Why do Christian Churches, and not Universities, Facilitate Intercultural Engagement for Chines International Students?

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Abstract

The paper offers new, significant insights into the Church engagement experiences of Chinese international students in the UK. Based on a mixed-method research and focusing on a group of international Chinese students participating in local Christian churches, it explores the motivations (for), dynamics and types of connections students establish and maintain with the church communities, and the implications for stakeholders in facilitating intercultural engagement with the local community. The limited cross-cultural interactions alongside other structural and contextual factors often deprive meaningful engagement between international students and host nationals within the campus. According to the research participants, internationalised university is promising and promoting intercultural experiences but not delivering them. Chinese students of usually non-Christian background gravitate towards Christian churches as alternative places to gain desired intercultural experiences. The findings encourage universities to reflect on the quality of intercultural engagement for international students and draw from the reciprocal and respectful intercultural connections that some students discovered through engaging with Christian churches.

Introduction

The worldwide internationalisation of universities is reflected in the rate of increase in international student numbers. It is worthy of note that in the 12 years from 2000 to 2014 the number of international students more than doubled, with an average annual growth of around 7% (OECD, 2016). In terms of the most affected regions of the world, Europe's institutions have the highest intake of international students (48%), followed by North America, and Oceania (OECD, 2015). Among these regions, the US and the UK account for a large portion of the global international student population, with 16% and 13% in 2014 respectively. Mixing international students with host students potentially create a diverse study environment.

The rising international mobility of both students and academics within higher education has generated growth in research and theories on inequalities related to international mobility and education (Bilecen & Van Mol 2017; Marginson, 2012; Tannock, 2013), challenging contemporary debates that seek to present the internationalisation of higher education as a 'neutral experience' without taking into consideration historical, political, economic and cultural events and relations which influence the process (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo 2009). University documents on internationalisation and student mobility are filled with contentions about intercultural learning, global outlook and understandings of 'difference' (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Differences in social lifestyle, culture, religious beliefs, language and sexuality across the student body are critical catalysts of many of the tensions that exist on campus between international and home students, argue Andersson et al (2012: 512), thus questioning whether engagement with diversity extends beyond the glossy brochures and pictures of multi-ethnic crowds on campus (Brooks & Waters 2011). Drawing on literature about the intercultural experience of international students (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Denson & Bowman, 2013; Moskal and Schwiesfurth 2018; Tran & Pham, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2017a, 2017b), the paper contributes to the debate on educational mobility, and the possibilities and limits of social connectedness and openness in the internationalised university environment (Moskal and Schwiesfurth 2018: 94).

The overwhelming number of Chinese students within some subjects' areas, particular within the subject of business, deprived the students of opportunities to communicate cross-culturally. Chinese international students hold different expectations of

the international experience and arrive in the UK with individual goals ranging from cultural engagement to language improvement, and some of the students become disappointed with the experience, particularly those with high expectations. (Yu and Moskal, 2018). Churches can play the role of social support for both believers and non-believers, including immigrants and refugees, as well as international students. We argue that any cultural engagement with the church is related to students' consideration of, and negotiation with, the challenging host environment, and church participation can be understood as a conscious choice for Chinese international students. Expectation gaps (such as a language barrier), constrained intercultural communication within universities, discrimination, and loneliness, all occurred simultaneously at the beginning of their intercultural interaction within the campus-based university (Yu and Moskal, 2018). As a result, church participation - as a form of cultural engagement, can form the important social experience for many Chinese students in their overseas study (Li, 2012; Williams, 2012). However, given that most of the Chinese students originate from a non-Christian background, it is unclear as to why they would choose a form of intercultural interaction that is founded upon this specific religion.

Thus, the current article explores the questions: Why do these students choose Christian churches, rather than organisations within the university or other secular groups, for intercultural communication and involvement during their overseas study? And, how churches facilitate the students' intercultural engagement?

Internationalisation beyond the classroom

Leask (2009) highlights that internationalisation takes place within formal and informal (beyond the classroom) curricula; both are equally important in supporting and furthering the intercultural/internationalisation practices of the other. The role of teachers within the internationalised campus, and particularly within the classroom, cannot be underestimated. Teachers, as the vital link in students' internationalisation could be understood as 'cultural translators and mediators' (Cushner, 2008), connecting course content to events and knowledge within global and local environments (Green, 2003). However, past research such as Stone (2006) and Ward (2001) found that higher education teachers are not adapting sufficiently either their content or pedagogical methods when engaging with international students, in particular to those from countries with significant cultural differences. Dessel (2010) found that teachers are not prepared to work with class diversity, that is, other

sociocultural backgrounds that make up the student body in their classroom. De Beuckelaer, Lievens, F., and Bücker, (2012) suggest that teacher's intercultural competence should be considered before recruitment to improve the overall teaching quality.

