

Hall (2007) explicated two definitions of 'cultural identity' based on the interpretation of black Caribbean identity. The first was to define cultural identity as a common culture. As a matter of fact, cultural identity was a reflection of shared historical experiences and cultural norms that gave ethnic groups a stable sense of identity. The second position emphasized that cultural identity was based on the continuous development and change of the history of 'existence'. People specified themselves in the past historical narration and moved constantly in the process of social life (ibid). During Chinese economic reform, individuals experienced the transformation of cultural identity from 'fact' to 'production' for identity and self-cognition. The exploration of the individual cultural identity happened after the end of the class-centered political struggle in the communist stage of the Chairman Mao era, which could be regarded as the shift from collectivist to individualist models of social structure and identity formation. However, the end of the political struggle did not mean that the constructed class identity was eliminated, even though the vocabulary 'social class' was replaced by 'social stratification' after economic reform (Bian, 1997). In the process of social mobility and the tendency of stratum curing, the political power of the individual was constructed under the influence of economic factors.

The daily use of political slogans in the public and private environment after 1978 is an example of externalizing political slogans as the means to shape the public 'reality' (Lu, 1999). The researcher claimed that the official language had changed after the political transformation, but the original form of ideological propaganda was maintained. Besides, several generations of political slogans and official languages were widely mixed and applied. The public discourse system, as a concrete form of identity of the masses, had a divergence as well. The political-led cultural forces continued to construct individual discourses. However, in previous qualitative studies, researchers (Gu, 2009; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) did not explore the cultural patterns on ways of thinking and expressions through Chinese interviewees' discourses. This research, thus, is to study the reflective understanding of identity construction of Chinese students while they participate in the host England society as well as its cultural patterns, such as folk adages and the phases of political propaganda of Chinese interviewees' expressions.

In the pace of China's modernization, individuals are aware of the multidimensional nature of their identity and the intricate social relations between other social identities (ethnicity, gender, region, etc.). The cultural identity of

contemporary Chinese individuals has located its own position in the past narration and has been constantly repositioned in the multi-dimensional identity construction (Fong, 2011). Moreover, identity formation in the Chinese context is broken and complex for the popular culture was highly colonized by alienation and marketization. And the cultural identities are evolving with new experiences and representation in the society, so they would constantly reconstruct their cultural identities and meanings of cultural symbols.

### **2.1.2. The rise of the third wave of studying abroad and the role of technology**

After a decade-long Cultural Revolution, the college entrance examination resumed in 1978. Young people who lost their education regained the opportunities to enter colleges. Education and employment-driven domestic mobility became the main form of cross-regional population migration in the early days of the commodity economy (Ruth, 2008). Since 1978, Chinese economic reform has further promoted the change of social structure and the reconstruction of higher education mechanisms. To improve the situation of high unemployment and lack of skilled laborers, the reformer Chairman Deng Xiaoping focused on the development of meritocracy (Liu, 2013) and technical training that could fulfill agricultural and industrial production needs (Ruth, 2008), and gradually liberalized the restrictions on studying abroad at individual expenses. Given the reality of resource scarcity and the phased achievements of the market economy, the Chinese government further switched China's education system from the Soviet model of a 'central control' system to decentralize control of higher education (Zhao, 2008).

Along with the popularization of higher education, the number of degrees and educational opportunities in domestic universities could not meet the employment needs of the growing population and the decreasing sense of cultural differences (Fong, 2011). Studying abroad as a 'symbolic' marker and as a tool of cultural capital accumulation has become one of the choices of one-child families and middle-class families in China (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018). Education-driven transnational mobility has gradually become one of the main forms of global talent flow (Gu, 2009). Student migration differed from the five diasporic types (Barn & Cohen, 1998) in previous historical contexts (Victim diasporas, Labour diasporas, Trade diasporas, Imperial diasporas, Cultural diasporas). Chinese overseas students, as sojourners in the globalized world, without changing their citizenship, have experienced a process of integration into the host society. They grew up in China's socio-political context, reflecting a stable common cultural code. While living in the host country, they broke through the foreign imagination reported by the media and contacted local society (Zhang, 2018); meanwhile, they interacted with the homeland through various media and communication

technologies (Lin & Chen, 2019). Cross-border mobility and interaction frequently took place under the active support of technology development and transnational policy (Liu, 2013). This process enabled time to conquer space and fulfill the behavioral demands of agents through technology and institutionalization (Zhang, 2018).

Furthermore, the non-linear time strengthens the instantaneity of the 'agent-centered' interaction (Wu, 2016) under transnationalism in the course of the interaction between information and transport support. Fong's (2011) book, based on the 1990s Chinese student group, emphasized that online interaction has improved the problem of transnational communication with families, and it is the regular way for Chinese students to meet their identity needs in the face of the host country (Lin and Chen, 2019). Zhang (2018) thought that Chinese students ignored the social forms of in-person interaction because they were overly dependent on social media. Social media has prompted Chinese students to co-exist with Chinese groups in cyberspace while breaking with previous conventional forms of integration of international students into local societies. As Tsagarousianou (2004) saw it, ethnic diaspora in the context of globalization was a non-permanent transnational flow based on pluralistic media and transport. The current cultural identity of diasporic was constructed and constructed in various interactive relationships in multidimensional surroundings.

