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Missing Intercultural Engagements in the University Experiences of Chinese International Students in the UK

Abstract

This paper looks at structural conditions or institutional arrangements that facilitate or hinder interactions for international students. Drawing on the contact and diversity theory, analyses compare Chinese students' intercultural experience in business and non-business schools in one UK university, and explore how these students interpret the meaning of quality intercultural contact based on their responses to the social environment around them. Findings indicate that the overwhelming number of Chinese students, particularly in business schools, combined with obstacles these students face in establishing intercultural contact around the university potentially motivates them to explore engagement with a wider host society (e.g. Christian churches). The denial of intercultural contact due to a lack of diverse environment may lead to inequality in opportunities for cross-cultural learning and personal growth. High quality intercultural contact is not only beneficial to international students; it also enhances the intercultural competency of native students in the global market place.

Key words: university diversity, intercultural engagement, Chinese International students' comparison, China, UK

Introduction: Beyond the Global Higher Education Market

Over the last decades, the rapid growth in international student mobility has become an increasingly significant feature of the higher education landscape. Universities worldwide, especially those in Europe, Oceania, and North America, have seen rapid development in the internationalisation of education. Among these regions, the US and the UK account for a large portion of the global international student population. Asian international students constitute the largest group enrolled for education outside their countries (53% of the overall international student population). Chinese students represent the highest share in the OECD area, accounted for 22% of all international students (OECD, 2016).

With the reputation for quality in higher education and the global education market, UK universities have been experiencing rapid changes in student demographics. The number of international students in the UK has grown steadily in the past ten years. Among all international students in the country, the number of Chinese students far exceeds that of any other nationality, at 91,215 (HESA¹ 2017). China is the only country showing a significant increase in student numbers in the 2015-2016 academic year. During the eight years from 2010 to 2017, the number of Chinese students in the UK grew at an average rate of 9% annually and accounted for about 20% of all international students (438,101) (UKCISA² 2017; HESA 2017). This means that one in every five international students is Chinese. Chinese students are therefore of primary importance to the market for international education in the UK.

International students have generated invaluable economic, societal, and cultural benefits in the UK. According to research from Universities UK (2017), in 2014–15, on- and off-campus spending by international students and their visitors generated a knock-on impact of £25.8 billion in gross output in the UK. It should be noted that one-eighth of a university's income comes from tuition fees, and it is predicted that tuition fee income will increase to £4.4bn in 2020 (based on 2011 prices, assuming constant fee levels in real terms), and living expenditure will increase to £7.7bn (also based on 2011 prices) (CABS³ 2016). International students are indispensable to the profitable market for higher education. In addition, the contribution of international students adds value to both the experience of UK students and the UK's global 'soft' power. British students build international contacts and understand other cultures through their interaction with international students, equipping them for an ever more globalised labour market (Universities UK 2017). Three-quarters of local students' state that studying alongside international students is a rewarding preparation for working in a global environment and that the experience gives them a broader worldview (HESA 2017). The ability of a country to attract international students, or facilitate exchanges, is a powerful tool of public diplomacy, and generates long-term assets both nationally and internationally. For instance, the UK's higher education market has attracted fifty world leaders from fifty-one countries to study there (McClory 2015).

The flourishing of student mobility and the significance of international students have seeded a booming research area in intercultural education and integration, as more and more students engage in this migratory trend. The trend towards greater mobility in the educational arena has generated numerous theories and vast research on the quality of international education, educational equality and justice (Marginson 2012; Tannock 2013), and the intercultural experience of international students (Denson and Bowman 2013; Umbach and Kuh 2006; Moskal and Schwiesfurth 2018). According to Marginson (2012), international students currently inhabit a 'grey zone' or 'limbo'. Their

‘non-citizen outsider status and the related issues of cultural difference, information asymmetry, and communication difficulties render their existence in the countries where they attend university ‘uncertain, vulnerable and de-powered’. The relationship between the internationalisation of higher education and its rapid marketization, privatisation, and commodification raises questions about the historical and contemporary unjust geopolitical conditions that underpin the current recruitment of international students in the UK (Tannock 2013). In terms of the intercultural experience of international students, the established and growing interest and research in the domain of cross-cultural interaction among international students focus on relationships (interpersonal or contextual), involvement and inclusion, and the associated patterns of intercultural adaptation (Kim 2001).