Unlike classroom interactions, activities outside of the classroom, such as clubs, sports, workshops, festivals, study trips, internships, and residential arrangements, such as programmes and integration within residency halls, dining halls, commuting circumstances, offer multiple opportunities for engaging dissimilarity (Couros, 2009). This can be fleeting, with informal curricula activities offering opportunities for more in-depth interactions and the building of relationships. Meanwhile, a body of literature also suggests that among international students there is usually a strong desire to achieve contact, friendship and social engagement with host country nationals (Brown 2009a, 2009b; Holems, 2007; Marginson, 2014). Meaningful social contact has thus far been understood as an important determinant of international students' emotional wellbeing and learning within the host country (Tran & Vu, 2017b; Yang, 2016). By undertaking educational mobility, international students are engaged in evolving intercultural relationships with people, places and communities, with a desire to attain intercultural integration (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Tran & Pham, 2017b), and at the same time, a responsibility for enhancing their own intercultural competence and connectedness (Tran & Vu, 2017a). Tran & Vu's (2017a) research highlights that the act of positioning at the periphery of the local culture (of some international students) considerably precludes their agency and capacity to negotiate reciprocal and respectful intercultural interactions.

Nevertheless, the research also documents a lack of interaction among different student groups within the multicultural campuses of higher educations (Brown, 2009a). Some researchers contend that international students fail to establish meaningful connections with host nationals due to a variety of reasons, including the host nationals' lack of interest in engaging with the newcomers (Brown 2009a; Brown & Holloway, 2008), for example reluctance to include international students in a group work as it might compromise the collective mark through lack of language ability or of English pedagogy (Newman 2007). A lack of real integration between the host community and international students means that their limited and often superficial interactions restrict opportunities for the personal growth of both international students and native students (Brown, 2009a; Dunstan, 2003; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007; Peacock & Harrison, 2008). Research has

suggested several potential reasons as to why intergroup interaction is infrequent. Both host and international students may feel negative emotions, such as anxiety, discomfort, frustration and irritation, over intergroup contact due to inherent cultural differences, and expect complicated interactions (Peacock & Harrison, 2008). International students may fear being inadvertently offended, embarrassed, or stereotyped, or being misunderstood or disliked; and vice versa for host students (Peacock & Harrison, 2008). The lack of intergroup socialisation can suspend in-class interaction, create resentment, reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2007), and undermine the very purpose for bringing the two groups together. This often leads to a substantial gap in expectations among international students, and 'defeats many proclaimed advantages and benefits associated with higher education internationalisation and global students mobility' (Dall'Alba & Sighu, 2015; Yang, 2016).

Church Participation and Immigrants

For newcomers to a country, their limited personal resources and scant social networks serve as an impediment to coping with the various challenges of integration and settlement (Stewart et al., 2008). Religious institutions have held an important place within the lives of migrants and refugees, in offering support, and relieving the pressures of change and assimilation into the host environment. Traditional sources of support, such as ethnical family, have been reduced, and are often unable to provide guidance for new immigrants to help them adapt to life in new and changing circumstances. 'New immigrants, therefore, are looking for new forms of authority through which they can achieve a sense of certainty and security, and find guidance and protection in their new life' (Cao, 2005). The majority of relevant studies focus on the role of ethnic religious organisations within the lives of immigrants. Limited research has focused on the role of religious organisations within the host country. This research includes few studies on groups of sojourners such as international students. Li (2012) published research focusing on the context of university and Christian volunteer groups for international students, focusing on the transformation of Christian identity. Williams (2012) investigated new emerging Christian identity, and the actions of international students after they had finished their studies and returned to their home countries. Both studies focused on the influence of religion on international students, rather than the process of students' engagement with religious institutions within the host

country.

This study follows on from existing research on immigrants and refugees, as well as on international students, and draws on one study[1] that investigated the cultural experience of Chinese students in and around religious organisations in the UK.

Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

The paper employs data from a mixed-method approach to research, encompassing a survey, semi-structured in-depth interview, and participant observation. The research process was a part of a larger mixed-method study on Chinese international students' church participation experiences in the UK.

Research Locations

The fieldwork in the study was launched in two types of locations, with one being the education institution (the university), and the other being the Christian churches near the university. Christian churches as religious organisations are open to the public and welcome people to come into their congregations. The study identified two churches as suitable cases to represent international Christian community of the UK. Both churches attracted a significant number of Chinese international students due to their location near the university.

Survey

Participants

The quantitative survey sample was composed of 501 Chinese international Master's students (76.6% female and 23.4% male students) in one university. 97.6% had been living in the UK there for over six months (but less than one year); the others for less than six months. 84.8% of the participants in the sample were of no religion (N=421), with a total number of 64 identifying as possessing religious beliefs. Among these 64, 46 students identified as Buddhist, 14 as Christian, and four as Muslim. All of them held their religious faith before they came to the UK.