## **2.2 Identity Stereotype**

### **2.2.1 Stereotypes from home societies**

In contrast to the student population at domestic higher education institutions, the overseas students who studied abroad at their own expense were more likely from a richer family background (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018) or were supported by more educational investment in their families (Iannelli & Huang, 2014). One of the main contributors to the stereotypes propagated by Chinese domestic society's social media within the framework of the division of domestic social strata is the social identity of Chinese students studying abroad (Lin & Chen, 2019). Fong (2011) proposed that the background of the stereotype was affected by Chinese people's vague, fixed and hazy cognition of 'developed countries'. Chinese masses believed that the social experience of living in developed countries would transform the cultural identity of the Chinese diasporas to that of the developed world (ibid). The cultural identity of the developed world transforms the contradiction of the stratum differentiation into group prejudice. The group bias is hybrid and includes a hierarchical and cultural identity (Zhang, 2018). In addition, the returnees tended to share a positive study experience rather than objectively reflect the 'facts' they experienced abroad (Fong, 2011). The description of the experience increases the stereotype of the Chinese in developed countries and the prejudice to the experience

of studying abroad. Besides, it strengthens the identity construction of 'in-group' international students.

The reports from domestic news media on overseas students' deviant behavior (gambling, flaunting wealth, etc.) aggravated the identity stereotype. However, psychological problems (such as depression, anxiety and loneliness) were the intricate motivations that might lead to gambling problems (Spence-Thomas et. al., 2000) which were not understood by the Chinese society. Lin and Chen's (2019) noticed the interaction with domestic social media and the negative evaluation of domestic netizens, which further aggravated the psychological loneliness and passive emotions of foreign students. Identity stereotyping began to erode their sense of belonging to the original society (Lin & Chen, 2019). Still, pluralistic media interaction provided the platforms for communication that might ease the negative mood. Similarly, Zhang (2018) also observed that Chinese students used social media from Chinese society and the host society to maintain Chinese cultural identity. In a two-way social context between the two societies, the coherence between their identity and citizenship was constantly reproduced.

### **2.2.2. Identity stereotype of Chinese students in the host society**

The identity stereotype from the host country is the main challenge for the international student identity construction. Previous literature revealed that the differences between dualistic culture and organizational social forms were the main reasons for the formation of 'others' cognition (Hofstede, 2001, p.14). From the perspective of learning patterns, Watkins and Biggs (1996) argued that 'the Chinese Learner' symbolized the image of Chinese students and replaced the prejudice of 'nerd'. Although they criticized Chinese 'rote learning', the authors predicted that the global educational trend and the transformation of teaching methods would refine the traditional Chinese learning paradigm. However, Slethaug (2010) argued that the 'otherness' approach had deepened the identity stereotype of Chinese learners in international education. Iannelli and Huang's (2014) recent research also reflected that Chinese students received lower academic results compared with the local British students. However, with the growth of Russell Group's number of Chinese students, the overall academic level of Chinese students has been improved (ibid). The university educators in the host society might erase their identity stereotypes of students through in-depth contact, cooperation and the academic achievements of Chinese scholars (Ramsay et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, identity stereotypes are from daily communication and media coverage. Lin and Chen (2019) stated that media coverage and public opinion in the host country had deepened prejudice against the Chinese. In some cases, students' unreasonable domination of the

cost of living and biased behavior caused by excessive consumption (such as gambling) disturbed the regular order of the local society (Spence-Thomas et al., 2000). Rosenthal et al.'s Higher Education report (2006) in Australia mentioned that physical conflicts and physical injuries were caused by the processes when international students integrated into society. In other cases, Chinese Millennials were regarded as a new consuming group from another social system. But this perception was based on their consuming behaviors, rather than on the divisions of strata in China. Their high consumption behavior abroad has become an apparent phenomenon that has been studied (Ngai & Cho, 2012).

Besides, Chinese millennials are 'digital natives' (Mirrlees, 2015), and their online behavior constructs their cultural identity in class. While Lin and Chen (2019) proposed that cultural differences objectively made host country individuals misunderstand the motivation of posts by Chinese students, other researchers noticed that 'flaunting wealth' on the internet is the externalization of class differentiation and capital consolidation, rather than the difference of civilization. For instance, Mirrlees (2015) illustrated that high consumption behavior and online sharing forms were not dominated by Chinese millennials, but by the specific practice of neoliberalist global class differentiation which was exposed in multimedia. The existing research presented scholars' construal of cultural identities from their analytical positions but lacked students' views on identity contradictions and misunderstandings either from home or overseas contexts. For Chinese students, understanding the social situations of home society and host society is helpful to their self-identity construction and intercultural communication. King and Magolda (2005) emphasized that the cross-cultural experience of overseas students was formed through cultural interaction. Experiences through cultural interaction would be adapted and further shape the identity of international students.