Extant research has found that among international students there is usually a strong desire to achieve contact, friendship, and social engagement with the host nationals (Brown 2009a; Brown 2009b; Holms 2007; Marginson 2014). Meaningful social contact has generally been noted as an important factor contributing to international students’ emotional well being and successful adjustment (Yang 2016). Research has also documented a lack of interaction among different student groups in the higher education’s multicultural campuses (Brown 2009a). Some researchers point out that international students fail to establish meaningful connections with host nationals for a variety of reasons, including the host nationals’ lack of interest in engaging with the incomers (Brown 2009a; Brown and Holloway 2008). The development of social networks and friendships between local and international students can be an extremely difficult endeavour and a complex task (Brown, 2009a) exacerbated by cultural difference and stereotyping (Bodycotte 2012). This often leads to expectation gaps among international students and ‘defeats many proclaimed advantages and benefits associated with higher education internationalisation and global student mobility’ (Dall’Alba and Sighu 2015; Yang 2016). The relevant body of literature acknowledges the structural conditions and institutional arrangements that facilitate or hinder the interactions between international and domestic students and among international students themselves (Pham and Tran 2015, Tran and Pham 2016). For example, Pham and Tran (2015) emphasized the social and structural conditions could restrict or nurture the engagement of international students with local students as well as their integration into the institutional community. Similarly, Gu et al (2010) and Leask (2009) have argued that ‘the conditions of contact’ including institutional culture, campus environment, the availability of support play a role on the intercultural development and engagement of international students, which is essential to the learning for all local and international students.

This paper seeks to contribute to a growing stand of literature that examines in qualitative detail the intercultural interaction of international students in international

education. The paper explores the phenomena of ‘Chinese Schools’ in the internationalised environment of UK higher education and challenges the prevailing ideas about cultural differences and language issues that affect the intercultural communication among international students. The paper argues that deprived diversity of environment and interactions affects meaningful intercultural contact. Institutional or structural diversity and the relevant diversity of interactions play a major role in the quality of intercultural contact and engagement. Outcomes of the study may shed light on the potential reasons as motivations indirectly push the students into other places beyond campus (such as Christian churches) to look for resources and support.

The following section presents a conceptual discussion of contact theory before moving on to a brief introduction of the research method and data collection process.

Intercultural Contact and Diversity

Intercultural contact or diversity experience is believed to be the crucial factor for dealing with acculturative stressors encountered frequently by international students, including language barriers, differences in an education system, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems associated with changing environments (Berry 2006; Smith and Khawaja 2011). The contextual stresses also include the pressures of interacting and establishing social relations with host nationals (Trice 2007). Understanding and dealing with stresses associated with international students’ intercultural contact during study abroad is imperative to the success of international education (Bodycotte 2012). Denson and Bowman (2011) distinguish three forms of experiences with diversity for international students: structural diversity (student body composition), curricular/co-curricular diversity (programmatic diversity efforts), and interaction diversity (interactions with diverse people). ‘Structural diversity’ refers to the racial or cultural composition of the student body. ‘Curricular’ or ‘co-curricular diversity’ refers to institutionally structured and purposeful programmatic efforts to help students engage in diversity with respect to both ideas and people. ‘Interaction diversity’ (or ‘diversity interactions’) refers to the extent and quality of interpersonal interactions with diverse peers that occur during the normal course of undergraduate life. This study focuses on structural and interaction diversity.

Structural or student diversity brings a variety of perspectives for helping students to identify new possibilities, both for themselves and their environment. Interaction with culturally diverse peers can enhance the overall educational experience of the students and foster positive learning outcomes. The exposure to the interaction with diverse perspectives could create more engaged, interculturally competent, globally aware graduates who possess the tools required to successfully ‘negotiate the richness of a world miniaturised by globalisation’ (Sexton 2012, 5). As Conklin (2004, 38) contends:

‘we learn when shaken by new facts, beliefs, experiences and viewpoints’, an argument echoed by Bollinger (2003, 433) who considered that ‘encountering differences rather than one’s mirror image is an essential part of a good education’. Besides the advantage of diverse peer support, students from different cultures - international or domestic - are ‘cultural carriers’, who bring diverse ideas, values, experience, and behaviours to the learning environment (Segll et al. 1990).