Procedures

To ensure the collection of completed questionnaires, and to cover as broad a range of Chinese students as possible, the survey was distributed randomly around one university campus in the UK, for example in the library. Students were invited to fill in the survey; by submitting their responses they implicitly agreed to take part voluntarily in the project. The response rate of the questionnaire was 98%. The survey questionnaire contained the basic information about participants, such as gender, age, academic background, and the length of time they had been in the host country. The main items of the survey focused on cross-cultural adaptation processes and were based on the dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation that Ward and Kennedy proposed (1999): social cultural adaptation and psychological adaptation. The socio-cultural adaptation scale in the study was adopted from the Revised Sociocultural Adaptation (SCAS-R). As a one-dimensional measure, the scale has previously demonstrated good reliability and validity with a wide variety of cross-cultural samples. The Psychological Adaptation Scale assesses psychological adaptation. The scale was adopted from the Brief Psychological Adaptation Scale. The validity and reliability of the scale has been tested, and item-total correlations were high (αBPAS =0.79).

Data analysis

The gathered data were imported into IBM's SPSS statistics software for quantitative analysis. The data was analysed using both descriptive statistics (in the form of frequency distributions, means, and percentages) and inferential statistics (including ANOVA and correlation analyses).

Interviews

After exploring the multiple motivations behind church participation statistically, the study attempted to capture the church experience of individuals through the interview to investigate the specific process of intercultural interaction.

Participants

The qualitative interviews were conducted among fifteen Master's students, selected from the church participants. Interview participants were recruited via invitation at churches, under the conditions that they (1) are Chinese international students, (2) are undertaking a Master's 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 face-to-face interviews. Interviewees in the study included four male students and eleven female students. Eleven

interviewees were from the School of Business and four form other university departments, namely: the School of Education (N=2), the School of Engineering (N=1), and the School of Biology (N=1) (See table 1).

Procedure

The first author conducted and translated the interviews. The questions were designed to explore the process of the cross-cultural adaptation of international students based on church engagement, and included: What do Chinese students obtain from the church? Why did they choose Christian churches in the UK as the place for cultural engagement? Student participants were free to choose to converse in the language they preferred. All participants chose to share their personal experiences in Chinese, feeling that they were more comfortable and could discuss issues in greater depth in their native language. All interviews were then translated from Chinese into English for data analysis. In the translation and data production process, interpretation, and selective presentation of participants' experiences and perspectives concerning their religious experience has to be acknowledged (Venuti, 2012).

Data analysis

 The interviews were conducted in Chinese with frequent church participants on the university campus, and each lasted for about 60 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with the consent of the respondents. The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach and coded with 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 & Osborn, 2008).

Church participation of international students

The study offers the insights into the church participation of the international students from China in the UK. In terms of the students' frequency of church participation and type of church; among all of the participants in the survey, 178 students (35.5% of the total sample) had been in a Christian church in the previous six months. Therefore, over a third of Chinese students in the survey sample had experienced attending a Christian church. Among these church participants, 62.4% (N=111) had been to church once or twice, and approximately 37.6% (N=67) had been three or more times. With regard to the type of church, 163 students

had been in local Christian churches, 26 students had been in Chinese Christian churches, and 8 had been in non-Christian churches. 19 students had been in more than one type of church.

Motivations behind Church Participation

According to statistics from the survey regarding the assumed reasons for church participation of Chinese students, such as friends, food, English language, cultural knowledge, Bible study, and prayer, the top three intentions that motivated Chinese students (N=178) to take part in the church activities were found to be: making friends (N=63), cultural knowledge (N=58), and English language (N=40). Fewer students went to the churches for food (N=6), bible study (N=12), or prayer (N=4). These top three reasons were also evidenced in the interviews with the Chinese students who were church participants. Besides these, there are other significant factors mentioned in the interviews that played a role in the selection of churches as a location for cultural interaction. They corresponded with the expectation gaps that Chinese students faced in their intercultural encounters around university.

Curiosity about Western Culture

Curiosity about Western culture was one of the main motivations that attracted Chinese students to go to churches. The lack of exposure to Christianity in China has resulted in a general curiosity among the students about the symbols of Western culture. Non- Christian students were predominantly acquiring Western cultural knowledge through their experiences of church. Two thirds of respondents stated in the interviews that they were curious about churches, as Christianity was not well known in China, and they had never been to any churches before. One participant stated:

> I want to know more about the culture here. Originally, I thought churches were very mysterious places. I did not know anything about them when I was in China, because there are not many churches there. Although there are churches in China, I never went there. I think the atmosphere in churches here is very different from in those of China. I heard that there are many churches here. When I went travelling in Europe, I found there was great architecture in church buildings. (Chen, School of Business)

The mystery of religion led Chen to visit churches. Through the comparison of churches in China and Europe, it is implied by Chen that churches in China are different from churches in the Western world because of the differing attitudes towards religion.