## **2.3 Students' Social Engagement and Cultural Adaptation to the Local Society**

### **2.3.1 Cultural shock and cleft habitus**

Based on previous cultural adaption theory, the U-shaped curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and W-shaped curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), as well as Brown and Holloway's (2008) empirical research on International postgraduate students in England all illustrated that the negative impact on the interviewees was both psychological and socio-cultural. The social engagement and cultural adaptation further led to a psychological level of negative problems, such as depression, loneliness, stress, and insomnia. Although a recent international student health study (Rosenthal et al., 2006) reflected that culture shocks would not cause mental or physical health issues, the results of Brown and Holloway (2008) demonstrated that



cultural shock was long-term and deep in the process of cultural adaptation. Hall (1959) believed that familiarity with disrupting and eliminating cultural clues had created 'cultural shock'. A cross-cultural individual is 'like a fish out of water' (ibid; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127). The individual in a different cultural context could not measure the social time-space through familiar cultural symbols, and could not engage the local community through common habitus either. It was less easy for a foreigner to locate him/herself in the host community than in the home community. The implicit cultural stereotypes and cultural-led analysis of 'the Chinese learner' (Watkins & Biggs, 1996) were criticized by Gu (2009), because he argued that the previous studies might ignore the influence of other factors on the individual's performance, and he emphasized that personal motivation and experience should not be ignored in the cross-cultural adaptation of international students. The individual's unique motivation and embedded experience could be applied to break down the boundaries of limited national identities through communication. For example, Anderson (2006, p.140) proposed that the political community of imagination had strengthened the individual's nationalistic consciousness and its sensitivity to the form of social organizations. Nevertheless, the reasons for sojourners to adapt to the host society might present differences in 'The Community of Imagination'.

### 2.3.2 Interculturality

'Mixed identities and cultures' under globalization are breaking the boundaries of national identity (Barn & Cohen, 1998). Spencer-Oatey and Xiong's case study (2006) presented that most Chinese respondents were not adapted to local social patterns, such as alcohol culture and social etiquette. Compared with other international students and their communication with the host community, Chinese interviewees had lower quantity and quality of interaction with British civil society (ibid). Other studies seemingly proved that (Ramsay et al., 2007; Sawir et al., 2007) the group identity of international students contributed to the interaction between students. The experience of transnational mobility and education strengthened the identity of subjects from different cultural backgrounds. Faced with the national identity of the local society, international students were far from their families and unfamiliar with the new society. They broke through their national identities to form new ones, and constantly constructed a cosmopolitan identity (Barn & Cohen, 1998) in the process of self-positioning and interaction. However, Lewthwaite's (1997) findings showed that only a small number of international students adapted to the social relations of international student groups. When international students were exposed to cultural shocks, they prioritized improving academic inadaptability, rather than actively adapting to the communities. Moreover, Lin and Chen's (2019) Studies presented that cultural conflicts

and stereotypes could deepen the identity of overseas students with homesickness and national identities of their home countries. When Chinese students experienced cultural shock, online social networking with their home community relieved their loneliness and homesickness. Millennials, as digital natives, imperceptibly acquired the network's habitus. The cleft habitus in the physical surroundings might passively strengthen the identity of the diaspora. With its deterritorialized character, the internet was the technology and medium for overseas students to maintain their national identity (Zhang, 2018).

Engaging in cyber social surroundings could be regarded through the habitus that was deemed as the metaphor 'fish in water' by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p.127). Habitus of Internet users had produced the social world of cyberspace, and the world of society was the product of the habit. Paradoxically, online social networking could only alleviate the cultural insensitivity of the diaspora in the physical surroundings and provide a sense of 'home' (Lin & Chen, 2016). However, the 'home' perception would be broken by the cultural paradigm in cyberspace (Zhang, 2018). The physical carrier of this cultural paradigm existed in the physical surroundings. Overseas students must actively encounter short-term cultural shock and long-term cleft habitus. The distorted narrative of 'otherness' and 'nationalism' has strengthened the stereotype of the host society towards diasporas, which means that the process of cultural adaptation is the process of dividing and reorganizing the constructed individual identity. The continuous intercultural interaction between individuals could traverse the boundaries of stereotypes and the elimination of bias (Gu, 2009). The process of construction and being constructed is the process of decentralizing between the subjects in social relations, which re-constructed the cleft habitus by the subjects.

The above-mentioned research has not yet collected the views and perceptions of Chinese students on the local society through everyday practice, which, however, might provide different evidence for the interpretations of interculturality in the new era.