Structural diversity and interaction diversity does not always bring positive results. A significant number of scholars highlight the challenges of student diversity and the potential for negative outcomes, both for the students and for the institution. There may be increased stereotyping, a hardening of prejudicial attitudes towards other groups, and intergroup hostility (Asmar 2005; Henderson-King and Kaleta 2000; Rothman et al. 2003; Wood and Sherman 2001). Therefore, it is insufficient to just have a culturally diverse student group. Rather, it is necessary to maximise educational benefits for all students. Experiencing cultural diversity increases the chances that students will become more involved in diversity-related activities and will socialise more often with diverse peers, which, in turn, will both have a positive impact on students’ development (Chang 2001).

A more salient point that emerges from structural diversity is whether or not it provides more opportunities for students to engage in diversity-related activities and interact more frequently with diverse peers (Chang, Astin and Kim 2004; Pike and Kuh 2006). Structural diversity can be understood as providing the foundation for interaction diversity. Interaction diversity related to the quality of intercultural contact has been shown to be positively associated with outcomes such as intergroup attitudes and understanding (Antonio 2001; Chang et al. 2006; Denson and Chang 2009; Lopez 2004), general academic skills and self-efficacy (Denson and Chang 2009), student learning and personal development (Hu and Kuh 2003), learning outcomes (Chang et al. 2004; Gurin et al. 2002), civic engagement (Bowman 2011), intellectual and social self-confidence (Chang et al. 2004; 2006; Laird 2005), well-being (Bowman 2010), sense of belonging (Locks et al., 2008), student retention (Chang et al. 2004) and student satisfaction with their overall college experience (Chang 2001). Gurin et al. (2002) have provided the theoretical framework for understanding how students benefit educationally from attending racially or culturally diverse universities and suggest that increased opportunities for interacting with someone of a different culture adds value to students’ development. McBurnie and Ziguras (2009) and Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2009) find that students with more interactions with diverse peers in higher education are equipped with higher levels of skills. These skills include an awareness of social problems, creativity in relation to idea generation and problem solving, ability to acquire new skills and knowledge independently, and relating to people of different races, nations, or religions. Moreover, Denson and Bowman (2013) identify high-quality engagement with

diverse peers as being positively associated with improved intergroup attitudes and civic engagement, whereas poor-quality engagement yields a negative association. Furthermore, interaction with culturally diverse peers can enhance the overall educational experience of the students and foster positive learning outcomes (Dunne 2013). For instance, student experiences with diversity are positively related to effective educational outcomes, including improved intergroup interaction, critical problem solving and student satisfaction (Umbach and Kuh 2006). Seifert et al. (2010) also hypothesise that learning with diverse peers and instructional approaches could deepen awareness of diversity, which is so central to students' significant learning experiences and development.

Although large volumes of research have examined the role of diversity experience on the development of international students and its relation with meaningful intercultural contact, the lack of relevant contact with domestic students for international students continues to be a concern among educators (Brandenburg and de Wit 2011), which requires a social context that enables local students and international students to engage in intercultural interactions. Thus, the paper explores the phenomenon of deprived diversity of structure and interactions in an internationalised university environment and raises the question: How structural conditions and institutional arrangements facilitate or hinder the meaningful intercultural contact and learning for international students in the UK?

Method, Data Collection and Analysis

The paper is mainly based on qualitative semi-structured interview data, conducted by the first author. The interview process was a part of a larger mixed-method study on Chinese international students' church participation experiences in the UK. The sample in the larger mixed-method study consists of 501 survey participants and 15 students and 5 church representatives participating in the interviews. The background survey data from Chinese student respondents, the participant observations, and the informal, unstructured interview material has been also consulted in this study.

The interview sample of fifteen Chinese master's students at one case-study university, constituted 20% of the target group, which is considered sufficient to obtain corroborative research evidence (Cohen et al., 2013). According to the survey in the project, 67 Chinese students had been to churches three or more times in the previous six months (named as frequent church participants). Thus, the minimum number of interviews should be 14. Interview participants were recruited via invitation in two cased churches under the conditions that they (1) are Chinese international students, (2) are at Master program, and (3) have studied in the UK for more than six months. Those who were willing to take part in the research were asked to attend the face-to-face interviews.

The majority of respondents in the survey sample in the project came from the Business School (83.2%), followed by 5.8% from the School of Social Media and 5.4% from the School of Education. There were fewer students representing other subjects such as Engineering, Law, Sociology, and Medical Science. The distribution of students from business school and non-business schools in the interview sample is roughly consistent with that in the survey, including 11 interviewees from business school and 4 from non-business schools, namely the School of Education (2), the School of Engineering (1), and the School of Biology (1). All students had been in the UK for over six months and had been to the Christian churches over six times in the six months before the interviews.