Another respondent, who had majored in English Literature and had watched many Western films relating to Christianity, was interested in the Biblical stories, because her lack of cultural knowledge had prevented her from understanding the films. Another student, Tang, commented that it was helpful to know more about the differences between the East and West, and, despite being an atheist, he considered the Bible to be a masterpiece and adored Jesus Christ. Tang stated:

> Language and the Bible are the most important things to me [when visiting churches]. Teachers there are good. They know how to start a story with interesting questions. You can find teachers who tell the stories in different styles. I hoped they would say more about other things, too; for example, the characters of church buildings and their differences. (Tang, School of Engineering)

Tang showed a clear interest in the issues related to Christianity, such as Biblical stories, architecture, and cultural differences. His personal interest in Christianity prompted him to return to the churches to learn more about religious culture. Tang's case was similar to two other respondents from a Buddhist family. Their intention was to compare the two different religions. One of them reported that he believed in Buddhism but wanted to know more about Western culture to see if there were any differences in terms of religion.

In addition to an interest in Christianity, some students also indicated their need in relation to other cultural knowledge. Differing from the limited access to cultural knowledge within the university, due to the overwhelming number of Chinese students enrolled in the School of Business (Yu and Moskal,, 2018), churches are noted to provide the opportunity to acquire vast cultural knowledge. This, in turn, contributes to the efficacy and appreciation of forms of communication relevant to the intercultural situation, cultural norms, and participation in the conversation. Since the isolation from the host environment and limited access to intercultural encounters results in a shortage of intercultural knowledge, to 'increase the intercultural communicator's understanding of other and self in order to facilitate making accurate predictions and attributions (Wiseman, 2002), half of the respondents demonstrated a need to meet local people, endeavoring to explore beyond the

campus. This can be understood as partly due to the constrained mono-cultural university environment, particularly in some departments like the School of Business. Therefore, students cherished the opportunity for forms of cultural communication with local Christians. Communications with church members helped them to learn about native people; for example, how they live, their habits, how they use the English language in their daily lives. One student depicted her experience at Christmas in a local family. She commented that it had been very interesting, and that now she knew how people celebrated Christmas, which she found to be fascinating. As she noted, it was not just about a turkey on the table at Christmas; rather, there were many games they played together. She stated:

> Hundreds of Chinese students seated together in the classroom…. The reason why we would go to the churches is because we have few opportunities to meet local people, no matter what their culture, or their lifestyles. So, if there was a family for two or three international students to have a chat with, or know more about local issues through**,** we could choose to go and get involved. (Zhou, School of Business)

People at churches shared their different points of view, and their attitudes towards life and work contained rich cultural knowledge. It broadened the students' perspectives. Similar to Chieffo and Griffiths (2004), students regarded the knowledge and appreciation of another country or culture of utmost significance in the study. Another respondent reported that churches helped them to get involved in local culture and life. One of them indicated that:

> Church gave me a feeling that I could get involved in local life, not isolated like in the school. People in the church were very kind. If you are a Christian, I think you could get fully involved in a church, and also in their culture. I think in going to church, I can feel the culture there. By getting involved in it, to some extent, I get involved in the local culture too. (Xue, School of Business)

As intercultural knowledge provides important information with which the behaviour of people from other cultures can be understood, Wiseman (2002) proposed increasing the intercultural communicator's understanding of others and the self, in order to facilitate the making of accurate predictions and attributions. Such knowledge also provides significant insights into the development of intercultural knowledge during the study abroad. In the

current study, regardless of whether it happened out of a pure appreciation of the material culture, such as church architecture, or to gain knowledge about Christianity, or other cultural information, it is certain that Chinese students greatly endeavored to learn more about Western culture. Church-based cultural contact allows Chinese students to be closer to the native culture and people in their local environment. As a result, churches were understood by participants to act as types of cultural centres through which attendees could communicate with local people.

Social Network and Friendship

This study shows that it might be out of curiosity that some students entered the churches, and it is the desire for cultural contact that prompted the continuity of church participation. Wider social contact with the host culture is believed to be an effective and beneficial acculturation strategy (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015), and one of the benefits is that students can make friends and receive peer support. Most often, international students are believed to have their primary form of intercultural communication in the classroom or around the university campus. However, our previous research (Authors, 2018) indicated that, due to the overwhelming numbers of Chinese students - particularly within the School of Business - Chinese students lacked essential intercultural contact within the mono-cultural (Chinese) context, even though universities are - at least superficially - internationalising or becoming more multicultural (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Considering such limitations, all respondents in the interviews conducted - as frequent church participants - referred to the role of the social network in their church experiences and compared it with their experiences on campus. One participant stated:

> I never expected there to be so many Chinese students here [at the university] …I don't have much social life in my free time, to be honest. And I don't want to limit my whole life to the university, or, in other words, confine myself to the Chinese society of the School. I do need parts of my life that are not focused on my studies, classmates or campus. So church is a supplement. Church is an opportunity to experience a different cultural life; so why not explore and try it? I tried it several times and it has become a habit now. (Mao, School of Business)

It is the motivation to search for another way of intercultural life outside of the campus that encouraged Mao to search for different experiences in her free time. As one of the

different experiences she discovered, church life made up her leisure time and enlarged her social circle. As a result, Mao established her social community with limited social resources. Church participation, in this sense, provides the opportunity for students to establish forms of social communication and friendship, which is significant - particularly for Chinese students from the School of Business, since they lack an intercultural environment, due to the overwhelming number of co-nationals within the School.

Some students demonstrated that they had contact or connection outside the churches in their daily life with the friends they knew from church. This group of students did not just meet their church friends when at church, but also kept connections with each other outside of this time or place. Some students even left the church after they had made friends through it; this suggests that churches act as a medium in the establishment of this social contact. Originating at church, relationships may develop into a relatively close friendship, through mutual communication and interaction based on and beyond the activities of the church. As documented, friendships often gradually develop into strong ties (Mertens et al., 2015). Kim (2001) posited that international students who have developed stronger ties with host nationals would be more advanced in the cross-cultural adaptation process. Church was a destination that connected different people and played different roles for different groups of students. Church helped to enlarge or maintain students' social networks and was beneficial to their integration process.

English Language Practice

Language fluency bears a straightforward relationship to socio-cultural adjustment and is associated with an increase in interactions with members of the host culture, and a reduction in adaptation problems (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Primarily, the core components of an international student's socio-cultural adaptation were language proficiency and communication competence, supplemented by effective intercultural interaction (Yu & Shen, 2012). In turn, participation in the host community leads to improved proficiency in the host language (Clement et al., 2001; Yu, 2010). In this study, English language practice was another primary reason, cited by all respondents. Churches were considered to be a key place of learning, wherein students could go to practice their English through classes or other events with local church members. One participating student from the School of Business indicated that, although there were many Chinese students at the church - particularly at the international café - students were encouraged to talk with local people as

much as possible, differing from the isolation experienced in the School of Business. She commented, "At least, we have some kind of intercultural talk." Another respondent from the School of Business contended that practicing English and communicating with people were her only motivation for attending church, noting that it was her only opportunity to talk with local people. She stated:

> I think I want to communicate with others as much as possible. I am wasting my time if I just stay in my flat. I would take part in as many of these activities as possible if I have time. Usually, I would go to a lot of them [at church]. If I were interested in it, I would go regularly. (Wen, the School of Business)

These opportunities to speak and practice English beyond lectures and workshops at the university became very important, in particular for business students. However, such opportunities were often deprived, as Chinese students made up the majority of many university classes – particularly for that part of School of Business. They enjoyed their time at English language or cultural events at church. For these participants, there was no doubt that English practice and improvement were vitally important for them. Andrade (2006) supports the contention that English language and culture are the primary factors that affect academic and socio-cultural adaptation. The development of language fluency facilitates other communicative competencies, as well as the ability to participate in various intercultural experiences. It provides students with the means to establish interpersonal relations and receive social support in their cultural learning and socio-cultural adjustment (Ward, 2004). Church was thus regarded as a place that provided the opportunity to communicate in English, and therefore improve their English language proficiency.

Support and Acceptance

Practical assistance from church members made students feel accepted and cared for in their interaction within churches. Differing from the relative isolation experienced on campus and in public university spaces, Chinese students felt accepted and received care from church members, that made them feel at home and part of a wider community. Churches created an inclusive atmosphere that welcomed international students. Some respondents even felt that churches were their homes, and that church members were like family who stayed together. Many of the Christians' warm hearts, catering, and company won the trust of a wide range of Chinese students and kept them free from loneliness and anxiety. One third of respondents revealed that they had looked for assistance from church

members. One participant commented that church members were warm-hearted and nice people who helped students to adapt to the new environment - something that greatly impressed the student. For example, they spoke very slowly to students and took great care of them. The respondent stated:

> It was very comfortable, and I did not need to think much [at church]. People were warm-hearted. They would initially ask us what our problems or difficulties were. And they would help us to deal with our problems. University life puts a lot of uncomfortable pressure on us. (Wu, School of Business)

Another student found a part-time job indirectly with the help of people at the church. He reported that:

> I want to know more about the local culture. People at the church have a variety of backgrounds. They are Christians, and at same time, they have different jobs in different fields. Talking with different people gives you a very different understanding. For example, one is a lawyer; one is a businessman, and so on. They get together at church (Chen, School of Business).