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## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

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### 3.1 Subjects

This study recruited 10 Chinese students who had studied and lived at Durham University for more than one year, which involved four juniors, two seniors, three graduates with previous experience, and a Ph.D. student. In light of the fact that prior related qualitative studies (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Gu, 2009) had frequently used a 12-month cycle, it was possible to comprehend the review of interviewees who had gone through the cycle of the cultural shock model. Detailed information about the interviewees can be referred in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Information about the subjects**

|    | Name (pseudonym) | Gender | Level of Study / Occupation  | Duration in Durham University |
|----|------------------|--------|--|-------------------------------|
| 1  | Ricky            | Male   | Postgraduate, with BA degree from Durham University                      | 5 years                       |
| 2  | Rosy             | Female | Postgraduate, with a year exchange to Durham University during BA degree | 1 year and 5 months           |
| 3  | Hunter           | Male   | Postgraduate, with 6-month work experience in Durham                     | 1 year and 3 months           |
| 4  | Chloe            | Female | Undergraduate  | 2 years and 6 months          |
| 5  | Tatum            | Male   | Undergraduate  | 2 years and 8 months          |
| 6  | Gavin            | Male   | Undergraduate  | 2 years and 8 months          |
| 7  | Zoey             | Female | Undergraduate  | 2 years and 7 months          |
| 8  | Hannah           | Female | Undergraduate  | 1 year and 6 months           |
| 9  | Itzel            | Female | Undergraduate  | 1 year and 6 months           |
| 10 | Chad             | Male   | PHD student with MA degree from Durham University                        | 5 years and 5 months          |

To minimize researchers' internal bias and quota sampling bias, 10 interviewees were sampled through the recommended snowball of three gatekeepers. The different communities where the three gatekeepers lived could locate hidden populations and broaden the previously selected sample limits. Although the subjects involved were limited, the authors conducted in-depth interviews to look at the essence of their daily life and gain an objective understanding of the experience and status of interviewees by focusing on their interactions between the home society and host society to explore how individuals build and find identity in social and cultural surroundings and context changes.

### 3.2. Data Collection

This study used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Each individual interview was about 45 minutes. Interviewees provided details about how their personal opinions were formed in narratives. The interviewed questions were related to social forms and cultural adaption, such as deviations caused by uncontrolled financial management crises (Spence-Thomas, 2000), language barriers, depressive mental states (Lewthwaite, 1997), and 'cultural loneliness' (Sawir et al., 2007). The interview questions also involved the Chinese student's views on social forms, mobility, self-localization, ethnic diaspora (Hall, 1992), respondents' u-shaped curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and the w-shaped curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). In addition, owing to the small-scale research, the epistemological cultural shock model proposed by Brown and Holloway (2008) referred to structure interview questions on interviewees' psychological and emotional status at each stage, such as the respondents' opinions on the emotional changes assumed by the cultural shock model.

During the interview, memorandums were applied to record the interviewees' utterances. At the end of the interviews, the interviewees reviewed the memorandums and supplemented them with further notes to ensure the accuracy of the recording. In addition, interviewees

reviewed their expressions in the structured portion of the interviews after discussing and evaluating the model assumption, followed by modifying their expressions and adding more details. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin as the primary language, and native tongues were allowed. Vocabulary and phrases expressed in English were all labeled.

### 3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

The data was transcribed verbatim and translated into English, and the translated materials and notes from the interviews were analyzed. Thematic analysis was applied to locate and check the relationship between interviewees' experience in participating in the home society and host society and identity construction during the study abroad period. Besides, neutral analysis of snowball samples was applied to find out the universality between 'micro-dialog' and 'macro-phenomena' raised by Bryman (2012, p.424). Both inductive and deductive methods were used for data analysis. Coding was applied during bilingual text comparison to ensure the reliability of the coded terms and the accuracy of the interpretations related to the narrative vocabularies, metaphors and theory-related materials, such as 'collegiate system', 'live out my life in retirement', and 'diaspora'. The authors optimized the coded messages and built the theme by integrating the acquired information, other extra involved materials, together with the reflexivity and expanded the subcategories of each topic by positioning the topics in the original texts, and formed continuities between the themes and a hierarchy between the themes and the subthemes.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Production of Cultural Identity

This section analyzed how interviewees perceived the state of their existing ethnic identities in the process of cross-border flows driven by education, and it showed that the generation growing up in the process of globalization

had strengthened the experience of internationalization in studying abroad and consolidated their belonging to their ethnic identities. The sense of being 'the other' in the host society (Fong, 2011) had been replaced by a sense of 'student identity with postgraduate programme' and the formation of strong subjectivity under individualism.

#### 4.1.1 College membership or a host of rented student apartments

The migration purpose of all interviewees in this study was education-oriented, who had similar experiences with the Chinese and British education systems, and perceived China's education system was not a 'better choice' (Ricky, interviewee 1) or were not satisfied with the domestic education experience. They wanted to experience different education systems, academic environments and lifestyles. The status of 'student' is primary for them after the interviewees arrived at Durham, because of the formation of social networks and the production of identities centered on 'students'. The interview results showed that the respondents' college membership and local living community played decisive roles in their adaptation to the new social culture and daily life.