The interviews were conducted on the university campus and each lasted for about 30-40 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with the consent of respondents. The real names of the interview participants were replaced by the pseudonyms. The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic approach and coded with the NVIVO software. Following the generation of the emergent themes, a complete round of analysis was carried out, where a hierarchical structure of superordinate themes and subthemes was identified (Smith and Osborn 2008). The key concepts emerging from the students' experience reflected the process of intercultural engagement and how they perceived and responded to their intercultural experience. Drawing on the contact and diversity theory, the analyses presented in the paper relate to structural diversity (student body composition) and interaction diversity (interactions with diverse people) (Denson and Bowman 2011). The analyses compare international students' intercultural experience in both business and non-business schools to see how structural conditions around students play a role on students' intercultural contact. The analytical section focuses specifically on the quality of intercultural contact, and explores how Chinese students interpret the meaning of quality intercultural contact, and what do they value in the process of intercultural engagement on the basis of their responses to the cultural environment around them.

Business Schools – ‘Chinese Schools’

It is often acknowledged that diversity is an inherent part of international education. This is true in general and the constitution of international students in the UK is also multicultural. Or in other words, universities are at least superficially internationalising or multicultural (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009). However, for some specific circumstances, understandings about the university environment need to be updated. For instance, the multicultural environment has changed as a result of the increasing number of Chinese students now studying abroad. According to the respondents in the sample, they had a feel that there were a very large number of Chinese students particularly in schools of business. Half of the respondents felt that it was difficult to meet non-Chinese students in

the schools where Chinese students constitute the majority. All of those holding this opinion were pursuing a study in the business school. One respondent added that there were thirty students in her class but only two of them were not from China. She compared the situation to the English lectures when she was at a Chinese university. In one lecture in the business school, Zhou (a Chinese student) found that hundreds of Chinese students sat together, while the non-Chinese students were seated at the back of the classroom, automatically forming a small group. She even felt that those non-Chinese students, to some extent, seemed to be isolated as the minority in the classroom. Another two respondents complained that although they knew there would be many Chinese students before they came to the UK, especially in the business School, they never expected there would be so many around them. One of them even showed her regret for choosing that particular university and noted:

I never expected there to be so many Chinese students here. If I had known, I think I would not have chosen this university. I heard that at the University of Manchester, they control the rate of students from different countries (Mao, International Business).

This phenomenon of ‘Chinese Schools’ in UK universities is becoming increasingly evident, as Chinese international student numbers have increased rapidly in recent years. Combing the data from HESA (2014) and HEFCE (2014), in the academic year 2012-2013, an average of 52% of all students in the UK taking the business and administration courses were from China (HEFCE 2014). In some universities, the proportion was even as high as 60%. Chinese students have gradually become an indispensable part of UK international education, particular in business schools.

For political and economic reasons, the UK, at both national and regional levels, shows a high level of interest in maintaining educational links with China (Fakunle et al. 2016). There is no doubt that universities want to recruit international students. This is a highly profitable segment of the international educational market. Gradually, as is shown in the study, some schools (especially business) are becoming an environment in which there are large numbers of Chinese students. While in theory an international education should provide a diversified or multicultural environment, with a lot of students from different cultures (Yusupova et al. 2015), the overwhelming number of Chinese students in some popular subject areas has made it almost impossible to construct an ‘international’ university with diversity. As the foundational condition of intercultural contact, structural diversity is restricted in business schools. The ‘Chinese school’ in the business faculty produces expectation gaps and obstacles in the students’ overseas experiences.

Expectation Gaps

Expectations are believed to play a vital role in the adjustment process and the outcome of overseas study experiences (Pitts 2005; Goldstein and Kim 2006; Kim and Goldstein 2005, Moskal 2017), while expectation gaps are thought to influence the overall learning experience (Kingston and Forland 2008; Vande Berg 2007). As the largest group of international students in UK universities, three quarters of Chinese international students in the interview hold different individual expectations of the international experience, and arrive in the UK with individual goals ranging from cultural engagement to language improvement, which is echoed the studies from Dunne (2013) as well as Yu and Shen (2012). Some of the students in the study described themselves as being disappointed with the experience, particularly those with high expectations. Practical issues after arrival brought culture shock (Brown and Holloway 2008). There were a number of gaps that students were faced with in the new milieu, which required special individual effort and negotiation in the process of their adaption to the host cultural environment. Although these gaps presented obstacles in the students' adaptation processes, the negotiation that was required to fill these gaps expanded their knowledge and worldview over the course of their journey in international education (Gu et al 2010).