Attending church was useful for Chen to obtain information about local part-time work, and at the same time, there were people of different backgrounds with various points of view, professional knowledge, thinking patterns, and personal experiences - which he could make use of in work. For a few, church was the only the place that they could access information about particular living experiences. They reported that it was useful to exchange questions and receive answers at church. For the students, contact with church members was valuable, as they could get some support to deal with practical issues.

In the process of giving and receiving, students felt that they received care and attention from church members. Students cited their acceptance within the churches as being one of the differences with other public places for cultural engagement. A number of respondents felt welcomed and involved in the community around the churches. They were valued by the churches and did not seem to feel lonely within the host environment. Church participation also gave students a type of belonging that they sought in the host environment. One respondent even regarded the church as a second home in the UK, and she enjoyed the safety and closeness she felt in it. She stated:

Church, rather than university, is like my family in the UK. I think that people at the church are the best people that I know here. I trust them 100 per cent, because I don't think that they would do something to harm me if they are Christians. And now, going to the church is a habit. You know, it gradually becomes something that is part of my life. (Mao, School of Business)

It could be inferred that there existed a sense of interdependence between Mao and the church she attended. She felt trust, involvement, and closeness with the church members, which further made her feel that she belonged to the community or, as she referred to it, 'family'. As seen, the members of one group learn more about the cultural background of the other group as a consequence of feeling more positively towards them (Nesdale and Todd, 2000).

Social Community

The church was also described as a social place where students found relaxation. Three respondents referred to the relaxed atmosphere the church created. The solemn and warm atmosphere with music and serenity made them feel peaceful and calm, particularly when they did not feel this at the university. One respondent in the interview reported that they did not hold Christian beliefs, but, instead, wanted to find ways to feel at peace with themselves. Another respondent in the interview thought that the atmosphere around her in the church calmed her down and seemed to give her confidence to meet any difficulties experienced at university. In addition to looking for peace, there were four respondents who thought that the social activities taking place at the churches helped to alleviate the feelings of pressure on them, and the church was the place they went to, to find relief.

Another three students referred to the church as a place for fun. It is clear that they enjoyed themselves during these activities, and that the churches were more similar to a social venue for them. One participant stated:

I feel comfortable staying with [the people in the church]. It feels very different from people in the work place, as there is competition among colleagues; it is very different from people in the church… they give to me... It is a social place for me. I like talking with them. Basically, we meet in the church and do activities, we chat a lot. That is it. (Chen, School of Business)

As Chen noted, interactions and forms of communication with people in the church

was comfortable and enjoyable. The friendly atmosphere and social activities constituted an inclusive environment and allowed him to be free from competitive relations with colleagues and the work pressures of his part-time job.

Furthermore, it was also found by the current study that churches were the places that students found they could go to regularly, as churches provide events every week, from the beginning to the end of each semester. One student gave the example of her friend, stating that if her friend found that week that she had not communicated with any local people, she would go to the church and have a chat. It was suggested that church was a kind of substitute for the campus, where she had less cultural communication with those in her surroundings. Therefore, churches became a social point where students could experience an inclusive atmosphere. She stated:

> It is a condiment in my life, for fun, for relaxing. I already had a few close friends. I did not get much from the church; it is a kind of place for having company and playing. It is not a crucial part of my life, but it coloured my life here and made me happy. I enjoyed my time in the church. My social life is boring; I feel comfortable with my time now. Here, you know business school is just like a Chinese school. (Qing, School of Business)

Qing indicated that the church was a place where she looked for pleasure in her life. The fun or company she experienced at church, to some extent, was not unique in her life, as she had her own social network, but it made her feel relaxed. The extent of relaxation experienced at church events varied according to the respondents' individual experiences, and their attitudes towards the church's significance in their own social life.

Constrained Services within University

According to the study's findings, for many international students, Christian churches can be understood to replace the role of universities, which are expected to act as the primary facilitators of intercultural interactions within the internationalised education context. According to the study's participants, churches did provide a platform and offer students opportunities to learn more cultural knowledge, to meet new friends and local people, practice English, and more importantly, integrate into an inclusive native community. Thus, one clear question is: Why did these students choose the church to serve this role, rather than organisations within the university, or other secular groups, to engage with during

their overseas studies?