##### Case 1.

*Ricky (interviewee 1) (all the names used in this study were pseudonyms) is a graduate student who has lived in Durham for five years and has rich experience in college accommodation and renting. He now lives in the college's graduate dormitory building and serves as the warden of the dormitory. He said: 'When I first arrived at the college, I realized that I would speak English most of the time because I was surrounded by foreigners. I met students from Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong at the college's basketball court and other places. We all spoke English ... I realize the differences between accents ... I do not think I can speak English. This was a cultural shock ... Fresher's week activities at the college quickly familiarized me with the new environment. I did lots of sports: basketball and tennis. Playing sports does not require much talking, but neutral understanding.'*

Ricky was sensitive to the new cultural context and its changes in the English language environment in which a shared ethnic identity might bring him with a British college identity on this occasion. Research by Zhang and Brunton (2007) showed that language barriers directly affected interpersonal relationships in social interactions. However, individuals quickly communicated and built groups that belonged to them through the habits of familiar domains (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.136). Through a familiar college learning environment, Ricky quickly established his own social network with university students from other cultural backgrounds and adapted to the college's lifestyle during social activities.

##### Case 2

*Similar to the model of cultural shock by Brown and Holloway (2008), the other three interviewees, Rosy, Itzel,*

*and Hannah, more often interacted with Chinese or Asian students after trying out social activities organized by the college. This 'natural racial gathering' (as Rosy labeled) came from a lack of adaptation to certain social situations, such as English bars. Rosy (interviewee 2) said: 'I mainly work with the Chinese graduate group in the college. I rarely go out to socialize. We play badminton every week with Chinese guys ... The College's JCR (Junior Common Room (JCR) Undergraduates) love drinking, which is noisy. They are more out of bounds, more personal, and more uncontrollable when socializing ... They have a lot of interesting ideas that have entered the JCR's proposal. These are things I cannot see in China. If they are in China, schools may not give approval ... I do not have many exchanges with foreigners; my social group is still Chinese. This is my comfort zone. So I do not have more ways to contact foreigners ... The experience of studying abroad will change my subjective recognition I know, but it will not change my behavior. My political and cultural bottom line have become lower. I started to accept and understand it, but I will not do it.'*

Rosy claimed that the college's community life allowed her to meet and learn about different 'Rosies' and social concepts. At the same time, she was able to socialize with students of the same ethnic group and stay in the social 'comfort zone' (as Rosy proposed). When students faced loneliness and maladjustment, they tended to seek social network support rather than institutional support (Sawir et al., 2007).

##### Case 3

*Gavin (interviewee 6) and Zoey (interviewee 7), after experiencing college life, found suitable social circles in student apartment life outside the college. They made friends with classmates of the same major and agreed to rent a studio in the same student apartment. When integrating into the new environment, Gavin expressed his incompatibility with living habits. Limited knowledge on language and culture in communicating with the British had affected his friend circle. Zoey believed: 'I do not converge on the cultural and social life here. But it is also different from the social life in China. Instead, I have entered a state of solitary self-entertainment and self-balancing. Now I have no sense of belonging ... I am not dissatisfied ... In this state, the state of self-closed loop and balance in the older age occurred in advance. It doesn't matter. It is fine.'*

Compared to previous interviewees who entered the state of college members, Gavin and Zoey had become hosts of rented student apartments, it would be more accurate to say that they had created their own life and surroundings.

#### 4.1.2 Loneliness or 'Live out my life in retirement'?

Much of the previous literature mentions the experience of loneliness in cultural adaptation.



#### Case 4

As mentioned in the previous point (4.1.1), Zoey (interviewee 7) mentioned self-closed loop and she said: 'I became more independent in the experience of social mobility and living alone. This independence will form my own comfort zone ... At the beginning, I actively adapted to the social life here. When I was tired, I felt pushed out. ... I think a diasporic lifestyle is common. At least, it is very common in my social circle. It will be easier to stick to a lifestyle that has been used for more than ten years.'

Zoey's situation is in line with Brown and Holloway's (2008) suggestion that the pressure of cultural shock outweighed the positive emotions she experienced during the 'active contact' stage. When the authors explained the hypothesis of the cultural shock model to Zoey, she confirmed this model. As she adapted to her new environment, Zoey replaced loneliness with a sense of independence and embraced the lifestyle of the ethnic diaspora.

#### Case 4

Different from the direct impact of cultural and social forms on Zoey, Rosy (interviewee 2) attributed her loneliness to living alone. She described her mental state that 'in China, no matter what, you will not be alone in a surrounding. But in a collective dormitory, even if you live in a standard room, there is nobody you can contact with, you still live by your own.... even if it is a shared bathroom and kitchen, which easily causes depression. (...) I suddenly felt lonely when I looked out from a window at night. I had this feeling for the first time.'