English Language Barriers and Academic Pressure

The overwhelming numbers of Chinese students in some schools deprived the students of opportunities to communicate cross-culturally. The significance of English as the tool of intercultural communication and interpersonal relations was evident among Chinese students in the interviews. Lack of English language communication in the intercultural contact emerged as a major cause among those business students. Participants from business schools noted that there was a limited English-speaking environment around the campus, particularly in the classrooms. Due to the large number of Chinese students in one lecture, students observed that they could only talk with their co-national counterparts as they were all seated together. One student described how as there were so many Chinese students around him (in the School of Business), the Chinese students were 'practicing' mandarin instead of English most of the time.

As there are many Chinese students, we often speak in Chinese. It is like we're in China, nothing different. Although we are studying in an English-speaking country, there are too many Chinese students. We don't have many opportunities to speak English. We also have a tutorial; however, as they are all Chinese in one group, we often speak Chinese here too. It is like we are in China, nothing different. (Chen, accounting student)

The above quote demonstrates that Chinese students were negative to 'Mandarin practice' with other co-nationals, and they preferred to be with local students or students from other countries in a mixed group. English practice was seen as the essential part of

their overseas experience. Losing the opportunity of practising English meant losing meaning of international learning. Chinese students' desire to practice English and improve language skills was consistent with the finding of Pham and Tran (2015) who argued that international students value English as a form of cultural skills to communicate and interact with surroundings. Lack of structural diversity deprives Chinese students in some business schools not merely the opportunity to speak English, but cross-culturally communication through the intercultural encounter.

Compared with students in business school where there is a lack of cultural exposure, Chinese students in non-business schools have more opportunities for English communication with the non-Chinese students around them. The non-Chinese environment pushes students to speak English all the time. It might be difficult during the initial period. However, as time goes on, they become more and more familiar with the usage of English in daily communication.

I talked about [the language issue] with my classmates, and found that we shared the same experience. I also asked some local classmates and found out how they think about the problem. Gradually, I got to know how they expressed themselves and how they think. Now, it is better. (Tang, engineering)

My English is not so good, but with a lot of non-Chinese classmates around me, I have to speak it all the time. In everyday communication, my classmates would teach me some words and expressions if I were not sure. I learned a lot in school and after class when we stay together for lunch or dinner. Compared with when I arrived here, I think both my oral and written English have improved a lot. (Zhang, biology)

The above shows that in contrast with the Chinese students' situation in business schools, students in other schools not only practised English but also had the advantage of being able to obtain peer support for their English improvement. International classmates played a significant role in daily communication as they helped establish an English-speaking environment and facilitated the intercultural and educational understanding (Holmes, 2005). The multicultural environment in the non-business schools gave Chinese students the possibility of cultural communication and the confidence to express themselves in English and thus improves their competency and confidence in intercultural communication.

The student's fluency in English could be seen as a form of cultural capital that serves to communicate and establish interpersonal relations (Brooks and Water, 2013). The native speakers or international students from other countries not only

established an environment for speaking English; they also informally provided the information so that Chinese students could learn to express themselves properly, that is to improve the skills to comment and reflect. The process might not always be enjoyable, but after a period of practice and reflection, it was believed that they were more confident in their English communication. In contrast to the students in business schools, who complained of their lack of practice, non-business school students experienced a hard but rewarding process in terms of English learning. International peer support (Andrade, 2006) in the cross-cultural interaction creates an encouraging environment and promotes the agency that makes Chinese students willing to communicate through the virtuous circle of learning. Language barriers and academic anxiety could be lowered if the university provides the necessary intercultural context in which students can communicate and learn (Dunne 2013).