When further exploring the possible reasons, it is significant to note that universities have been contended to be a place possessing limited services for international students - in particular for Chinese students, as the university provides little intercultural communication opportunities (Yu and Moskal, 2018). Furthermore, although there were various services for international students, students still missed many, due to their limited access to information, particularly at the beginning of their time of study. For instance, Fang noted that:

> These social activities [at the university] were mainly at the start of each semester, like clubs, talks, welcoming catch-ups. At the time I did not pay attention to them, as I had difficulties in understanding what they were about. I think I don't have a lot of access to these kinds of information, so I missed a lot. I found out that there was a horse-riding club, but by the time I found out it was too late to join. (Fang, School of Business)

Thus, providing a range of services will not automatically improve the experience, unless the services are provided in a way that ensures that they are utilised and effective (Roberts & Dunworth, 2015). Compared with churches' considerate introductions and advertising along the streets near the university, to welcome students from the start of each semester, universities appear to fail to offer enough information to support international students and let them know what kind of services are available. Another student, Wen, noted that she knew of organisations that helped international students at the university, such the as Student Representative Centre (SRC), but that she was confused how the centre worked, and to what extent it could help students. This limited information about the university and its potential forms of support services clearly impeded students' abilities to make use of relevant services.

Another student, Chen, supplemented his similar experience, and implied the short-term nature of social events on campus:

> Church is the only place that hosts activities continually. I also went to other places, such as, parties organised by the School of Business, GUU, such as Halloween and Christmas parties. However, you know, they are very short-term or one-off events. I do not find anywhere at the university that regularly offers

social events like churches do. (Chen, School of Engineering)

Even though there are social services for international students at the university, this does not mean that those services could keep close connections with students. Comparatively, forms of communication based on churches among students are consistent and regular. It can be contended that, during their studies, Chinese students need a consistently supportive and involved environment for them to connect with local culture through – rather than one-off branded 'international' events. The quality of service thus significantly influences student satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2010).

Furthermore, some respondents noted that parties primarily consisting of dancing, often taking place at student's unions, were not popular among Chinese students. This is perhaps because it is not the usual way that students connect with each other in China. Smith (2006; 2007) and Forbes-Mewett (2008) argue that support must be meaningful in order to be effective, and that the provision of support services in a depersonalised, generic manner will mean that they are unlikely to address the needs of students to enhance their own intercultural competence and connectedness. The implicit distance between the students and the host culture may limit the actual intercultural contribution that international students can potentially make to the host culture and home culture (Tan & Vu, 2017a).

Individual Selection in Church Participation

Associated with actual services within universities, church participation - as a form of cultural engagement - was not an accidental choice for many Chinese international students. Rather, it is arguably related to students' responsibilities to enhancing their own intercultural competence and connectedness (Tran & Vu, 2017a: 284). Responsibility to integrate into the host country's culture entails the students' intrinsically driven commitment to foster connectedness with the host culture, and to proactively project their cultural self to the host society (Tran & Vu, 2017a: 297). Church participation, for Chinese students, could be seen to an extent as a mark of responsibility to proactively connect with local culture, and contribute to the host society outside of the university (Tran & Vu, 2017a). When Chinese students' expectations of cross-cultural contact were not met or undermined, particularly just after arrival (Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard, 2005; Bertram et al., 2014; Sullivan and Kashubeck-West, 2015), church participation was one of the responses that some students used to exercise their agency to negotiate respectful intercultural engagements across different cultural spheres, for social contact and support within the host

country (Tran & Vu, 2017a). This presented a clear alternative to the university, which claimed to provide comprehensive support for international students, yet was found lacking – and so Chinese students engaged with local churches as a means to strengthen intercultural forms of communication. This process is illustrated in the diagram (Figure 1) below.

On the condition that the church environment granted students the freedom of cultural exploration, as international groups in each church organised numerous events and opened the door to welcome international students without any pressure, cultural contact and interaction around the Christian community was an outcome of the individual exploration of intercultural resources. Based on personal interests and needs in the adaptation process, Chinese students not only selected churches from those destinations of intercultural contact within their host environment, but they also chose which specific church event to attend. Students' participation could be generally categorised into four types, which understand their motivations with originality in the research. One type can be termed **Social birds**, representing those who take part in the church events and socialise in church, make friends, and exchange information. In the process, these students obtain relaxation and fun from the church community. **Cultural learners** are those students who are interested in cultural knowledge and want to broaden their horizons to include Christianity, as well as other Western cultural symbols. A large number of students are **English practitioners**, who seek to improve their oral English and academic writing. The least represented category is the **Explorers of Christianity** as a faith. These students are on their journey to becoming Christians. These four types can all exist in one individual church participant, as a single student may have more than one need to meet through contact with a church.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

Both internal (church) and external (university) factors can be understood to have facilitated the continuing engagement of Chinese students with religious – specifically Christian - organisations. As cross-cultural facilitators, churches can be regarded as a strategic choice for Chinese international students. Their participation in church events often originates from their desire to connect and belong after the inicial exploration of the host environment. Somewhat similarly to the reasons of immigrants and refugees who engage with local church communities (Constent & Massey, 2003), church participation can be understood as a preferred individual selection among all forms of social contact available to international students. Participants searched for 'the most rewarding, the least costly, and the best value

related to other relationships' (Hoppe, Snell & Cocroft, 1996). These costs and rewards were socially determined, and include intangible, emotional aspects (Cook and Rice, 2003). In comparison to other potential places where students could acquire the necessary resources; for example, in our study, the university campus offering limited and often inaccessible services for international students, church was regarded as a place that provided students with substantial company, friendship, language practice, information, and assistance - all needed in the host environment. Some students' interest in Biblical stories and Christianity arguably came from their curiosity about the religious culture in the UK, rather than an exploration of their own personal faith. Their essential task at the adaptation stage of their intercultural experience was to achieve a balanced state within a new society (Kim, 2001), which required communication in the English language, peer support from host friends, cultural knowledge, and skills.