The loneliness occurred because of the change of living modes from collective living to living alone. When the familiar collective surroundings disappeared, the individual was 'like a fish out of water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127). In addition, migrants even build a network of relationships in the host society when they return to their home society in which they might produce another sense of loneliness.

#### Case 5

Our subject Chloe (interviewee 4) described this occasion as 'when you return to China, you will feel lonely again, as there will be no friends to meet. It will take time to reconnect with people you have known and have new encounters, but unfortunately, you won't be able to find anyone to meet.'

Such loneliness described by Chloe was caused by being unable to return to the life track of the previous community. Fong (2011) believed that this loneliness took place because of the lack of common experience in group relations within a stage. Retrospective common memory is the main topic of reunion. In addition, loneliness appears in a 'Living out my life in retirement' mode after being overcome.

#### Case 6

Zoey (interviewee 7) referred to the perception of the

status of local groups as 'the elderly who choose to live in peaceful small villages after retiring from big cities to settle in their old age.'

Zoey believed that living alone has put her into self-closing, like most of the old people in the County Durham. Positive loneliness and independence under self-closing are the ways Zoey coped with *cleft habitus*. A description of the status of 'Living out my life in retirement' also appeared in interviews with Itzel and Rosy. But they saw this state as a temporary neutral experience, without fundamentally changing their habitus. However, while sighing positively about the feelings of 'living out my life in retirement', they were aware of the competitive pressure to return to Chinese society. Itzel (interviewee 9) actively regarded this 'live out my life in retirement' style of life as an episode in the trajectory of life, and 'a beautiful dream-like experience extracted from the conventional trajectory.' Rosy's worry was 'cannot keep up with the pace and progress of domestic tension.' In other words, it would bring her anxiety for not being able to return to the 'comfort zone' and to adapt to the life that she was used to. Bourdieu and Nice (2008, p.100) mentioned in *cleft habitus* that individuals who had migrated back to the social environment might enter a state of lack of sense of belonging to the two environments and experience the *hysteresis effect*.

## 4.2 Social Engagement and Cultural Adaptation and Their Impacts on Identity Construction

Social engagement with the student identity is an important form of identity construction for sojourners whose social participation in various university activities presented a decisive role in respondents' college membership and community experience in adapting to new social culture and daily life, because the student community's inclusiveness to multiculturalism and the spontaneity of the student actions allow them to choose the local way and the frequency to adapt themselves to the new environment.

#### Case 7

Ricky (interviewee 1) interpreted such an adaptation as 'When I am in Durham, besides my daily activities, such as local shopping, my social engagement can be summarized as follows: Firstly, as the warden of the college this year, I have developed a close relationship with our porters. This connection has been fostered through our working relationship, and because I have been studying at the college for many years, making myself well-known to them. Secondly, as we have rented a house, I frequently interact with local real estate agents. Whenever there is an issue with the house, I am often the one who would be responsible for conducting room inspections and resolving any problems arisen. Lastly, I hold a driving license in Durham and my driving instructor is also a local, through him, I gained insights into the perspective of the local community.'



Ricky and many other interviewees mainly interacted with the local individuals through interactions within university, such as university staff and local students in Durham, and through shopping activities in their daily life, but with little involvement in local society outside of university. In addition, most of their local knowledge was provided by daily news and information published from the official media of universities and colleges. Their experience revealed that Chinese students lacked connection with off-campus local society and information about the country and local people. Different from the linguistic and cultural barriers when communicating with other *foreign* students (as opposed to the Chinese), respondents were barely aware of the existence of communities other than their *students* and student-related identities at Durham University. In most of the interviews, interviewees' understanding of *Durham* is only subjected to the identity of the Durham University students. The index of the name *Durham* refers to *Durham University*, rather than the *County Durham*.

#### 4.2.1 Social in Durham or Social in Durham University

In reality, both university-organized community models and individual self-adjustment could help interviewees shape their own lifestyles. However, social participation in these models is non-local. The responses from our interviewees showed that their knowledge of the university accounted for most of their knowledge of the city.

##### Case 8

Ricky (interviewee 1) proposed that 'as students, we don't care about Durham's local news through social media. Rarely, right? The distinction between Durham students and the local Durhamese is obvious. I heard that the local Durhameses hated students, which led me not to understand them. Or why do they hate us? Was it due to the gap between our lives, which was so large that there was no way to understand each other.' ..... 'Durham is a close-knitted community where people live in close proximity to one another, fostering a strong college-based environment that facilitates numerous community activities. This, in turn, strengthens the bond among our students and creates closer relationship for them. In contrast, in London, people disperse throughout the city after class, making it difficult for students to build relationship and have social interactions. As a result, it is hard to build and maintain relationships. However, in Durham, we can easily preserve this connection through various unintentional encounters and interactions.'