Due to the language barriers, the different educational system (Smith and Khawaja 2011), and disappointing academic performance compared with other students, academic pressure was perceived to be one of most stressful aspects of the Chinese international students' lives. This negative experience made them feel depressed and anxious. Most Chinese students in the interviews expressed their hopes for their academic studies, which included aspirations to improve their oral English as well as their academic performance. Some of them had set for themselves specific aims for their academic performance, like obtaining the most credits, or even achieving the highest grades in class. A mismatch between academic expectations and the realities of university life makes the experience more stressful as it decreases the students' confidence in their new environment and negatively impacts on their academic performance. The majority of Chinese students in the sample emphasised this repeatedly and with disappointment. Problems with the language barrier and academic anxiety could perhaps be alleviated through intercultural engagements within the university, which would provide students with opportunities to communicate and learn in the intercultural context (Dunne 2013; Guo et al. 2014). However, for students in business schools, it is nearly impossible to turn to some native students for consultation. Students in non-business schools, on the other hand, received the support of native students. Besides language, those native students also provided the basic knowledge in academic skills, such as essay writing.

Friendships and Social Network

Besides restricting opportunities to communicate in English and increasing academic pressure due to the language barrier and different educational system, the overwhelming number of Chinese students also limits the potential to make friends with non-Chinese students. Relationships are a highly important component required for satisfying an individual's deep personal and emotional needs (Hendrickson et al. 2011).

Half of the respondents in the study felt that it was hard to access non-Chinese students in the school of business where Chinese students constitute the vast majority. Most respondents in business schools implied that they did not have any non-Chinese friends. One student used the expression 'hi-bye friend' when he described those non-Chinese students in his class, which suggested that their relationship was fundamentally based on the sense of being familiar with each other rather than with any deeper level of interaction. It has been shown that Asian international students from typically collective cultures tend to find it harder to make friends with locals than their European counterparts (Yeh and Inose 2003). Similarly, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong's (2006) research on Chinese students studying in the UK found that while the students attached considerable significance to intercultural contact diverse interactions proved to be the most problematic area. A lack of diversity in their academic environment makes it even harder for Chinese students to establish friendships with local people or their international counterparts. The unbalanced distribution of students and homogeneity of nationality in a particular school has an even more detrimental effect on the establishment of friendships beyond the cultural group, as it tends to lead to students having less interest or curiosity (Dunne 2013) in their counterpart groups. Classrooms or campuses offer effective opportunities for the establishment of friendships when they provide the opportunities for interactions among students. Students also perceive these 'conditions of contact' as enabling them to benefit from the shared learning and broadening their views about international practice (Gu, Scheweifsurth and Day, 2010). However, as there were so few non-Chinese students around them, the individuals were less inclined to make local friends around the university.

Although previous research has confirmed that in a mixed group, Chinese students tended to cling to solely Chinese peers due to their lack of confidence in intercultural communication and language proficiency (Wang et al. 2012), the general findings of this study contrast with this picture when the students are given full intercultural exposure. Chinese students in business schools lack the chance to choose with whom they mingle but instead must face the fact that there are only Chinese groups they can engage with. The overwhelmingly Chinese environment makes it hardly possible to motivate the establishment of friendship.

In contrast with those business students who experienced relative isolation in the host environment, students in non-business schools could easily make friends with local students and students from others countries,

I am outgoing, so in daily life, I have many friends and hang out with both with Chinese students and non-Chinese students. (Huo, education)

The social network represents an essential tool for Chinese students to obtain intercultural contact with non-Chinese students in the host education. Propinquity has been noted as a highly influential factor in the formation of friendship (Kudo and Simkin 2003). The overwhelmingly Chinese environment in business schools deprives students of the pre-set conditions for the development of intercultural networks and host friendships, which are believed to interrelate with wellbeing and even academic performance, as they all interact within a single ecological system (Elliot et al. 2015). The propinquity functions were suspended for students to recognise and cultivate similarity in activities, needs, interests, values, attitudes and personality. Overreliance on friends from any single nation can have an adverse effect on developing intercultural communication competence, as all contacts with multi-cultural nationals are integral in developing an individual's host communication competency (Kim 2001). If the network is limited to co-nationals, even the international education journey itself loses its meaning as it deviates from diversity-oriented intercultural communication. Bodycotte (2012) point out that successful social integration and having local friends can result in better intercultural adaptation, lower levels of stress and fewer adjustment problems for international students. Therefore, the construction of a diversified friendship network is encouraged in intercultural contact. The findings point to the need of providing more opportunities for Chinese students in the business school accessing and building diversified social network.