Differing from university services that may not be well known among international students, or lack continuity and suitability and enough of a multicultural environment for Chinese students (as some participants pointed out in the study), through regular participation in church events, many Chinese students felt gratitude for the support they received with linguistic, social, cultural, and psychological desires and needs. This cultural exposure contributed to the students' own growth in their international education in terms of, among other things, their confidence in intercultural communication. Students also formed different friendships through these church interactions. It was suggested that churches were ideal places for Chinese students to release the pressures of their overseas life, and they acted as information hubs providing practical assistance. For a few students, churches were even a home in which they felt a sense of belonging. Students could be divided into four categories through their church participation, including 'social birds', 'cultural learners', 'English practitioners', and 'Christian explorers'. As a result, these categories offer new, original knowledge and terms for better and more deeply understanding the church behaviours of Chinese international students.

The popularity of church participation among some Chinese students indirectly suggested the relatively low and infrequent interactions held with native speakers and cultural groups within the campus-based university. Tran and Vu's (2017a) research drew attention the act of positioning, or forced-positioning, at the periphery of the local culture of some international students - who are less likely to exercise their agency and capacity to

negotiate reciprocally respectful intercultural interactions. In contrast to what the university offered, the organisational activities and support from the international Christian community filled in the gaps, and made a difference to the experience of Chinese students. Cultural engagement based around the churches made up for the shortage of informal learning environments, where international students could actively take part in various extra-curricular activities and engage in meaningful intercultural interactions.

From the perspective of the Christian churches, regardless of their missionary work, we may find some inspiration in terms of examples of meaningful cultural engagement and inclusion in intercultural interactions and apply these to a secular environment such as the university.

The churches' engagement in the study demonstrates the effects of activities outside of the classroom, with the involvement of diversity and in-depth interactions within a multicultural context. The structured events around the international Christian community extend mutual communications in a meaningful way, leading to the sharing of resources and the establishment of genuine relationships. One of significant benefits provided by churches was the opportunity to gain English language practice and cultural knowledge; although, they might not be the essential responsibility of churches for these international students. In both the formal classes and informal international nights in the Christian community, Chinese students learned the skills and knowledge required to be able to communicate cross-culturally.

Within higher education sector, service providers emphasise service quality because of its strategic role in enhancing competitiveness, attracting new students and retaining existing students (Sultan & Wong, 2010). Apart from the professional knowledge that is required in major courses, the research suggested that the nurturing of international ability must be included in international education (Cooper, 2007; Yershova, DeJaeghere, & Mestenhauser, 2000)**,** sa the Chinese students' needs to develop cross-cultural skills and competence. This paper does not imply that universities make no effort in regards to this aspect. More pedagogical interventions are taking place in higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere, with emphasis on critical reflection and the promotion of interculturality in both domestic and international students – in and outside the classroom. The question here is about the quality of intercultural experience for international students within campus and the extent of the facilitation of trainings and services to attract and

engage all international students in intercultural interactions in a meaningful way. Klak and Martin (2003) recommend that some elements of the informal curriculum, particularly extra-curricular activities, could be included within the formal curriculum. To encourage students to take part in these informal activities, universities could make use of the credit system, and leave students the space to select their own forms of intercultural engagement around the campus. Universities, if possible, may find ways to collaborate with churches in order to enhance any intercultural connections with international students. Churches may share their experiences with the university, and launch regular social events such as an international café and weekend trips away, to create and support a multicultural community, and design games and activities to attract both local students and international students and bring them together.

International student support is a complicated issue that requires substantial consideration of various aspects. In order to promote student's engagement and inclusion on the international university campus, many universities organise orientation and induction programmes for international students in the first few weeks of the new academic year (Brown and Holloway, 2008). However, from the perspective of the participants of current study, the university efforts are insufficient. In the presented cases of churches, regular service and support from the beginning to the end of each semester is arranged according to students' individual needs. The approach of churches demonstrates the necessity to give support to university students, so they leave their comfort zones, and actively participate in diversified interactions around campus, in order to achieve the ideal outcomes of the inclusion and engagement of both international and national students within the growing internationalised environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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