Ricky directly proposed the distinction between students and the local Durhamese. It was seemingly not about race and ethnicity, but the differences in living style and taste between the two communities in this city. In addition, Ricky expressed his feelings for Durham as a resident student, which came from the scope of the urban environment and the spatial distribution of student

activities. The student's participation in the university community built an interpersonal relationship network for them and strengthened the individual's cultural identity as Durham University students. Besides, Ricky's statement also illustrated the importance of 'presence' in generating and maintaining a sense of belonging.

Concerning interpersonal communication, Rosy and Chole both referred to racial discrimination experiences related to execrating speech attacks. Rosy described the attackers as young men without jobs. Chloe emphasized the characteristics of local elderly white women. However, both of them classified those people as local Durhameses based on their accents. Our interviewee Hannah shared this impression with two interviewees in view of the two communities she learned from her network.

##### Case 9

*Hannah (interviewee 8) argued that 'I do not have any prejudice or opinions about them. However, I have friends from the UK and European countries, who are mostly from the upper class, and they perceive the local Durhameses or portray them as drunk images. Durham University, being a private institution, has an air of privilege, but the city gives students the impression that the surroundings are more related to the working class. This also creates a sense of disconnection between the students and the local community.'*

The differences in classes were attributed to the separation between the main body of the university and the main body of the local community by invisible walls which are simultaneously formed in cyberspace, too. All interviewees mentioned that official emails and social media from universities and colleges played important roles in helping students know about the local situation and update their knowledge about the changes. For instance, our interviewee Chad (interviewee 10), as a Ph.D. student shared his learning and research experience about the history of urban mining areas and universities' local expansion. Itzel and Zoey both mentioned the college's mentor who informed them of the tendency of the local population, aging society and the tendency of young people and their community. However, such one-way information sharing makes it difficult to establish a positive social relationship between student groups and local Durham groups.

#### 4.2.2 Social media and home society

According to Lin and Chen (2019), the two-way dynamic formation of stereotypes from *outside society* and *inside society* has led international students to struggle for their identity games and construction in these two cultural environments. The alienation in the process of integration into the host society has strengthened the construction of international students' national identity. However, China's social media and cyberspace reflect some stereotypes of international students, which exacerbates the uncertainty of international students' social identity construction. In

actual practice, this result showed that most interviewees benefited from long-range social forms.

#### Case 10

Ricky (interviewee 1), Hannah (interviewee 8) and Rosy (interviewee 2) argued that 'long-distance social media interaction and low-frequency face-to-face communication could avoid unnecessary social interactions.' According to them, close friends and friends with similar interests were screened out during remote communication. Ricky further stated that 'On the contrary, moderate online contact maintains friendship, because friends have enough time to chat on common topics and interests.'

Swair et al. (2008) argued that the loneliness caused by collectivist habitus was based on the closeness of personal and family networks, rather than the inevitable problems that individuals experienced in migrating experience. However, Gavin and Chad expressed the adverse effects of remote interactions on intimate relations and families, who claimed that 'the process of gradual alienation is painful' as Chad raised. Thus, homesickness and lack of communication have caused a conscious strangeness.

Different from Lin and Chen's (2019) research, interviewees paid more attention to the maintenance and development of social networks, rather than domestic (Chinese) media's reports and evaluations of Chinese international student groups. As shown in 4.1.2, migration experience strengthens the subjectivity and independence of individualism. Regarding Hall's (2007) second position on cultural identity that cultural identity is existing and changing, cultural identity in cyberspace relies on the way individuals choose freely. The two-way choice of social software and platforms for the home society and host society maintains the two cultural identities of international students (Zhang, 2018). However, this result showed that the frequency of using social software lies in sharing a convenient platform with close relationship networks, rather than 'hard-working to maintain a performance stage' as Tatum (interviewee 5) suggested.

#### Case 11

Tatum (interviewee 5) claimed that he 'does not have to rely on family or group lifestyles' as Ricky and Zoey suggested. In addition, for some interviewees, as long-term users of online social networking, social media is a familiar community in social networks. After the geospatial movement occurred, Rosy continued to track her home (China) and international news and discussed related topics online with her close friends from China. In addition, they could continuously produce common memories with the ethnic group through online games as Tatum saw it. Tatum stated that 'I do not care much about the impact of normal culture. I generally regard it from the perspective of survival. Eat, live and surf the internet.'

For Tatum, living alone but online could maintain a long-term sense of belongingness. In the new social

network form and technological media, cultural identity was broken through his previous social link and its maintenance, production, and reproduction in a more individualized, active, and decentralized manner in the network ear.

### 4.3 Cleft Habitus and Identity Construction

#### 4.3.1 Unchangeable Cultural Attribute

Bourdieu and Nice (2008, p.100) referred to the status of an unfamiliar habit that a person encountered in a new field as *cleft habitus*. He cited the idiom *a fish out of water* to describe this state. Similarly, the symbol *water* was used by interviewees in our research. They commonly regarded *water* as an image of culture.