Cultural Contact

An intercultural environment provides students with the means for cultural interaction through social activities, while a relatively mono-cultural context, to some extent, constrains exposure to cultural diversity and opportunities for cultural involvement. For the majority of participants in the study, quality intercultural interaction means opportunities to contact with local students and other international students. Through these opportunities they could gain cultural knowledge and personal skills including interpersonal relations, since everyone is the 'cultural carrier' (Segll et al. 1990). Zhang and Tang examples illustrate more in depth how the cross-cultural context in non-business schools facilitated students' engagement with the host culture and helped them to know better and get involved in the local culture.

I usually took part in gatherings or dinner parties at weekends with my classmates. It was great to relax with my friends, especially the locals, as they introduced me to local culture and invited me to visit their home. Last month, we had a tour to the Isle of Skye - it was so amazing. There were five of us, and I was the only Chinese. We planned the travel itinerary together and enjoyed the trip. (Zhang, biology)

One day my classmates and I talked about ‘Western’ culture, like movies, sports. I did not know much about them. I understood their meaning, but I couldn’t share my ideas because I had never watched them, and so lacked the necessary background knowledge. Later, I would ask them what it is about and also, I would read some news. Now it is better. On the other hand, I think they are willing to know more about me, mutual interaction. Sometimes I would push myself to talk more or see more. After all it is a new environment, so you need to change yourself sometimes. (Tang, engineering)

Both of these quotes point to the importance of structural diversity contributes to facilitate diverse interactions, exchange of ideas, and accumulation of cultural knowledge, interpersonal relationships and awareness of others. Although communication at the beginning was a struggle for Tang because of the cultural differences, the negative situation was transformed into a positive one in the process of connection with the local classmates. The opportunity of contact provides the valuable experience and confidence to interact with non-Chinese students regardless of the possible embarrassment. It is the experience of mutual interaction that leads individuals to change. Cultural knowledge they gain from the diversity of interactions assists the efficacy and appreciation of communication relevant to the intercultural situation, cultural norms, and participation in the intercultural conversation (Neuliep, 2017). The cultural negotiation experiences contribute to student’s interpersonal relations and awareness of others. These findings echoed in other studies about the potential social and developmental benefits associated with cross-cultural contact between local and international students (Gu et al. 2010).

In contrast, business schools offered comparatively fewer opportunities for Chinese students. The interaction between both sides is constrained no matter from which perspective it is viewed.

There are few non-Chinese in my class. I seldom had a chat with those students. I found they preferred sitting at the back of the classroom. They sat together, though Chinese students also sat together. (Qing, marketing)

From the description, there seemed to be invisible segregation in one lecture. The contact and connection that students need is restricted in the segregation, though it was not constructed on purpose. Thus, it could be inferred that it is unrealistic to expect the kind of intercultural engagement experienced by non-business school students. The limited cross-cultural involvement links to fewer informal learning opportunities for students and leads to depression and lack of trust in engaging with the surroundings (Kim and Gudykust 2005).

Isolation from cultural contact, furthermore, results in limited access to the information and knowledge required to ‘increase the intercultural communicator’s understanding of other and self in order to facilitate making accurate predictions and attributions’ (Wiseman 2002). Although the majority of respondents confirmed that they had, more or less, been prepared for cultural differences, these gaps still shocked them and remained an issue in their daily life. For those Chinese students who saw the cultural differences but did not have enough knowledge to understand or predict them, it decreased their appreciation of the host culture, and even increased their misunderstanding, which tended to result in the attribution of discrimination.

With limited cross-cultural communication and interaction, some students even attempted to seek out cultural communication beyond the campus, for instance, in churches, bars and cafés.

I made a lot of friends, including Chinese and people from other countries, outside the campus. It helps me get familiar with this new life here. (Bai, finance)

However, exploration outside campus was the choice that just a few students made, and it took time to achieve the aim. Lack of institutional diversity restrict their possibility of exploration and transform their intergroup attitude (Berry, 1991). After carefully considering the potential risks from society outside the campus, most students opted not to explore beyond university boundaries. The enthusiasm and willingness to interact with locals gradually disappeared once they had accepted their current situation. In this regard, Bai was brave and willing to make efforts in the direction of cultural exploration. Another three respondents reported that they did not have any social activities, and just stayed at home after class. Some students described their daily life as boring because university and home were the only places they ever went. They felt that opportunities to experience the life of the host country were limited. Within this environment, either by conscious and positive choice or because of discomfort with other forms of interaction, some international students ended up socialising and living with people from their own country or with similar cultural backgrounds, limiting the extent of their contact with other groups (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009).

Public Discrimination

Discrimination was another concern that Chinese students expressed about their lives abroad. Although it does not happen every day, discrimination is believed to be a common source of stress for international students (Ward and Masgoret 2004, Maundeni 2001). Some respondents, both from business schools and non-business schools, showed concerns about their public safety. One student reported that some high school students

had mocked her and her friends in the street, which had made her very unhappy. Despite not knowing why the high school students had behaved in this way, she had been made to feel uncomfortable and upset in that moment. These negative experiences depressed the Chinese students and intensified their feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Misunderstanding, or at least miscommunication, brings a lot of uncomfortable feelings and negative impressions of the international experience, which is found to negatively impact on an international student's adaptation and links directly to psychological wellbeing and depression (Atri, Sharma and Cottrell 2006; Jung et al. 2007; Wei et al. 2007), as well as to homesickness (Saha and Karpinski 2016), and lack of confidence in making friends with the locals (Chen 1992).

Although experienced similarly by both business students and non-business students, the latter indicated more proactive attitudes towards the discrimination. They were ready to discuss it with their classmates to seek comfort or learn from the native students how to protect themselves from harm. In this sense, we could see non-Chinese peer support contributes to dealing with the negative experience in cultural adaptation and integration as extant studies show (e.g. Berry 2006). In contrast, business students tended to be more passive to the negative experience. Although they had complained about it in the interviews, most of the time they were just left feeling depressed and helpless.

Conclusions

The paper argued that the environment comprising overwhelming numbers of international student could result in a situation that precludes international (Chinese) student's intercultural contact and development. Unlike previous research that pointed to innate cultural differences and expectations of complicated interaction (Peacock and Harrison 2008; Sánchez 2004) to be the reasons for infrequent intercultural interactions, this study finds structural conditions and institutional arrangements in some schools in the UK universities making intercultural contact difficult for students. Overwhelming numbers of Chinese students in so-called 'Chinese schools' provides limited opportunities for international students to interact with diverse cultures and gain intercultural competence and a broader worldview. The reality of 'Chinese Schools' in the study pushes some students to bravely cross over the campus boundaries and seek out intercultural interaction in a wider society. One such example is the phenomenon of non-Christian Chinese students attending Christian churches to look for more intercultural exposure (Authors, forthcoming).

Such a lack of institutional diversity and interaction diversity implies a potential inequality in approaches to cross-cultural learning and personal growth. Diversity of environment is central to student development; yet, such diverse

environments do not exist in some schools due to the unbalanced admission of students from one single country. A multicultural environment as the essential condition should incorporate multifaceted means for addressing issues and offering support. Unfortunately, this is not recognised in practice. The constrained intercultural contact impedes the further improvement of internationalised higher education in this study due to the unbalanced distribution of access for different cultural groups. It should be underlined how the high quality of intercultural contact not only benefits international students but also influences the intercultural competency of native students in the global marketplace.

Although the study's time and sample limitation restricts potential generalisation, the results still remind us not to ignore those essential factors that play a role in determining the quality of intercultural contact. Meaningful intercultural contact does not just happen. Purposeful measures and interventions are suggested to take into consideration so as to construct a balanced and diverse environment for each international student and to improve the equality and quality of international education. This could ensure the UK maintains the financial, social, and cultural benefits it receives from international education and continues to develop its soft power in the diplomatic sphere. Rather than targeting the Chinese market regardless of its possible influence on the quality of international education and sustainable development in the long run, universities and policy makers are advised to focus on a more recruitment of students from different countries in different majors to create a multicultural campus environment for each student. At the moment, it suggests that supplementary efforts should be made to better engage international students in cultural exploration and communication as compensation for the imbalanced make-up of nationalities in schools of business. The future research could enlarge the number of case universities and attempt to test more systematically the phenomena of 'Chinese schools' in the UK and in other receiving countries. The potential factors that impact on the quality of intercultural contact of all international and domestic students should be further explored.

Notes:

1. HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency
2. UKCISA: UK Council for International Student Affairs
3. CABS: Chartered Association of Business Schools
4. Universities UK is the voice of universities, helping to maintain the world-leading strength of the UK university sector and supporting our members to achieve their aims and objectives

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