#### Case 12

When Ricky (interviewee 1) was asked about how to position himself in the cultural and social dimensions, he described that 'I am like a sponge. I can absorb water, and the trait would not change. But when you throw me into different waters, what I absorb would be different. For this metaphor, I still suffer great influence... Because I am in the UK (studying at the university), my understanding is broader, to understand what people around the world are thinking. This is a broader term... I feel that I am a person who understands both Chinese culture and Western culture... My understanding of British culture is better and deeper, which does not mean that I fully accept their culture. I can only say that I understand both cultures. I could find specific interpretations in specific cases. I can understand the two logics and choose between values. But I am always Chinese because that is my nationality.'

Ricky has a reflective and practical attitude towards cultural variations. His Chinese culture came from his nationality and the basic ideas he had developed from experience. The continuous cultural identity had formed his traits. The absorption and understanding of other cultures broadened his knowledge of the world but did not change his attributes. Besides, he believed that citizenship and nationality had decisive influences on his sense of belonging and cultural positioning.

#### Case 13

Similarly, Chloe (interviewee 4), from Guangzhou, a coastal city in southeast China, used her native language Cantonese and local proverbs to express her attitude: 'I feel that I am very Guangzhou. Because I think I will be distant from people who are more inland. This is the externalization of a very Guangzhou person when coming to this country. Because we are closer to salt water. We have a long history of accepting and merging foreign cultures.'

*Salt water* here means seawater in Cantonese. Chloe aimed to express through proverbs how she externalizes the cultural identity of the Guangzhouese. Her cultural identity and sense of belonging are localized and embedded, derived from her daily experience in the

cultural atmosphere in which she grew up. This inherent, continuous cultural identity was not replaced by another cultural identity. As summarized by Hannah, 'The cultural attributes of the Chinese cannot be changed. It is deeply ingrained.' For most interviewees, the culture they contact overseas is to improve their experience and broaden their horizons, but not to change their identification. Nevertheless, some interviewees maintained their sense of belonging to cultural identities after experiencing *cleft habitus*, while others reconfigured their identities based on *cleft habitus* experience.

#### Case 14

Another interviewee from Guangzhou, Chad (interviewee 10), believed that 'relocation experiences had excluded him from many social norms. When he realized the alternatives in his lifestyle, he gained greater freedom. However, he refused to label himself with any category. Maybe international ... I increasingly dislike the nationalist or localist tags.'

Additionally, Unchangeable Cultural Attribute could also refer to cyberculture. As Tatum mentioned that his belonging to cyberculture is unaffected by social and cultural experience. His concern for real life is survival, but not the culture and society. Therefore, under these circumstances, there were no experiences of *cleft habitus* occurring in his physical surroundings. Furthermore, presenting in the community without engagement but only experiencing through observation could be another way to help the newcomers to learn the diversity of culture and social forms in the host country. Firstly, living away from a collectivist life and strong family connections had promoted Chinese students to adapt to an independent and individualistic lifestyle. Secondly, the weak connection between the local community and the student group formed a recognition of the social participation of individual international students. From the subjective standpoint of international students, *Durham* refers to the university, rather than to local society; thirdly, the international students' emotional needs for the function of online social media tended to maintain close relationships. Last but not least, the cultural attributes and cultural identities of individuals were strongly seized by Chinese students who feel difficult to change. However, the possibilities for cultural identity were still diverse. The practice of cyberculture was not easily affected by the migration of physical surroundings and even changed in habitus.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As Hall (2007) suggested, identity was constantly and dynamically formed through the process of bicultural construction, resulting in the creation of 'the other' and the promotion of cultural pluralism. In the meantime, the 'presence' of cultural identity in multiple societies continuously constructs this identity (ibid). Therefore, in the two-dimensional discourse of the home society

and host society, as well as physical surroundings and cyberspace, 'who am I?' and cultural identity continuously contributed to a more comprehensive and complicated self-identity construction through multiple social engagements and cultural adaptations at different levels, which have been affected by cultural attributes, interpretations of the local living environment and the forms of social interactions. Most interviewees stated that while adapting to the habitus of a new environment, the cleft in the transformation of multiple habitus could refine the subjectivity of the individual. This experience might be a deficient phenomenon in the collectivist social paradigm. This dynamic process of identity construction prompted Chinese students to reflect on social and cultural self-positioning in cultural shock and cultural adaptation. Some interviewees in this research refused to use *intercultural*, *cross-cultural*, and *international* to modify the vocabulary of self-tagging while affirming the objective existence of the cultural attributes of the home society. However, they explored their identity preferences and belongingness in cultural attributes from their personal stances. Thus, in the process of dynamic construction of identity, Chinese international students recognized and reflected on the inherent cultural attributes of individuals, and constructed a sensitive self-identity in a multi-dimensional social network as well as a special preference for cultural identity which is presence and co-presence in multi-dimensional social surroundings in the continuity and reflection of individuals.

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